

PREGNANCY, CHILDBIRTH AND THE FEMALE BODY IN EARLY MODERN GERMANY*

I

One summer morning in 1558 a Cologne wine-merchant named Hermann Weinsberg was awoken by his wife, Drutgin, with the frightening news that she had miscarried in the night.¹ In the half-light, she showed him the contents of her chamber-pot; a messy foetus lay at the bottom. Hermann was shocked. He had been unaware that his wife was pregnant, or even that she was still able to conceive. Now he realized that a quarrel he had had with her two days earlier must have disturbed the nurturing flow of blood which the child needed; he should have protected his wife from excitement, he believed. Only later that day did he suspect that Drutgin had tricked him. The foetus in the chamber-pot looked as if it had been fashioned out of wet paper. Hermann understood the bluff's emotional subtext very well, however. The pretended miscarriage was Drutgin's way of voicing her anger at his violence and her claim to respectful treatment.

This article sets out to contextualize a story of this kind. It explores the assumptions common in early modern Germany about women's bodily sensitivity during pregnancy and childbed, and about the connection between their emotional and physical well-being. It also takes issue with earlier approaches to these themes. Attitudes to the early modern female body have hitherto been explored through medical tracts, collections of folk-customs and contemporary literary accounts.² Upper-class diaries in par-

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¹ *Das Buch Weinsberg: Kölner Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. K. Hohlbaum, F. Lau and J. Stein, 5 vols. (Leipzig and Bonn, 1886-1926), v, pp 20-2. On the Weinsberg marriage, see S. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 72-80.

² See, for example, P. Crawford, "Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England", *Past and Present*, no. 91 (May 1981), pp. 47-73. For a different approach, see L. Accati, "The Spirit of Fornication: Virtue of the Soul and Virtue of the Body in Friuli, 1600-1800", in E. Muir and G. Ruggiero (eds.), *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective* (Baltimore, 1990), pp. 110-40.

ticular have suggested that pregnancy, birth and lying in were mainly private experiences, “rough passages” full of danger for the mother’s life.³ One historian adds that, even so, becoming a mother was “suffused with political meaning”. A female culture of childbirth enabled pregnant women to resist their husbands’ “patriarchal power” by withdrawing sexual services and physical labour. The lying-in chamber was a tolerated but exclusive arena of female gossip, where women forged networks to resist male control.⁴

Clearly, women enjoyed a privileged position during pregnancy and lying in. But I argue that this was not necessarily due to the organization around childbirth of an exclusively female culture. In ways which historians have scarcely recognized, husbands played key participatory roles at times of childbirth. Sharing their wives’ understanding of bodily needs, they nurtured, entertained and comforted their pregnant women, and they celebrated safe delivery with them. Moreover, it was understood that women had a right to be cared for by their husbands; and communities supported them as they manoeuvred for more influence within their marriages if husbands failed to do so. This right to protection extended beyond the sphere of conjugal relationships. Pregnant women could also resist political violence by using their claims to protection strategically, and this again with communal support.

I shall attempt to elucidate these themes through sources which have not previously been exploited. They come from south-west German courts, from common people’s complaints and demands recorded in council minutes, and from legislation. These sources reflect common people’s daily life in fascinating detail (and demonstrate that historians are by no means forced to rely on writings by educated people and on medical discourse to reconstruct the cultural meaning of early modern physical experiences). Often in the most unexpected contexts, they give a strong sense of

³ P. Crawford, “The Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-Century England”, in V Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren* (London, 1990), pp. 3-38; L. Pollock, “Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early Modern Society”, *ibid.*, pp. 39-67; M. Laget, “La naissance aux siècles classiques: pratique des accouchements et attitudes collectives en France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles”, *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxii (1977), pp. 958-92; J. Gélis, *A History of Childbirth*, trans. R. Morris (Cambridge, 1991); F. Loux, *Le jeune enfant et son corps dans la médecine traditionnelle* (Paris, 1978).

⁴ A. Wilson, “The Ceremony of Childbirth and its Interpretation”, in Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, pp. 68, 96.

the ubiquity of the pregnant woman in the early modern consciousness, and show that it was a presence deferred to by men as well as by women.

In order to understand this deference, I address an additional theme, and a key one. It concerns contemporary beliefs about the ways in which social, physical and emotional experiences were linked — the notion, for example, that miscarriages resulted, not from organic deficiencies and mishaps, but from socially delivered shocks, or from withheld anger against others. These presumed linkages made women's emotional well-being during pregnancy highly dependent on public and private support. Pregnancy, childbirth and lying in were experienced by the “unfinished and open body . . . not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries” but “blended with the world” and suffused with the duality of birth and death.⁵ A woman before, during or after childbirth occupied a liminal space in which outer experiences were readily transmuted into inner experiences which affected both her and the child. She knew that she could give birth successfully only if her whole body “flowed”: she had to sweat, cry, shout and open her womb wide. Her vulnerability as she prepared to give birth was recognized and honoured. Gestation and parturition thus made sexual difference an “ontological category”: they gave essentially different meanings to each sex which were rooted in contemporary perceptions of bodily processes.⁶ Moreover, the experience of motherhood could have a wider ethical meaning. In particular social and political contexts it allowed women to demand respect for generosity, love and care as the conditions human life depended on. This article seeks to demonstrate how in these ways beliefs about women's physical nature could become a source of female strength.⁷

⁵ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Indianapolis, 1984), esp. p. 26

⁶ This is to argue against Laqueur's contention that “to be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes”. Laqueur only discusses the role of sexual intercourse in the reproductive process, ignoring gestation and parturition as part of female reproductive labour: T. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 8.

⁷ For a stimulating anthropological exploration of this theme, see Y. Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de faire la laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière* (Paris, 1979). For an important critique of this book, see C. Dauphin *et al.*, “Culture et pouvoir des femmes: essai d'historiographie”, *Annales E.S.C.*, xli (1986), pp. 271-94, available in English as “Women's Culture and Women's Power: Issues in French Women's History”, trans. C. Garnier, in K. Offe, R. R. Pierson and J. Rendall (eds.), *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (London, 1991), pp 107-33

II

The importance of childbearing (as distinct from virginity, for example) for women's sense of identity was vividly expressed in an incident during the Peasants' War. In March 1525 some women told the nuns of Heggbach convent that if they prosecuted their husbands for emptying the convent's grain-stores, they (the women) would return to scratch out the nuns' eyes. Then (as one nun reported) it would be the nuns' turn to "go out and milk the cows and wear rough jerkins", while the women "would come in and wear clean furs"; moreover, the nun continued, "we would be driven into the common crowd (*gemeine Haufen*) and have our dresses tied up over our heads, and we would have to bear children and have harm done to us, like them".⁸ Nuns, in short, would have to experience work, wartime rape and the pains of childbirth in order to know what women's life was "really" like.

