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Mothers, Monsters, Machines: Unnatural Maternities in Late Eighteenth-Century British Women's Writing

Meghan Lorraine Burke
MOTHERS, MONSTERS, MACHINES:
UNNATURAL MATERNITIES IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH WOMEN’S WRITING

By
MEGHAN LORRAINE BURKE

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Meghan L. Burke defended on March 14, 2007.

Candace Ward  
Professor Directing Thesis

Eric Walker  
Committee Member

Meegan Kennedy-Hanson  
Committee Member

Approved:

Nancy Warren  
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of English

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
Dedicated to Daryl Ann Burke, my own Ideal Mother, with thanks and love.
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The notions of maternity and motherhood in late-eighteenth century England are fraught with ambiguity and contradictions. By this period, the cult of idealized motherhood and maternal virtue is beginning to emerge in England in order to protect a seemingly threatened cultural hegemony. However, this ideological project is dependent upon problematic constructs of the overriding “unnatural” aspects of maternity. In order to delineate ideal, normative maternity, examples of dangerous and monstrous motherhood are overwhelmingly emphasized. Although women’s reproductive authority was historically granted to them because the female body was viewed as the natural site of reproduction, eighteenth-century England saw an influx in the number of ways motherhood could be rendered unnatural by its very ties to women’s bodies, which were represented as being susceptible to (or, more seriously, the source of) all that was uncontrollable and irrational: illicit sexuality, ignorance, passions, madness, disease, and even murderous desires. Maternity as it was understood as the symbolic locus of collective female community and creative agency was effectively effaced, and was instead rendered an “unnatural” pathological condition “naturally” in need of treatment and control by masculine, rational authorities.

In this thesis, I interrogate these constructions of maternity through the 1790s fiction of writers Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and Eliza Fenwick, all of whom, I argue, use their texts to protest the pathologization and mechanization of maternity that had occurred within their culture. In Wollstonecraft’s Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman, Hays’s The Victim of Prejudice, and Fenwick’s Secrecy, or The Ruin on the Rock, each writer utilizes popular gothic conventions in their dramatizations of the dangers of various forms of feminine oppression in patriarchal England, not the least of which lies in the removal of maternity from female control. In each of their novels, Wollstonecraft, Fenwick, and Hays appropriate and reproduce much of the dominant negative discourse of unnatural maternity in order to show how it is ultimately these sorts of oppressive ideological fictions (and their patriarchal proponents) that are themselves monstrous, rather than the women whom they demonize and oppress. Furthermore, I argue that by creating and disseminating texts that protest the loss of maternal agency and demand a return of forms of collective female power, these writers are attempting to wrest back control of some form of creative power that was once indelibly linked to the woman’s womb.
INTRODUCTION

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it, but it goes on.” Motherhood’s impossible syllogism.

– Julia Kristeva in “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini”

Critic Marilyn Francus notes in her discussion of male reproductive and creative anxieties, “What constitutes strength in the female weakens the male, and therefore female power must be reinterpreted in order to be subjugated” (830). In eighteenth century England, maternity was one such site of strength for women that underwent a subjugating reinterpretation in the dominant discourse. In the following study, I examine the ways in which maternity, once a locus of empowerment and agency for women, was successively demonized, pathologized, and ultimately mechanized by patriarchal discourse in late eighteenth-century England, until the birth process itself was effectively re-gendered as a masculine domain, and thereby no longer threatening to the existing male hegemony. This re-gendering is largely achieved by a gradual erasure of the mother and her specific forms of and claims to maternal agency in the experience of pregnancy and childbirth through a complicated recasting of the concept of “natural” maternity. Although women’s reproductive authority was historically granted to them because the female body was viewed as the natural site of reproduction, eighteenth-century England saw an influx in the number of ways motherhood could be rendered unnatural by its very ties to women’s bodies. Everything from literature to legal and medical discourse featured narratives of deviant motherhood, highlighting the ways in which maternal bodies were susceptible to (or, more seriously, the source of) all that was uncontrollable and irrational: illicit sexuality, ignorance, passions, madness, disease, and even murderous desires. The concept of abnormal, unnatural, and monstrous mothers became paradoxically naturalized in the culture’s consciousness, until maternity was seen as a dangerous pathological condition in need of treatment and control by masculine, rational authorities. Once “safely” placed in the full control
of physicians, lawmakers, and other patriarchal powers, the natural mother was then further removed from her former claims to agency by her being reconceived as an object upon which male doctors could perform their obstetric skills, a passive reproductive machine to be worked on and, when necessary, repaired with technological tools and rational, efficient science. In England in the 1790s, then, maternity as it was understood as the symbolic locus of collective female community and creative agency was effectively effaced, and reproduction subsequently existed in a masculinized, mechanized sphere.

However, this reconfiguration of natural-to-unnatural, female-to-male-controlled maternity did not occur without some resistance, both political and personal, from some of England’s strongest female voices. In my study, I examine three novels of the 1790s by British women writers, all of whom, I argue, use their texts to protest the pathologization and mechanization of maternity that had occurred within their culture. In Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*, Mary Hay’s *The Victim of Prejudice*, and Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock*, each writer utilizes popular gothic conventions in their dramatizations of the dangers of various forms of feminine oppression in patriarchal England, not the least of which lies in the removal of maternity from female control. In each of their novels, Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick appropriate and reproduce much of the dominant negative discourse of unnatural maternity in order to show how it is ultimately these sorts of oppressive ideological fictions (and their patriarchal proponents) that are themselves monstrous, rather than the women whom they demonize and oppress. Furthermore, by creating and disseminating texts that variously protest the loss of maternal agency and demand a return of forms of collective female power, these writers attempt to wrest back control of some form of creative power that was once indelibly linked to the woman’s womb. In creating and producing novels, women writers are active “mothers” in cultural (re)production, and, not surprisingly, are thereby criticized as “unnatural” in markedly similar ways as many biological mothers were during the time.

It is important to note that eighteenth-century England was not the only society to recognize the maternal body as a site of great ambiguity and contradiction. Forever shifting and morphing in physiological structure as well as cultural import and context, pregnancy and maternity have in every century been subject to paradoxical interpretations and associations. For example, pregnancy is treated often as not merely private but unspeakable, a mysterious
gestation taking place in the unseen, secreted dark world of the woman’s womb. However, the condition of pregnancy itself is, particularly in its latter stages, self-evident; not only is it visible on the body, but it becomes by its sheer visibility a kind of spectacle, open to monitoring, intervention, and control. Furthermore, the issue of this sort of “control” over pregnancy is at the source of many of the other interpretive paradoxes and anxieties that surround the condition, along with the equally pressing questions of “nature”: Is pregnancy a “natural” or “pathological” state? Is woman the active agent in or “master” over the processes of pregnancy, or is she an object of impregnation, a subject upon whom uncontrollable processes work? If pregnancy is, as it has often been interpreted by patriarchal discourses, something fundamentally unpredictable, uncontrollable, and ultimately unknowable, the condition could arguably be classified as “unnatural,” and therefore dangerous. However, another interpretation of the “chaos” that is signified by the seemingly anarchic, mutable maternal body may posit pregnancy as ultra-natural, a state so closely related to “nature” that it has connections with the primal, the uncivilized, and the “savage,” all “natural” states that Western societies have variously considered more dangerous and feared than many “unnatural” ones.

The idea of the maternal as something potentially dangerous is the essential connective thread between all these contradictory interpretive issues. After all, any questions of who or what controls pregnancy and what constitutes a normal one arguably only appear under the influence of pervasive fears of maternity’s uncontrollable and abnormal potentials. While it may be difficult to locate any discernable danger in our modern-day notion of the “mother” and her many nurturing, protective associations, the pregnant female body itself has historically been a source of and target for well-documented fear and misogyny. The gravid body can be a visibly disturbing signifier of the unknown, existing unnervingly at the crossroads of the created and uncreated, formed and unformed, and serving as a constant reminder of the “sin” of the sexual acts of which pregnancy is the consequence. Furthermore, pregnancy itself can be viewed as a profoundly corporeal process, associated with volatile exchanges and eruptions of blood and bodily fluids; such intense images of primordial physicality allows antagonistic discourses to easily distance the maternal from more intangible and positively-construed notions like virtue, intellect and order. Proponents of such anti-feminine positions, such as those in eighteenth century England, could thereby easily appropriate the physical facts of pregnancy in order to construct arguments in which the figure of a woman and her unborn child morph into the
grotesque image of a host and its parasite, and act as emblems of a low, shameful origin rather than awe-inspiring creation of human life. Maternity easily becomes the locus of male disgust with the feminine in general and the natural dependence all life has upon it.¹

Most importantly, the maternal body represents a very specific site of power: the power of human creation. The “secret” biological workings of reproduction go on without any observable post-coital male intervention and remain the woman’s realm for the usual nine months before birth. It is up to her, then, to ascertain and understand her maternal experience, regardless of what any man may presume or want to know about it. Furthermore, because individual pregnancies are considered the mother’s, rather than the father’s, experience, maternity is often understood as a determinant of the feminine experience on the whole; a general authority over reproduction is therefore often extended to all women (not merely those with child). For example, in his study *The Making of Man-Midwifery*, Adrian Wilson describes how throughout centuries of European society, childbirth and reproduction were viewed as completely the “domain of female control and collective solidarity” (2), as women—mothers, midwives, other female relatives and friends—gathered together to share their knowledge and support from the earliest stages of pregnancy through the parturition and postnatal “lying-in.” Not only would these women share their expertise and advice with one another, but, as men were almost completely excluded from scenes of birth, women were also the sole proprietors of the facts of what exactly went on during each birthing-room incident.

It is no wonder, then, that in the context of a traditional patriarchal society, such power—housed in and seemingly available only to the presumed weakest members of the population—can be a palpable source of anxiety. If creation itself is fundamentally located within feminine processes unavailable to men, male claims to cultural and biological dominance are no longer completely impervious to challenges. Female reproductive biology can be a source of great jealousy in men, and can also generate insidious doubt in men’s ability to reproduce and create at all. Furthermore, the collective nature of women’s power over reproduction is perhaps most threatening to male hegemony, as control over the facts of childbirth essentially results in control over social systems as a whole: because physical sites of reproduction like wombs and childbeds often appear secreted from men, there exists the fearful possibility that the true identity and legitimacy of every infant, from the nation’s lowest newborn to its future king, could be either maintained or masked by the maneuverings of scheming mothers and their midwife.
collaborators. In her book *Birthing the Nation*, Lisa Forman Cody describes this historical fear that “women gathered alone together were outside the reach of patriarchal control and that when these women succumbed to their innate desire to deceive and rule men, they were acting *politically*” (47). When secrecy surrounds female reproductive practices, women have the ability to conceal illegitimate class infiltration and disrupt the proper flow of paternal inheritance and authority. The “lesser” sex thereby gains incalculable influence over important patriarchal structures.

This thesis explores the ways in which women’s control over the processes of pregnancy and the sites of childbirth was effectively erased over the course of the eighteenth century, through a series of oppressive constructions (and conflations) of maternal and female nature. My choice to examine the works of three British women writing in the last decade of the eighteenth-century is motivated by a number of reasons. As Eleanor Ty and Linda Lang-Peralta both point out, the 1790s saw an increasing politicization of previously “private” concerns, including female conduct, sexuality, and women’s experience of motherhood (Ty, *Unsex’d Revolutionaries* 14), in response to which women published books and expressed political views—both revolutionary and reactionary—in a historically unprecedented number (Lang-Peralta x). Furthermore, I chose to focus on the three specific women at the center of this study because they are linked together not merely by their contemporary careers, or the Jacobin politics and gothic maternal thematics in their work, but by a bond they shared in life that is has its own particular relevance to this project: all three were devoted friends, and were together when one of their trio, Mary Wollstonecraft, died from complications from childbirth. Throughout my thesis, I return to this central scene of combined maternal death and solidarity again and again, as all the motifs I am exploring in this study—pregnancy and pathology, transmission and confinement, power and submission—exist in microcosm in the story of Wollstonecraft’s last days.

I begin by examining the idealization of motherhood and the corollary demonization that occurred of any woman who did not fit the normative models of bourgeois domestic maternity. In my first chapter, “‘Horror—Ah! What Horror!—That I Discovered I Was With Child’: Rational Mothers and Gothic Realities in *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman,*” I examine how Wollstonecraft, in her unfinished novel *Maria*, uses the popular gothic literary conventions of her day in order to literalize the nightmarish oppression that results from confining middle-class mothers in unnatural cultural scripts of submission, sensibility, and irrationality. The use of the
dominant representations of “irrational” mothers and maternity as a form of social control is at the heart of Maria’s critique, as Wollstonecraft centers her novel around the figure of a mother unjustly imprisoned by her husband in a gothic madhouse, and thus literally confined in a false construction of inherent irrationality.

This theme of literal and metaphoric maternal confinement is expanded upon in my second chapter, entitled “‘What Calamities Has Thy Frailty Entailed Upon Thy Miserable Offspring!’: Transmission, Confinement, and the Pollutant Maternal Body in Wollstonecraft and Hays”. Through an analysis of Hays’s The Victim of Prejudice as well as Wollstonecraft’s aforementioned works, I explore how maternal transmissions—from the intangible effects of a mother’s emotions and imagination to her physical exchanges of breast milk and blood—were pathologized in the eighteenth century in order to construct the maternal body as an inherently pollutant source of potential contagion in need of masculine surveillance and control. I argue that by constructing women’s bodies as inherently dangerous, women were taught to fear and restrict all their acts of maternal transmission, rather than to interpret them as sources of empowerment. Furthermore, I also examine how representations of female pathology not only serve as justifications for the actual practice of eighteenth-century parturient maternal confinement—literalized in The Victim of Prejudice, as in Maria, by a woman’s gothic imprisonment in a jail—but also end up trapping women in oppressive inherited social identities they can not escape.

Having examined how the patriarchal discourses of eighteenth-century England demonized mothers as irrational monsters or cast them as monstrous contagions, all in an effort to contain potentially subversive feminine power, in my final chapter I turn my attention to the way in which reproduction was ultimately removed from the realm of women’s power: that is, through the erasure of the mother as the central active agent in the birthing room. In this third chapter, “Making Mother Obsolete: Fenwick’s Secresy and the Masculine Appropriation of Maternity,” I examine the forcible confinement, objectification, and eventual death of the pregnant heroine of Fenwick’s Secresy in the context of the eighteenth-century rise of male medical intervention in childbirth, and the ways in which this cultural change signaled the end of maternity as a site of female agency.

The works of feminist theorists, particularly Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, have been extremely helpful in conceptualizing major parts of this study. While Irigaray’s and Kristeva’s approaches have been criticized by some as overly essentialist, I found it particularly useful to
borrow from their insightful perspectives on the maternal experience. For example, my first chapter analysis of the idealized domestic constructions of motherhood was influenced by Irigaray’s discussion of the ways in which all women are historically associated with mothers, regardless of their biological experiences or lack thereof. Owing to women’s “seclusion in the ‘home,’ the place of private property,” Irigaray posits that women have “long been nothing but a mother” (130).

Additionally, both Irigaray and Kristeva offer insight into women’s complicity, both knowingly and unconsciously, in the very patriarchal projects that oppress them, a point I argue in both my analysis of Wollstonecraft’s Maria as well as my discussion of the rise of male-midwives and the subsequent “mechanization” of mothers. Irigaray writes that women have been associated with the unthinking matter of pure nature, and therefore confined to a mere subordinate function in the “man produces/women reproduces” binary (42). Whereas men, Irigaray argues, are able to achieve subjectivity and are active participants in and creators of culture, women are excluded from subjectivity and citizenship and (importantly for Chapter 3 of study) made into maternal machines. Irigaray writes, “Basically, even when [women] do work, what society demands of them is that they go on being mothers. Machines to serve the man-father in private ownership, and to serve the State. The two things are institutionally connected” (50). Therefore, even though women are not considered full subjects, they often offer critical unacknowledged support to patriarchal culture, and society cannot function without their contributions. Just as Irigaray claims that the mother is the unacknowledged infrastructure of society, Kristeva also explains in such pieces as “From Filth to Defilement” that the social is essentially defined by repressing maternal authority, and that individual cultural and national identities are constructed against the exclusion of the feminine (226).

Furthermore, Kristeva’s highly personalized account of the near-madness that accompanies the “splitting” experience of pregnancy (an “other” inside one’s “self”) allies well with in my own analysis throughout this thesis of the gothic scripts of unnatural motherhood and, importantly in my first chapter, its associations with madness that were so prevalent in the eighteenth-century. Kristeva sees many institutional practices and definitions as alienating and excluding women from their own bodies—and the products of those bodies—so much so that maternity is experienced as a borderline state that is both fascinating and terrifying. For example, in “Stabat Mater,” she recalls being “bedazzled” during her own maternal experience when:
trying to think through that abyss: a staggering vertigo. No identity holds up. A mother’s identity is maintained only through the well-known closure of consciousness within the indolence of habit, when a woman protects herself from the borderline that severs her body and expatriates it from her child. Lucidity, on the contrary, would restore her as cut in half, alien to its other—and a ground favorable to delirium. (323)

The “staggering vertigo” Kristeva articulates is also reminiscent of the gothic experience of the fictional heroines I examine who attempt to define an independent identity, either separate from their mothers or separate from their role as mother, in a society in which all women are confined in cyclical and oppressive maternal scripts; despite their best attempts, “no identity holds up.”

Furthermore, both Irigaray’s and Kristeva’s perspectives on female subjectivity, in particular on the relationship between language and bodily experience, were particularly useful in examining how women writers try to negotiate their way through writing when the only symbolic discourse available to them is a masculine one bound up in patriarchal values, and in which women can only be objects. In both Irigaray and Kristeva’s theories, women exist in a society in which the only possible subject-position is a masculine one. However, the maternal body exists as evidence of the natural, pre-symbolic, and unnamable realm of signification and opposed to the masculine symbolic, and therefore also represents the possibility that women can develop a new alternative discourse to the traditional, patriarchal one through which they have been oppressed. Throughout this study, I argue that writers like Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick anticipate this project; in each of their fictional works, they manipulate patriarchal discourse in their explorations of maternity in order to protest the oppressive social constructions of womanhood that have made this natural state unnatural.

In The Coherence of Gothic Conventions, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies the “unspeakable” as one of the main themes of the Gothic (3). On a similar note to Sedgwick’s observation (and in keeping with Irigaray and Kristeva’s theories), Margaret Homans writes in Bearing the Word that, according to the dominant myth of language, “women’s experiences are unrepresentable and women cannot perform acts of representation” (xi). Of all women’s experiences, maternity may be the most unspeakable and unrepresentable, unable to be fully understood by even the woman experiencing it herself. As evident in the opening epigraph from
Kristeva, maternity is about existing within a paradox, living on an indefinable border between self and other, unsure as to where and when one’s own maternal body stops and another body begins. There is a balance between great helplessness, a feeling of being an unwilling victim to one’s own biology, and great power in this position, and in societies that pervert maternal experience and construct gothic terrors to surround the birthing process, this potential for power disappears and is replaced only by fearful passivity—motherhood indeed then seems monstrous. However, writers like Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick appropriate both the “unspeakable” Gothic theme and “unrepresentable” feminine experience and, in writing, break the blank terrified silence that is women’s supposed relationship with motherhood. Their fictions reveal the artificial constructions that fuel maternal terror and the patriarchal motivations behind them, and, although their negotiations of such constructions are not always perfect, they are, considering the context of the times, undeniably brave. This thesis attempts to convey how these women writers saw the cultural changes surrounding motherhood and tried to, in both their writings as well as often in their own day-to-day own lives, reclaim some form of the feminine agency that had been lost with the medicalization and mechanization of maternity.
CHAPTER ONE
“HORROR—AH! WHAT HORROR!—THAT I DISCOVERED I WAS WITH CHILD”:
RATIONAL MOTHERS AND GOTHIC REALITIES IN MARIA, OR THE WRONGS OF WOMAN

This study begins, in one way, at an end: on the morning of September 10, 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft died of complications ten days after giving birth to the future Mary Shelley. Although her death is a specific tragedy, many of the conflicting interpretations surrounding it also relate to the fraught position of all mothers in late-eighteenth century English society. While motherhood has, at all times, carried contradictory meanings for the women who experience it, the British mother of the 1790s was simultaneously idealized and demonized, raised to mythic heights as the model of English morals and the literal bearer of the nation’s wealth and future even while her identity was completely defined by and grounded in her body’s biological processes. Much like Wollstonecraft herself, the figure of the eighteenth-century mother was variously identified in popular discourse as both angel and fiend, guided by a feminine emotionalism that could be either the source of her most positive traits or the root of uncontrollable evil. Both positive and negative depictions of motherhood emphasized women’s supposed emotional rather than rational nature and the dormant “monstrosity” that this inherent emotionality was always in danger of awakening. Furthermore, this belief implicitly served male interests; if all women were thought to be led by complete (and potentially dangerous) sensibility rather than reason, it was necessary for the good of society that they submit to the total authority of rational men (Cody 149).

In the days before her death, Mary Wollstonecraft had suffered excruciating pain as a result of puerperal fever, a common though ambiguous diagnosis for eighteenth-century childbed infection, caused by the internal mortification of part of the placenta that had failed to deliver. Although maternal death in home deliveries had become a fairly rare event, even in 1797, the diligent care of one midwife, four physicians, and numerous friends could do nothing to revive her. As her husband William Godwin wrote in his Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman, “If skill or attention could have saved her, Mary would still live” (187).4

Wollstonecraft’s body and its processes had taken on painful and decidedly “monstrous” alterations over the days as it rotted from the inside out. As outlined by physician John Clarke
(one of the doctors who attended Wollstonecraft), women suffering from puerperal fever experienced great bodily horrors, as “discharges become of a very bad colour, very large in quantity, and abominably offensive to the smell […] the countenance assumes a pale and sallow cast, and the woman loses flesh daily […] and] eyes become glassy [and…] pale, as do also the tongue and lips” (99-100). Wollstonecraft had planned on breastfeeding her infant, but her milk was contaminated as the infection progressed, and so she attempted to smile through the grotesque scene of having puppies suckle her painfully swollen breasts. As her death approached, Wollstonecraft became an embodiment of many of the extreme pathological qualities most fearfully associated with the maternal body: contaminating, mutating, uncontrollable, and deadly, the shocking physicality of her demise—the appalling amounts and malodors of blood, urine, sweat, and decaying flesh that came with this fatal maternity—belied the ethereal, artificial constructions of the idyllic “mother” that society projected upon most maternal scenes.

The reaction to her death was equally complicated as friends and critics invoked similar images of heavenly versus all-too-human constructions of women and mothers. Godwin lovingly described her as “a light” (Godwin 199), and Eliza Hays remembered Wollstonecraft as “almost idolized” by the “best of human beings” (qtd. in Todd 455). The year following her death, however, Wollstonecraft was offensively immortalized by Richard Polwhele in his poem “The Unsex’d Female,” in which he noted that her terrible death was essentially “just deserts” for an unnatural, unfeminine existence. Polwhele writes:

I cannot but think, that the Hand of Providence is visible, in her life, her death, and in the Memoirs themselves. As she was given up to her “heart’s lusts,” and let “to follow her own imaginations,” that the fallacy of her doctrines and the effects of an irreligious conduct, might be manifested to the world; and as she died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women, and the diseases to which they are liable [...]. (29-30, my emphasis)

Mary Wollstonecraft’s tragic death is full of what Vivien Jones appropriately calls “ideological ironies”: the woman who had tried to downplay sexual difference and minimize the importance of the body suffered a highly gendered demise, dying in a birthing room as her distinctly female body—rotting uterus, painfully swollen breasts and belly—revolted against her rational will. She had told her husband she thought she would have died early in the week but
that she had determined not to leave him (Godwin 177). Prior to going into labor, she had been highly confident in both her physical and mental strength, as she had been during the easy birth of her first daughter, Fanny Imlay. In Memoirs, Godwin recalls how Wollstonecraft “was so far from being under any apprehension as to the difficulties of child-birth, as frequently to ridicule the fashion of ladies in England, who keep their chamber for one full month after delivery,” and proposed she would come down to dinner the day after her labor (174). Wollstonecraft’s rational optimism was supposed to be able to combat any physical limitations, from maternal labor, to sickness, to the confines of the female form—it could not, however, foresee or combat the complete failure of physiology itself (Jones 202). This is why, as Jones states, Wollstonecraft’s death “resists both emotional comprehension and rational assimilation” (187). Its events have been variously read as both natural and unnatural, impossible to foresee and possibly avoidable, an arbitrary accident and a specified punishment all at once, all of which precludes any understanding of it in reasonable terms; and, importantly, all of which reflects the nearly-identical eighteenth-century readings of maternity, and mothers in general, as removed from the realm of rationality.