Only two months earlier Luther had preached about Timothy's insistence that although women had brought about the Fall, they were sanctified by the bearing of children. What, he asked, did nuns have to be proud of?⁹ Protestant pastors repeated many times that a pregnant woman was "God's workshop", sanctified during and saved by childbirth.¹⁰ Those who contradicted this, as did one Conradus Fabricius when he preached in 1539 that "when a woman became pregnant, the Devil entered her body and the child was not brought into this world by God but by the Devil", were reported at church-visitations and severely punished.¹¹

Protestantism, in short, had relatively little regard for life-long virginity; its praise of motherhood drew on older tradi-

⁸ M. Kobelt-Groch, *Aufsässige Tochter Gottes: Frauen im Bauernkrieg und in den Täuferbewegungen* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1993), p. 34.

⁹ M. Luther, "Eine Predigt vom Ehestand", in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, xvii, pt 1, ed. G. Buchwald (Weimar, 1907), p. 26.

¹⁰ H.-C. Rublack, "Lutherische Predigt und gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeiten", in H.-C. Rublack (ed.), *Die lutherische Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland: Wissenschaftliches Symposium des Vereins für Reformationgeschichte, 1988* (Gütersloh, 1992), p. 366 n. 90. The Strasbourg Church Ordinance, printed in 1598, held that "a woman's 'greatest honour on earth is her fertility'", and here as elsewhere prayers for pregnant women were regularly offered during sermons: see L. J. Abray, *The People's Reformation: Magistrates, Clergy and Commons in Strasbourg, 1500-1598* (Oxford, 1985), p. 218.

¹¹ Conradus was banished from Württemberg: Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (hereafter HStASt), A 44, U 2494, 1 Sept. 1539, district of Calw.

tions.¹² Since the late Middle Ages, devotional emphasis had focused increasingly on the holy family, Jesus' childhood and Mary's motherhood. Mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux taught that Mary, the virgin mother, liberated women from the curse of Eve. Women who might otherwise be dismissed as weak could prove their toughness by pointing to the pain they endured during childbirth. Their special needs and desires were respected: for example, a pregnant woman caught stealing fruit could not be prosecuted.¹³ Similarly, cities passed legislation protecting pregnant women's health.¹⁴ By 1436, Augsburg supported several lying-in women,¹⁵ and Nuremberg introduced special alms for such women in 1461.¹⁶ Its 1478 begging ordinance gave them permission to beg in front of churches wearing a special badge, or to send others to beg in "churches, houses and streets" on their behalf.¹⁷ From the sixteenth century onwards, most towns seem to have regularly supported poor women before and after they gave birth if they were citizens. Midwives handed out "bedding, bread and lard to needy women", ensuring that "clean swaddling clothes and bandages were ready for the delivery".¹⁸ At the beginning of the sixteenth century, pregnant women in Hall were also invited to an annual meal of fish, the symbol of fertility.¹⁹ Fish was not to be eaten by virgins,²⁰ but pregnant

¹² C. W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1991).

¹³ U. Tolksdorf, "Schwangerschaftsgelüste (picae gravidarum)", *Kieler Blätter zur Volkskunde*, vii (1975), pp. 81-106; L. Zehnder, *Volkskundliches in den älteren schweizerischen Chroniken* (Schriften der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, lx, Basel, 1976), p. 107; H. Fehr, *Die Rechtsstellung der Frau und Kinder in den Westumern* (Jena, 1912), pp. 4-9.

¹⁴ O. Ulbricht, "Der Einstellungswandel zur Kindheit in Deutschland am Ende des Spätmittelalters (ca 1470 bis ca.1520)", *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, xix (1992), pp. 159-88.

¹⁵ P. Schuster, "Hinaus oder ins Frauenhaus. Weibliche Sexualität und gesellschaftliche Kontrolle an der Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit", in A. Blauert and G. Schwerhoff (eds.), *Mit den Waffen der Justiz: Zur Kriminalitätsgeschichte des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1993), p. 30.

¹⁶ Ulbricht, "Einstellungswandel zur Kindheit in Deutschland", p. 164.

¹⁷ *Nürnbergische Polizeiverordnungen aus dem XII bis XV Jahrhundert*, ed. J. Baader (Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, lxxii, Stuttgart, 1861), p. 319.

¹⁸ M. E. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1986), p. 72.

¹⁹ G. Wunder, *Die Bürger von Hall: Sozialgeschichte einer Reichsstadt, 1216-1802* (Sigmaringen, 1980), p. 31, report from 1525.

²⁰ When in 1561 the daughter of the former town clerk of Memmingen was suspected of an illegitimate pregnancy, a patrician woman regarded the mere fact that she had not eaten fish at dinner as sufficient proof of her innocence: Stadtarchiv Memmingen (hereafter StAMM), A 158/1, no. 7, fo. 11^r, Madlena Meurer.

women were believed to crave it. Even though this meal fell into disuse, a “lying-in florin” was routinely granted to the Hall poor during the early modern period. In 1687, for example, a day-labourer told a lower court that his wife had delivered a child, he had nine children, and it was difficult to feed his family because employment in the salt-works was hard to come by; he then asked for the “usual lying-in florin”.²¹ Wine ordinances similarly drew attention to women’s needs after they had given birth. In 1650 the duke of Württemberg outlawed cider-making because many citizens sold home-made cider as wine. “Foreign and poor countrymen” were thus deceived, and the practice “deprived and ruined poor and sickly women in childbed and breast-feeding women, who are unable to get a fair drink of wine”.²² Wine was believed to purify the blood, and together with meat was thought to be an essential part of the diet before and after birth. Durlach butchers risked being fined if they refused to give sick, pregnant and lying-in women cheap roast meat.²³

The language used about childbearing women of course depended on their social status. Honourable women would be described as “great with child” (*gross schwanger*), unmarried mothers as “big-bellied”, or as a “dishonourably pregnant person” (*in Unehren schwangeres Mensch*). Even so, such mothers were commonly allowed to stay in civic poorhouses or hospitals for two weeks while lying in, and their mistress might be ordered to bring “meat and other food”. In 1669, an exiled prostitute repeatedly returned to the Constance city gates “with a big belly” and successfully pleaded for permission to give birth in the poorhouse.²⁴ Two weeks were a brief time compared to the usual six weeks of lying in, but were at least something; moreover, the expense was borne by communes. These donations became less generous as the number of unmarried mothers rose during the

²¹ Stadtarchiv Schwäbisch Hall (hereafter StAH), 4/553, Einunger-Protokolle 1685-7, fo. 308^r, 13 Sept. 1687. In 1670, a woman whose husband had been banished from Constance received more alms while she was lying in: Stadtarchiv Konstanz (hereafter StAKN), Ratsprotokolle (hereafter RP) 1670, BI 150, fo. 81^r, 5 Feb 1670, Hans Heinrich’s wife

²² *Vollständig, historisch und kritisch bearbeitete Sammlung der württembergischen Gesetze*, ed. A. L. Reyscher, 19 vols. (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1826-51), xii, p. 83, 18 Sept. 1650.

²³ E. Schneider, *Durlacher Volksleben 1500-1800. Volkskundliches aus archivalischen Quellen zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der ehemaligen Stadt Durlach* (Karlsruhe, 1980), p. 70.

²⁴ StAKN, RP 1669, BI 149, fo. 705^r, 22 Oct 1669, Maria Blarin.

French Wars,²⁵ but in 1674 the Constance council could still grant a foreign soldier's wife permission to receive "wine and everything else needed by women who lie in".²⁶ Pregnant prisoners received a special diet, too. In 1683 the imprisoned daughter of a Hall shoemaker received half a *Mass*²⁷ of wine and half a pound of meat every day during her pregnancy, and "good, strong soups" afterwards — probably the best diet she ever had.²⁸ In these ways magistrates supported women materially before and after childbirth if their husbands were unable to do so, and they affirmed this commitment even towards prisoners, unmarried mothers and prostitutes.

III

The support for women in childbirth was double-edged, however. The child's welfare was increasingly given priority. Luther famously expected mothers to die themselves rather than let their offspring perish, and exalted self-sacrificial motherhood.²⁹ Motherhood was increasingly policed by secular authorities in both Protestant and Catholic towns and territories. Contraception and abortion were punished and miscarriages monitored.³⁰ Württemberg women who miscarried because they were reluctant to go into labour were accused as criminals and reported to the ducal supreme council, for such behaviour fundamentally challenged the view that motherhood was natural and sacred. Their cases are of particular interest, since they illuminate the emotional and physical conditions understood to be essential for a successful birth.

²⁵ StAKN, RP 1674, BI 154, fo. 346^r, 23 May 1674.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, fo. 727^r, 24 Oct. 1674.

²⁷ 1 *Mass* = c.1 litre.

²⁸ StAH, A 11/41, 1683, Jacob Roth's daughter. In 1624, the Württemberg supreme council had been less generous towards a pregnant woman in prison. She claimed that she did not know how to survive, as neither a "drop of wine [nor a] morsel of meat had passed her throat". The council granted her a quarter of wine and a small piece of meat every day: HStASt, A 209, Bü. 739, Anna Maria Mayer.

²⁹ Luther, "Predigt vom Ehestand", p. 25.

³⁰ Relatives could be forced to let surgeons dissect a woman who had died during childbirth: see HStASt, A 206, Bü. 4600, 25 Aug. 1649. In 1649, the Constance council stipulated that if a woman were about to die during childbirth and it seemed possible to save the child by performing a Caesarean section, doctors had to operate regardless of whether or not relatives protested: StAKN, A1/28a, Franz-Bickel-Chronik, p. 73, 20 Mar. 1649.

In 1597, for example, a town clerk's wife in Sulz was reported for "not having acted during her labour as she should". Another young woman had to be told by her midwife to use an onion to help her cry and push.³¹ This woman gave birth successfully and merely received a warning; but in 1657 Anna Maria Krauth, the wife of a Neckarhausen marksman (*Schütze*), was imprisoned for ten days and fined after three of her babies were stillborn. The parson said that he had spent eight days and nights with her, but she had sat "stiff as a stick", as if the birth did not matter to her. Her husband had beaten her, and the pastor had "sharply reminded her of the law", but she refused to use the birth-stool or go to bed, and, the midwife added, she swore so much that "honourable people were frightened". None of the women present during the birth noticed any "seriousness" in her. Her mother claimed that she had paid no attention to her exhortations; she had earlier sworn that she wanted no child from Krauth. During her latest pregnancy she had said that it was as if "the Devil was in her belly", and on the way back from the Esslingen market she had exclaimed that she wanted to drown herself in the Neckar, or even be hanged on the iron gallows of Stuttgart. Her husband felt helpless. He testified that "he did not know what to do with her", describing her as a bad, obnoxious and ungodly woman. He begged for her to be pardoned none the less, because he needed her labour, and if they "did not work [even] for a single day they would have nothing to eat". Krauth was hard-working but disabled, with each of his thighs as thick as "a man usually was on his whole body". Anna Maria, conversely, had been spoilt in her youth and therefore dreaded even the effort of giving birth. One woman had reminded her a couple of times of her duty, and the schoolmaster's wife knew that she swore and cursed, "especially while she was pregnant". When the women had shown her one dead baby to make her feel guilty, Anna Maria had merely wanted to be killed herself.³² In 1668, similarly, a carpenter's wife was accused of having behaved "wildly" during childbirth. She had refused to use the birth-stool. Although the parson admitted that his own wife had given birth to several children in bed, the midwife and others insisted that this woman should stand in the stool, pulling her legs apart

³¹ HStASt, A 206, Bu. 4656, 15 June 1597, Catharina, Walter Springer's wife.

³² HStASt, A 209, Bü. 1720 (1), 29 Aug, 2 Sept. 1657.

when she did so. Even then she suppressed her labour-pains, and neither sighed nor repeated "God grant it!"³³

These cases show how it was considered to be the woman's duty to suffer for the child's safe delivery, and how disturbing it was if she refused to go through this experience.³⁴ Along with menstruation, lactation and the menopause, women's experience of birth defined identity. The conjunction of fertility and finality was part of their being: the refusal to live through the pain and fear of death in order to give birth challenged views of what being a woman was about. The destructive force of such uncooperative women was feared. They were described as ungodly, suicidal, murderous, Devil-possessed. Both sexes felt this way: male doctors and officials were not on one side, with midwives, mothers and a supportive "female culture" on the other.³⁵

The case of a forty-year-old smith's wife in 1698 demonstrates very clearly both this fear and this concurrence. During twelve years of marriage Walburga had had only one child. She never joined other women in spinning-bees, nor spun hemp by herself. She was generally thought of as lazy, even though she sometimes helped her husband at the forge. The pastor had punished her because she had not attended in church during sermons. Everyone knew that she had run away from the village of Nahrstetten several times and wanted to kill herself. Now, having at last given birth to a girl, she suffered from severe melancholy, sighing: "I don't have any linen, everything is torn, and girls are so expensive, how am I going to dress her and give her a dowry?" She stopped eating for ten days. She neither listened nor spoke to other people, and lay immobile even when shaken, splashed with cold water or rubbed with snow. The mayor, schoolmaster and her maidservant suspected that this was unnatural. The maidservant knew that the Devil could be driven out of a body if he was insulted as "chicken-shit" (*Hühnerträckler*). So she shouted this

³³ Protestants used such "prayers" to console women, and to replace devotion to saints like St Margaretha. The story was reported by the woman's daughter HStASt, A 206, Bu. 2485, 1668, Agnes, Michel Riechen's wife, Gärtringen.