During her life, Mary Wollstonecraft campaigned adamantly against this ideologically-grounded exclusion of women, and particularly mothers, from rational thought and agency. Her writing in Vindication in 1792 first outlined her belief in the necessity, rather than incompatibility, of combining rationality with motherhood, and the problems that arise when mothers were denied any rational capacity at all. The impact of this philosophy remained evident in her personal actions and letters as well. Furthermore, at her death, Wollstonecraft left an unfinished novella that had begun the first steps of dramatizing the horrors women experienced in a culture in which they were automatically relegated to the “irrational” and excluded from the agency that claims to reason afforded men. In Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman, Wollstonecraft uses gothic conventions to reveal how eighteenth-century motherhood is indeed always potentially monstrous, but not as a result of any “natural” feminine tendencies or failures. Instead, mothers are rendered unnatural by various artificial societal constructs which are created within patriarchal cultures as a means of social control. The story of Maria Venables, a young mother whose demand for personal agency has resulted in her being imprisoned upon false allegations of madness, literalizes the situation of all eighteenth-century mothers: in being denied
any rational capacity and made to fit artificial ideals, women are trapped in a gothic script of motherhood in which the only formation of maternity is a terrifying “unnatural” one.

The (Im)possibility of Rational Motherhood

In her essay “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,” Luce Irigaray writes how the mother-child relationship is constructed specifically by male discourse as something frightening and repulsive. The relationship with the mother is figured as “a mad desire, because it is the ‘dark continent’ par excellence” (Irigaray 35); like the “savage” nations in colonial discourse, motherhood is also associated with the primal and the unenlightened. Irigaray explains that the combined power of both this primal bond and women’s generative capacity is extremely frightening to men and threatens their claim to dominance, and so, “wanting to be the sole creator, the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language [langue] and symbols which cannot take root in it” (41). Furthermore, not only are women forced into silence as part of this symbolic order which has been created by and privileges the masculine, but they are done further violence within it. Irigaray writes,

The womb […] is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca or anal and urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman’s sex [sexe] as whole. There are no words to talk about it, except filthy, mutilating words. The corresponding affects will therefore be anxiety, phobia, disgust, a haunting fear of castration. (41)

Although Irigaray’s theories apply to women throughout the history of Western culture, her words are a helpful starting point in discussing what was happening to women’s conceptualizations of their own maternal bodies in eighteenth-century England. In the name of social control, British women in the 1700s were both defined and demonized by their reproductive capacity, and denied any hand in creating their own meaningful interpretations of maternal experience. This particular ideology was largely tied to debates over each sex’s natural capacity for “rationality;” men were thought to have it while women did not, and so the only rational interpretations and experiences of motherhood were thought to be those that had been filtered through controlling masculine authority.
In *The Proper Lady and The Woman Writer*, Mary Poovey discusses how and why women’s domestic roles became idealized and strictly delineated with the eighteenth-century rise of the middle class. Women’s duties at home were thought to directly support capitalist values: a loving wife’s submission and sympathy supported her husband through his productive labor in the public sphere, while her reproductive labor ensured the transmission of her husband’s wealth through proper channels—she both produced new generations with her body, and instilled in her offspring “a morality centered on discipline and self-control; in doing so, she helped promote the values necessary to another generation of successful competitors” (Poovey 10). Scholars including Ellen Pollak, Marilyn Francus, and Felicity Nussbaum pinpoint some of the indirect misogynistic motivations behind this “cult of motherhood” (Pollak 26). For example, promoting this ideology was a way of disguising the devaluation of women’s productive capacity and the general loss of agency women had experienced through the changes of the Industrial Revolution, before which they were “producers of things as well as of life” (Nussbaum 126). Furthermore, the culture’s idealization of maternal tasks encouraged middle- and upper-class women to enjoy a passive economy of leisure (as opposed to becoming active members in the new money market economy), which led to the very infantilization of mothers as they were relegated to their children’s, rather than the adults’, sphere (Francus 844).

The most important motivation behind the cult of motherhood, however, was surely that of control: a woman who did not buy into the ideology of a purely domestic, supportive, and essentially self-sacrificing position was a threat to social order. For example, part of the idealization of motherhood involved distancing middle-class mothers from the sexual act that led to pregnancy itself. Any signs of active sexual desire in a woman generated fears of her potentials for promiscuity and illegitimate offspring. As Poovey writes, “because of the complex economic and psychological roles of property, a woman could, by one act of infidelity, imperil both a man’s present security and his dynastic ambitions (5). Furthermore, in the decades following the French Revolution, the need to control reproduction and femininity served both important ideological and material purposes in the English nation. Not only was a cult of controlled, prolific, healthy maternity emphasized by those who believed that Britain’s population was in decline and that large future generations would help the nation better compete in what seemed to be an eternal war with France (Colley 240), but the English nation also felt a particular anxiety about preserving the principle of subordination and its ancillary standards of
female propriety, all of which the revolutionary actions in France had threatened (Poovey 30). The French Revolution—an outbreak, Linda Colley writes, “in a nation viewed as peculiarly ‘feminine’ and susceptible to female influence”—had appeared to many British thinkers, such as the famed Edmund Burke in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, to be “a grim demonstration of the dangers that ensued when women were allowed to stray outside their proper sphere” (Colley 252). It was important, then, that women’s adherence to the social scripts of domestic submission did not seem optional. In order to ensure this feminine conformity, the idealized constructions of motherhood had to be made to seem “natural,” just as any unconventional expression of the maternal self had to be branded as “monstrous.”

Eighteenth-century middle-class women were taught that their natural character was one of nurturing maternity and wifely submission; only an “unnatural” woman refused “her primary function as the conduit of lineage and wealth” (Nussbaum 146). Likewise, the absence of a maternal instinct was thought to be so unnatural in the middle-class Englishwoman that it automatically figured as a sign of the Other, an uncivilized, un-British being (Nussbaum 131). It is notably ironic, of course, that passive, submissive motherhood was associated with female nature even while volatile female “nature” was exactly what British society was trying to restrain and manage within artificial the confines of patriotic duty (Sudan 76). While the concept of “natural motherhood” as a civic vocation was lauded, the dominant images of women’s innate capacities consisted of solely dangerous passions and complete irrationality. It was popularly accepted that women could not safely rely on their own sense of judgment as a guide, but must instead depend on the benevolent authority of the part of the population fully possessed of reason—namely, men, though more specifically upper- and middle-class men (Pollak 43). In fact, medical texts of the eighteenth-century support the notion that a woman’s reproductive capacity completely overshadows any faculty she might have for intellectual labor, as drawings of wombs become bigger and representations of women’s heads grow smaller (Nussbaum 127). Furthermore, women were not merely thought to be susceptible either to “good” loving, nurturing maternal instinct or “bad” neglectful, violent passions; instead, mothers were warned of the dangers of all their possible emotional states. Julie Kipp has noted how women could be deemed “monsters” in nearly every maternal choice they made: “they were ‘dangerously good’ if they loved their children too generously, too indiscriminately; and ‘naturally bad’ if they did not love them enough” (11). Motherhood presented women with an irresolvable double-bind.
In complicated ideology consisting of paradox upon paradox, women were told they were naturally unnatural. No matter how rational a woman believed herself to be, there was always some kind inherent monstrosity lurking within her female body—an internal pathology perhaps that would kill her in childbirth, or a madness that would make her kill her own child—that precluded any of her claims to reason. Furthermore, women were taught that the dangers of that monstrosity manifesting itself grew tenfold with a woman’s pregnancy, because both the irrepressibly mutating maternal body and the unseen emotional symbiosis taking place between mother and child signify all that society has constructed as truly uncontrollable in a woman: her physiology and her presumed fierce emotional instinct. But having been denied rational capacities, women are always only physiology and instinct; therefore, this construction of maternity reminds women that they are always only dangerously uncontrollable, and therefore need to be subjected to patriarchal restraint.

Motherhood could only be made “rational,” then, only when mothers had been made to fear themselves as irrational monsters. The ideal “natural mother” was delineated and praised only to recede in the background as forms of monstrous maternities received disproportionate attention and criticism (Francus 829). There was nothing a woman could do to avoid the “monstrous” label other than submit herself to patriarchal control; for instance, women could not even try to contain their supposed irrational biology by purposely refraining from motherhood, as the choice not to be a mother was considered itself an unnatural, “active monstrosity” (Francus 845). Subsequently, men, by asserting their rational distance and difference from the irrational female reproductive body, took total control of the maternal experience (Cody 15). Husbands, fathers, lawmakers, and physicians gained complete authority over female reproductive power, while women had to conform to the artificial constructs of ideal bourgeois motherhood and serve as symbols, though not subjects and citizens, for the British nation (Keane 108).

In her 1792 publication *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft makes a defense of a natural rational capacity and economic independence for women, and in doing so rails against the paradoxical construction of motherhood that cited maternal bodies as both foundational to the capitalist society and the reason that women’s access to and participation in that society must be restricted (Kipp 22). Wollstonecraft saw the failure of women’s education as one of the most oppressive and socially damaging aspects of the middle-class feminine ideal. She argued that women were taught rather than born with a “weak elegance
of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners” (VRW 8), and were overly dependent upon emotions rather than reason simply because their ability to think rationally had been socially inhibited. Recognizing that total feminine submission is not natural but is rather deliberately promoted in patriarchal societies, Wollstonecraft writes that “the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding” (VRW 54), and it is only through these artificial forces that understanding “has been denied to woman; and instinct, sublimated into wit and cunning, for the purposes of life, has been substituted in its stead” (VRW 54). Besides her criticism of large-scale patriarchal authority, Wollstonecraft also blames women’s faulty education upon all individual men in society, claiming they had systematically degraded women through condescension disguised as sensibility. She points out “those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence” (VRW 8) and through which “men are insultingly supporting their own superiority” (VRW 57), and writes that she suspects many men “have been more anxious to make [women] alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (VRW 6).

This figure of the rational mother is central to Wollstonecraft’s feminist argument in Vindication; in fact, the term “rational mother” appears in the very first paragraph of the work. Wollstonecraft addresses the dominant eighteenth-century ideology that motherhood is a woman’s first duty, and essentially agrees with it. However, she argues that motherhood is a rational, civic duty, not a purely instinctual one. In fact, Wollstonecraft states that a woman’s first duty is to her own rationality, writing that, “The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother” (VRW 149).

Wollstonecraft argues that women become valuable citizens when they are free to cultivate a “rational affection for their country, found[ed] on knowledge” (VRW 198), as opposed to being taught that their sole worth lies in their uncontrollable biology. She further extends this line of thinking—that logic and understanding, rather than appeals to pure emotion, promote dutiful action—to all aspects of maternal duty, such as in her refutation of popular ideas of maternal instinct. “Natural affection, as it is termed,” she writes, “I believe to be a very faint tie, affections must grow out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy” (VRW 157).
Wollstonecraft wanted women “to be recognized as reasonable beings with the potential for higher genius and that they be endowed with the rights of subjects” regardless of the cultural constructions of their reproductive capacity (Keane 110).

In addition to outlining how a return to rationality would improve the condition of women, *Vindication* also details how dangerous the current constructions of motherhood were to British society. Wollstonecraft indicts all the popular, artificial ideals of maternity that circulated in the 1790s, claiming that truly good mothers “must have sense and an independence of mind women who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands do not have” (*VRW* 156). For example, she disapproves of the mother-as-machine, those “unthinking neatly reproductive women” blindly producing more citizens for the Crown (Keane 121). Likewise, Wollstonecraft scorns the image of the submissive, childlike mother whose ignorance, veiled as “innocence,” makes her ill-equipped to care for her own children, asking, “Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?” (*VRW* 9).

So-called “fashionable” mothers such as these receive the brunt of Wollstonecraft’s criticism, as she recounts story after story of “women of quality” whose vitiated actions end up producing such monstrosities as “the half alive heir to an immense state [who] came from heaven knows where” (*VRW* 136) or, even when legitimate, “an half formed being that inherits both its father’s and mother’s weakness” (*VRW* 143).

In what initially seems like a counterproductive choice, in many passages like these Wollstonecraft invokes some of the same images of “monstrous” maternity as one finds in the dominant patriarchal discourse of the 1790s. Despite her feminist assertion of woman’s inherent rationality and intellectual equality to men, *Vindication* is replete with examples of “unnatural” mothers whose passions lead them to dangerously love their children either too much or not enough. Wollstonecraft writes,

> Woman, however, a slave in every situation to prejudice, seldom exerts enlightened maternal affection; for she either neglects her children, or spoils them by improper indulgence […] It is this want of reason in their affections which makes women so often run into extremes, and be either the most fond or most careless and unnatural mothers. (*VRW* 156)

However, Wollstonecraft carefully explains that women’s “want of reason in their affections” is not a natural quality, but merely the end result of their living in a society in which
the feminine capacity for rationality has been completely denied. Having been forced to embody damaging artificial ideals, women cannot be blamed for being poor caregivers; in fact, Wollstonecraft states it would be as wise to expect “figs from thistles, as that a foolish ignorant woman should be a good mother” (VRW 198). Additionally, the aristocratic luxury she seems to associate with monstrous births can also be seen as the result of patriarchal expectations of women; the fashionable mothers have merely accepted their expected positions as consumers rather than producers in the luxury economy. Therefore, Wollstonecraft cautions men against continuing to advertise women’s maternal failures, and, until they “generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience” (VRW 154), they ought “mark not more severely what women do amiss […] and allow her the privileges of ignorance, to whom ye deny the rights of reason [...]” (VRW 201).

In Vindication, Wollstonecraft sought to expose the degraded status of woman in a culture that devalues the maternal mind because it fears the reproductive power of the maternal body. She had also hoped to expand on her discussion with a second volume, in which she planned to “further enlarg[e] on the advantages which might reasonably be expected to result from an improvement in female manners, towards the general reformation of society” (VRW 201). Amidst the torrent of personal and professional activity that filled her remaining five years of life, the additional volume was never realized. In her final work, however, Wollstonecraft came close to creating a fictional version of this proposed last volume. Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman, fictionalizes many of the same the social evils perpetrated against eighteenth-century women that Vindication addressed. Even the mirrored titles (“Rights” vs. “Wrongs” of Woman) suggest the works can be read as two halves of the same political whole. I would also argue that although unfinished, Maria contains some shadowy glimpse of the “reformation” that Wollstonecraft had intended to promote in her second Vindication volume. In the fragmented sketches that serve as the novella’s makeshift conclusion, Wollstonecraft presents some small hope that women, when freed from masculine oppression and allowed to assert to their own rights and agency as rational beings, can wake from the gothic nightmares that are their lives in eighteenth-century England and positively redefine femininity and maternity for future generations. The possibility of such an awakening, in light of the misogynist constructions of femininity in society, is indeed a small one, and in no ways guaranteed—indeed, the four other possible endings Wollstonecraft sketched each suggest a far less optimistic outcome for
womankind—but its potential realization through feminine rationality remains a powerful statement.

**Women’s Gothic Realities**

*The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* opens with a deliberate evocation of the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century. Wollstonecraft writes:

> Abodes of horror have frequently been described, and castles, filled with specters and chimeras, conjured up by the magic spell of genius to harrow the soul, and absorb the wondering mind.

However, in the very next line, this gothic imagery is pointed out as pure fiction, while a new undeniably gothic scene is described as the story’s “real” setting:

> But, formed of such stuff as dreams are made of, what were they to the mansion of despair, in one corner of which Maria sat, endeavoring to recall her scattered thoughts!

(*Maria* 7)

The images that immediately follow this apparent dismissal of the Gothic—the shrieks of tortured madhouse inhabitants, specters of kidnapped infants—are indeed gothic, as are many of the thematic and structural devices throughout the unfinished novel. Wollstonecraft calls attention to gothic conventions only to assert that her very-gothic fiction is actually realist; in fact, she writes that making the instances more dramatic would have sacrificed her main objective, which was the “the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (*Maria* 5). In the context of the realities of the time, then, Wollstonecraft’s seemingly contradictory rhetorical choice—writing a gothic realist novel—is actually valid. *Maria* reveals the gothic nature of women’s reality in late eighteenth-century England, particularly in the terrors that surrounded their maternal roles.

The Gothic form would have been an attractive style for any woman writer to adopt in the late-eighteenth century, particularly one like Wollstonecraft whose writings had a political end. Not only was gothic fiction one of the most popular forms in England in the 1790s, comprising some two-thirds of all novels published during that decade (Clery 70), but, as is discussed by such scholars as Juliann Fleenor in *The Female Gothic* and Maggie Kilgour in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, it was seen as a inherently feminine form, outside the strictures of mainstream (masculine) literature, and therefore was adopted largely by female writers. The
Gothic form, accused by critics of featuring emotional excesses and unrealistic plots, allowed women writers to reproduce their own complicated cultural experiences. Women’s gothic writing rails against the very fictions that are a woman’s life—the false representations, mystifications, and mechanizations that are created to construct even as they conceal “real” feminine experience. The Gothic novel thereby serves as a “deconstructor” of the very ideological systems it features, as it shows how “human constructs disguised as natural”—like those surrounding motherhood in the eighteenth century—“are a means of oppression” (Kilgour 47).

The Gothic has a complicated relationship to the Enlightenment concepts of reason and rationality, which are central to Wollstonecraft’s philosophy. On the one hand, the Gothic has been associated with a “rebellion of the imagination against the tyranny of reason” and a rejection of modern concepts that locate authority within an individual, rather than tradition (Kilgour 3), a formulation that was linked to Edmund Burke’s reactionary praise of old feudal systems and chivalric codes as the true root of modern freedom. In his 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke argued that modern people had lost hold of the earlier organic model of society in favor of an unnaturally mechanistic, atomistic view of human relations. Enlightenment emphasis on individual reason and rights had, Burke believed, produced a frightening self-interested society in which “inherited instinct for deference, fealty, and service” had been lost, and along with it any civilized interchange between peoples; modernity was now marked by barbarism (Miles 47).

However, Burke’s opponents argued that chivalry was itself an oppressive, false system of human constructs disguised as a national “organic” tradition; his critics specifically employed the terms “gothic” or “feudal” in place of Burke’s use of “chivalry,” as “gothic” carried older connotations of “barbaric” or “medieval” (Miles 47). Radicals like Wollstonecraft, whose 1790 *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was the first published response to *Reflections*, Godwin, and other English Jacobins claimed that the uncritical internalization of national mythologies, like those of the chivalric code, actually served as mental fetters that imprisoned citizens and concealed their true natural identities and rights (Miles 49). Enlightened reason, they argued, was the only thing that could see through the mysteries of such oppressive institutions, and in their writings they drew on Gothic rhetoric to show ancient forces of oppression being overthrown by reason and progress, rather than vice versa. Godwin’s *Things as They Are, or the Adventures of*
Caleb Williams, published in 1794, is the first ostensible Jacobin Gothic in this tradition (Miles 48).

Just as Godwin’s Caleb Williams reveals how political systems invade the private world of men, Wollstonecraft’s Maria uses gothic conventions to expose the how women are particularly entrapped in false systems of representation perpetuated by seemingly “natural” customs and prejudices (Kilgour 75). Unlike the conservative form of the genre, Wollstonecraft’s radical form of the Gothic does not wish for a recovery of seemingly suppressed, primitive imagination; instead, Maria shows that, as Kilgour explains, “a society which denies women reason, while encouraging them to feel and indulge their imaginations, makes them mad” (Kilgour 81).

But besides the political potential of the radical Gothic, the genre has many complicated associates with the maternal experience which made it particularly appropriate for Mary Wollstonecraft to utilize in writing Maria. For example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pinpoints the two central Gothic themes as “the unspeakable” and “live burial” (3), both of which carry particular resonance when applied to explorations of maternity. According to Sedgwick, the “unspeakable” gothic theme encompasses a range of narrative situations, from the hidden secrets that spur a gothic plot to the expression of emotions (guilt, fear) that are difficult to talk about. Perhaps more importantly, it carries structural significance as well: the Gothic story is itself “unspeakable” in that it has difficulty getting itself told. Sedgwick writes:

This difficulty occurs at every level of the novels. A fully legible manuscript or an uninterrupted narrative is rare; rarer still is the novel whose story is comprised by a single narrator, without the extensive interruption into the middle of the book of a new history with a new historian […] The story does get through, but in a muffled form, with a distorted time sense, and accompanied by a kind of despair about any direct use of language. (14-15)

It is not much of a stretch of the imagination to say that pregnancy is “unspeakable” in many of the same ways. On a basic level, not only are the processes of pregnancy hidden from view like “secrets” and discussion of it prohibited from public conversation at various times in history, but women, particularly by the late eighteenth century, must feel a sense of despair at the difficulty they have in telling the story of their own maternal experiences. Irigaray posits that women can never fully tell their story as long as the masculine symbolic order is the only
discourse through which women can speak; within this order, woman is unable to symbolically self-define, and the only subject position she can attempt to find for herself is that of a “defective” male (Whitford 3). Similarly, a British woman in the eighteenth century could not articulate a “self” that did not fit into a culturally-constructed maternal type. If she attempted to do so by any means, she became herself an “unspeakable”—an “unsex’d,” unnatural, monster.

Likewise, the gothic convention of “live burial” can be aptly applied to analyses of pregnancy as well. On a purely narrative level, the confinement experienced by many Gothic heroes and heroines in prisons and madhouses is seen as a sort of living death, or at least preceded by such a stage; in Maria, for example, the heroine flatly states that upon being drugged into a deathlike-swoon and awakening in a madhouse, she “perceived I was buried alive” (Maria 119). However, “live burial” can also apply to oppressive mental states and social positions, such as those experienced by all eighteenth-century mothers. In the 1790s, a woman’s identity was both determined by her maternity yet also sublimated by it: women become “buried alive” in the role of mother and denied any other legitimate social existence. Additionally, the physiological experience of pregnancy itself can have “live burial” implications as well. The “active violence” that Sedgwick observes in the “liminal moments” related to the live burial—“for the instant of moving out of or into the dungeon” (Sedgwick 24)—corresponds well to the “violent” moments related to pregnancy (i.e., the act of intercourse and the moment of birth) when the barrier between an interior and exterior (in this case, a woman’s body) is bridged. Furthermore, a mother must attempt to reconcile the idea that her body, like a crypt or vault in a gothic live burial, houses living yet not-yet living (as it has yet to be born) being, and must combat the fear that her womb may prove both to be a real tomb for the child (Maria mourns “for the babe of which she was the tomb” (Maria 136)) and lead her to her own early grave.

There are other ways in which pregnancy not only reflects typical gothic literary themes, but can be considered as gothic in and of itself. For example, other Gothic themes also include the dread of female sexuality and physiology. The self-fear and self-disgust that registers in a gothic heroine’s psyche is the result of the negative patriarchal discourses she has internalized (Fleenor 11). This is the same kind of process by which eighteenth-century women became fearful of their own pregnancies and “unnatural” maternal potentials. Additionally, anxieties about illicit border crossings are a defining feature of the Gothic; as Kipp states, gothic literatures “generally explore transgressions and borderline territories and subject positions;
foreground slippages between outside and inside, the body and the psyche” (57). In her book *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, Clare Hanson describes these same anxieties of indefinable borders in relation to the maternal body:

> What is distinctive about pregnancy is the fact that the bodily space which we are accustomed to think of as our own is invaded by an other to whom we must attribute some degree of sentience, and hence individuality. Yet the border between the self and that other is never clear-cut: even the child’s movements, evidence of its independence, are experienced as one’s own. (13)

With pregnancy, as Hanson and Kipp both explain, a woman undergoes a transformation of self that does not fit into any easily definable category of identity; “she is Other, rather than mother” (Kipp 6). This maddening potential of the other inside the self and the extraordinary violation of identity that proceeds from this potential is at the heart of both maternity and the Gothic. Furthermore, these same concepts are also in keeping with Wollstonecraft’s particular politically radical bent of the Gothic. Her Jacobin sense that “external systems of authority are forms of disguised violence, comparable to gothic demonic possession, invasions of our privacy and individuality” (Kilgour 49) also extends on a more conceptual level to political discussions of the maternal body. The female body and mind is not inherently subversive, as male discourses claim, but can become so when it is subjected to “foreign invasion” and “violence” in any form—be that the physical realities of intercourse and pregnancy, or the metaphoric invasion of patriarchal authority into a woman’s concept of self (Kipp 82).