³⁴ Terminating a pregnancy was permissible before the child began to move inside the womb, but a "quickened" child had a God-given soul and it was a woman's duty to give birth to it.

³⁵ The latter is the impression one is likely to receive, for example, from Crawford, "Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-Century England". On conflicts between women in childbed, midwives and lying-in-maids, see L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994), ch. 9.

at Walburga, who suddenly leapt at her and nearly strangled her. After she had stayed in bed for days she got up to cook porridge for her baby girl. Watching the flame, she decided to burn down her neighbour's house. Tried as a possible witch and arsonist beset by the "Devil of avarice", she was found guilty and beheaded.³⁶

These women's physical and emotional postures were at odds with the collective understanding of pregnancy. They were described as "clogged", their emotions stagnant or suppressed inside the body. The last example shows how it was understood that the physically blocked woman also put herself on the margins of all other areas of economic and social exchange: work, nourishment, inheritance, generosity, neighbourliness, love and care. When feelings were thus blocked by envy or hatred, the community was endangered. Arson or witchcraft might ensue if reconciliation failed.³⁷ As Barbara Duden has shown, being "clogged up" had in this sense real physical and metaphorical social meanings and consequences, in a society in which "there was neither a demarcated, self-contained body nor a social environment that stopped abruptly at the skin".³⁸

IV

Duden's description of a "pre-anatomical" understanding of corporality helps explain why early modern people believed that shocks, rage, anger and other extreme excitements could cause illness and pain, and also why pregnant women were so fearful of terrifying sights or conflicts. Such experiences were dangerous because the ensuing physical symptoms could not be cured in the usual manner. On the one hand, a shock drove the blood away from the limbs to swamp the heart with blood. On the other, anger made the blood flow rapidly into the head, limbs and uterus, where its movement caused convulsions, the cessation of menstruation, and so forth. Women most commonly reported this as a "flux" in their bodies. It thickened the blood, making it impure and causing it to "clog". The concept of health was

³⁶ HStASt, A 209, Bü. 1635, 24 May 1698, Walburga, Hans Raichler's wife.

³⁷ On sickness, see D. W. Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 37-60, esp. p. 56.

³⁸ B. Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany*, trans. T. Dunlap (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), p. 144.

based on the notion that blood had to be pure and flow.³⁹ Hence cures entailed blood-letting in order to re-establish a balanced pace and distribution of blood inside the body. Accumulated blood (for example, in the uterus) was likely to be impure.

Pregnant women could not purify their uterine blood by menstruating. Instead, blood accumulated dangerously, surrounding the foetus for months. In 1573 the Protestant pastor Simon Musaeus imagined how, after God created a living being in the womb, he “moved it from side to side like a midwife, cleaning, so that we should not suffocate in filth”.⁴⁰ The womb was like a dark cave, but also a dirty one. Christoph Völter, author of the 1679 Württemberg manual for midwives, found it humiliating to reflect that he had developed in what was “almost a sewer, between many bad smells and filth”.⁴¹ Moreover, if a pregnant woman became angry, a hot flow of blood would swamp the fragile cells of the foetus, causing miscarriage; if she were shocked, blood would drain away and the foetus would starve. Thus the borders between women’s inner body and the outer world were thin. Even imagined images could affect a foetus.⁴² The symbiotic relationship between the body and the outside world was confirmed in the fact that pregnant women craved unusual (or even usual) food, or were unable to eat anything at all. If menstruating women felt confused about food (in 1699 a young woman told her family that she was unable to eat rice or salad because of her period),⁴³ pregnant women were even more so. A woman would vomit, or want to eat “raw, unnatural things” which, Luther mused, “would shock her, if she was healthy”.⁴⁴

³⁹ R. and D. Porter, *In Sickness and in Health. The British Experience, 1650-1850* (London, 1988), p. 49.

⁴⁰ Simon Musaeus, *Postilla, das ist Auszlegung der Euangelien durchs gantze Jar an Sonntagen und gewoehnlichen Festen in der Kirchen, vblch und gebraeulich in drey vnterschiedliche Theil getheilet* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1583), pt 3, fo. 343”, cited in Rublack, “Lutherische Predigt und gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeiten”, p. 366 n. 90.

⁴¹ C. Völter, *Neueröffnete Hebammen-Schuhl Oder Nutzliche Unterweisung Christlicher Heb-Ammen vnd Wehe-Mütter*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart, 1687), p. 5.

⁴² For example, an unsatisfied craving for strawberries might result in a child with a strawberry-mark or other red birthmark on its body: T. Paracelsus, “Das dritte Buch von den Unsichtbarn Wercken”, in his *Bücher und Schriften*, ed. J. Huser, 6 vols. (Basel, 1589, repr. Hildesheim, 1971-5), i, pp. 269-88; T. Paracelsus, “De Pestilitate”, *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴³ HStASt, A 210, Abt. II, Bü. 128, 2 July 1699, Maria Magdalena Fröhlich.