Mary Wollstonecraft was no stranger to these gothic scripts of violence, madness, and death that surrounded maternity in the eighteenth-century, not merely at a conceptual level but through personal experience as well. She had undertaken the dangerous removal of her younger sister Eliza from a difficult marriage after the birth of Eliza’s first child plunged the new mother into intense post-partum depression (Todd 45). Furthermore, long before Wollstonecraft’s own gothic nightmare of deadly childbirth began, she watched as her dearest friend Fanny Blood died after an unhealthy pregnancy and difficult birth. Wollstonecraft’s description of her horror during the ordeal as one of “beginning to awake out of a terrifying dream” (*Collected Letters* 63) calls to mind Sedgwick’s description of a particular kind of psychological terror expressed in the Gothic: “to wake from a dream and find it true” (31).
It is this very feeling, then, that Maria’s opening lines succinctly convey: women wake from gothic fictions of “such stuff as dreams are made of,” only to find that those very fictions are their truth. For eighteenth-century women like both the fictional Maria Venables and her creator Mary Wollstonecraft, reality—with all its opportunities for fear, confinement, madness, and death—is always, undeniably, gothic.

“The Natural, the Dreaded Consequence:” Constructions of Motherhood in Maria

Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman, was left unfinished after Wollstonecraft’s difficult childbirth and subsequent death. In many ways, however, Maria was itself a sort of difficult birth for its author. Wollstonecraft’s wording in the work’s preface links the writing to images of troubled labors; she asks readers to “grant that my sketches are not the abortion of a distempered fancy” and to remember the falsity of heroines who seem to skip the painful realities of human birth and are instead “born immaculate […] just come forth highly finished Minervas from the head of Jove” (Maria 5, my emphasis). According to Poovey, in writing her last novel Wollstonecraft appeared to suffer what seemed to be writer’s block for possibly the first time in her life. The woman who had written her Vindication of the Rights of Woman in a mere six weeks began Maria in 1796 and worked on it for over a year, only to leave it less than a third finished at her death (Poovey 95). Later, Godwin observed his wife’s writing difficulties in his Memoirs:

She was sensible how arduous a task it is to produce a truly excellent novel; and she roused her faculties to grapple with it […] She began it in several forms, which she successively rejected, after they were considerably advanced. She wrote many parts of the work again and again, and, when she had finished what she intended for the first part, she felt herself more urgently stimulated to revise and improve what she had written, than to proceed, with constancy of application, in the parts that were to follow. (171-2)

Exactly why the writing of Maria gave Wollstonecraft such trouble is open to conjecture, although several theories have been proposed. Poovey, for example, describes Wollstonecraft’s writer’s block as being the result of her difficulties with writing in the sentimental mode, a genre from which, along with the Gothic, Maria draws (96). Another possible explanation lies in the sheer weight of the task Wollstonecraft had undertaken. Godwin remembered his wife’s anxieties about achieving her goal of truly conveying “the misery and oppression” that had
afflicted the entire history of women, rather than just that of a single individual (*Maria* 5). He writes, “Impressed, as she could not fail to be, with the consciousness of her talents, she was desirous, in this instance, that they should effect what they were capable of effecting” (Godwin 171). Furthermore, no matter how confident Wollstonecraft may have been in her personal radical philosophies, she was nonetheless a woman and mother who was trying to articulate the tyranny of the very bourgeois institutions that undeniably had contributed to her own self-definitions and value system. Drawing on the theories of Nancy Chodorow and Kristeva, Eleanor Ty makes the essentialist argument that as a professional woman writer Wollstonecraft naturally had to conflate masculine, public symbolic discourse with the emotional semiotic language of her sex, a combination that may have proven most effective in the complicated gender explorations she was undertaking in her writing, but one that surely raised difficulties in its execution (*Unsex’d Revolutionaries* 44).

Whatever the reason for her authorial troubles, the anxieties Wollstonecraft experienced in writing *Maria* fit aptly with the novel’s gothic nature. After all, Sedgwick reminds us that the Gothic has difficulty in getting itself told. *Maria* reflects this gothic theme structurally as well, as the life stories of two women and one man are told through various letters and speeches, and are variously interwoven with additional accounts of other oppressed women’s experiences. The primary story of *Maria* is that of the titular character Maria Venables, who, after being essentially fooled into a terrible marriage by her belief in scripts of chivalry and sensibility, attempts to leave her veritable gothic tyrant of a husband. Instead of asserting her personal rights and gaining freedom, however, Maria has her newborn daughter snatched from her and is thrown into a madhouse upon false allegations of insanity. While in the madhouse, Maria’s story is revealed through a long account she writes to her kidnapped child, and is eventually joined with the stories of her keeper, Jemima, and her fellow prisoner and new lover, Darnford, to make up the single volume Wollstonecraft finished out of her intended three. In the few subsequent chapters, Maria successively escapes from the institution, lives for a short time with Darnford, and is tried for adultery in court. Wollstonecraft left five fragmentary sketches of possible outcomes for Maria’s story, most of them—although, I will elaborately later, importantly not *all*—involving a second pregnancy for Maria, a betrayal by Darnford, and some kind of suicide or death that ends the tragic tale of the wrongs done to and by women in an oppressive patriarchal society.
Maria is a powerful critique of many expectations and institutions that oppressed women in the eighteenth century, including women’s indulgence in excessive sensibility and the feme covert status of married women that leads Maria Venables to write, “Marriage has bastilled me for life” (Maria 103). However, I argue that Wollstonecraft’s overarching project of Maria is to demand a recognition, rather than her contemporary society’s denial, of women’s capacity for reason. After all, both the societal encouragement of women’s excessive sensibility and the justifications for a husband’s complete authority over a wife are based out of the accepted belief that women are inherently irrational and prey to their passions. Women must be denied agency for their own safety, and this lack of agency in turn leaves them with no cognitive task but to indulge their emotions; the belief in women’s irrational emotionality is then a self-perpetuating, self-fulfilling “truth.” Importantly, Wollstonecraft chooses to foreground her examination of the wrongs of denying woman’s rationality through the trope of motherhood. Maria opens with the twinned images of a visibly maternal body surrounded by the shrieks of madwomen, thereby connecting the two of the most prominent eighteenth-century signifiers of woman—maternity and irrationality—in the context of a terrifying gothic nightmare, and signaling to readers how damaging such paired qualities really are to women and society as a whole.

Maria Venables is introduced to readers in the fundamental gothic act of waking from a dream to find it true. The “dream,” in this case, is essentially a state of complete irrationality. Wollstonecraft writes, “Surprise, astonishment, that bordered on distraction, seemed to have suspended [Maria’s] faculties, till, waking by degrees to a keen sense of anguish, a whirlwind of rage and indignation aroused her torpid pulse” (Maria 7). In waking out of an irrational stupor and into a rational rage, Maria’s first moments demonstrate the torture of being a rational woman in a society that denies the possibility of rationality; as Claudia Johnson explains, Maria is “doomed to a painful enlightenment that makes her look like the crazy one in a corrupt world” (164).

Along with the painful return of her senses, Maria’s complicated maternal position provides her with literal pain in the first moments of the novel as well. Not only do the “maternal apprehensions” that torture Maria’s thoughts resemble labor contractions, with “[o]ne recollection with frightful velocity following another,” but Wollstonecraft also grounds the reader’s attention in Maria’s maternal body by describing her “burning bosom—a bosom bursting with the nutriment for which this cherished child might now be pining in vain” (Maria
7). Because Maria’s daughter has been stolen from her, and, readers later learn, is presumed dead, Maria exists in the liminal state of a non-mother with an undeniably maternal body. When the only available definitions for women lie in motherhood, a woman who cannot place herself fully within or without this category finds herself immured in an unnatural stasis (much like that of Maria’s “stopped” breast milk) with no place to fill and no agency to exercise; Maria’s madhouse imprisonment literalizes this oppressive condition (Sudan 83).

In her literal imprisonment, Maria is surrounded by inmates who are actually insane and whose madness is also explicitly linked to maternity. One of the most prominent of such figures in text is the “lovely maniac,” who daily sings “passionately wild” tunes that are punctuated by “fits of laughter, so horrid,” all of which is a result of losing her senses during “her first lying-in” (Maria 21). There is some trace of Wollstonecraft’s own observations of her sister Eliza’s postpartum mental collapse in her depiction of this “maniac.” In letters to her youngest sister Everina, Wollstonecraft had described their ill sibling’s behavior in much the same manner as she describes the maniac’s “torrent of unconnected exclamations and questions” (Maria 21). Wollstonecraft recounts Eliza’s “raving fits that had not the least tincture of reason—Her ideas are all disjointed and a number of wild whims float on her imagination and uncorrected fall from her—something like strange dreams when judgement [sic] sleeps and fancy sports at a fine rate” (Collected Letters 39).

Although the similarities are undeniable, Maria’s “lovely maniac” is representative of a much larger problem than Eliza Wollstonecraft Bishop’s individual affliction. Post-partum depression was not medically recognized then as it is today, although accounts of “melancholia” following childbirth fill the records of eighteenth-century insane asylums, and many women recorded their personal “low spirits” after labor (Todd 45). Therefore, it was not an uncommon affliction for women. However, although our twenty-first century understanding of such conditions accepts biological and genetic factors as a cause for postpartum illnesses, in their eighteenth-century context a specific social factor must be examined as well. At the time of Wollstonecraft’s writing, women’s voices were often silenced in their culture, particularly when they were going to be raised in complaint against any form of patriarchal authority. The ideal models of femininity (again, the only acceptable ones available to “proper” women) forbid active anger or rebellion, and so, because “women could find no voice in which publicly to complain; they took refuge in depression or madness” (Heilbrun 15). Indeed, this oppressive and
internalized inhibition against voicing rage or protest may have led to Eliza’s own maladies, as Wollstonecraft observed “[Eliza] seems to think she has been very ill used” (Collected Letters 39), but could only infer the circumstances of this “ill use” since Eliza could not rationally voice it. Women like Eliza and the fictional “maniacs” were forced into madness when they were denied reasonable agency and expression; told that as women they possess only uncontrollable imaginations and emotions by virtue of their uncontrollable maternal bodies, they retreated into dark mental worlds of “strange dreams” and “passionately wild” fantasies when their “irrational” maternal potential had been realized.

Maria, on the other hand, has not sought asylum in madness because of her inability to voice her rational indignation and exercise personal agency. Ironically, she has been forcibly placed in a mental asylum because patriarchal authorities have interpreted her ultimate act of rational feminine agency as the ultimate act of insanity. She has “made an utterance—a physical one—against patriarchal law in her flight from her husband’s house with her child” (Matthews 88). In a society in which mothers have no status as citizens and few personal rights, it matters little that Maria determines to leave her husband only after he has committed repeated offenses against her person, including the egregious act of offering to prostitute her to a wealthy friend. Likewise, she is not viewed as a woman “asserting the independence of mind distinctive of a rational being, and spurning at slavery” (Maria 90). In a patriarchal society, women have no power to self-define their identities and actions against the definitions provided by the dominant male discourse. Therefore, Maria’s rational explanations of her behavior have no weight against her husband’s claims that her conduct is the result of an inherited “melancholy malady” (Maria 129).

Maria’s only hope for escaping both her marriage and her husband’s false account of her actions lies in appealing to other women who have also felt the tyrannical force of male control in their misogynist society. Most of the women with whom Maria shares her story are initially sympathetic to the young woman’s position, because they too have been subject to the oppressive dictates of eighteenth-century definitions of women. For example, the several landladies who provide the fugitive Maria with shelter during her pregnancy share their own tales of abuse and submission at the hands of men. However, Maria’s connections with these women ultimately fail because of both the intrusion of male authority figures onto the scene and, more importantly, because of the women’s own internalizations of the scripts of feminine
submission. When various men (including husbands, lawyers, and Venables himself) demand that Maria be removed from the various homes in which she has taken shelter, each landlady guiltily complies with the request, usually begging forgiveness from Maria while reiterating patriarchal maxims such as, “When a woman was once married, she must bear every thing” (Maria 104), and “Women must be submissive […] Who had they to maintain them, but their husbands?” (Maria 110).

Wollstonecraft uses these scenes to illustrate how total adherence to the eighteenth-century ideal of feminine docility not only does not result in the protection of women, as the dominant discourse claimed, but actually weakens them and fosters situation of abuse (Ty, Unsex’d Revolutionaries 42). Furthermore, forced submission prevents women from being truly, rather than artificially, virtuous. The various women who fail to help Maria each affirm they know, logically, that she deserves their aide (particularly as she has served as a benefactress for one of the women in less desperate times), but that they cannot risk doing the right thing in a society in which “women always have the worst of it, when law is to decide” (Maria 112). Furthermore, as Johnson argues, it is in the interest of patriarchal control to break up any solidarity or affective community between women. “Normalized” female-to-female violence and betrayal is built into a heterosexual, patriarchal society as a tool in order to keep women from rationally recognizing their “mutually oppressive complicity in a system of male privilege” (Johnson 168). Women must either appear irrelevant to one another or relate to one another as competitors as a way of decreasing their potential cultural power.

However, when Maria confides in her jailer, Jemima, the outcome is radically different. Maria’s first exchange with Jemima, concerning the validity of her incarceration, is as follows:

“Do you really think me mad?” asked Maria, meeting the searching glance of her eye.
“Not just now. But what does that prove?—only that you must be the more carefully watched, for appearing at times so reasonable.” (Maria 9)

Jemima’s statement reaffirms the typical patriarchal interpretation of Maria’s actions: the very appearance of reason in a woman threatens the “natural” social order, and therefore it must be monitored as a source of potential subversion or danger. Additionally, unlike some of the other women with whom Maria shares her story, Jemima’s previous abuse by men does not immediately influence her to aide Maria. In fact, Jemima remains unmoved by the story of Maria’s false confinement for the very reason that “she had felt the crushing hand of power,
hardened by the exercises of injustice, and ceased to wonder at the perversions of the understanding” (Maria 12). Maria’s position as a mother, rather than a fellow woman, determines Jemima’s intervention. Wollstonecraft writes,

But, when told that her child, only four months old, had been torn from her, even while she was discharging the tenderest maternal office, the woman awoke in a bosom long estranged from feminine emotions, and Jemima determined to alleviate all in her power, without hazarding the loss of her place, the sufferings of a wretched mother, apparently injured, and certainly unhappy. A sense of right seems to result from the simplest act of reason, and to preside over the faculties of the mind, like the master-sense of feeling, to rectify the rest. (Maria 12)

Here, Wollstonecraft again evokes the imagery of “awakening” and, in a subtle sense, the theme of gothic “live burial,” as the “woman” who has been trapped inside the hardened tomb of Jemima’s abused exterior is freed. In an interesting move, Wollstonecraft also uses this passage to connect “feminine emotion” to the “act of reason,” two qualities that patriarchal discourse claims are antithetical. Wollstonecraft describes Jemima’s feminine emotions as providing the impetus for a rational decision, which in turn produces the “sense of right” that guides and rectifies her degraded mind. Whereas the other women’s internalization of the doctrine of feminine irrationality and submission prevented them from acting from a true “sense of right,” Jemima’s choice illustrates Wollstonecraft’s belief that positive virtue results from an active sensibility (as opposed to “false refinement”) that acts in harmony with reason. This proper union of sympathetic passions and reason will produce the rational women whose actions “rectify the rest”—be that “rest” another’s injuries, the troubles of their own mind, or (as proposed in Vindication) the ills of society itself.

Jemima’s story, one of the three central narratives that comprise the first volume of Maria, is integral to Wollstonecraft’s critique of artificial constructs of motherhood and the “monstrous” women they produce. Jemima, unlike Maria, is not a middle-class woman who has been “protected” within the promoted model of non-sexualized, bourgeois motherhood. Instead, she is one of the lower-class women who have been sexualized and denied a position as a “natural” mother in the name of establishing the maternal ideal; after all, there must be deviant models against which respectable norms can be judged. As Felicity Nussbaum argues, England’s “crisis of authority” over its middle-class women was partially contained by pitting bourgeois
mothers against their lower-class peers. In comparing their maternal behaviors, patriarchal authorities could be assured that middle-class women could happily recognize their differences from lower-class women as proof of some superiority, but would not be able forget that there existed in their undeniable biological sameness “an indication of their gendered inferiority” (Nussbaum 126).

Jemima, who variously refers to herself in such “unnatural” terms as “creature” or “monster,” lives a life comprised of a series of abuses and exploitations. It is in her that Maria’s overarching metaphor about women’s positions as slaves in eighteenth-century society is actualized. Ty observes that Jemima—repeatedly abandoned, beaten, raped, starved, prostituted, and imprisoned—is literally a societal slave in that “[s]he has no control and no right to her own body” (Unsex’d Revolutionaries 38). Furthermore, Jemima’s encounters with motherhood serve to underscore the gothic nature of maternity, not just for middle-class women who are frightened of falling outside the strict confines of idealized domestic motherhood, but for those poor and working women who are by definition always outside such margins. Jemima describes becoming pregnant after a brutal rape with an invocation of the gothic feeling of “horror:” “I discovered with horror—a! what horror!—that I was with child” (41).

The “horror” Jemima experiences with her pregnancy serves as an interesting corollary to the dreadful revulsion Maria feels towards the sexual union that resulted in her daughter’s conception. Maria writes to her daughter, “The greatest sacrifice of my principles in my whole life, was the allowing of my husband again to be familiar with my person, though to this cruel act of self-denial, when I wished the earth to open and swallow me, you owe your birth, and I the unutterable pleasure of being your mother” (Maria 86). Although the last words in Maria’s statement emphasize the pleasure that her role as a mother brings her, her use of the word “unutterable” (reminiscent of the Gothic “unspeakable”) is particularly significant. Kipp argues that this pleasure is “unutterable” because, having been (literally) borne out of horror, it is fundamentally “incomprehensible;” motherhood required of Maria “an act of self-sacrifice so profound it is equated with a desire for death” (Kipp 79), and therefore the happiness it brings is experienced as unnatural. Just as Maria feels that her “natural” maternal pleasure is unnatural, Jemima’s “unnatural” response to her maternal state—her suicidal anguish and near-deadly abortion—occurs as what Kipp calls “a ‘natural,’ if horrifying impulse toward ‘self”-
preservation” (80). In Maria, Wollstonecraft explodes the natural/unnatural constructs of maternal behavior, proving just how artificial—even, unnatural—such a binary is.

Early in the course of her imprisonment, Maria begins the project of writing an instructive narrative for her stolen daughter. Although unsure if she will ever find the child again, Maria writes with the hope of eventually cultivating her daughter’s sense of reason, writing, “From my narrative, my dear girl, you may gather the instruction, the counsel, which is meant rather to exercise than influence your mind” (Maria 58). Maria’s narrative, however, serves a dual purpose in relation to Wollstonecraft’s promotion of feminine rationality. Her memoirs are not only a vehicle through which Maria’s daughter will receive rational instruction, but the act of writing is also a tool through which Maria can focus her intellectual activities and maintain her own vulnerable sense of reason. As “one who had no other resource to escape from sorrow, and the feverish dreams of wretchedness or felicity,” Maria finds that “writing was then the only alternative” to losing her sanity (Maria 14).

Jemima’s first concrete actions in assisting Maria directly relate to promoting female reason as well. Jemima is swayed to go and search for Maria’s missing daughter after the distraught mother begs, “In the name of God, assist me to snatch her from destruction! Let me but give her an education—let me but prepare her body and mind to encounter the ills which await her sex, and I will teach her to consider you as her second mother, and herself as the prop of your age” (Maria 55). Here Maria explicitly equates maternal duty with providing a rational education, and imagines the intergenerational feminine support and solidarity that result from such instruction.

However, Maria’s hopes for her daughter’s happy, independent future are shattered upon learning that the child has apparently died. After hearing the devastating news, Maria’s determination to maintain her reason and communicate her knowledge and experiences to her daughter apparently dies as well, as she is “plunged in the deepest melancholy” and abandons rational thought to instead “indulg[e] superstitious notion” (Maria 57). Maria’s sense of rational, active sensibility begins to become overshadowed by the dangerous passion and imaginative enthusiasm that she projects upon Darnford, a shadowy character who resembles the heroes of Maria’s favorite romances—the same romances that Wollstonecraft so vehemently criticizes in Vindication as purveyors of the false sensibility that “prevents the intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others” (VRW 61).
The language with which Wollstonecraft describes Maria’s growing passion signal the dangerous and stereotypical feminine irrationality in which she is indulging: for example, Maria finds herself falling “insensibly” into confidential discourse with Darnford (Maria 122), and begins to trust his declarations of love “without sufficient reason” (Maria 123, my emphasis). In the midst of her grief over her daughter’s death, Maria receives Darnford as her new “husband” and “protector” (Maria 122), thereby reinserting herself in the back into the conservative heterosexual, patriarchal power relations in which weak, submissive women are protected by strong, rational men.

Wollstonecraft depicts Maria’s escape from the madhouse almost immediately following the scene in which Maria and Darnford consummate their relationship. Because of her new dependent role in a stereotypical romance, Maria’s escape does not represent the fully liberating flight from patriarchal stricthes that it ought to. Instead, upon Jemima’s urgings that they both must leave the asylum, Maria’s first words are, “But Darnford!” followed by the mournful statement that “liberty has lost its sweets” (Maria 124). Jemima successively insists on their departure, however, and a truly gothic scene ensues:

A being, with a visage that would have suited one possessed by a devil, crossed the path, and seized Maria by the arm. […] Maria said,] “Who are you? what are you?” for the form was scarcely human. “If you are made of flesh and blood,” his ghastly eyes glared on her, “do not stop me!”

“No, no; you have nothing to do with me,” she exclaimed, “this is a moment of life and death!”—(Maria 125)

Flinging her arms around Jemima and crying “Save me!,” Maria and her companion eventually manage to open the gate and run until “they were out of his reach” (Maria 125).

The supernatural violence of this scene is jarring after the tragic but fairly realistic events recounted up until this point in the novel. Although Wollstonecraft’s descriptions of the madhouse scenery throughout are undeniably gothic (in such lines as, “horror still reigned in the darkened cells” [Maria 35]), the inmates receive little description aside from the sympathetic sketches of “poor wretches” and “petrified figures.” It is therefore difficult for a reader to assimilate the sudden unexplained appearance of a fierce devil-being into the overall narrative. This incident does, however, fit perfectly with Sedgwick’s analysis of gothic conventions, in
which she writes that “the worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralyzing instances of the uncanny in these novels […] are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall” (14). Additionally, the creature’s words are the very epitome of the gothic uncanny—the familiar made terrifyingly unfamiliar—in that they are the same words Jesus poses to his mother Mary in the New Testament account of the Marriage at Cana (John 2:3-5), surely a well-known story to an eighteenth-century Christian audience.\(^8\)

In recognizing that the “sepulchral voice” (strangely disembodied in this scene, yet presumably coming from the creature who menaces Maria) speaks the famous words of Jesus Christ, Maria’s retort—“You have nothing to do with me!”—and subsequent rescue by Jemima take on great symbolic import. In leaving her husband and trying to flee his legal control, Maria has already rejected two major institutions of patriarchal authority: marriage and the law. During these chaotic moments within the madhouse gate, she metaphorically loosens herself (with the support of another rational woman’s strength) from the oppressive grip of yet another, and arguably most powerful, masculine institution: Christianity, a religion in which Wollstonecraft saw feminine oppression—based upon the condemnation of the first woman’s fall—at the heart of much of its practice.\(^9\)

However, Maria’s ultimate attempt at rejecting patriarchy does not result in a decisive break from male control into rational feminine independence, largely because of the romantic script into which she has fallen with Darnford and her inability to define herself in relation to any term outside of conservative domesticity. Although she no longer fits her culture’s definition of a wife and mother, as an eighteenth-century woman Maria has no alternative framework with which to view herself. Even after setting up a new house with Darnford and Jemima (who stays on in the capacity of a paid housekeeper), the thought of Maria’s “child was ever before her” (Maria 125) and, despite her aversion to marriage as a confining institution, Maria still “wished to avow her affection to Darnford, by becoming his wife according to established rules” (Maria 128). Therefore, when Darnford mysteriously leaves on business before he and Maria are to be brought to court on respective charges of adultery and seduction—charges which Maria defends with an impassioned and rational argument, only to be dismissed by the judge as having pled her irrational “feelings” (Maria 133)—and fails to return, there is nothing left for the broken woman than to sink into complete irrational despair. Essentially, then, Maria’s existence once outside the madhouse is nearly identical to (and, arguably, worse than) the experience she had inside. This
too, of course, is in keeping with gothic conventions, as “in many instances, conditions outside the imprisoning wall simply duplicate conditions within” (Sedgwick 23). What is so oppressive about woman’s oppressed position in society, Wollstonecraft’s novel reveals, is that it is not a specific structure that can be breached by a brave escape attempt. It is a invasive, ideological imprisonment that exists inside its own inmates, built into their very understandings of self.

Following the final full scene of Maria’s failed defense in court, the rest of Wollstonecraft’s manuscript consists solely of two detached sentences and five fragments of varying lengths indicating possible endings for the story. The two sentences each refer to Darnford’s extended absence, his possible disloyalty, and the growing worry it causes Maria (a situation which is highly reminiscent to Wollstonecraft’s own heartbreaking experiences in her relationship to Gilbert Imlay). Of the proposed endings, each written in a series of vague, dashed phrases, several anticipate a generally tragic end for Maria’s plight, mainly involving a second pregnancy, a miscarriage, and a suicidal death for the sad heroine.

Nonetheless, one proposed conclusion stands out as highly different from the others. Beginning where the other possibilities end, the last fragment opens with a pregnant, abandoned Maria swallowing a fatal dose of laudanum and waiting to die and escape “from this hell of disappointment” (Maria 136). Instead of immediately dying, however, Maria instead experiences a sort of birth. Using language nearly identical to that with which Wollstonecraft described Maria’s first awakening to rationality in the madhouse, here at the moment of imminent death Maria finds that “Still her eyes closed not—one remembrance with fright velocity followed another” (Maria 136). As she drifts in and out of consciousness, Maria realizes that Jemima has entered her room with her presumed-dead daughter, the sight of whom causes Maria to vomit up the poison and be “restored to life” (Maria 137). The scene ends with the child’s momentous utterance of “Mamma!” (a word taught to her by Jemima), after which Maria finally exclaims, “The conflict is over!—I will live for my child!” (Maria 137).

Ending with a rebirth in place of a death, this conclusion breaks the gothic cycle of eighteenth-century maternity in which becoming a mother always involves some kind of literal and metaphoric mortality: having survived the very real dangers of childbirth, a woman lived only to become “buried alive” in the crushing artificial scripts of motherhood and femininity, bearing forth daughters who, denied any subjectivity and citizenship in their society, were themselves as good as already-dead in that they were doomed to the same oppressive existence.
This particular ending of *Maria*, on the other hand, reverses the traditional birthing scene in that the existence of the already-*living* daughter allows the *dead* mother to be born back into life. Furthermore, the new life Maria reclaims in her role as “Mamma” is not going to be the same submissive existence that marked her first miserable twenty-six years on earth, but rather one free of tyrannical male domination—there are no masculine authority figures connected with this last “birthing room”—and initiated by an act of agency. Maria makes the active, rational choice to live as a mother for her child. The fact that Jemima is there to assist in Maria’s “birth”—acting as a sort of metaphoric midwife by presenting the lost child “alive again” to her mother and encouraging Maria’s recovery—emphasizes the importance of women’s solidarity in this new vision of positive feminine possibility. As Claudia Johnson argues, the ideal domestic scene that defines eighteenth-century womanhood has been restructured in *Maria’s* hopeful conclusion, so that “the emancipated, sturdy, parentally purposive, and rationally loving republican couple that Wollstonecraft spent her career imaging is, finally, a female couple” (170).

It is ultimately impossible for modern readers to know whether Maria’s final birthing room ordeal would have ended in a radically optimist assertion of new life or the tragic finality of death, because Wollstonecraft’s writing was left unfinished when her own maternal scene ended in the latter. Perhaps this is why it remains so difficult to separate the events of Wollstonecraft’s life from the pages of this last work. Surely it was for her widower; in his editorial notes that accompanied his posthumous publication of *Maria*, Godwin’s writing seems almost unconsciously replete with the language of the maternity that Wollstonecraft experienced while writing her novel and carrying her (their) unborn child. He describes the novel as “these sketches of what, if they had been filled up in a manner adequate to the writer’s conception, would perhaps have given a new impulse to the manners of a world” (*Maria* 4), and later describes each of the story’s events as singularly “pregnant with passion and distress,” unlike those produced by “barren authors” (*Maria* 135-4, my emphasis). Her critics could not separate the woman from the writing either, and Godwin’s well-intentioned but ill-timed *Memoirs* gave fodder to the conservative fire that matched Wollstonecraft’s demise to the apparent moral depravity of her published philosophy and behaviors.

But perhaps it is truly best not to forget the events of Wollstonecraft’s life in a final analysis of *Maria*. In fact, it may be essential to remember them; after all, the author certainly did not strive keep her personal story completely out of her writing. Instead, traces of
Wollstonecraft’s real parents, sisters, lovers, and oppressors deliberately people the pages of *Maria* because Maria Venables’s fictions are Mary Wollstonecraft’s realities, in that they are also *all* women’s realities in eighteenth-century society. Depending on which fragmented ending one reads, Maria, struggling to assert agency and articulate a “self” in a culture that denied her access to either, either is silenced in a gothic script of excessive and fatal feminine irrationality (the “destiny of women” that Polwhele righteously pointed out), or defies the limits placed upon her maternal body and mind and rationally reclaims her life for herself, her daughter, and all women in all generations to come. Likewise, in her life, work, and death, Wollstonecraft was variously seen as an “unsex’d” monster who fatally forgot her female bodily limits in her irrational claims to a masculine mind, or a true genius whose insistence in the innate harmony between women’s rational, emotional, and maternal capacities could arm the female sex with the tools necessary to finally break free of the unnatural gothic constructions of self to which they were subjected.

Mary Wollstonecraft publicly defied the unnatural patriarchal constructs of ideal mothers, and so in dying she was made to embody monstrous ones. However, demonizing Wollstonecraft did not relegate her feminist ideas to permanent obscurity, and neither did death; although both the result of difficult “births,” Wollstonecraft’s final maternal creations—a daughter, who would become a novelist, and a novel about the power of daughters—ensured her rational words as a revolutionary “mother” would continue to be transmitted and reproduced in the hopes of saving later women from the oppressive gothic scripts that haunted her generation.
In both its most idealized and most feared forms, the maternal body is always understood as a kind of conduit. In “Volume without contours,” Irigaray suggests that the dominant fantasy of the mother is as a volume or a “receptacle for the (re)production of sameness” (66). She also makes clear that men need women to be an essentially closed volume, one whose input and output a man can control by immobilizing it in his possession (Whitford 28). Likewise, in the eighteenth century, a middle-class woman’s reproductive work served as the proper channel through which a man could transmit the very things that maintained patriarchal order; a husband’s property, titles, and class position went to his rightful heir thanks to the workings of his wife’s biology.

The fact that this fundamental power of transmission rested so clearly in the woman’s hands made the system of inheritance (and consequently, the very foundation of hierarchical, patriarchal society) seem uncomfortably tenuous. Women, historically thought to be naturally weak, irrational, and, in the words of Ellen Pollak, “insatiably oversexed” (5), had the power to eradicate class distinctions and masculine authority if they so chose by wielding their reproductive power in a subversive or unrestrained manner; they could place illegitimate offspring on thrones unbeknownst to patriarchal authorities, thereby flouting that authority completely.

One way to prevent these threatening and subversive forms of reproductive transmission was to pathologize all forms of the conductive bond between mother and child and between mothers and society, as happens in the dominant discourse of eighteenth-century England. Every maternal transmission was reconfigured as a potentially “unnatural” one, from the physical milk and blood that flowed from the mother’s body and into the child’s, to the invisible inheritance she passed down in the way of the circumstances of conception or her mindset during pregnancy. Moreover, this pathologization served political and social interests in the patriarchal society. Much as I argued in the previous chapter in relation to the eighteenth-century denial of feminine (particularly maternal) capacities for rationality, I suggest here that if women were made to
suspect and fear their own bodies as channels of contagion and tragedy for both themselves and their offspring, they would come to fear all their acts of maternal transmission rather than turn to them as sources of inherent power. Subsequently, their actions could be more easily controlled by male authorities.

I want to explore the pathologization of maternal transmission in the eighteenth century in relation to another aspect of eighteenth-century motherhood, namely, confinement. In constructing the maternal body as a pollutant, a source of contagion and corruption, it is only logical that the dominant masculine, rational discourse would also encourage a “quarantine” of sorts observed around the woman during and post-pregnancy. For upper- and middle-class mothers in the 1700s, an obligatory month-long “lying-in” or “confinement” period during their last month of pregnancy and following labor served as this very sort of quarantine; even poor women were often expected to confine their scenes of childbirth and postpartum healing in some way. Although various versions of maternal confinement had been in practice for centuries before the period I am exploring, and, arguably, supported and created by the very women who were confined, I am interested in the oppressive and punitive meanings maternal confinement takes on in the context of a patriarchal society that was in the process of wresting control of the birthing room from women by investing pregnancy and motherhood with uncontrollable, unnatural, and pollutant qualities.

One story that perhaps best demonstrates the ideological links of confinement and pathological maternal transmission is that of the “Rabbit Breeder of Godalming.” Some seventy years before Mary Wollstonecraft died from complications in childbirth (only to be criticized as an unnatural woman who deserved her gendered death), another British Mary found herself at the center of an “unnatural” birthing room scandal and punishment. In 1726, Mary Toft, the poor wife of a cloth-worker in Godalming, Surrey, astounded the nation when she claimed to be giving birth to rabbits, and proceeded to perform this miracle in the presence of some of England’s most eminent medical men. Numerous physicians, surgeons, and male-midwives (including the Prince of Wales’s secretary, members of the court of George I, and the esteemed Sir Richard Manningham) physically examined Toft in an effort to discover the source of the alleged “Rabbets.” She was also brought to London and exhibited to throngs of common people who clamored to see the convulsive “leapings” of her pregnant belly and, if lucky, witness (in the words of one physician) the “filthy miracle” of her monstrous births.
Eventually, however, the case was proven to be an elaborate hoax. After Manningham threatened to “try a very painful Experiment on her” in order to prove “that she was differently form’d from other Women” (Manningham 31-2), Mary Toft confessed to allowing her mid-wife mother-in-law Anne Toft to insert dead rabbits into her womb in order to make money from the spectacle. Upon confessing, Toft was charged with being “a Notorious and Vile Cheat” and sent to Bridewell prison, although ultimately the charges against her were inexplicably dismissed. (Dennis Todd speculates “that those in authority thought either she had been punished sufficiently by her imprisonment in Bridewell or that further prosecution of her case might embarrass others who had been embarrassed enough” (37).) Embarrassment certainly characterized the experience of the medical men whom Toft had duped, and several of them (particularly John Howard and Nathanael St. André, who had actively defended the validity of the monstrous births) found their reputations almost completely ruined. In fact, while the public’s reaction to the scandal was largely one of ridicule and anger, it was the medical profession, rather than the Toft women, that received the brunt of criticism. While doctors themselves rallied together against Mary and Anne Toft, uniting, as Bonnie Blackwell argues, “in declaring male presence in gynecology as a methodological imperative to sniff out the dishonesty of the female patient” and “stave off alliances she might make with her unethical cohort, the ignorant and superstitious mid-wife” (“Mechanical Mother” 99-100), the public reserved their outrage for the “rational” men who had been taken in and thereby made, in the words of Lisa Cody, “emasculated, feminine, dupes” (133). Mary Toft, though intensely satirized, was also most often described as foolish, weak, and decidedly illiterate, and was therefore exonerated from real guilt by virtue of her “natural” female ignorance. As one writer observed immediately following the scandal, the public’s “Resentments fall upon the true imposters, or Quacks, and not on a poor innocent Woman, whose Misfortunes they have made a Cat’s Paw of their roguery” (Tuft 8-9).

Scholars like Todd, Blackwell, and Cody have observed the contradictions in this reaction. The facts clearly showed that Mary Toft had enough shrewdness and skill to almost get away with a very elaborate hoax, and the intense performative aspect of her monstrous births, such as her ability to veritably “switch on” seizures and contractions on cue, reveals how much active participation the events required from her. However, this obvious power and agency, linked so inextricably to maternity and therefore femininity, could not be “allowed” to exist in a
society in which social order depended on doctrines of female weakness and subordination in contrast with male rationality and authority. Proclaiming Mary Toft’s guilt in the courts and public discourse would only have confirmed that an illiterate, lower-class woman had almost managed to outwit the nation’s most visible embodiments of rational, patriarchal institutions: medicine, law, and, given the doctor’s associations with the royal court, even the crown. In addition, she had not simply threatened male hegemony with her “irrational” maternal biology—after all, the “births” were not real—but instead with the purposeful and “rational” machinations of her mind. Therefore, both the doctors and the public she had fooled needed to cast Mary Toft as a passive, innocent tool of others’ cunning, and sought scapegoats upon whom to displace the power, intelligence, and agency that her participation in the scandal obviously required.

Confining Mary Toft in a prison did nothing to address her real transgressions: the circumstances and interpretations of Mary Toft’s story had to be confined to “safe” parameters in order to contain the potential spread of her insubordinate feminine powers.

Essentially, then, the threat of Mary Toft lay in her power of transmission: on the one hand, her maternal imaginative imprintation that she claimed caused the births (a common early eighteenth-century belief which will be explained in further detail later in this chapter), and, on the other, the transmission of a subversive maternal, irrational “disease” that overpowered the finest rational male minds of the time and could potentially “infect” other women with the desire to do the same. Masculine authorities had no choice but to confine Toft by depicting her through pathological, weakening constructions of womanhood in order to wrest back the control they almost lost.

Mary Toft’s story encompasses and introduces the same themes that would appear later in the century in the works of radical women writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays. Toft’s maternity, literally pathologized and eventually “confined” in the name of patriarchal control, reflects the metaphoric experience of eighteenth-century motherhood that Wollstonecraft and Hays literalized in their gothic fictions. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wollstonecraft’s depictions of female suffering in *Maria* literally take place inside a prison, where a woman has been confined due to the “hereditary malady” she exhibits after childbirth. Readers learn that the pathological madness from which Maria supposedly suffers is none other than a rational rebellion against patriarchal oppression, and that it is the transmission of the subversive power of this threatening ideology, not a contaminating disease, from which Maria’s
confinement is meant to shield society. Furthermore, as S. Leigh Matthews argues, the supposed loss of Maria’s daughter “prevents her, to borrow [Margaret] Homan’s title, from ‘bearing the word’ of rebellion down to her (very significantly) female child” (90). However, the fact that Maria (and, in reality, Wollstonecraft) is still determined to write a narrative to transmit her belief and experience not only to her daughter but to any future reader demonstrates the ways in which a woman can successfully harness the positive ideological potentials of a new sort of maternal production and transmission—writing—in order to encourage future generations to reclaim their agency and identities. Even when their bodies have been pathologized and confined, Wollstonecraft’s work attests to the ways that women must still use their minds to support one another in rebelling against oppression.

Another novel that explores the same notions of maternal transmission and confinement is Mary Hays’s The Victim of Prejudice. Hays, Wollstonecraft’s contemporary and also her close friend, dramatizes the ways in which women are doubly confined by their sexualized, reproductive bodies that are in turn subject to oppressive cultural scripts. In The Victim of Prejudice, Mary Raymond becomes entrapped by the gothic story of her mother and subsequently punished for the inherited sins that were transmitted through her monstrous maternity. Although Mary’s narrative ends in a spiral of personal tragedy, I argue that Hays’s work, like Wollstonecraft’s, attempts to demonstrate the possibility of positive, even revolutionary, transmission from and for women even in the most oppressive of social conditions. Mary Raymond is defeated and confined by her “pollutant” mother’s story, but her determination to voice her own story even through her confinement may free future women from her fate.

“Involved, As By a Fatal Mechanism, In the Infamy of My Wretched Mother:” The Power and Pathology of Maternal Transmission

In the eighteenth century, various formulations of maternal transmission were recognized and gradually pathologized. One of the earliest of such notions was that of the influence of the maternal imagination (called “maternal impressions” or “maternal imprintation”), a doctrine that attributed great power to a pregnant woman’s imagination over her gestating fetus. According to Dennis Todd, theories of a mother’s imaginative influence predated written times, as it was purportedly supported by such thinkers as Hesiod and Hippocrates and persisted through to early
modern writers like Martin Luther (47). The idea gained such momentum in Western Europe from Renaissance times onward that it was accepted as fact that “monstrous” or malformed offspring resulted from disorders of the maternal imagination and a woman’s capacity to “imprint” physical characteristics upon her child (Huet 1).

According to Julia Epstein, the theories surrounding maternal impressions revolved around two ideas. First, women were thought to mark their children by any strong, unsatisfied desire they might experience during pregnancy. An oft-cited example was that a mother’s uncontrollable craving for certain fruits would leave berry-shaped growths or birthmarks on her infant’s skin; the theological analogy between “forbidden fruit” and a monstrous birth are obvious (Epstein 117). Secondly, imprintation was also thought to be the result of the shock of disturbing experiences. Everything from the sight of public executions to vicious animals was blamed for the subsequent birth of a deformed baby. In Imagining Monsters, Dennis Todd even recounts such grotesque instances as one in which a “woman who had watched the disembowelment of a calf with a fascinated horror gave birth to a child whose viscera hung out from an opening below his navel” (50). Of course, these two concepts of the prenatal influence of imagination were not mutually exclusive; Mary Toft cited both desire and disturbance in her account of her monstrous births, as she claimed she had been five weeks pregnant when she was startled by rabbits while working in field, after which she felt a constant desire to eat nothing but rabbits, although she was unable to procure some (Dennis Todd 7).

The general understanding of maternal impressions was that most imaginative imprints upon an unborn child were involuntary on the part of the mother. Even so, the doctrine of prenatal influence provided undeniable sources of power for many early European women; although the practice was hardly universalized, numerous commentators endorsed the pregnant woman’s complete control in the household (Cody 33). Many middle- and upper-class families took the desires of pregnant women seriously out of fear of the possible dangerous prenatal influence that could result, and therefore went out of their ways to satisfy them; although most of these surely involved gentle indulgences, Epstein also recounts the extreme example of a German man who obliged his pregnant wife when she claimed “that she felt overwhelmed by the need to smash a dozen eggs in his face” (117). Furthermore, some women were feared not as victims of their imaginations, but manipulators of it. Marilyn Francus writes that any woman was thought to have the ability to hide the evidence of adulterous sin by thinking of her husband
while committing adultery, thereby ensuring that any illegitimate child would look like her legitimate partner (840). Starting in the seventeenth century, some medical texts even advised women on what sort of imaginative exercises they ought to employ in the hopes of producing not only coveted boy infants but also “great men” and “male geniuses” (Braidotti 146). This understanding of maternal imagination emphasizes women’s role as conscious wielders of procreative power and “raises maternity to the status of art” (Francus 840).

As the eighteenth century progressed, however, and Enlightenment notions of empiricism, science and reason were advanced, numerous authorities began to refute the doctrine of maternal impressions. According to Cody, the first text focused specifically on discrediting theories of maternal imagination was James Blondel’s 1727 *The Strength of Imagination in Pregnant Women Examim’d*, written in reaction to the Mary Toft scandal (145). In it, Blondel categorically demonstrated that theories of imaginative impressions were not grounded in empirical observations, and therefore dismissed them as mere superstition.

In an important distinction, Blondel and other critics of the doctrine did not deny that a woman’s body and mindset could adversely “imprint” their child; however, they cited woman’s uncontrollable, irrational emotions as the cause of fetal problems and abnormalities, rather than the active maternal “art” of imaginative imprintation. Excessive emotion, physicians warned, could result in miscarriages, stillbirths, or irregular development of a fetus, and so women were strongly cautioned to monitor and fear their inherently irrational, over-emotional natures. If they failed to do so, the results could be devastating; women were told they could “end up transforming an otherwise normal pregnancy into a diseased state” (Cody 147). In *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, Clare Hanson describes this new doctrine as one of “maternal responsibility, for it encouraged women to internalize the medico-social view of their responsibility for pregnancy and, in consequence, to discipline their emotions and adopt ‘appropriate’ (constrained) behavior” (28).

By thus reconfiguring the concept of maternal imprintation, male medical authorities like Blondel stripped women of a powerful sense of control over their own reproductive abilities (one that also threatened men’s claims to complete cultural and biological dominance) and instead ominously constructed mothers-to-be as potential victims of their own uncontrollable nature. Because the realm of rational thought was strictly associated with masculinity—and, in fact, was often cited as the basis for man’s power over women—the earlier concept of maternal
imprintation in which women had the potential to purposely and even *rationally* manipulate their mind in order to affect their offspring encroached on the realm of masculine ability. The only solution was to confine women strictly to the realm of their biology, while also making that very biology (rather than outside sources, like frightening sights) the “danger” they had to fear. This also effectively increased male dominance; for example, husbands were no longer encouraged to indulge their pregnant wife’s desires if they wanted to protect their offspring, but to control and constrain the woman’s mind and body in accordance with medical conscriptions. As Cody points out, the paradox of the new understanding of imprintation was that much of the male medical discourse vehemently denied that women had any real influence over their fetuses, but then predicated their own authority over the reproductive body by asserting that the strange powers of a woman’s mind and body required rational, male intervention (122). Therefore, the maternal “responsibility” cited in this new doctrine of prenatal influence did not denote any power or control for a woman at all, but only the duty to defer to rational male surveillance and authority.

It is against this cultural backdrop that I wish to situate Mary Wollstonecraft’s personal and political writings, as it helps to explain the centrality of “maternal responsibility” in her work. In her letters written during her pregnancy with her first daughter Fanny, Wollstonecraft, a champion of women’s capacity for reason and rationality, nonetheless betrays a fear that excitement of her emotions may adversely affect her child in utero. In one letter to Gilbert Imlay, she writes, “It is time for me to grow more reasonable […] I have, in fact, been very much indisposed for a few days past, and the notion that I was tormenting, or perhaps killing, a poor little animal, about whom I am grown anxious and tender, now I feel it alive, made me worse” (*Collected Letters* 240). Later, these same issues appear in her novel *Maria*, as the pregnant heroine, upon feeling “very forcibly the effect which perturbation of spirits produces on a woman in [her] situation,” voluntarily confines herself while suffering under “the apprehension of a miscarriage” (*Maria* 104). Hanson, analyzing these and other passages in Wollstonecraft’s writing in which the mother-to-be likens herself to a potential murderer, describes how eighteenth-century women, even intelligent and radical ones like Wollstonecraft, were “not in the position to contest the prevailing medical views about the effect of emotion on [an] unborn child, and the result was a wearing degree of self-blame” (29). Women like Wollstonecraft and her fictional Maria deliberately constrain their bodies and minds because they have been made to
fear themselves as both potential victims and villains; in their society’s pathological and uncontrollable constructions of maternity, their motherhood can at any moment turn murderous.

Eighteenth-century women were not only taught to fear the pathologically murderous potential of their maternal bodies during their child’s gestation, however. Instead, the possibility of polluting their children continued to haunt mothers well after giving birth. Julie Kipp describes how the late-eighteenth-century literature “abounds with portraits of well-intentioned but ultimately death-dealing mothers […] women who poison their children with the same reproductive bodies that are supposed to nurture and shelter their developing young” (15). One of the most obvious conduits between a mother and child was the nourishing maternal breast, and this was also one of the most problematically pathologized acts of maternal transmission.