⁴⁴ “Predigt vom Ehestand”, p. 24. The recommended diet for women was “non-constipating foods that moisten but do not fatten”, which would support the circulation of fluids inside the body: see Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, p. 104. Recipes for pregnant and lying-in women can be found in the first German cookery-book written

More than one hundred and sixty years later Völter expected pregnant women to abstain from extremes, since dancing, violent laughing or voluptuous eating might damage the foetus.⁴⁵ However, he still recommended that relatives and servants who felt that a pregnant woman was about to behave indecently should withdraw so that she could “indulge in her lust properly without having to be shy or ashamed before anyone”.⁴⁶

This precarious state of women’s bodies and senses before and after birth explained a great deal to contemporaries. Just as an English maidservant allegedly gave birth to a cat in 1569,⁴⁷ so there were “monstrous” births in Württemberg. Parsons had to report every such birth to the supreme council, and women had to explain any deformity. Usually a shock of some kind was invoked to explain these phenomena. In 1659 a Stuttgart coppersmith’s wife “of honourable conduct” bore a child with one foot and without genitals. She said that this could only be explained by the shock she had received from seeing a lame beggar on her way to market.⁴⁸ In 1677 a woman in the Hall territory explained that a dog with puppies had jumped up at her while she had been doing her laundry. She had almost fainted and later delivered a child with deformed hands and feet.⁴⁹ Shocks explained false pregnancies too. In 1551 Anna Ulmer in Esslingen pretended to have a hugely swollen belly, even though she was a virgin and fasting. Her interesting condition inspired at least three broadsheets, and her mother explained it by telling the court that

(n 44 cont.)

by a woman. Anna Weckerin, *Ein Köstlich new Kochbuch von allerhand Speisen . . . furnehmlich vor Krancke in allerlay Krankheiten und Gebrästen, auch Schwangere Weiber, Kindbetterinnen und alte schwache Leute künstliche und nutzlich zuzurichten vnnnd zugebrauchen* (Amberg, 1598; repr. Munich, 1977), esp. pp. 3, 18, 37, 153, 157.

⁴⁵ Völter, *Neueröffnete Hebammen-Schuhl*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30

⁴⁷ D. Cressy, “De la fiction dans les archives? ou le monstre de 1569”, *Annales E.S.C.*, xlviii (1993), pp. 1309-29.

⁴⁸ HStASt, A 210, Abt. I, Bu. 252, 24 May 1659, W Pulz, “Graphische und sprachliche Tierbildlichkeit in der Darstellung von Missbildungen des menschlichen Körpers auf Flugblättern der Frühen Neuzeit”, *Bayerisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde* (1989), pp. 63-81; P.-G. Boucé, “Imagination, Pregnant Women and Monsters in Eighteenth-Century England and France”, in G. S. Rousseau and R. Porter (eds.), *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 86-100; O. Niccolò, “Menstruum quasi monstruum’: Monstrous Births and the Menstrual Taboo in the Sixteenth Century”, in Muir and Ruggiero (eds.), *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, pp. 1-25; D. Wilson, *Signs and Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (London, 1993).

⁴⁹ StAH, 4/79, Fraisch- und Malefizrepertorium, Eschenau, 1677.

Anna had been shocked to see a boy who suffered from falling-sickness.⁵⁰ High and low people flocked to Esslingen to see her, until she was imprisoned for life for fraud.

“Shock”, then, was a common danger — so much so that in Gryphius’s 1658 comedy *Peter Squentz*, those acting Pyramus and Thisbe (like Snug in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) thoughtfully warned pregnant women in the audience that the lion was not a real one and was played by the local carpenter.⁵¹ There were innumerable recipes for calming mixtures for use when women were shocked. The eighteenth-century Württemberg manual for midwives proposed saffron and wine, or — cheaper and sweeter — wine boiled with sugar and cinnamon.⁵² More radically, citizens in the south-west did not hesitate to insist that shockingly ill or ugly residents be removed in order to protect pregnant women. Town councils backed them. A Nuremberg ordinance of 1478 told beggars to hide malformed limbs out of consideration for pregnant women, and other towns followed.⁵³ Private complaints endorsed the point. In 1604 a man told the Memmingen council that Barbla Fiderer, who suffered from falling-sickness, was “a huge burden on her pregnant neighbours”, his own wife included. On Wednesday at breakfast-time she had entered his house and shocked his wife by falling over. She “fell all the time and shouted terribly”, he said; she was a loose woman, chased by lads, and a neighbour had seen her drunk, and also angry when her sister had beaten her for falling.⁵⁴ In 1630, a man similarly reported to the Wildberg district court that “Claus Saalen’s daughter was so disgusting that pregnant women might be shocked”. The council confined her to her house in future.⁵⁵ Similarly, in 1685 Caspar Fritz reported to the Weinsberg district court that Jacob Bochen’s wife had “horribly

⁵⁰ “The Deceitful Woman of Esslingen”, Zentralbibliothek Zürich, Wickiana, PAS II 2/13, reproduced in *The German Single Leaf Woodcut, 1500-1550*, ed. M. Geisberg, rev. W. L. Strauss, 4 vols. (New York, 1974), iii, p. 1066, G.1118; “Gruntliche antzaugung des Teufflischenn und schentlichen betrugs Mit dem gemachten Bauch von anfang biss zu end 1551”, PAS II 10/19b; “Des falschen Weibs vnd Junckfrawen zu Esslingen Auss gericht” (undated), PAS 10/19; “Blut- oder Peinliches Urteibuech”, Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg, B 169, Bu.119 I, fos. 145^v-156^r, 23 Jan 1551.

⁵¹ Andreas Gryphius, *Lustspiele I*, ed. H. Powell (Tubingen, 1969), p. 7

⁵² V. H. Riecke, *Kurtzer und deutlicher Unterricht Für die Hebammen des Löblichen Herzogthums Württemberg* (Stuttgart, 1746), app.

⁵³ Ulbricht, “Einstellungswandel zur Kindheit in Deutschland”, p. 163.

⁵⁴ StAMM, A 135/6, 19 Apr. 1604.

⁵⁵ HStASt, A 582, Bu. 86, 29 Nov. 1630

ugly hands", and it was decided that she should cover them in public so that pregnant women would not be disturbed by them.⁵⁶

It is apparent from such incidents that the publicly recognized need to protect women during and after pregnancy provided a focus for narratives about disturbed social relationships, just as it mediated women's claims to respect and consideration. Some women used their pregnancy to dramatize complaints about noisy gatherings in neighbours' houses.⁵⁷ An Esslingen woman accused a neighbour of stealing meat from her while she was lying in — this to prove his recklessness as well as his dishonesty.⁵⁸ Some women skilfully dramatized their demands. In 1711 a pregnant peasant-woman quarrelled with other women about the rank of her seat in church. She asked the parson to decide the matter because she would otherwise be too upset to be able to shout during her labour. She showed him the swaddling-clothes she carried with her lest she give birth suddenly. Since the birth did not take place for another six weeks, the parson not surprisingly felt that he had been duped.⁵⁹

V

The fact that pregnant women claimed protection, care and appreciation as of right, and long lying-in periods too, might help explain why deaths in childbirth were relatively uncommon in Germany up to the eighteenth century. A demographic study of three sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Württemberg villages shows that women gave birth to five children on average up to the age of 38-40. Between 1690 and 1724, an average of four women in a thousand died within forty-one days of giving birth; but between 1760 and 1794 the average rose to eleven.⁶⁰ Between

⁵⁶ HStASt, A 214, Bu. 1071, Weinsbergisches Vogtgerichtsprotokoll, fo. 42^v, 30 Oct. 1685, Caspar Fritz.