As Kipp points out, eighteenth-century women had great difficulty reconciling the increasingly popular emphasis belief in the infectious dangers inherent in all physical ties between mothers and children with the growing cultural imperative that women had a natural duty to breastfeed their infants. Starting in the mid-century, physicians began to both produce and invoke various scientific discoveries in order to not only encourage women to breastfeed their babies, but virtually demand it; the benefits of colostrum for children began to be universally promoted by 1748, and various experiments conducted within the new lying-in hospitals furthered the understanding that breastfeeding could also benefit mothers by radically reducing instances of fatal “milk fever” in nursing women (Fildes 86). Contemporary German authorities took these findings one step further and actually legislated breastfeeding, requiring all healthy mothers to nurse their children (Kipp 38-9). However, this kind of adamant medical discourse that demonized mothers who did not readily accept their “natural duty” also ignored some of the enormous social, political, and physical pressures that had been in place for women (particularly, upper-class women) for centuries that had discouraged women from nursing. For example, the required fashion for upper-class mothers, including tightly-laced corsets and stays, could lead to irrevocably inverted nipples, and the infertility caused by a nursing mother’s suppressed ovulation conflicted with many upper- and middle-class women’s social obligation to bear as many heirs as possible (Kipp 40). Furthermore, some men flatly refused to allow their wives to breastfeed at all because of social prohibitions against sexual relations during the nursing period, thereby pitting a woman’s expected obedience to her husband against her equally expected “natural duty.”
Many women, including Mary Wollstonecraft, readily accepted the idea that it was natural to nurse their babies. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, for example, Wollstonecraft devotes entire sections to emphasizing the natural benefits of breastfeeding, advocating it as a healthy form of birth control and writing that “nature has so wisely ordered things, that did women suckle their children, they would preserve their own health, and there would be such an interval between the birth of each child, that we should seldom see a houseful of babes” (*VRW* 197). However, even if women agreed with this argument, they still had to face the contradictory popular message that the maternal breast was also always a potential source of contamination. Kipp notes that even physicians who advocated maternal breastfeeding warned that their endorsement only applied to women whose characters were not considered “disturbed” or “tainted,” and that many “fashionable” mothers may be so morally dissipated that their children were better off with wet nurses (42). Moreover, choosing the proper wet nurse was equally risky. Women were warned against using urban wet nurses, who were associated with diseases like syphilis and thought guilty of creating a “web of infectious people” (Kipp 43); furthermore, the popular belief that children assumed the mental, racial, and emotional characters of their nurse forced mothers to agonize over the smallest characteristics, from diets to hair color, of even seemingly healthy rural nurses. Overall, mothers were again trapped in a double-bind in which any decision they made about breastfeeding could potentially kill, or at very least permanently contaminate, their offspring.

Finally, the threat of “polluting” future generations did not apply only to the physical exchanges between mothers and children that occurred during pregnancy and nursing, but could actually take much more serious and insidious forms that would doom the “tainted” offspring forever. In fact, the intangible sins or moral failings of a mother—even prior to her pregnancy—were thought to be transferred to her unfortunate offspring. Many contemporary accounts of weak or sickly babies were attributed to a mother’s vicious past, even if physical remnants of that vice (most often in the form of sexually transmitted diseases) were not present. Furthermore, the notion of a mother’s sin visited upon a child rang especially true in the cases of illegitimate pregnancies; although even a child that resulted from an illicit union ought to be considered in terms of a *tabula rasa*, in practice illegitimate children were often treated as inherently tainted beings whose very existence functioned to threaten the proper patrilineal transmission of power,
and therefore were made outcasts of social communities before they even had the chance to enter one.

In short, women were expected to confine their behaviors, emotions, abilities, and even bodies to the designated scripts of submissive, masculine-controlled maternity, if they did not want to confine their children to terrible fates. A good, “natural” mother who desired to protect a child from her own “unnatural” transmissions willingly gave up her freedom and agency during her pregnancy, and this sacrifice of maternal control was perhaps best literalized in the practice of maternal confinement.

“A Prison May Yet Bring Her to Reason:” The Politics of Power and Maternal Confinement

In The Making of Man-Midwifery, Adrian Wilson suggests that an eighteenth-century woman’s childbed confinement, or “lying-in,” was a locus of celebration, support, healing and collective female power for women (27), during which other women treated the new mother as a beloved invalid and sheltered her for a short time from the normal rigors of married life (including sexual activity, which was suspended during confinement). Wilson argues adamantly that rituals like confinement and its related “churching” (a sort of post-confinement ecclesiastic purification rite popular throughout the eighteenth century) were “constructed and maintained by women because it was in the interests of women” (Wilson 29, original italics).

Wilson’s perspective on these practices is appealing in that it depicts maternal confinement as an active choice with many positive benefits for women. However, I would argue, much as Bonnie Blackwell does in her essay “Tristram Shandy and the Theater of the Mechanical Mother,” that Wilson is actually misinterpreting a woman’s forced passivity as a form of agency, particularly when “confinement” takes place in the context of a culture that has promoted unnatural, irrational, and pathological constructions of maternity and ideologically removed much of the experience of pregnancy from women’s control. In the eighteenth-century, women may have willingly participated in confinement as had generations of women before them, but their participation may have likely been precipitated by an internalization of the constructed aspects of their “pathological” maternal bodies. Furthermore, with the increased male medical presence in eighteenth-century birthing rooms (to be explored at further length in Chapter 3), confinement could hardly be recognized as a site of female strength and community.
any longer. Instead, it more closely resembled a compulsory “quarantine” during which women’s “irrational,” “uncontrollable” maternal power could be restrained according the dictates of the dominant masculine discourse. Perhaps this is why many reformers and feminists—like Mary Wollstonecraft, whom Godwin remembered ridiculing ladies who kept to their lying-in chambers for months (Godwin 174)—scoffed at confinement as a social construction that kept women weak.

According to Charles White’s 1785 description of an upper-class woman’s confinement, there was often little that was comfortable or relaxing about it. White writes that the woman is:

covered up close in bed with additional cloaths, the curtains are drawn round the bed, and pinned together, every crevice in the windows and door is stopped close, not excepting even the key hole, the windows are guarded not only with blankets, the more effectually to exclude the fresh air, and the good woman is not suffered to put her arm, or even her nose out of bed, for fear of catching cold […] She is confined to a horizontal position for many days together, whereby both the stools and lochia are prevented from having a free exit. (6)

White’s description contains intense imagery of imprisonment: the guarded windows, shut doors, and even stopped keyhole all emphasize that mobility and autonomy is not an option for the confined women. Surely it is no coincidence that, according to the OED, the word “confinement” was historically associated with the act of physical, punitive imprisonment nearly a century before it gained its childbirth associations in 1774. This implication of maternal confinement as a sort of punishment is difficult to ignore. Blackwell argues that in the eighteenth century pregnancy itself (particularly if it occurred outside the confines of marriage, but also in its legitimate forms as well) was often understood as the corrective “sentence which predictably attends the crime of sexual congress” (“Oh Soften Him!” 16). In fact, early obstetric teachings maintained that labor “should be painful for all women, but especially so to punish those wicked enough to conceive out of wedlock (Blackwell, “Oh Soften Him!” 22). Therefore, it is not much of a stretch to consider “the limitations imposed on pregnant and parturient women of the eighteenth century as a species of para-criminal confinement” (Blackwell, “Oh Soften Him!” 16). Additionally, Blackwell compares the “confinements” of mentally ill people and mothers (two kinds of detention that coalesce in Wollstonecraft’s Maria), both of which involve the justification of restraint by invoking reasons of “protection,” and asks, “[W]ho is protected by
the imprisonment of such persons?” (“Oh Soften Him!” 15). As is evident from White’s description of the counterproductive measures of most confinements, the answer is not the person imprisoned. Instead, the party being protected by confinement would appear to be patriarchal order. S. Leigh Matthews writes, “The confinement of the birthing mother and the mad person seemed to have had the same purpose: to suppress any discourse that posed a potential threat to the dominance of patriarchal authority” (93). In order to maintain patriarchal order, the reproductive power a woman wields must be reconfigured as a disease or punishment for which she is detained, until she has been “cured” and able to return to society in her “natural” submissive state.

White’s account of trapped internal discharges and tightly swaddled limbs also reveal the corporeal character of bodily stoppage and blockage that is part of confinement, and the experience of pregnancy in general. Women often feel like tenants or prisoners of their own pregnancies (Blackwell, “Oh Soften Him!” 13), particularly in a society in which pregnancy is constructed as a sort of punishment. Even progressive women like Wollstonecraft sometimes felt uncomfortably trapped within their own pregnant bodies; after the birth of Fanny, Wollstonecraft complained of “the inundation of milk, which for the moment incommodes me” (Collected Letters 252), and, during her last pregnancy, Wollstonecraft admitted to being “only a little impatient to regain my activity, and to reduce to some shapeliness the portly shadow, which meets my eye when I take a musing walk” (Collected Letters 435).

However, the pregnant body was not only an oppressive prison of sorts for the woman who experienced it, but also could be seen as painfully imprisoning rather than sheltering the new life it housed. With the increasingly pathologized constructions of various forms of maternal transmission, women felt acutely the ways in which their emotions and bodies could harm the child that was “trapped” by their uncontrollable, irrational biology. Claudia Johnson writes in a larger examination of Wollstonecraft’s Maria that

[T]he bodies of these women both epitomize the unnatural blockage they protest—as when Maria’s maternal milk is not permitted to flow—and reproduce that gynocidal blockage, becoming reluctant prisons in and of themselves—as when the wretchedness of Jemima’s mother becomes the daughter’s manacle, the “heavy weight fastened on her innocent neck”[…] or when Maria “mourning for the babe of which she was the tomb”[…] realizes that her own pregnant belly is a deadly jail. (164)
The forms of maternal “confinements” do not end, then, a month following a woman’s childbirth. Just as eighteenth-century mothers were confined in oppressive cultural scripts, the children they reproduced were also from birth confined in an inherited social identity they could not escape. This inheritance was particularly unfortunate for daughters, who in inheriting their mother’s class position and moral reputation also inevitably inherited the gendered cultural expectations of submission and self-denial that oppressed all women.

Mary Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice* is the story of this kind of transmission and confinement, in which daughters are trapped in the nightmare narratives by which society traps their mothers. Despite her wealth of personal resolve, spirit, and intelligence, Hays’s Mary Raymond is trapped, by virtue of her confining female body, within the violent and oppressive story of her mother’s “fall.” The result is a gothic nightmare of female experience—the only kind of female experience available in a culture in which women are entrapped in both pathologized, objectified bodies and crushing cultural scripts, and any attempt to break free of such constructions is met with more literal confinement than before.

**The Infecting, Inescapable Maternal Narrative in *The Victim of Prejudice***

Mary Hays, an outspoken intellectual and close peer of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, published *The Victim of Prejudice* in 1799, when she was already an accomplished—and controversial—writer. Her 1796 publication *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* was a radical exploration of feminine economic dependence and sexuality, themes she revisited in her later novel. Much like her friend Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*, *The Victim of Prejudice* dramatizes many of the wrongs and injustices that were perpetrated against middle-class women in the eighteenth century, particularly in the forms of social “prejudices” and expectations that press women into submission to and dependency upon men.

*The Victim of Prejudice* tells the story of Mary Raymond, a young woman who, despite a happy (though relatively isolated) upbringing by a loving paternal benefactor, finds her life gradually destroyed by a series of injustices, the central of which circulate around the illegitimate circumstances of her own birth. Mary knows nothing of her parentage until she reads a written narrative of her mother’s seduction, impregnation, fall into prostitution and crime, and eventual death by execution. Though steadfastly virtuous, Mary becomes doomed to face circumstances
much like her mother’s after being raped, robbed, shunned by society and eventually imprisoned, only to wait for death as the only possible release from her literal and metaphoric confinements.

Hays’s novel, published two years after Wollstonecraft’s death, resembles her late friend’s *Maria* in several ways. In fact, the title of the latter work even echoes a line in the former, when Maria laments she cannot live with her husband “but as a victim to the prejudices of mankind, who have made women the property of their husbands” (*Maria* 78, my emphasis). Like *Maria*, *The Victim of Prejudice* dramatizes the experience of eighteenth-century women as a terrifying one. Mary’s story is told through a series of typical gothic conventions, as the heroine faces nightmarish visions of her dead mother, wanders through dark and stormy nights, and is doggedly pursued and eventually trapped by a villainous aristocrat. Mary’s discovery of her terrible maternal legacy is in itself gothic. As Eleanor Ty writes, the “nightmares discovered in ancient papers are enacted and become ‘real’” (*Unsex’d Revolutionaries* 61), echoing Eve Sedgwick’s discussion of waking from gothic dreams to find they are reality. Like Wollstonecraft, Hays also uses her novel to cast the typical Burkean patriarch in tyrannical terms. In *The Victim of Prejudice*, Mary’s destroyer is the aristocrat Sir Peter Osborne, a man who single-mindedly pursues the gratification of his own lust and revenge without regard for any responsibilities he has to his tenants. However, Osborne is not the only masculine authority that fails Mary; much like Maria Venables, Mary is treated as an object by most of the men she comes into contact with, and when she refuses to conform to the artificial, oppressive, sexualized scripts they have created for her, she is confined in order to silence and isolate her rebellion forever.

In yet another similarity to Wollstonecraft’s novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* is structured as a fictional autobiography, written, like Maria Venable’s personal narrative, for a sort of “descendent.” While Maria’s memoir is addressed to her biological daughter, Mary writes that her narrative is for “thou, victim of despotism, oppression, or error, tenant of a dungeon, and successor to its present devoted inhabitant, should these sheets fall into thy possession” (Hays 3). However, because *The Victim of Prejudice* is meant to catalogue the injustices and cultural dictates that victimize eighteenth-century women, the “victim of despotism” that Mary addresses can also be read as a sort of daughter—that is, any future woman who finds herself oppressed and confined within the “dungeon” of masculine tyranny in a patriarchal society as Mary did.
The fact that Mary writes her narrative from within a prison, to other future prisoners, also puts the notion of confinement at the forefront of the novel. Mary’s situation is a sort of gothic “live burial” in which she is locked away from the living world, waiting to die; her description of her gloomy cell reads like one of a tomb, in which “damp and unwholesome air” mingles with “mephitic vapour” while a “deadly torpor steals over [her] faculties” (Hays 168). This “burial,” which Mary specifically notes is marked by terrible “inactivity,” contrasts markedly with her early memories of a free and active youth. Hays’s descriptions of Mary’s childhood match the youthful activity Wollstonecraft advocates for young women in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she writes that “most of the women […] who have acted like rational creatures, or shewn any vigour of intellect, have accidentally been allowed to run wild” (*VRW* 42). Mary Raymond is indeed portrayed as a healthy, rational creature in her early days, who describes herself as having “a robust constitution, a cultivated understanding, and a vigorous intellect” (Hays 5). Her physical accomplishments (“I could ride the forest-horse without bridle or saddle; could leap a fence or surmount a gate with admirable dexterity; could climb the highest trees, wrestle with the children of the village” [Hays 5]) are repeatedly emphasized along with her mental ones (her knowledge of “French, Italian, and Latin,” her studies in “geometry, algebra, arithmetic” [Hays 6]), rather than the typical “superficial” or “frivolous” feminine accomplishments of flattery, fashion, and charm that Wollstonecraft railed against in her *Vindication*. When Mary’s body is emphasized in the narrative, it is not in recognition of its feminine delicacy or sensual voluptuousness, but of its attractive strength and energy. Mary describes herself as, “Tall, blooming, animated, my features were regular, my complexion a rich glowing brunette, my eyes vivacious and sparkling; dark chestnut hair shaded my face, and floated over my shoulders in luxurious profusion; my figure was light and airy, my step firm, my aspect intelligent, and my mind inquisitive” (Hays 5), thereby combining beauty and robustness, while ending on an emphatic endorsement of her mental capacity.

Eventually, however, Mary’s body becomes not a source of strength and activity, but a prison in and of itself. Mary becomes “trapped” within her own female biology—the very biology, as I have argued in the previous chapter, that was thought to preclude her rational, mental capabilities—and soon begins to be viewed as a sexual object for male gratification rather than as a thinking, acting subject. As Ty writes, Mary “becomes simply body and no mind in others’ eyes” (“The Imprisoned Female Body” 149).
The crucial scene in which Mary’s body is first recognized as an object of male lust significantly echoes the biblical story of the first woman’s fall in Eden. In it, Mary is seduced into entering a garden to steal a forbidden cluster of tempting grapes. However, it is not a serpent that convinces Mary to disobey her adoptive father’s command, but the young William Pelham, a boarded student of Mr. Raymond’s who quickly becomes the object of Mary’s adoration. William is a generally kind but ultimately impetuous and selfish young man whose demands of Mary in the name of his “love”—from this initial request for forbidden fruit to his later proposals that she become his mistress—often conflict with her sense of morality; he persuades Mary to steal the grapes by misrepresenting her virtue as feminine failure. William ignores both Mary’s strength of character and logical justification of her obedience, and instead claims that she is “timid and spiritless” like the rest of her “weak sex” (Hays 12).

In accusing Mary of “natural” feminine weakness, William Pelham is the first male figure in Mary’s life to attack her autonomous actions and identity her with oppressive gender constructs. Furthermore, the fact that these constructions are couched in the context of romantic, heterosexual love (with William voicing twinned doubts about the “estimate of [Mary’s] courage and affection” [Hays 13]) reveal one of the more insidious ways in which harmful cultural scripts of femininity were internalized and reproduced by all members of society. Just as Maria’s relationship with Darnford compromises the heroine’s reclamation of rationality and agency in Wollstonecraft’s novel, the language of “love” in The Victim of Prejudice is the same vehicle through which Mary is first made to doubt her sense of self and obey a man’s arbitrary order rather than follow her own sound principles and logic.

It is only after Mary is caught by the garden’s owner, Sir Peter Osborne, in attempting to grant William’s request that the heroine’s “fall” into tragic femininity becomes complete. Upon catching Mary in the act of theft, Osborne physically seizes her body and mocks her as “a true daughter of Eve,” solidifying the scene’s biblical metaphor and seconding William’s earlier insinuation of Mary’s (like the rest of the female sex’s) “natural” weakness and deception. The encounter with Osborne is also a highly sexualized one, as the nobleman places full attention upon his captive’s physical characteristics, calling her “a little beauty! a Hebe! a wood-nymph!” (Hays 14) and demanding a kiss before Mary manages to struggle free. The intensity of Osborne’s first lusty demands upon the young Mary—“I must and will have a kiss,” he proclaims (Hays 14)—also foreshadows the brutal rape that culminates their acquaintance;
although Osborne does not physically harm Mary at this point, her wild dash away from him leaves her body visibly and violently violated, with her “clothes torn, [her] hands and arms bruised, scratched, and streaming with blood” (Hays 14).

Therefore, although Mary temporarily frees herself from Osborne in the garden, her true “freedom” can never be regained after this incident. Not only does it instigate the tyrannical sexual pursuit that leads to the heroine’s complete ruin, but William and Osborne’s misogynist characterization and objectification of Mary confine her for the first time in the harmful and oppressive scripts of eighteenth-century femininity. Furthermore, the events that immediately follow the trauma in the garden signify the fact that both Mary’s perception and the actual constitution of her body have been irrevocably changed. The previously strong and healthy Mary is seized suddenly by a violent fever, one which she desperately fears will contaminate her beloved William. Hays writes of Mary’s alarm: “‘Take him away!’ exclaimed I, clasping my hands together in an agony, and trying to avoid him. ‘He will catch the fever; he will be sick and die; and, then, what will become of Mary!’” (Hays 18). In one elongated narrative moment, then, Mary has not only had a metaphoric “fall” from innocence to become trapped in constructions of weak, deceptive, and sexualized womanhood, but her body has also taken on—in fact, in itself become—a pathological infection that she fears will contaminate the man she loves.

However, Mary soon finds that a secret has been lurking in her very biology that threatens to “contaminate” William and his patriarchal line in a far more serious way than her fever may. After Mary and William’s growing relationship clearly begins to approach the point of marriage, Raymond decides that the particulars of his ward’s background have now become “too important to justify a longer concealment” (Hays 58). Although Raymond claims to be sharing the damaging narrative only out of the greatest concern for Mary’s future happiness and well-being, his justifications fall somewhat flat and reveal how truly invested even the kind, fairly progressive benefactor is in the status-quo social order. He is presumably the only person who knows the sordid details surrounding Mary’s origins (readers learn from the ensuing narrative that Mary’s mother secretly directed him to the place she was keeping the child), and yet he refuses to conceal the damning information in order to further protect Mary from the misery and exile that the revelations of her birth effect. Instead, despite knowing Mary’s true worth, Raymond agrees that by mere virtue of her illegitimacy Mary has “few claims” upon the world’s justice (Hays 8), and insists it better she know the “truth” of her identity rather than
unknowingly “contaminate” a proper patriarchal bloodline. Despite his protests otherwise, Raymond seems to have internalized the traditional interests of patriarchy so completely that they outweigh his interests in his adoptive daughter.

Raymond then presents Mary with a packet containing a written narrative of the circumstances surrounding her illegitimate birth. In it, Mary’s mother’s words (in the form of a confessional letter written to Raymond) are framed by Raymond’s own authoritative narration of the events. This structure, in which a woman’s defining personal moments are encased in the observations of masculine eyes, is a fitting metaphor for most women’s experiences in eighteenth-century England; the female experience and identity is routinely filtered through (or, in another view, trapped within) the dominant patriarchal constructions of what women ought to be.

Raymond describes the tragic fall of Mary’s mother (fittingly also named Mary) as a sort of consuming disease; before even knowing of her actual seduction he perceives “that a secret malady devoured her” (Hays 59). A few years later, the elder Mary’s sexual ruin can be symptomatically and horrifyingly read on her physical body, a condition that at once emphasizes the corporeal and contaminating nature of her sins. Raymond describes seeing the once “amiable and accomplished” young woman as a “catastrophe full of horror,” reduced to “a death-like paleness” with a “countenance stained by blood, disordered by recent inebriation, disfigured by vice, and worn by disease” (Hays 60). Later jailed as an accidental accomplice to a murder, the first Mary purposely inflicts more physical punishment onto her body, the site of her crimes; she writes, “I dashed my wretched body against the dungeon’s floor; tore, with my nails, my hair, my flesh, my garments […] a stream of blood gushed from my nose and lips[,] mingling with a flood of tears” (Hays 68). The grotesque, corrupted body of the condemned woman also has a dangerous “infecting” effect on the men who view her. When Raymond describes the woman as “a phantom which seemed to have unsettled my reason” (Hays 61) and faints upon seeing her, he literalizes how the monstrous, uncontrolled, irrational female body is perceived as a gothic threat to man’s rationality and strength.

A letter the elder Mary has written from jail is embedded within Raymond’s own writing. In it, the fallen woman explains how the same artificial scripts of feminine sensibility that Wollstonecraft cautions against in *Vindication* led her to her tragic fate. She describes herself as “educated in the lap of indolence, enervated by pernicious indulgence, fostered in artificial
refinements, misled by specious, but false, expectations, softened into imbecility, pampered into luxury, and dazzled by frivolous ambition” (Hays 63). Mary’s mother’s natural reason and virtue crumble as she is confined to an artificial existence and “unaccustomed to reason” (Hays 63); therefore, she easily became entrapped in the typical seduction plot. She is quickly romanced, impregnated, and abandoned to her unfortunate fate.

The elder Mary describes becoming a mother as a sort of joyous, transformative experience that may have had the power to save her from vice, had she not been so frightened by the possibility of transmitting that very vice to her innocent offspring. In her letter to Raymond, she writes that while caressing her newborn daughter, “I forgot for awhile its barbarous father, the world’s scorn, and my blasted prospects: the sensations of the injured woman, of the insulted wife, were absorbed for a time in the stronger sympathies of a delighted mother” (Hays 65). However, her vicious companions, upon whose urgings she “had been reluctantly prevailed upon to place [the infant] with a hireling” (Hays 66) entice her into further corruption, until she can hardly bare to visit her child out of both selfish pity for herself and fear of her own influence on the girl. She writes, “Its innocence contrasted my guilt, it revived too powerfully in my head the remembrance of what I was” (Hays 66). Barred from the possible restorative bond with her daughter by handing her off to a nurse, the elder Mary slips further into irretrievable ruin, until she writes her final words to Raymond while awaiting execution.

In her final embodiment, Mary’s mother identifies herself as “a monster, cruel, relentless, ferocious; and contaminated alike, with a deadly poison, the health and the principles of those unfortunate victims whom, with practised allurements, I entangled in my snares” (Hays 67). As Ty points out, the elder Mary has clearly internalized the dominant image of the sexual woman as “a monstrous sickness” (“The Imprisoned Female Body” 140). Before her death, however, Mary’s mother takes pains to withhold several of the more sordid details from her memoirs from the fear that she “should stain the youthful purity of [her] unfortunate offspring, into whose hands these sheets may hereafter fall” (Hays 66), and likewise begs Raymond to adopt her daughter and “shelter her infant purity from contagion” (Hays 69). However, what the doomed woman does not fully realize is that the younger Mary is already “stained” and made “contagious” by her mother’s story, because in their culture’s understanding of maternal inheritance Mary’s mother’s story is Mary’s story as well. Mary will always be simultaneously socially confined by her illegitimacy—unable to marry a man she loves, unaided by any claim to
rightful property and support—and socially exiled, denied access to the middle class in which she has been raised, yet prevented from gaining employment as even the laboring class can. She is thereby caught in a gothic liminal state in which she is neither inside nor outside the strictures of society, “buried alive” and doomed from the moment of her birth.