⁵⁷ In one case the midwife had been with a woman close to delivery, and silenced a man who kept knocking at the door with his pike and cursed God StAKN, HIX, F.42, 30 Jan. 1601. In 1603, a Constance woman similarly claimed that a neighbour often invited journeymen for dances until midnight, so that she had once been unable to sleep while she was lying in StAKN, HIX, F.43, n.d., Jacob Schmidt's wife

⁵⁸ StA Esslingen, AII, Reichsstadt, 43C/592, fo. 54^v, 31 May 1666.

⁵⁹ HStASt, A 206, Bu. 1279, fo. 11^v, 1711, Ernst Krieger's wife: Klein Gartach, junior bailiff's and pastor's report I am grateful to Jürgen Beyer for a transcript of this case.

⁶⁰ A. Maisch, *Notdürftiger Unterhalt und gehorige Schranken Lebensbedingungen und Lebensstile in württembergischen Dörfern der Frühen Neuzeit* (Quellen und Forschungen zur Agrargeschichte, xxxvii, Stuttgart, 1992), p. 291.

1655 and 1724, a woman would have run on average a 2-3 per cent risk of dying in childbed at some point of the procreative cycle; between 1760 and 1829 the risk was 5-6.5 per cent.⁶¹ This change might be related, not only to a lower age of marriage, but also to an intensification of female labour during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which forced many women to resume work shortly after delivery and reduced husbands to relative passivity.⁶²

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a husband would be affected by his wife's pregnancy roughly every other year. The quality of a marriage was tested in the long weeks before and after the birth, even though the husband would usually be excluded from the birth itself. The physical survival of most couples depended on intensive co-operation in work, with a clear division of labour and little leisure. Between a third and a half of all artisans did not employ a journeyman and depended on their wives' help.⁶³ Although a maidservant might take over female tasks when her mistress was in late pregnancy, many households could not afford such help. Female work during advanced pregnancy was nevertheless frowned upon, and it was understood that a pregnant woman should not carry heavy objects.⁶⁴ In 1602, it was a central point in a wife's complaint that during her pregnancy her husband, a cartwright, forced her to work because he had no journeyman.⁶⁵ Husbands had to reorganize the work-load, nourish their wives with meat and wine, buy or hire the bed in which she would lie in, and if possible pay for a nurse.⁶⁶ In

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁶² W. R. Lee, "The Impact of Agrarian Change on Women's Work and Child Care in Early-Nineteenth-Century Prussia" in J. C. Fout (ed.), *German Women in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History* (New York, 1984), pp. 234-55. On changes in female work patterns, see C. Vanja, "Zwischen Verdrängung und Expansion, Kontrolle und Befreiung Frauenarbeit im 18. Jahrhundert im deutschsprachigen Raum", *Vierteljahresschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, lxxix (1992), pp. 457-82; on Württemberg, see D. W. Sabean, *Property, Production and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700-1870* (Cambridge, 1990), ch. 6.

⁶³ H. Wunder, "Er ist die Sonn', sie ist der Mond": *Frauen in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 1992), p. 100.

⁶⁴ In 1610, a woman explained that her baby's brain had been crushed because she had pulled a heavy tub during her pregnancy: StAKN, HIX, F.44, 3 Apr. 1610.

⁶⁵ StAKN, HIX, F.43, 17 July 1602, Georg Gamel's wife

⁶⁶ Sometimes a woman's father was obliged to send his daughter as much as "several buckets of wine": StAKN, HIX, F.48, 5 Apr. 1576. Even in illicit relationships, the fact that a man brought a pregnant woman meat and wine meant that he wanted her to keep the child and was committed to her, as in the case of Barbara Kohnbuhl, who had a relationship with a soldier: StAKN, K4, 9 Aug. 1691.

Constance independent nurses were commonly hired to look after lying-in women. Single women sometimes lodged with a married couple for the purpose.⁶⁷ It was also commonly accepted that debts might fairly remain unpaid if a husband expected his wife to be lying in soon.⁶⁸ Evidence of this kind suggests that few wives, even in poorer artisan households, resumed onerous duties early.

This impression is endorsed by the case of a Constance tailor, Lonhardt Lörer, in 1668. His brother-in-law told the mayor that Lörer had beaten and cursed his wife during pregnancy, thus depriving the foetus of its "food inside the womb", and again after she rose from childbed. He spent everything he earned on drinking, leaving wife and children without bread. Lörer defended himself by saying that he had cursed his wife only because she had lain in for eight weeks: he had wanted to move her bed from the ground floor to the upstairs bedroom to enable him to re-employ a journeyman. (Women always seem to have lain in in the main room, for warmth or company.) When Lörer cursed his wife she shouted to make neighbours think he was beating her. She told clients that he did not feed her well enough, and she had spent eight florins clients had given her. The council nevertheless did not believe this tale of a greedy, unruly lying-in woman and banished Lörer from the town.⁶⁹

A husband was expected not only to provide for his wife but to be close to her before and after the birth. When in 1525 the citizens of Rothenburg were armed to fight rebellious peasants, one man claimed that his pregnant wife would not let him go; he duly stayed behind.⁷⁰ Men were commonly released from prison as their wives approached childbirth. A Sulzdorf peasant was imprisoned in 1686 because he had left his wife for a day while

⁶⁷ StAMM, RP 1 July 1667 - 11 Aug. 1669, Jonas Lanumith's house.

⁶⁸ H. Bullinger, *Werke*, pt 2, v, ed. H. U. Bächthold, R. Henrich and K. J. Ruetschi (Zurich, 1992), p. 134, letter from Gervasius Schuler, 4 Feb. 1535; cf. the case of a Constance father: StAKN, HIX, F.48, 5 Apr. 1576.

⁶⁹ It took his wife and his guild four months of pleading to get him back into town on condition that he would stay away from taverns: StAKN, RP 1668, BI 148, fos. 430-433, 11 July 1668; fo. 476^r, 4 Aug. 1668; fo. 541^r, 17 Sept. 1668; fo. 561^r, 22 Oct. 1668.