Unlike her mother, Mary recognizes her inevitable entrapment within her mother’s narrative; she realizes with horror that she is “unable to transcend the imprisoning web of the narrative, and becomes enmeshed in the words” (Ty, *Unsex’d Revolutionaries* 63). After reading through the packet, Mary is overwhelmed by “a sense of oppression, almost to suffocation” from which she must run into the open air of the stormy night. The scene that greets Mary at this rush out into the wilderness is indicative of the gothic turn her entire life has taken with the fatal revelations of her birth. Hays (as Mary), writes:

> The wind howled mournfully through the foliage; the leaves were scattered at my feet; the rain fell in torrents, cold and chill; the underwood caught and rent my garments, which clung around me, heavy with the damp, and impeded my progress. I experienced, in encountering the conflicting elements, a gloomy species of pleasure: they were, methought, less rude and savage than barbarous man. I recalled to my remembrance the image of my wretched mother: I beheld her, in idea, abandoned to infamy, cast out of society, stained with blood, expiring on a scaffold, unpitied and unwept. I clasped my hands in agony; terrors assailed me till then unknown; the blood froze in my veins; a shuddering horror crept through my heart […] (71-2)

Even in the vast open landscape of nature, Mary feels physically confined (her ripped garments trapping her, her blood freezing up within her body) and terrorized by the undead presence of her contaminating mother. She also contracts yet another fever from these desperate wanderings, thereby literalizing the pathological danger she now feels within her bloodlines.

Mary’s resolute adherence to principles of truth and integrity force her to tell William the secrets she has learned, and to insist that he likewise not conceal them from his father. It is important to note that Mary does not immediately refuse William’s continued advances because she truly believes she is now unworthy and “pollutant;” in fact, she agrees she will marry him if his father’s consent can be obtained. Mary does, however, feel the power of the cultural dictates that now designate her as undeniably pollutant, however unjust they may be. The Pelham patriarch, who has publicly voiced his concern that his sons must preserve a “family honour
[that] had been preserved uncontaminated for many generations, [and] should descend unsullied to posterity” (Hays 8), quickly sends William away to avoid the contaminating influence of a connection with Mary. In his absence Mary’s story quickly spirals into bleaker and bleaker states, as a series of events lead to the loss of her small savings, the death of Mr. Raymond, and culminate in her veritable kidnapping by Osborne. Without recourse to friends, parents, or social status, Mary spends nine days locked in a chamber in Osborne’s home, before she is raped amidst the gothic scene of a dark and riotous midnight ball. Hays’s describes Mary’s memories of the violent rape with a terrifying emphasis on her helplessness and the patriarch’s unrelenting violence, writing:

Deaf to my remonstrances, to my supplications, —regardless of my tears, my rage, my despair—his callous heart, his furious and uncontrollable vehemence,—Oh! that I could for ever blot from my remembrance,—oh! that I could conceal from myself,—what, rendered desperate, I no longer care to hide from the world!—I suffered a brutal violation. (Hays 117)

Not only does Osborne violate Mary’s person with his depraved act, but he also confines her more firmly in the story of her mother; that is, despite being the victim of an unsolicited attack, Mary is now perceived by the rest of society as a “fallen woman,” and as such is subject to the societal scripts and expectations that surround such a creature. Her personal power and agency is doubly destroyed, in both the moment that she is unable to fight her rapist’s advances, and in the proceeding days in which she is harassed, persecuted, shunned “as one infected by a pestilence” (Hays 162), and denied any form of aid or employment through which she could still eke by an honest subsistence. Just as Mary was first sexually objectified by men in that long-ago moment in the garden, she is now viewed as decidedly nothing but a sexual object by all of society, and the only opportunities she is offered are no more than veiled proposals of prostitution. In her desperation, Mary again is haunted by visions of her mother:

In some of these terrible moments, the visionary form of my wretched mother seemed to flit before me. One moment, methought I beheld her in the arms of her seducer, reveling in licentious pleasure; the next, I saw her haggard, intoxicated, self-abandoned, joining in the midnight riot; and, in an instant, as the fantastic scene shifted, covered with blood, accused of murder, shrieking in horrible despair, dragged to the scaffold, sinking beneath the hand of the executioner! Then, all pallid and ghastly, with clasped hands, streaming
eyes, and agonizing her fate! Her dying groans and reiterated warnings, in low, tremulous accents, continued to vibrate on my ear: they became fainter and fainter, when methought I rushed forward to clasp my hapless parent in a last embrace. (123)

Mary’s visions of her mother combine sex, violence, disease, and death all in a terrifying maternal body, thereby epitomizing the eighteenth-century anxieties about maternal bodies as visible sites of chaos and sin. Furthermore, her instinct to clasp the grotesque dying mother in an embrace symbolizes both the connection she recognizes between herself and her mother—their stories seem to rapidly be becoming the same—and her wish to join her mother in death (or better, to have never been born), as evidenced by frenzied her cries of, “What calamities has they frailty entailed upon thy miserable offspring! Would to God thou hadst never given me existence! Would to God thou hadst strangled me at my birth!” (Hays 137).

Finally, Mary finds herself not only imprisoned in her “ruined” female body and the ruinous story of her mother’s fate, but in the walls of a literal prison itself. Mary is jailed ostensibly for her debts, but the true motive lies in Osborne’s belief that confinement would “bring her to reason” (Hays 151). Ironically, the kind of “reason” Osborne demands of Mary actually equates a denial of her innate reason and morality, to which she still desperately clings, and would involve her acceptance of her place in the artificial and immoral cultural scripts for fallen femininity by becoming his (and, in separate offer, the now-married William’s) dissipated mistress. In this way, Mary’s confinement in prison is linked to the patriarchal eighteenth-century society’s desperate desire for surveillance and control of female sexuality (Ty 134). Instead of agreeing to a complete effacement of self in this kind of compliance, however, Mary radically declares, “I had a right to exist!” (Hays 141). Although this claim to “existence” may seem belied by her simultaneous anticipation of death, what Mary actually asserts is her right to an existence, however brief, on her own terms. She writes:

Involved, as by a fatal mechanism, in the infamy of my wretched mother, thrown into similar circumstances, and looking to a catastrophe little less fearful, I still have the consolation of remembering that I suffered not despair to plunge my soul in crime, that I braved the shocks of fortune, eluded the snares of vice, and struggled in the trammels of prejudice with dauntless intrepidity. (Hays 168)
Though she may wish to die, Mary nonetheless wishes to die with some sense of her original self-definition—separate from the story of her mother, and from the constructions of self offered to her by a “prejudiced” society—intact.

But Mary does not die—not immediately at any rate. Instead, she lingers in jail a little longer before being rescued by old friends and brought to a life of somber reflection, isolation, and decay in the countryside. At the novel’s close, Mary, having buried these friends and feeling the onset of actual death close in around her, still cherishes her hard-won integrity. However, her one lament is that that her life may prove unproductive. She writes, “[T]he powers of my mind wasted, my projects rendered abortive, my virtues and my sufferings alike unrewarded, I have lived in vain! unless the story of my sorrows should kindle the heart of man, in behalf of my oppressed sex, the sacred claims of humanity and justice” (Hays 174).

In the end, Mary’s greatest hope also revolves around a sort of “maternal transmission,” whereby her story may be reproduced and internalized so that future women may be freed from the literal and metaphoric confines in which she was placed. This hope, I suggest, invites a different response than that proposed by Ty, who sees Mary as someone unable to “read herself and her body differently from her mother” (“The Imprisoned Female Body” 140). For despite being trapped by her mother’s story, Mary does not identically repeat her mother’s story, nor more importantly the meaning of her mother’s story, at all. As Rajan argues, both reading and writing do not always have to be about the reproduction or internalization of a fixed meaning or imprisoning roles and interpretations; instead, writing can be viewed as creating an occasion for reading, for setting the stage “for a meaning yet to be produced” (“Wollstonecraft and Godwin” 229). When writing a text that involves readers in the making of new meaning and therefore new possibilities, both reading and writing become about transcending, rather than reaffirming, one’s original condition (Rajan, “Wollstonecraft and Godwin” 249). Because there was only one available social “reading” of Mary’s body and birth story—both “fallen” and contaminating—Mary had no real power to fight the dominant discourse with alternative constructions and meanings of her experience. However, in relating her story to her future readers, Mary never accepts the negative interpretations that have been heaped upon her body and self. Whereas her mother readily agrees with the dominant understanding that she is a “monster,” Mary maintains to the last that she has been an innocent victim of false constructions. “My spirit,” she writes, “which I have searched and probed, acquits me of intentional error” (Hays 168). Therefore, the
story in *The Victim of Prejudice* that both the fictional Mary Raymond and real-life Mary Hays transmit to later generations is not one of imprisonment, but possible freedom; Hays has her heroine articulate the ways in which women are unjustly pathologized and confined so that other women may “derive[e] firmness from innocence, courage from despair” (Hays 3), and look to her tragedy as sort of alternative maternal inheritance that can strengthen, rather than debilitate, the sex.
CHAPTER THREE
MAKING MOTHER OBSOLETE:
FENWICK’S SECRECY AND THE MASCULINE APPROPRIATION OF MATERNITY

As I have discussed in the previous chapters, eighteenth-century maternity was subject to a number of changing social constructions, many of which increasingly allied mothers and the maternal body with the destructive realms of the irrational and unnatural. Generally, such constructions were motivated by the larger effort to contain the potentially subversive power posed by the female capacity for reproduction: Women not only possessed the hidden biological processes through which human life developed and was born, but the very scenes of childbirth were shielded from male view, and consequently, male control. Mothers gave birth in darkened rooms, surrounded by women attendants using centuries-old techniques that the majority of men had never been privy to, but to which they owed their very existence.

In order to combat this apparent weakness in the patriarchal social order, male authorities needed to demystify a woman’s natural, invisible power—which, by virtue of its invisibility and exclusion from male subjective experience, had already gradually been painted as “unnatural” in the dominant masculine discourse—and conquer the world of birth. Eighteenth-century men therefore began to physically penetrate the secret world of the birthing room, all in the hopes of ultimately infiltrating the secret workings of the woman’s reproductive capacity. If men could finally explore and define the maternal body in rational and scientific terms, there was a sense they could appropriate both its figurative power as the source of mysterious, exclusively feminine experiences, and perhaps even its actual generative power as well. After all, the ultimate way to achieve male dominance would lie in the creation of the definitive unnatural maternity: a masculine kind of generative “motherhood,” in which man could reproduce other men without relying on the lesser sex.

Although men did not so literally appropriate the realm of maternity in the eighteenth century, both the control of childbirth and its generative power was, in the words of Felicity Nussbaum, “increasingly compromised and awarded, in a figurative guise at least, to men” (146). In a profound historical contradiction, eighteenth-century Englishmen largely defined themselves, sexually and materially, as fully outside the scope of the maternal yet eager to intervene within it (Nussbaum 146). In the following chapter, I explore how this change was
effected, as scientifically trained male-midwives united in removing the traditional female practitioners from the birthing room while the mothers’ role as an active agent in labor was made increasingly obsolete and almost antithetical to the growing obstetric technology. Additionally, I consider how these changes are literalized in the 1795 novel of Eliza Fenwick, *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock*. Fenwick, the third figure in the formidable trio of friends that also included Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, presents a gothic story whose thematic elements—failed female communities, the oppressive objectification of women, the appropriation of gender roles, pregnancy, and, of course, the titular “secrets” that women keep—match markedly with the cultural changes surrounding maternity throughout the eighteenth century.

**Removing the Midwife:**

During the first half of the eighteenth-century, male presence in the birthing room was still a decided anomaly. Husbands were often excluded from the lying-chamber before and after the birth, and surgeons and physicians were only sent for in the case of emergencies as a last resort. Childbirth was instead an all-female ritual, headed by a midwife.

For centuries, the midwife was a formidable, indispensable, and near-universal figure in the birthing room. The appellation “midwife” literally means “with woman,” a phrase that carries implications of both physical and psychological support. The midwife did not just see a pregnant woman through the bodily processes of childbirth, but helped encourage and comfort her; her presence cast the act of childbirth itself as part of a natural, collective ritual of all women (Kipp 49). According to Adrian Wilson in *The Making of Man-Midwifery*, the defining feature of the midwife’s office was power. The midwife, Wilson writes, “took charge as soon as she arrived, and expected to remain in charge thereafter;” this “charge” also could surmount class boundaries, as it was “possible for a young and inexperienced midwife, probably of no higher than yeoman status, to defy a mother who was a lady, that is, the wife of a gentleman, a member of the ruling class” (26). She was assisted in her tasks by a group of female attendants called “gossips,” a word, Lisa Cody has noted, “that has come to suggest women’s chatty cattiness, but originally signified the spiritual relationship as godparent” (36). Throughout the labor, all women—midwife, gossips, and mother—worked incredibly hard: the mother, the active central force in the labor, often stood, walked, or sat in specially-crafted labor stools or chairs through hours of intense pain with little recourse to anesthetics (save some herbs, rare opiates, alcohol, and
prayer); the gossips and midwife physically supported or restrained the laboring woman, washing, wiping, massaging, and heartening her as the midwife delivered the child (Cody 36-7). Clearly, then, women were active agents in the traditional birthing chamber, and their collective actions produced a temporary community of female solidarity.

The only notable exception in which childbearing and childbirthing were not considered the exclusive province of women applied to royal labors. By the late seventeenth century, male physicians were increasingly in charge of the birthing rooms of queens and other female royalty. Bonnie Blackwell points out that a royal woman’s use of a physician in place of a traditional midwife can ostensibly be explained by a national concern of “special care” for a kingdom’s leaders, but also argues that “a more cynical supposition placed the male doctor in the palace bedchamber: his job was to prevent female conspiracies involving substitution or mistreatment of the heir” (“Oh Soften Him!” 31). Famous birthing room controversies, such as the Warming-Pan Scandal of 168816, highlighted the subversive political potential of women’s secret activities in the delivery room, and, as Cody writes, “helped to fuel popular suspicions that midwives could potentially undermine society and the state through their feminine prerogatives” (83).

The secrecy, power, and agency surrounding and centralized in the all-female birthing room therefore presented a direct threat to masculine control, and not merely on a large-scale political level. Midwives and mothers were also thought to collude in a number of acts that deliberately flouted patriarchal order to various degrees. Midwives, Wilson and Blackwell both note, were often accused of aiding young women in hiding or aborting illegitimate offspring, and their uncomfortably controlling presence in the home of pregnant women could clash with a husband’s previously paramount authority.

With all the anxieties surrounding the power wielded by midwives, it is not difficult to understand how the centuries-old prejudice against men in the delivery room completely dissolved in about seventy years during the eighteenth-century (Blackwell, “Oh Soften Him!” 31). The social and political climate of this era was also ripe for such an alteration to occur; as discussed in previous chapters, the changing and often artificial constructions of “natural” womanhood and motherhood (both in their idealized and pathological constructions) took place in the eighteenth century as a way of reaffirming patriarchal control and proper social order. Like all aspects of motherhood in general, it was in the interest of male hegemony that maternal labor and delivery needed to be brought under male supervision and authority in order to be made
“rational” and “safe;” made, by new and arguably “unnatural” medical intervention, paradoxically more “natural” than it had always been.

Male-midwives, or accoucheurs, had been a growing presence in Britain since the Chamberlen family invented the forceps in the mid-seventeenth century and the famed William Smellie improved and taught its design and usage in the 1730s (Wilson 3). However, it was not until around the 1750s that women began booking the childbirth services of male practitioners in lieu of a midwife, rather than in addition to or as an emergency backup for the female specialist (Wilson 164). Armed with an array of surgical instruments and claims to innate rationality—both of which female midwives were denied access too—male-midwives were lauded for offering “rational and natural explanations for the commonplace and strange” whereas women’s delivery room practices were targeted as superstitious and ignorant (Cody 23). Men justified their appropriation of child delivery ostensibly based upon their superior knowledge of science and anatomy, thereby presenting traditional midwives who were excluded from formal scientific studies with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle (Evenden 202). Also, although some critics of male-midwifery attempted to paint the male practitioners as no more than leering rakes in disguise, most husbands were actually more comfortable with a male presence at their wives’ labors. Instead of chafing under the banishment from the birthing room and seemingly insubordinate directions of a female midwife, a husband now was able to welcome another man into his home as “expert” employee and fellow male confidant (Cody 194).

Wilson notes that many wives as well as husbands claimed to be happier with a man-midwife in place of the traditional female one, for reasons that also related to power dynamics. Childbirth, Wilson argues, had always been “the great leveler,” in that it physically brought together women from different ranks. This was done by both exposing all women to the same risks of complication, disease, or death, and by being one of the only arenas in which a “lady” was subordinate to a lower “midwife,” thereby reminding upper-class women of their biological connection to all members of their sex. In Wilson’s words, “the midwife, by her very presence—whatever her actual deportment—served as a tangible reminder that ladies were mere women” (191). Being able to hire a male-midwife, on the other hand, offered tangible proof of an upper-class woman’s continued superior social status, even in childbirth.

Wilson uses this trend of man-midwifery as “an area of conspicuous consumption” (191) to justify the statement that “male practitioners were turned into midwives not by their own
desire but through the choices of women […] The making of man-midwifery was the work of women” (192). However, I, and other scholars including Bonnie Blackwell and Doreen Evenden, disagree with this conclusion. It is misleading to talk about the “choices” women had about the maternity considering, as Evenden writes, that “with the ‘discourse of science and reason’ firmly in the control of men, the choices about childbirth that women could make were really not their own” (203). Many women had internalized the subordinate scripts offered to them by the dominant discourse—after all, if they did not, they risked being labeled “monstrous”—and readily believed much of the popular demonization of midwives that was based solely on their “natural” female ignorance. Who were the mothers, as inherently “irrational” women themselves, to disbelieve the rational authority of male educators, physicians, and moralists who broadcast the dangers midwives’ lack of knowledge posed to women in labor? Furthermore, the fear that had been constructed around maternity in general—“the mystique of Gothic terror which surrounded the birthing process,” as Julie Kipp describes it (52)—made women afraid not to trust the male physicians who both stressed the pathological instability of the maternal body and claimed to possess the skills to police it. On an additional practical level, by the early nineteenth century only a male-midwife’s presence could absolutely protect a woman from criminal accusations of infanticide and “female conspiracy” in the event of a miscarriage or stillbirth (Blackwell, “Oh Soften Him!” 32).

Even Wilson’s own description of the ladies’ dislike of midwives—because they reminded the upper-class woman that she was inescapably “mere women”—reflects not a positive rationale for an autonomous choice but instead a reactionary instinct motivated by the damaging self-hatred eighteenth-century women had internalized with the oppressive cultural scripts they had been offered. It also reflects how eighteenth-century patriarchal authority was maintained by pitting women of the upper and middle classes against lower-class women in the dominant discourse of the time, so as to essentially “divide and conquer” women’s potential collective power. As Felicity Nussbaum observes, constantly comparing upper and lower-class women helped uphold the current social order by emphasizing their differences as proof of the truths of class superiority, yet their sameness as an indication of and rationalization for gendered inferiority (126).

Therefore, while some mothers may have been complicit in diminishing the authority of the female midwife, they did so in the context of a culture that gave them little access to
“choice.” The eighteenth-century transition from female to male-wives then is hardly evidence of the “work” of women as active agents choosing their own history, but the “work” of patriarchal forces upon women in order to covertly break up any spaces of collective feminine power or community. Besides, what the mothers who chose to eliminate traditional midwives from their birthing rooms didn’t realize was that they were effecting the erasure of not one female agent but two: as men moved into the scenes of labor, the figure of mother as the central acting agent in childbirth was moved out.

**Erasing the Mother:**

Previous to their increased presence at routine deliveries, men’s experience in birthing rooms had only been in relation to emergency situations. Therefore, many male-midwives’ conception of childbirth in general was biased towards its complexities and problems (Kipp 48). Physicians were preoccupied with unnatural presentations of the fetus, diseases, and other complications, and continually stressed the potential pathology of the maternal body rather than the naturalness of the birthing process, as most traditional midwives had done (Kipp 49). Even those, like William Smellie, who admitted that statistics generally showed only a small number of abnormalities and complications in deliveries nonetheless stressed that they were the ones who could “objectively systemize pregnancy, birth, and reproductive anatomy” and use their theoretical and empirical modes of thinking to anticipate any problems and solve them expediently with surgical intervention (Cody 166, my italics), thereby ensuring women of a guaranteed “natural” birth only if their possibly “unnatural” body was subject to proper male surveillance.

The female reproductive body, then, became a sort of foe for male-midwives. Rather than viewing their pregnant patients as a woman with whom they worked, many men viewed them as no more than potentially dangerous, oppositional objects upon which they had to exert control and rational intervention, often in the form of their prized surgical instruments. Blackwell, who refers to the forceps as “the male surgeon’s ticket of admission into the confinement chamber,” writes that the male-midwife’s surgical instruments were viewed as veritable weapons against the seemingly malevolent “secrecy” of the female body (“Mechanical Mother” 122). In fact, many a physician smuggled devices like forceps, crotchets, and craniotomy instruments into the delivery room with the specific intent of hiding them from the very woman on whom he was
going to use them. Smellie endorsed this artifice in his popular *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery*, in which he agreed that “as women are commonly frightened at the very name of an instrument, it is advisable to conceal them as much as possible” (84).

In male-midwifery texts, women were generally presented as irrational, potentially unnatural objects that required manipulation and management; one could “triumph” over their oppositional presence by hiding knowledge from them (Cody 188). Besides the use (and concealment) of surgical instruments, physicians instituted a number of additional practices that emphasized the passivity and submission they expected from the ideal patient. For example, the institutionalization of the lithotomy or lying-down position during labor happened with the rise of male-midwifery. However, this development was counterproductive and “actually frustrated women’s participation in the delivery process and accented their passive role during childbirth—a role inconsistent with the facilitation of birth itself” (Kipp 52). This position worked against the natural gravitational forces of the body (which had been accommodated by midwives’ traditional birthing stools and chairs), and caused some of the very problems in labor that men had to then combat with the use of forceps. Furthermore, women’s objectification and passivity were gradually accepted not only as acceptable features of the birthing room, but of the very act of conception itself. By the mid-eighteenth century, older doctrines about the necessity of the female orgasm in conception had been replaced by the understanding that a “passive egg” was “activated by the aggressively mobile sperm” with or without women’s sexual pleasure, thereby casting women as “the object of impregnation rather than active participants in reproduction” (Nussbaum 128).

The lying-in hospitals that began to sprout up around England by the mid-1700s also contributed to the increasing objectification of the maternal body, while they also helped remove midwives from their positions of superiority. Although female midwives or “matrons” still performed most of the deliveries in these lying-in hospitals, and were expected to impart their traditional knowledge and skills to the male staff of physicians and surgeons, it was the men’s job to “give direction to the matron concerning the management of women and children” and take credit for the overall success of the deliveries (Evenden 190). In such establishments as Richard Manningham’s private charitable hospital, the City of London Maternity Hospital, and Dr. John Leake’s General Lying-in Hospital, the benefits for male medical pupils often outweighed those for the women they took in. Evenden describes the motive behind many of
these institutions as the desire to “provide midwifery students with live bodies on which to polish the skills” learned in lectures (187); she also argues that while “doctors were still polishing their child delivery skills, […] mothers were exposed to deadly germs” that they would not have necessarily encountered in a home-birth (197).

Women who did not submit completely to the authority of the “enlightened” male practitioner in either private birthing rooms or public hospitals were met with much criticism and complaint. John Clarke, for example, writes disapprovingly in his 1793 text of a woman’s “operation of the mind, in which they differ from other animals” during labor (15), noting that this “exercise of the voluntary powers is also capable of doing much mischief in an operation which the involuntary powers were alone intended, and are fully equal to accomplish” (16).

As is clear from such complaints, the technological innovations and approaches advocated in eighteenth-century obstetric education actually, as Blackwell writes, “set man-midwives at odds with all but the most inert, the most passive, and the most mechanical of mothers (“Mechanical Mother” 127). “Mechanical mothers,” stunningly, were precisely what most male-midwives actually worked on in their obstetric studies. In her insightful article “Tristram Shandy and the Theater of the Mechanical Mother,” Blackwell describes in detail the mechanical structures that instructors like Manningham and Smellie introduced into their midwifery classrooms in order to imitate the workings of the female womb. While there were several different versions of mannequins, dolls, models, and machines invented for this use throughout the eighteenth-century, Blackwell focuses much of her attention on what eighteenth-century audiences called “Dr. Smellie’s Mechanical Labor Device.” Blackwell describes the machine, popular in the early 1750s, as such:

She is really just a corset and a hoop skirt, for structure, with leather pouches put inside the whale-bone stays to represent organs. Levers in the abdominal cavity are squeezed by handles in the back, to give a mechanical sense of the actions of the womb during a contraction. The part of the womb itself is played by a glass carafe, turned upside down, with a leather doll squeezed inside in a configuration representing one of the possible breach births. (91-2)

In lectures involving this “mechanical mother,” educators like Smellie found numerous advantages in using manufactured rather than real women. Unlike living mothers, who could be possibly non-compliant, the mechanical woman never threatened to interfere with what was
constructed as “the physician’s courageous performance at the birth;” their very lifelessness ensured that the man-midwife was the only body in “labor” and became the active agent, and star, of the “performance” of birth (Blackwell, “Mechanical Mother” 93). The transparency of the glass womb also helped obstetric students to become confident in their ability to visually master and uncover the “secrets” of the female body that previously only women could claim subjective experience of and therefore ownership over.

Essentially, the mechanical mother allowed a total usurpation of all parts of the labor process by men, and suggested that the male medical profession’s authority over maternity was so complete that the profession no longer needed live women; it could now “manufacture new and improved female bodies which were suited to its specifications” (Blackwell, “Mechanical Mother” 82). Furthermore, as lectures featuring the mechanical laboring devices became wildly popular, medical men like Dr. Smellie seemed to effect a generative power of their own; through his creation of the mechanical mother, Smellie was able to “reproduce” some nine hundred accoucheurs (Blackwell, “Mechanical Mother” 96).

By the end of the eighteenth century, not only had the power and presence of midwives been removed from the birthing room, but the mother was being made obsolete—or at the very least, inactive. Startling visual evidence of this trend appears in the evolution of obstetric diagrams of the century. As Cody records in Birthing the Nation, seventeenth and early eighteenth-century texts about midwifery, many of them female-authored, included illustrations “that showed the entire mother, smiling or sleeping, with arms and legs posed, and her abdomen opened up for display” (169). In contrast, later diagrams provided by physicians like Smellie or William Hunter showed virtually no part of the mother, save for often graphically severed torsos and thighs of obviously “dead” (and therefore, obsolete) women, while a healthy unborn fetus was shown “to be merely asleep, in possession of a vibrant future life” (Cody 278) which the man-midwife would be responsible in bestowing to it through safe delivery.

Eliza Fenwick’s novel Secresy is aptly titled, as its events reflect the era’s dominant perceptions of a “secret” female childbirth culture that exists dangerously outside of patriarchal control. Indeed, the primary “secrecy” within Fenwick’s novel surrounds maternity, and the chaos thought to result under women’s control of it. The eighteenth-century understanding of pregnancy as a secret female process is embodied in its heroine Sibella, whose defiant, autonomous sexual act and the pregnancy that results from it both play out behind the walls of a
formidable castle. Both the circumstances of Sibella’s rebellion and her gravid body are known by a female confidant though hidden from figures of patriarchal authority, a situation that resembles the potentially subversive relationship between mothers and midwives. However, the connections between *Secresy* and cultural conceptions of childbirth do not end there, as the complicated events of the narrative eerily mirror other eighteenth-century alterations in the birthing chamber. In a sort of inversion of Smellie’s invention of mechanical women, men in *Secresy* attempt to form lifeless automatons out of living women in order to serve their own desires; particularly, the desire for masculine generative power. Although women attempt to turn to the collective support of female friendships and community to combat masculine oppression, *Secresy* ultimate ends with a tragic scene of fatal maternity, in which the literal death of the mother comes with the death of her authority and agency.

**Man-Made Women and Womanly Men: Destructive Reproductions in *Secresy***

Eliza Fenwick’s first and only work for adults was her 1795 novel *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock*. Like Mary Hays, Fenwick was a close confidant of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and a member of other politically radical circles; her husband John Fenwick was an Irish patriot and member of the political group the London Corresponding Society. However, unlike Wollstonecraft’s and Hays’s, Fenwick’s career as a wife and mother forcibly outweighed her aspirations as a writer, as she gave up most authorial work in order to provide for her children while her husband’s drinking plunged the family into poverty.

*Secresy* is an epistolary novel with a positively Byzantine series of interwoven characters and plots, featuring two central heroines: Sibella Valmont, an orphaned heiress who has been kept imprisoned within the grounds of her uncle’s castle during her entire upbringing, and Caroline Ashburn, an accomplished, rational young woman who has undertaken her own political and moral education and develops an intense friendship with Sibella through their written correspondence. Both Sibella and Caroline, despite the disparity of their experiences, each believe in protesting the patriarchal strictures that oppress women, and spend the majority of the novel trying to combat both their intangible confinements (as in the submissive cultural scripts women are forced to occupy) and their tangible ones (in Sibella’s case, her gothic imprisonment in the castle walls).
For both women, patriarchal oppression is embodied by the tyrannical George Valmont. Like Wollstonecraft’s and Hays’s later novels, Fenwick’s *Secresy* features a Godwinian critique of aristocracy by casting Valmont as a despotic villain so completely “wrapped in the impenetrable selfishness of high birth” that he “denies the possibility of eminent virtue existing without rank” (Fenwick 63). Valmont’s intense hatred of “heterogeneous” society is based on a fear for his claims to authority. Fenwick dramatizes the ways in which upstarts from other classes threatened the aristocrat’s “natural” power, describing how Valmont saw “his high-born pretensions to notice and deference pushed aside by individuals obscure in their origin, but renowned for artful intrigues, for bold perseverance, and dazzling success!” (Fenwick 62).

Furthermore, Valmont has suffered mortifying defeat at the hands of the female sex, as a coquettish and fashionable lady once “had sufficient power to make [Valmont] the most ardent of her lovers” only to have “rejected him, laughed at him, despised him” (Fenwick 63).

In order to regain the control over the very people who ought to be “naturally” subordinate to his aristocratic, masculine authority, Valmont decides to form the “virtuous project” of creating and instructing “a new race” (Fenwick 64). It is in the implementation of this project that Sibella is raised in total confinement according to the principles of gendered education proposed in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1762 *Emile* and so notably protested by Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* three decades later. Valmont believes that by bringing his niece up in total seclusion and teaching her only to exhibit grateful submission to his paternal authority, he will have created the perfect woman. Furthermore, he intends on marrying her to his adopted (though secretly natural) son Clement, whose identity he has also attempted to form according to his ideal constructions of aristocratic manhood. His intentions for their union, which he purposely conceals from the couple, are to solidify the honor and superiority of the Valmont clan for posterity and ensure that all future generations of his family will have been created according to his systematic vision.

In this project, Valmont actually resembles the male midwives of the eighteenth-century. He believes he has fashioned Sibella, according to his concept of the proper mechanized order of the world, as a perfect, passive, female object. Fenwick writes that Valmont “spoke mysteriously of his systems, and his plans, of his authority, his wisdom, and [Sibella’s] dependence, of his right of chusing for [her], and [her] positive duty of obeying him without reserve or discussion” (Fenwick 55). She is not to have a voice or agency in regards to the functions he has laid out for
her. Therefore, in a similar fashion to William Smellie’s use of the inert “mechanical mother” in order to reproduce more male-midwives, by whose actions children were then brought into life (with or without the “interference” of mothers and female midwives), Valmont hopes to use his Sibella “creation” to literally generate more ideal, identical Valmonts, and eventually an entirely new society peopled by beings who adhere completely to his principles. Even other characters comment on Valmont’s similarity to medical men (albeit fraudulent ones) in these reproductive schemes: the irreverent Lord Filmar sneers, “Oh, yes; Mr. Valmont possesses a grand secret! He is a quack-royal to the human race; and possess the only specific in nature to make a perfect man” (Fenwick 208).

Valmont is further aligned with eighteenth-century physicians in his insistence that Sibella appreciate and depend upon his authority, even when that authority may be painful and terrifying. In fact, Valmont demands not only that Sibella mind him but that she care for him as well; her obligations to him smack of marriage vows, as Sibella recounts that “it was my duty to love him, obey him, and be satisfied” (Fenwick 57). This expected relationship baffled many traditional midwives who were already frustrated by the male-midwives’ ascension and ingratiation in upper and middle-class confinement chambers even while their technological “innovations” often led to fatal internal injuries and infections; the contradiction led midwife Elizabeth Nihell to exasperatedly ask, “Why do women love their torturers?” (qtd. in Blackwell, “Oh Soften Him!” 43). Michelle Massé writes that “masochism”—clearly loving one’s torturers—“is the end result of a long and varying successful cultural training” (3). Women’s acceptance of—even fervent request for—male-midwives’ dangerous surgical techniques and Sibella’s expected adoration of her oppressive uncle are based upon the same kind of cultural training in which women, “seeking recognition and love, learn to forget or deny that they also wanted independence and agency” (Massé 3).

The problem, however, is that Sibella has not learned to forget her desires for independence and agency, and, although she has not questioned her physical imprisonment on Valmont’s estate, has never surrendered to the oppressive confines her uncle attempts to place around her mind. Instead, she defiantly writes to Caroline that “still may Mr. Valmont’s power constrain the forces of this body, [but where] is the tyrant that could ever chain thought, or put fetters on fancy?” (Fenwick 73). Throughout the novel, Valmont is shocked and disgusted that
Sibella is not the “docile and grateful creature” he intended her to be (Fenwick 42); in particular, he is bothered by her repeated acts of mental insubordination. Fenwick writes:

Mr. Valmont raised himself more erect on his chair; and he frowned too. “Always reasoning,” he said: “I tell you, child, you cannot, you shall not reason. Repine in secret as much as you please, but no reasonings. No matter how sullen the submission, if it is submission.”

[Sibella] replied, “I do not think as you do.”

“Child, you were not born to think; you were not made to think.” (Fenwick 43)

As such passages demonstrate, all of Valmont’s systematic planning cannot combat the fact that Sibella is a living, thinking, autonomous being, rather than the uncomprehending automaton he had hoped to create. Likewise, the male-midwives of Smellie and Manningham’s lecture halls eventually had to leave their comfortable practice on silent, compliant machines in order to exert their expertise and authority upon active, breathing women, with often frustrating and sometimes fatal results. In *Secresy*, it appears the same “voluntary powers” of the female mind that John Clarke complained did “much mischief” in an otherwise efficient birthing room have also disrupted Valmont’s best-laid plans.

Sibella flatly refuses to be the unnaturally submissive being that she states her uncle “design[ed] to make me: a timid, docile slave, whose thoughts, will, passions, wishes, should have no standard of their own, but rise, change or die as the will of a master should require” (Fenwick 55). Instead, even through her gothic confinement “buried her amidst obscurity and horror at Valmont castle” (Fenwick 64), Sibella finds the ultimate way to both assert her agency and flout not only the dictates of her uncle that she deems unjust but one of the predominant patriarchal decrees in place for all eighteenth-century women. When Valmont refuses to allow Sibella and Clement to marry, Sibella proposes a “natural marriage” to Clement that requires no further legitimating vows or sanction than a solemn oath of the lovers’ “fervent unspotted faith” and the binding physical consummation of their relationship (Fenwick 131). Importantly, Sibella’s motivation for this proposal is not one of lust, but rather in her eyes the righteous and rational rejection of an unjust dictate: “‘For ought I to withhold myself from giving him the fullest proof of my affection, from renovating him by this proof, because Mr. Valmont cruelly commands it?’” she asks Caroline, promptly answering for herself, “‘Surely I am not’” (Fenwick 129).
Unfortunately for Sibella, she is the only one who understands the true intended meaning of her “marriage.” She does not realize that Clement, upon being sent out into the world by Valmont, has become a sensualist rake who sees Sibella as little more than a sexual object made for his pleasure. In fact, every male who encounters Sibella imagines her as his own version of a passive, objectified, and utilitarian “mechanical mother” through which he can (re)produce his fondest hopes for the future. Clement sees her as a vehicle of sexual gratification; likewise, the neighboring Lord Filmar hopes to marry her only in order to marry her fortune, through which he can pay off his gambling debts. Even the lone ostensible hero of the novel, Arthur Murden, does not view Sibella as an independent person but instead as an impossible ideal upon whom he has projected his long-standing desires for “a being thus artless, thus feminine, yet firm, such an all-attractive daughter of wisdom” (Fenwick 259). As Tilottama Rajan states, Murden, a reformed rake, “loves Sibella as an image,” and has constructed around her an artificial devotion as “a cover for a more profound apathy that miscarries a lost, narcissistic desire” (“Dis-Figuring Reproduction” 226).

No one, then, is willing or able to recognize Sibella as an autonomous, living woman capable of anything other than automatically gratifying the desires of others, save one fellow female character: Caroline Ashburn. Caroline, herself a fiercely independent woman who, in the words of Isobel Grundy, “rejects the underlying structures of social control and political power, though she complies, more or less, with convention” (25), is appalled by the unceasing objectification of her friend, particularly by the “husband” Sibella has claimed. She is wary of Clement’s inflated praise of Sibella’s physical charms, believing that the “chosen of [Sibella’s] heart” should prize the powers of her mind over her body (Fenwick 193). Ironically, Caroline has employed her own resourceful mind in order to be granted correspondence with Sibella, who Valmont originally refused to allow any contact with other women; his desire for his niece to have no other resources for advice or support, save himself, reflects the general eighteenth-century patriarchal anxieties over the subversive potential of female solidarity. However, Caroline appealed to Valmont’s dismissive view of female ability in her very request, assuring him of the decided insignificance of any potential influence she could have over his confined niece and insisting, “A letter, Sir, cannot waft down your drawbridges; the spirit of my affection breathed therein cannot disenchant her from the all-powerful spell of your authority” (Fenwick 39).
However, as Caroline well suspects, Sibella views Caroline’s correspondence as a saving light piercing the veritable “dungeon” of “solitude and imprisonment” she has been faced with so long (Fenwick 41). In her very first letter to Caroline, Sibella begs her new friend to “teach me your art to soften [Valmont’s] power, to unloose the grasp of his authority” (Fenwick 41), thereby recognizing and seeking to harness the very seditious potential that Valmont, and other real-life eighteenth-century masculine authorities, feared was inherent in any signs of female community. Caroline, whom Rajan calls Fenwick’s “experiment with feminist authority” (“Dis- Figuring Reproduction” 227) obliges, and throughout the course of their communication assures Sibella that her “day of liberty will come” (Fenwick 89). Caroline bristles at societal structures of feminine weakness, and laments that when people hear of a woman “who scorns to sink in apprehensions, who would rather protect herself than sacrifice herself, who can stand unpropped in the creation, they expect a giant in step and a monster in form” (Fenwick 295). Her letters also are replete with ideas that seem to come straight out of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, including everything from praises of work ethic and distrust of high birth, criticism of “fashionable” mothers and contemporary scripts of femininity, and a distinct “liberal feminist ideal of gender equality whereby both men and women exercise their rational capacities for the good of the nation” (Chatterjee 48). Furthermore, Caroline encourages Sibella to both trust her own instincts and rational capacities, but also to rely on the solidarity of other women, as combined power is always more effective. When Sibella (in Caroline’s view, rashly) decides to propose her “marriage” to Clement, for example, Caroline is deeply disturbed that Sibella did not share her drastic intentions with her friend for consideration before acting upon them. In writing to Sibella about her decision, Caroline laments, “I know how useless it is to wish over the past: yet I must again say—would you had previously declared it!” (Fenwick 140).

Despite the occasional slip such as this, Caroline generally provides Sibella with a form of mental support through which the imprisoned girl can gain strength to escape the metaphoric, if not physical, aspects of her confinement. However, soon everyone’s attentions shift dramatically to the very physical aspects of Sibella’s “confinement” in every sense of the word, as the full evidence of Sibella’s “marriage” becomes apparent. Much to Valmont’s outrage, his intended role for Sibella as the passive, mechanized mother of his projected aristocratic race is shattered by the sudden proof of her active, independent biological reproduction: Sibella reveals she is pregnant with Clement’s child. Her uncle’s rancor at this revelation is implacable, and
Sibella, despite making a wild attempt to scale the castle walls and swim across the surrounding moat, is captured and placed in such intense captivity that Caroline fears for her health and sanity.

Although illegitimate births are a stock feature of eighteenth-century novels, Sibella’s pregnancy is wildly different in that her growing gravid body is not an emblem of female weakness and helplessness or “the result of women’s bodily subjection” (Rajan, “Dis-Figuring Reproduction” 226), but rather visual, irrefutable evidence of her assertion of agency. Sibella’s child was conceived when she gave herself freely and purely to Clement in the terms of their natural marriage—in Clement’s insipid explanation, an act only “Miss Valmont proposed, and with which [he] but reluctantly complied” (Fenwick 319)—and therefore Sibella is literally pregnant with her own power and volition. Similarly, her wild action of throwing herself into the moat immediately following the disclosure of her secret condition apes the stock situation of many unwed mothers in sentimental novels, but also carries a drastically different meaning; rather than wishing to drown and die with the evidence of her sin, as so many “fallen” literary heroines do, Sibella jumps in the water to actively swim away and assert her—and her unborn baby’s—right to a continued independent existence.

Of course, it is for all these reasons that Valmont’s punishment is so swift and severe. Much like Mary and Maria’s imprisonments in *The Victim of Prejudice* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, Sibella has to be confined because her assertions of self are evidence of Valmont’s, and therefore patriarchy’s, failure, and therefore must be quarantined for punitive reasons as well as to prevent their “infectious” spread. Additionally, Valmont is not the only male figure whose reactions to Sibella’s condition are those of shock, anger, or horror. Not surprisingly, nearly every man who projected desires upon the seemingly controlled, mechanical Sibella is appalled at the news of her pregnancy. Only Lord Filmar, who has been honest from the beginning in his pecuniary desire to “marry a fortune”—not a woman—is not bothered by the pregnancy, and in fact is made strangely sympathetic and inspired by it. Her other potential lovers, however, cannot reconcile their idealization and objectification of Sibella with her contradictory actions. Clement, who had ironically called Sibella’s earlier espousal of independent ideals “pregnant with evil” (Fenwick 200), declares himself “undone” and “ruined” by the circumstances (Fenwick 313), oddly echoing the usual laments of the typical fallen woman herself. Murden’s reaction is even more severe; upon Caroline’s urgings he rescues the weakened Sibella from her unhealthy
confinement, only to become “unmanned” at the sight of her altered body. Murden narrates the scene in a letter to Caroline:

Miss Ashburn, till I saw her, I did not understand you.—Well might you warn me! […] She came out to us.—“Ah! what, what is the matter?” cried she, extending her arms as if to save me from falling.—Why were you not more explicit in your letter, Miss Ashburn?—I recoiled from her, from the remembrance of her Clement—and […] I closed my dim eyes, and wished they might never more open upon recollection. (Fenwick 322)

Although Murden briefly recovers his strength, his “horror remained unabated” (Fenwick 322), and he quickly falls into a rapid deterioration that ends in raving fever, and eventual death.

It is important to note that the sight of Sibella’s pregnant body is not a terrifying shock to Murden because it is his first evidence of her sexual transgressions; in fact, Murden was informed by Clement of the clandestine “marriage” from the moment it was consummated. Even after that disclosure, Murden’s idealization of Sibella continues, thwarted but unrelenting. His radical reaction to her pregnancy, however, indicates that there is something inherently monstrous in the site of Sibella’s maternal body that drives Murden literally to the point of madness. Her pregnancy presents visual, and therefore undeniable, evidence that she is not the ethereal idol of his creation but an active being possessing a sexual, corporeal body with its creative (or in this case, reproductive) power. Murden now must view Sibella as a sort of horrible reanimation of the dead, calling attention to her “now haggard and jaundiced face” and comparing her to “moving corpses” (Fenwick 322), because that is what she has been to him: a non-living object, whose sudden assertion of life literally scares him to death.

Clement and Murden’s reactions to Sibella’s pregnancy are decidedly contrary to those prescribed by typical eighteenth-century gender roles; in fact, Murden’s entire saga is played out physically and emotionally in a stereotypical feminine mode, as he “goes mad, faints several times, weeps profusely by Sibella’s bedside, and dies from love in a consumptive fever” (Chatterjee 51). Many other male characters, including even tertiary ones like the perpetually weeping Davenport and paranoiac Sir Thomas Barlowe, are also depicted as variously weak and ineffectual. Caroline and Sibella, on the other hand, both exhibit arguably masculine traits. For example, Caroline complains about her mother’s interest in the typical feminine pleasures of fashion, makeup, and gossip, and describes Sibella as someone who “would rather think herself
born to navigate ships and build edifices, than to come into a world for no other purpose, than to twist her hair into ringlets, learn to be feeble, and to find her feet too hallowed to tread on the ground beneath her” (Fenwick 93). Therefore, part of the project of Secresy seems to be to present a reversal of gender roles and expectations. In depicting men as negatively “feminine,” Secresy calls to mind the warnings of male-midwives’ critics who claimed that men’s usurpation of female maternal roles caused a critical breakdown in sexual difference and led to the formation of “amphibious” or “hermaphrodite” men (Cody 206). Additionally, and perhaps, more importantly, this reversal also demonstrates that the exchange of stereotypical gender traits has evident advantages for the women and tragic consequences for the men. Therefore, it is the cultural scripts of femininity that emerge as irrational and weakening, rather than the inherent nature of them women who may enact them.

At the close of the novel, however, tragedy strikes for the female characters despite their previous strength. Just as Sibella’s pregnancy seems to Murden to animate her “safely” mechanized female body to dangerous life, its termination does the opposite. Shortly after her escape from Valmont’s castle, Sibella is reunited with the unfaithful Clement only to learn that he has surreptitiously married Caroline’s own dissipated, fashionable mother. Although Sibella deals with the traumatic shock with seemingly “unfeminine” stoical courage—she “showed no symptom of common sorrow” (Fenwick 345) and refuses to cry, merely hugging herself fiercely “as if to bind the agony” (Fenwick 346)—she nonetheless goes into an unexpected labor and delivers a stillborn child. Rajan argues that, in accordance with the doctrine of maternal imaginative impressions, Sibella’s miscarriage can be seen as a “willed infanticide, a refusal to cede her unborn desire to existing discourses of shame, betrayal, or repentance” (“Dis-Figuring Reproduction” 228). Furthermore, with the death of her babe comes the death of the agency and freedom the pregnancy represented. As Sibella returns to the realm of a mere object rather than a recognized autonomous individual, she must die. Fenwick’s description of Sibella’s deathbed scene reveals the woman’s despairing acceptance of the futility of living when denied a subject identity: “Give me not a name”—cried Sibella. “I own none! What am I? a shadow! A dream! […] Know you not I expired when—Oh! Am I not dead dead already?” (Fenwick 356).

Just as she tried to save Sibella from her metaphoric and physical confinements, Caroline desperately tries to come to her friend’s aid during the terrible climactic reunion with Clement. As Clement repulses Sibella’s embrace, Caroline again strives to harness the power of feminine
solidarity, screaming out to be Sibella’s support with the cry, “Sibella, dear Sibella, turn your eyes on me! Let not their pure rays beam on a wretch so worthless!” (Fenwick 346). However, Sibella does not turn to Caroline in time, just as she did not consult her friend about her proposal to become Clement’s bride, and once again Caroline is unable to save her.