⁷⁰ *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs aus Rothenburg an der Tauber*, ed. F. L. Baumann (Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, cxxxix, Tübingen, 1878), p. 361, Hans Trut.

she was lying in.⁷¹ It was emotional support that was needed. A child had to be welcomed by both parents, for this signified their union's strength. A Constance woman in 1562 accused her husband of betraying this union when he stayed in a tavern during her labour-pains. Later he even required her to sell the wedding-dress he had given her.⁷² In 1620 a Constance woman reported that her lying-in neighbour had only survived thanks to a friend who had looked after her. When the woman's mother had nagged her son-in-law to look for godparents, he had told her he would like to throw her down the steps. Overhearing this shocking response, the man's wife was instantly assailed by "labour-pains" and fears of death.⁷³ Curses on mother and child were dangerous; they could lead to miscarriages, since hatred destroyed life.⁷⁴ In 1614, a Protestant broadsheet attached a different moral to such curses. Mothers were commanded to internalize notions of what was good or bad for unborn children and not to miscarry or risk giving birth to monsters, because babies were God-given, even if unloved by their fathers. It recounted the tale of a pregnant woman who had urged her drunken husband, Hans Lorentz, to leave the alehouse and feed his family. (Plate.) When he started beating his wife, the innkeeper's wife told him to show her respect. Lorentz answered that she was "carrying Devil and hell" and was going to give birth to vipers and snakes. His wife angrily swore by God that she wished this would happen, whereupon Lorentz attempted to kill her with his sword. His wife escaped, but back home her labour-pains started and lasted eight days. Many women attended her and witnessed how she finally gave birth to a child with a long, snake-like tail. Shocked, she died instantly, and the child was killed. This story warned swearing husbands that they would not enter heaven, and pregnant women never to curse themselves; the women had to observe God's word "and read good books".⁷⁵

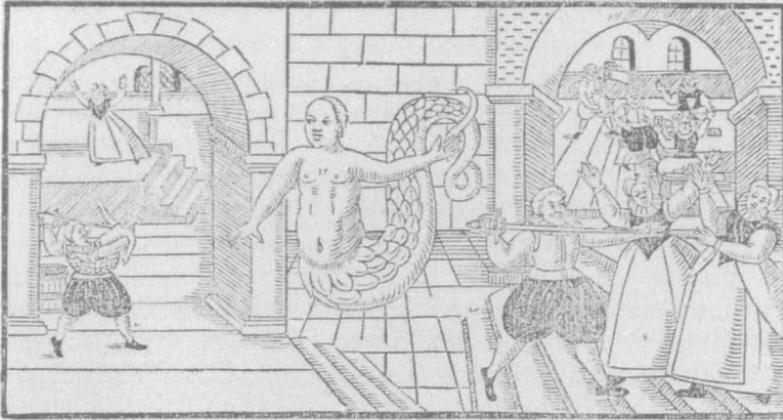
⁷¹ He had gambled, too: StAH, 4/485, fo. 7^r, 11 Sept. 1686, Georg Kiessel. In 1640, complaints against the Liebenzell junior bailiff alleged that he had imprisoned a gate-keeper who had briefly visited his lying-in wife. HStASt, A 206, Bu. 3316, Johann Georg Schwarz.

⁷² StAKN, HIX, F.32, [1562?], Hainrich Gast.

⁷³ StAKN, HIX, F.45, 30 July 1620, Rumel's wife.

⁷⁴ HStASt, A 209, Bu. 790, 1674, Hans Steusslinger. In 1650, a Hall citizen was imprisoned for a week because he had thrown firewood at his pregnant wife and told her she was carrying a "young Devil": StAH, 4/482, 3 Apr. 1650.

⁷⁵ *Deutsche illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, ed. W. Harms, iii, *Die Sammlung der Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel*, 3 pts (Tübingen and Munich, 1980-9), iii, p. 271.



Anon., "True Story of What Happened to Two Wanton Drinkers" (Ulmitz, 1614). From the copy in the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, 38.25 Aug. 2^o, fo. 800, in *Deutsche illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, ed. W. Harms, iii, *Die Sammlung der Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel*, 3 pts (Tübingen and Munich, 1980-9), iii, p. 268.

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As in the broadsheet, many women were usually willing to care for those who suffered long and difficult births. Otherwise, extensive female support networks (where other women would reside for days with the lying-in mother) could more easily be afforded by the propertied.⁷⁶ However, mothers often supported daughters, and neighbouring women dropped in for chats, to give help, or to cook strengthening meals.⁷⁷ In rural Swabia, the baby's godmothers would bring meals for between one and three weeks after the birth.⁷⁸ Female relatives and friends also came after the birth to celebrate a safe delivery. It was important that a woman could look forward to their visits and gifts. In 1605, the wife of a Constance fisherman gave birth in the kitchen, two midwives attending. Her sister-in-law came afterwards with a quarter of

⁷⁶ This culture among upper-class women is reconstructed in J. W. Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950* (Oxford, 1986).

⁷⁷ In 1584, the Ulm council forbade the following meal for lying-in women because it was "too lavish": melted lard, flour, and a mixture of eggs, saffron, wine (or, cheaper, cider), milk and sugar (or honey) poured over a roll: F. A. Köhler, *Nehren: Eine Dorfchronik der Spätaufklärung* (Untersuchungen des Ludwig-Uhland-Instituts der Universität Tübingen, lii, Tübingen, 1981), p. 21.

⁷⁸ H. Höhn, "Sitte und Brauch bei Geburt, Taufe und in der Kindheit", in K. Bohnenberger (ed.), *Volkstümliche Überlieferungen in Württemberg: Glaube — Brauch — Heilkunde* (Stuttgart, 1980), p. 76.

wine and roast meat, and another woman with roast meat and eggs.⁷⁹ Women lent swaddling-clothes to each other.⁸⁰ Friends who heard about a birth would debate what to give the mother, and might send wine over some distance, or respond to husbands' requests. A seamstress's husband told women friends that she wanted lard and wine.⁸¹ In return for such gifts, women would be invited for wine a couple of weeks after the birth.

Ever since the early fifteenth century, the authorities had acted with astonishing vehemence against these gatherings, in order to privatize and dignify the welcoming of a child (and make it less expensive). One of the earliest ordinances prohibiting childbed-ales and visits was issued in Constance in 1436,⁸² though the bulk of civic legislation to similar effect was passed in and after the last third of the fifteenth century. Baptismal feasts, usually celebrated two weeks after the baptism, were more decorous because usually the parson was invited to attend. But attendance at childbed-ales often had to be restricted to relatives and godparents.⁸³ In 1570 the town of Hall prohibited childbed-ales because of dearth, and in 1586 the council permitted parents to invite only "one table of women".⁸⁴ Even though such cases imply that husbands were excluded from childbed-ales, there is evidence for small, mixed gatherings in common people's households.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ StAKN, HIX, F.43, 11 July 1605, Conradt Stipperlin's wife.