What *Secrecy* seems to dramatize the most, then, is the failure of female friendships, or, as Ranita Chatterjee writes, Caroline’s specific inability “not only to constitute the dominant emotional relationship in Sibella’s life but also to protect her from the cruelty of men” (49). In keeping with the larger discussion of changes in eighteenth-century maternity, I would juxtapose Caroline’s failure to aid Sibella with the gradual removal of the midwife from the birthing room. Though never specifically conflated with a midwife in the text, Caroline Ashburn shares many traits with the typical woman of that profession. Just like the midwives whom Adrian Wilson describes as “local leaders of women” (187), Caroline provides an advisory role and approaches her friendship in tutelary manner, to help restrain some of the younger girl’s fears and passions (Chatterjee 52), and she is variously designated as wise, logical, and a “people-manager” (Rajan, “Disfiguring-Reproduction” 225). She is also the only female character treated with real, if begrudging, respect from even such misogynist male characters as Filmar and Valmont, calling to mind the resentful deference and authority men had to give the midwives in their home.

Unfortunately, also like an eighteenth-century midwife, Caroline is abruptly ousted from her duties and place in Sibella’s “confinement,” when Valmont, suspecting Caroline and Sibella of conspiring against him, bars her access to his pregnant niece. Caroline’s “failure” to save Sibella from doom is not then the result of her own fault, but caused by patriarchal forces that prevented her from exercising her intended duties.

Furthermore, the very fact that Sibella chooses to look to Clement as the “dominant emotional relationship in her life,” to use Chatterjee’s phrase, rather than to Caroline also echoes the complicity of mothers in breaking up the empowering community of the all-female birthing room. Like the eighteenth-century mother who willingly hired male-midwives, Sibella believed she was making an active choice and asserting her agency in asking a man to “Come to my apartments” (Fenwick 131). However, she did not realize that she was unknowingly “loving her torturer;” while refusing to be a mere machine for her uncle, Sibella failed to recognize that the other man in her life also saw her with selfish utilitarian designs, until it was too late. Although Caroline later tries to help Sibella recognize this fact, emphasizing the circumstantial rather than
natural impetus that led the young couple to “love from habit” (Fenwick 141), any power she has
to aid her fellow woman has been usurped by Clement’s infiltration in Sibella’s chambers, the
result of which is ultimately a tragic abortive birth—literally of Sibella’s child, but
metaphorically of her independent sense of self.

In *Secresy*, then, as in real life in the eighteenth-century, women are made irrelevant to
one another by the authoritative intrusion of men into previously exclusively-feminine spaces
and communities. Throughout the 1700s, the rise of masculine obstetric science and its
practitioners helped alter the face and cultural import of the birthing room dramatically. By
removing midwives and instituting technological advances that demanded a mother’s complete
passivity, medical men changed the delivery room from a site of collective female agency to
instead yet another arena over which constructs of male rationality, mastery, and authority could
reign. Lisa Cody observes that “as men-midwives overtook midwifery by the 1800s […] the
wonder of birth changed from being a mystery to a simple, almost mechanical topic within the
purview of modern science” (22). With the supernatural “secrecy” surrounding reproduction
penetrated and supposedly naturalized by the unnatural intervention of man-made technology,
there seemed little for eighteenth-century women to do but fall into submission, either
performing as ideal, mechanized mothers of the nation or, like Sibella of *Secresy* or the usurped
midwives, fading away as “a shadow, a dream” of the lost maternal loci of feminine power.
CONCLUSION

I will send you a more faithful sketch—a book that I am now writing, in which I myself appear, head and heart—but this is between ourselves—pray respect a woman’s secret!”

– Mary Wollstonecraft in a letter to William Roscoe, October 6, 1791

Throughout this study, I have argued that all aspects of maternity—from conception through pregnancy, from labors of childbirth to the postnatal feeding and nurturance—were steadily removed from the control of the women who experienced it (or by mere virtue of their sex, were thought capable of experiencing it) and placed firmly under the authority and interpretation of men. Motherhood was divested of any associations of feminine agency and strength, as women were compelled to either concede to cultural scripts of unthinking maternal submission or, if resistant, forcibly confined within the constructions of unnatural monstrosity.

In concluding this thesis, I want to return to the scene with which I began: the death of Mary Wollstonecraft. In Wollstonecraft’s demise, nearly all the eighteenth-century issues surrounding the changing constructions of motherhood coalesce, as the era’s most vocal proponent of feminine agency found her own power stripped away in a fatal birthing room. When Wollstonecraft had gone into labor with her second daughter, she surely expected an experience much like the birth of her first child: one in which she was in total control of the scene, exhibiting such maternal strength that her French midwife claimed that Wollstonecraft “ought to make children for the Republic, since [she] treat[ed] it so slightly” (Collected Letters 253). Instead, in her second labor Wollstonecraft found herself dramatically weakened and immobilized, confined indefinitely to the birthing chamber she expected to inhabit for only a few hours, slipping in and out of rational consciousness and unable to hold or nurse her own infant out of the very real fear of transmitting contaminants through her suddenly pollutant maternal body. Her personal choice of one midwife attendant (the highly skilled Mrs. Blenkensop, who, although Vivien Jones argues acted “absolutely in line with the most up-to-date opinion” about the management of difficult childbirths, has largely been blamed for Wollstonecraft’s death [Jones 201]) was soon displaced by a sequence of some five male doctors, including John Clarke, the very physician whose espousal of women’s ignorance and demand for maternal
passivity would have been anathema to Wollstonecraft’s personal philosophies, had she been strong enough still to declare them. Even Godwin, the man who ought to have known her best, expressed regret “at not having insisted that Wollstonecraft be managed from the beginning” by his own male physician’s attention (Jones 204, my emphasis), as if his wife’s characteristic claims to personal authority and management ought to have been overruled in relation to her maternity. Finally, after Wollstonecraft died, the power she had so forcefully demanded in her life—to assert her rationality alongside her female nature, to self-define and resist the artificial feminine scripts in which society attempted to confine her—was surrendered to the interpretations of a patriarchal culture that quickly reinscribed her in the constructs of monster or whore. The Anti-Jacobin Review of 1798 listed her in the index under the term “prostitution” (Ty Unsex’d Revolutionaries 19), as if by associating the woman and her work with such a highly-charged, “contaminating” word, Wollstonecraftian feminine radicalism could be quarantined and eventually forgotten.

However, while Wollstonecraft’s individual death seems tragically to enact in microcosm the eighteenth-century woman’s loss of positive maternal identity, agency, and strength that I have traced in the preceding chapters, this is not all it signifies. Wollstonecraft was not left alone in her suffering amongst a throng of men attempting to control her uncontrollably failing maternal body; importantly, two other women were with her throughout the ordeal. In her biography Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life, Janet Todd records how two of Wollstonecraft’s closest female friends, none other than Mary Hays and Eliza Fenwick, played integral roles in the dying woman’s final days. Fenwick and Hays appeared constantly at Wollstonecraft’s side during the fatal turn of her parturient confinement in the capacities of nurses and comforters, with Fenwick earning notice from Dr. Carlisle as “the best nurse he ever saw” (Todd 453). After Wollstonecraft’s death, her friends’ attentions did not cease. Fenwick took the newborn Mary Godwin to her home and cared for her for ten days until her father sent for her (Grundy 10). Additionally, both women were “mobilized as scribes” to spread the tragic news of their friend’s death, with Eliza writing to Wollstonecraft’s sister Everina and Hays both informing Fanny Blood’s widower and penning the anonymous obituary of her friend in The Annual Necrology 1797-8 (Todd 456). The women’s poignant support and mourning of their friend is palpable in their letters; in her biography, Todd quotes from both Fenwick’s and Hays’s writings to make the point that Wollstonecraft died neither “alone” nor “unloved” (455).
The presence and actions of Hays and Fenwick at Wollstonecraft’s death carry specific resonance for the full interpretation of the sad event, and in turn for this study. The two women were both witnesses of and actors in two seemingly opposite stages of Wollstonecraft’s maternity. One was her post-labor confinement, which, due to the onset of puerperal fever, took on far more literal connotations of imprisonment, stoppage, and closure as Wollstonecraft, trapped in her failing body in a birthing room turned sick room, saw her life come to an end. However, Wollstonecraft’s final maternity was also marked by a positive transmission and proliferation, not of the infection that ransacked her body in death but of the genius and philosophy that defined her life.

In memorializing Wollstonecraft, Hays wrote, “Her own sex have lost, in the premature fate of this extraordinary woman, an able champion; yet she has not laboured in vain: the spirit of reform is silently pursuing its course” (“Mary Wollstonecraft” 459). Wollstonecraft left this “spirit of reform” as a sort of maternal inheritance for all eighteenth-century women, not only for her actual daughters Fanny and Mary, but for all “daughters” of the contemporary and future generations. Furthermore, women—especially other women writers—like Hays and Fenwick were integral in continuing this inherited project of championing their sex. By publicly transmitting their beliefs in female independence, rationality, and worth, they attempted to support one another in a collective community of feminine strength and facilitate the spread of Wollstonecraft’s philosophies, which would otherwise have been contained in death and infamy.

I say “attempted” because, unfortunately, not all of their reformist feminist efforts immediately succeeded. Like Wollstonecraft, Hays was lampooned in Polwhele’s Unsex’d Females and several subsequent publications, and Fenwick was forced to give up professional writing when serious domestic concerns jeopardized her family’s well-being. However, the very fact that these and other eighteenth-century women writers ever took up their pens to intrude into the world of masculine discourse, particularly with stories that literalized women’s gothic oppression under patriarchal control, represents an important act of reclaiming the power and authority that had been denied women, including the control over their own maternity. Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick were women who produced powerful words in order to represent the maternal experience and thereby reclaim the power of reproduction.

Theorists like Irigaray and Kristeva call for a way to “parler femme” (speaking (as) woman)” (Irigaray 4) by creating an alternative, universally “feminine” discourse in order to
combat the traditional patriarchal one in which women have been oppressed. I do not contend that the three women writers in my study were able to achieve the creation of this revolutionary discourse; it is evident in even their most radical of writings that many of Wollstonecraft’s, Hays’s, and Fenwick’s conceptions and images of themselves were inextricably bound up in the pre-existing ideologies of their times. However, I do maintain that each woman was nonetheless doing something revolutionary for the female sex in their literary interventions in the dominant masculine discourse, through both the subject matter on which they were writing as well as the very act of writing itself. In their writing about mothers and maternity, authors like Wollstonecraft literally wrote about “labor,” a term, as S. Leigh Matthews points out, that sometimes carries connotations of “to bear forth resistance” (92). Therefore, texts about the maternal experience literally embody the “bearing forth” of an alternative discourse of resistance. Again, in Matthew’s words, such a text “embodies the alternative discourse inherent to […] the pregnant body, the mothering body; [the] text makes present the absent mother, another body of language and experience” (Matthews 92). The author, then, of the text is represented within the text, much as a mother is represented—by her biological likeness and genetics, and later her emotional, educational contributions—in the body of the child she produces, the being who for nine months was the “other” inside of, and arguably part of, the mother’s self.

Wollstonecraft is therefore correct when she writes to William Roscoe that she will literally “appear, head and heart” in a new text she is writing (here she refers to A Vindication of the Rights of Woman). The work will not only reflect the author’s (re)productive process of developing and writing the text, but will itself be a sort of maternal reproduction, a creation that is both separate yet a part of its creator. Wollstonecraft’s additional playful appeal to “pray, respect a woman’s secret!” further connects her writing to an act of maternity. The unseen reproductive powers of conception and gestation have historically been considered “a woman’s secret,” which is the very reason that patriarchal authorities view maternal reproduction as threatening to androcentric control. Ironically, it is exactly this kind of control that Wollstonecraft’s “secret” textual labors were meant to undermine.

Texts, however, were sometimes troubling births for Wollstonecraft; her actual role as a reproducer of daughters brought her more unequivocal joy. Wollstonecraft’s letters are replete with her adoration of Fanny; she asserts, “I feel great pleasure at being a mother” (Collected
Letters 253), and later considered the child as the only reason for living, writing: “But for the little girl, I could almost wish that [my heart] should cease to beat” (Collected Letters 286). Although she had only the briefest time with the newborn Mary, Wollstonecraft also documented her growing affection for her second child during her pregnancy, writing, “I am beginning to love this little creature” (Collected Letters 417). Like most mothers, she did not hesitate to project ambitious hopes upon her young girls, including playful predictions of their writing ability. In one letter following Fanny’s birth, Wollstonecraft proudly jokes, “My little Girl begins to suck so manfully that her father reckons saucily on her writing the second part of the R—ts of Woman” (Collected Letters 254).

However playfully Wollstonecraft intended her reiteration of Imlay’s sentiment to be, the image is one not only of a mother breastfeeding her daughter but of a daughter imbibing and eventually reproducing the very ideologies of her mother. In this sense it becomes a site of doubly positive, empowering maternal transmission, and reveals an important hope of Wollstonecraft’s: not only would her work influence future daughters, but future daughters (both literal ones, like Fanny, and metaphoric “daughters” of British society) would reproduce versions of these texts and ideologies, to help defend and support their oppressed sex. Although Fanny did not fulfill this destiny of becoming a woman writer, her younger half-sister Mary did. Like Wollstonecraft, Mary Godwin (later Shelley) asserted her own (re)productive cultural power by also mothering texts and bidding her literary “progeny,” however “hideous,” to go forth into the world.22

In interpreting the end of Wollstonecraft’s life, then, one must not forget that it was also a site of beginnings. As one woman lost her identity and agency to the events surrounding her maternity, that same maternity was responsible for the birth of a new autonomous female agent—a woman, a writer—who would both represent and reproduce her mother’s power of natural and cultural reproduction. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft’s reproductive, creative power was suppressed neither in her confinement chamber death nor in the “monstrous” constructions that were posthumously applied to her life. Instead, her influence and productivity remained after her corporeal presence was gone, supported by women like Hays and Fenwick, made evident by posthumous publications (Maria, after all, was not published until 1798), and serving as a new sort of maternal “narrative” for her daughter. As Shelley wrote, “The memory of my Mother has always been the pride & delight of my life; […] Her greatness of soul [has] perpetually reminded
me that I ought to degenerate as little as I could from those from whom I derived my being” (Shelley 2: 3-4).

Irigaray writes of women, “We bring something other than children into the world, we engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious for example” (43). This idea, it must be understood, does not advocate a denial of the mother, or a mere stepping out of the maternal realm of “nature” and into one of “culture,” but instead means that women must reappropriate the maternal, natural dimension and challenge the dominant perception of it as unthinking and in need of control, so that “motherhood” and in turn “womanhood” can be understood as belonging equally to nature and culture. Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick ultimately tried to achieve this very goal. In novels like Maria, The Victim of Prejudice, and Secresy, they showed the dangerous, damaging effects that result when women are considered only mother, only nature, particularly in a society in which motherhood’s very associations with “nature” (which itself was a construct) made it potentially “unnatural”. In writing, these women did not only engage in an act of reclaiming a feminine subject identity by attaining, as Irigaray advocates, a social and “public” existence—“writer”—that is separate from the role of the “private” and subjugated role of “mother”. They also enacted a “motherhood”—a feminine reproduction—that was a cultural reproduction, belying the oppressive patriarchal dictates that had relegated their sex in corporeal, “irrational,” “nature.” Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick, in reappropriating productive power, intervening in the dominant masculine discourse, and reproducing the “fictions” that were eighteenth-century women’s realities, rejected the unnatural constructions of maternity their patriarchal society offered them, and embraced, “head and heart” their own form of “unnatural” maternity. Neither monsters nor machines in the service of men, these women writers of the 1790s were mothers of texts.
For example, Marie Héléne-Huet quotes from Jean Paflyn’s 1708 Description anatomique de parties de la femme qui servent à la generation in order to illustrate the surprising virulence with which critics could denigrate the physical aspects of female sexuality and reproduction: Paflyn writes that men mistakenly believe women’s reproductive organs to be desirable, “when in reality there are none in the body that are uglier and more subject to several very loathsome ailments, often infected with contaminated blood and much filth. They are soiled and soaked each day by urine and emit a stinking and sulfurous odor […] It is here, I say, in these bodily parts, into which all the body’s filth flows and accumulates like a pit, that the Author of Nature nevertheless wanted Man—this superb animal, whose final destiny is the Heavens—to be conceived, shaped, and formed, so that remembering afterward the time and baseness of his origins, he be not proud” (qtd. in Huet, 58-9).

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Irigaray come from the various reprints of her works in The Irigaray Reader (ed. Margaret Whitford). The individual pieces from which I drew on the most included “The bodily encounter with the mother,” The Speculum of the Other Woman, and the interview “Women-mothers: the silent substratum of the social order.”

Unless otherwise noted, all Kristeva quotations come from The Portable Kristeva (ed. Kelly Oliver).

Godwin’s Memoirs offers a detailed, first-hand narrative of Wollstonecraft’s death, which serves as a source for two other definitive discussions of the events: Janet Todd’s final chapter in her biography Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life and Vivien Jones’s published lecture “The death of Mary Wollstonecraft.” Any factual references to the events surrounding Wollstonecraft’s death in this chapter that are not specifically cited come from an amalgamation of these three sources.

Due to the confines of this project, my analysis of eighteenth-century “women’s” experiences refers primarily to those of eighteenth-century middle-class, rather than lower- or working-class, women. I recognize that the cultural expectations and constructions surrounding motherhood and the biological maternal played out in particular class-based ways, and in no way intend to project that middle-class women’s experience was the universal experience of maternity; however, the scope of that full class analysis is larger than such a project as this allows.

All citations of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman will be parenthetically abbreviated VRW.

Wollstonecraft biographers, including Janet Todd, seem to agree that Eliza’s “ill use” was of a sexual nature at the hands of her husband, Meredith Bishop. Todd conjectures that Eliza could not deal with her husband’s “unsavory” sexual demands, based upon Wollstonecraft’s mention of her brother-in-law’s need for “gratification” and the eighteenth-century assumptions that “hysteria” was tied to sexual fear and abstinence (Todd 45-6).

John 2:3-5 (King James Version): “And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come. His mother said unto the servants, Whateover he saith unto you, do it.”

Although the specifics of Wollstonecraft’s own spirituality have been subject to some debate (including amongst those who knew her best, such as Godwin and Mary Hays), her writings emphasize the importance of a religion that combines faith with reason and does not demand blind devotion or limit human inquiry. In Vindication, Wollstonecraft states that “religion is also separated from morality by ceremonial veil” (VRW 145), and criticizes such Christian tenets as the secondary creation of woman and original sin, writing, “I may be allowed to doubt whether woman was created for man: and, though the cry of irreligion, or even atheism, be raised against me, I will simply declare, that were an angel from heaven to tell me that Moses’s beautiful, poetical cosmogony, and the account of the fall of man, were literally true, I could not believe what my reason told me was derogatory to the character of the Supreme Being: and, having no fear of the devil before mine eyes, I venture to call this suggestion of reason, instead of resting my weakness on the broad shoulders of the first seducer of my fair sex” (VRW 80). She also refers to the Divine Right of Kings (and, by proxy, Husbands) as a right that ought be freely contested in her enlightened age, and one “which will not bear the investigation of reason” (VRW 162).
A detailed account of Mary Toft’s story can be found in both Dennis Todd’s *Imagining Monsters* and Lisa Foreman Cody’s *Birthing the Nation* (Chapter 5: “Imagining Mothers”). My general summary of this incident is taken from facts provided in both Todd’s and Cody’s versions.

Numerous eighteenth-century medical texts and pregnancy manuals detail long lists of qualities both desirable and, more often, undesirable in a hired-nursemaid. Francis Mauriceau’s text *The diseases of women with child, and in child-bed: as also, the best means of helping them in natural and unnatural labours* (written in 1688 but translated and reprinted in repeated editions up through 1755) offers one such extensive checklist: “In general, she must be very healthful, and of good Habit, not subject to the Gout, King’s-Evil, Falling-Sickness, or any other hereditary disease; that she hath no Spot, nor the least Suspicion of any Venerial Distemper; that she have no Scab, Itch, Scald, or other Filth of the like Nature; that she be strong […], that she be of middle Stature, neither too tall nor too low, too fat nor too lean […] Let her be of sanguine Complement, which many be known by her Vermilion Colour; not altogether so red, but inclining to white; of a firm Flesh, not soft […] She must not be red-hair’d, nor mark’d with red Spots; but her Hair must be black, or of a Chessnut brown: she must be well shap’d, neat in her Clothes, and comely in her Face, having a sprightly Eye, and a smiling Countenance […] She ought to have a sweet Voice to please and rejoice the Child, and likewise ought to have a clear and free Pronunciation, that he may not learn an ill Accent from her, as usually red-hair’d have, and sometimes also those that are very black-hair’d and white Skins; for their Milk is hot, sharp, and stinking, and also of an ill Taste” (372-3). Some other examples of similar texts include William Moss’s *An essay on the management and nursing of children in the earlier periods of infancy: and on the treatment and rule of conduct requisite for the mother during pregnancy, and in lying-in* (1781), and Thomas Dawkes’s *The nurse’s guide: or short and safer rules for the management of women of each rank and condition in child-bed. With directions about the choice of a wet-nurse. In a dialogue betwixt a surgeon and a nurse. By the author of the Midwife rightly instructed* (1744).

It must be noted that Charles White, a surgeon and founder of lying-in hospitals, was not advocating maternal confinement in this quoted passage, at least not in what he saw as its standard practice at the time; in fact, he is arguing against it. However, unlike Wollstonecraft’s dismissal of confinement practices, I would argue that White criticizes confinement not out of a belief in women’s strength but essential feminine weakness; that is, he is criticizing the problems of confinement as results of the “large share which nurses have in directing the management of lying-in women, to whose interference practitioners must in some measure submit, though contrary to their better judgment” (White 12). He describes the work of traditional midwives as “bad fashions and customs” (White 2) and writes that confinement “if not properly managed has often fatal effects” (White 1, my emphasis).

In fact, it was Hays who threw a small party in 1796 and invited both Wollstonecraft and Godwin, allowing the two to reestablish their earlier acquaintance. This reunion would lead to Wollstonecraft and Godwin’s marriage in less than a year (See Janet Todd’s biography *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, pg. 378-80).

Cody provides a detailed overview of the Warming-Pan Scandal in Chapter 3 (“Abortions, Witches, and Catholics: Reproduction and Revolution”) of *Birthing the Nation*. In it, critics of Catholic King James II claimed that the birth of his son had been a hoax perpetrated by politically motivated midwives and his scheming wife Mary of Modena, in which “a ‘suppositious’ prince [was] sneaked into the queen’s bedroom in a warming pan by the birth attendants to be passed off as the latest Stuart heir” (Cody 72). The hoax was supposedly “proven” by Mary’s use of only female midwives rather than male doctors, the latter of whom were thought to have been able to distinguish the “truth” of her pregnancy and not have been duped, or participated in duping the public.

Although, some midwives, like Elizabeth Nihell, certainly tried to combat this trend; Nihell wrote that ladies who wanted assistance in lying-ins “want someone who can deliver them not dissect them” (qtd. in Evenden 202).

Isobel Grundy’s introduction to the Broadview edition of *Secresy* provides a detailed biographical sketch, from which these facts are taken.
The Adventures of Caleb Williams had just been published a year before, in 1794.

In her introduction to Secresy, Grundy quotes Fenwick as lamenting, “I cannot write perpetually surrounded with my family even were I assured that I have talents to make writing profitable & I possess no such confidence” (11).

Like most writers, Wollstonecraft began several projects she later abandoned (including an “Oriental tale” entitled “The Cave of Fancy,” and a draft of a comedy which was turned down by two publishers and later destroyed by Godwin because it was too “crude” (Todd 359). Todd’s biography also indicates Wollstonecraft was extremely attached to her writing and therefore highly protective of her words and personally pained by criticism; see Letter 325 in The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft as an example of Wollstonecraft’s vocal indignation at George Dyson’s criticism of manuscript of Maria.

From Mary Shelley’s 1831 Preface to Frankenstein: “And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper.” In a future study, I hope to expand upon the connections between Shelley’s “birth” of texts and her mother’s. Due to the confines of this particular thesis, however, I have had to omit any closer analysis of this theme.
REFERENCES


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Meghan L. Burke grew up in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina before moving to Tallahassee and graduating summa cum laude from Florida State University in 2005. She stayed on at Florida State to receive her master’s degree in English Literature in the spring of 2007; during her graduate work, she was a two-time recipient of the University Fellowship and taught in the First Year Writing program. Her interests are broadly in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, and particularly in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, maternity, monstrosity, the Gothic, and feminist theory. Recently, Meghan has been offered the three-year Susan L. Huntington Dean's Distinguished University Fellowship at The Ohio State University, and plans to attend OSU as a doctoral candidate.