⁸⁰ StAKN, HIX, F.31, n.d. (c.1500-50), Blutzenbergerin.

⁸¹ StAKN, HIX, F.32, 7 Feb. 1562, Agatha Ammun's testimony.

⁸² *Vom Richtebrief zum roten Buch. Die ältere Konstanzer Ratsgesetzgebung. Darstellung und Texte*, ed O. Feger (Konstanzer Geschichts- und Rechtsquellen, vu, Constance, 1955), p. 176.

⁸³ A. Reichart, "Wochenbett und Kindertaufe: Die Privatisierung des Alltags in den Satzungen der spätmittelalterlichen Stadt Essen", in B. Lundt (ed.), *Vergessene Frauen an der Ruhr: Von Herrscherinnen und Hörigen, Hausfrauen und Hexen, 800-1800* (Cologne, 1992), pp. 131-74.

⁸⁴ StAH, 4/492, fo. 559, 29 Nov. 1570; fo. 669, 25 Sept. 1586. Sanctions were often surprisingly tough. In 1608, Magdeburg pastors and magistrates decided that officers should guard the doorsteps of women who were lying in and turn away the "boozing hussies" (*Sauftrullen*) who swarmed in after baptisms: *Die Registraturen der Kirchenvisitationen im ehemals sächsischen Kurkreise*, ed. K. Pallas, 2 vols. (Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen, xli, Halle, 1906-18), II, p. 82.

⁸⁵ A small, informal mixed gathering took place in 1618, when a shoemaker bought two Mass of wine for the women who had gathered after his wife had given birth: StAKN, HIX, F 45, 20 Sept. 1618. Similarly, in 1656 a smith was accused of heavy drinking with women in his house before and after the baptism, a number of women having bought wine from local inns: StAH, 4/482, fo. 219', 14 Mar. 1656, Hans Weydner, Unterlumburg. For a seventeenth-century literary example of a mixed gathering, see Christian Reuter, "Des Harlequins Kindbetterin-Schmauss", in his *Schlampampe*, ed R. Tarot (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 86-110.

No matter how small, these celebrations helped to make childbirth a public event. Neighbours were socially involved in all stages of the process, keeping an eye on the mother's condition and supporting her if she was ill-treated.⁸⁶ Shouts from women who were pregnant or lying in were monitored and remembered.⁸⁷ When in 1600 a citizen of Constance threw a glass at his wife, her nurse reminded him that a lying-in woman was "free" from her obligation to yield to a husband's authority; it mattered less than her and the baby's health.⁸⁸ Violence in other types of relationship was similarly outlawed.⁸⁹ If a woman was already heavily pregnant, the authorities were even prepared to accuse a violent man of infanticide if the baby died.⁹⁰ Violent scenes and deaths were remembered as definitive statements about men's failure to live up to their duty to protect women and children. Descriptions of the consequences of violence against mothers and small children were forceful. One woman, beaten by her stepfather, delivered a dumb child who soon died,⁹¹ and in Constance in 1597, neighbours told how a baby had stopped sucking and died within a week because its mother had been beaten by her husband and father-in-law.⁹² Hatred and violence stopped babies from wanting any exchange with the world through speech or food.

These events were dramatic; a child was lost. If husbands did not realize the cost of their violence, women forced them to. When Hermann Weinsberg's wife feigned a miscarriage, as recounted at the beginning of this article, she was behaving typically. If a man (or a woman, as Anna Maria Krauth's example showed) was thought to have caused a miscarriage, he or she would be forced to look at the dead child. In 1536, Margaretha Trinckler of Canstatt, tried for bigamy, recalled a traumatic situation during her first marriage. Her marriage had suffered from her husband's numerous affairs with maidservants. Pregnant in "the year of Duke Ulrich's marriage" (1511), she had become

⁸⁶ StAKN, HIX, F.45, 16 Mar. 1621, Valentin Straal's wife.

⁸⁷ In 1595, women who were questioned about a couple's unhappy marriage remembered that the husband had beaten his wife three years before when she was lying in. StAKN, HIX, F.41, 25 Apr 1595, Steiss.

⁸⁸ StAKN, HIX, F.42, 1 Dec. 1600, Samuel Hulder.

⁸⁹ HStASt, A 209, Bü. 2058, 12 Oct. 1680, Catharina Klupper.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Bü. 406, Christian Schaubecker.

⁹¹ See n. 89 above.

⁹² StAKN, HIX, F.41, 21 Aug. 1597

angry when her maidservant called her a liar. She was about to beat the girl when her husband threatened to put a knife “deeply into her and out of her should she beat the maidservant, even if she carried a prince”. Shocked, Margaretha was unable to feel the baby during the following sixteen days. She wanted to discharge the maidservant. Her husband would not let her, but became increasingly uneasy himself. He told her to consult the midwife and pray to Our Lady in Hasslach. He wanted to have a mass said for the unborn child. Soon afterwards, Margaretha’s labour-pains started. It took three days for the baby to be delivered — stillborn. The women who helped her sent for her husband, so that he would see “the child and the misery” and be “punished”. He promised never to behave so thoughtlessly again, and said “he hoped by God that the child had been given a soul”.⁹³ The “strength” women could gain from such experiences was, of course, purchased with pain; even so, miscarriages gave them a language with which to make husbands see that life needed to be nurtured by respect and love.

VI

The effects of political violence on pregnant women were similar. It was long known that they were in danger of miscarrying if they saw an executed body; or the baby, if born, was likely to be pale and sickly. The Hall gallows were allegedly moved out of town in the early fifteenth century because the evening sun cast the shadows of hanged felons on to houses near the river Kocher: “this has frightened pregnant women”.⁹⁴ In 1550 the Imperial city of Augsburg similarly pleaded that the emperor’s judge should abandon a plan to erect gallows in the fish-market in order to spare “pregnant women and other respectable people”.⁹⁵ Customarily, pregnant women could beg for the lives of malefactors. A late medieval Swiss formula to be spoken immediately before execution asked judges to listen to married women’s requests for mercy because Jesus had been born of a woman. It then referred to the pregnant women present, and asked for

⁹³ HStASt, A 43, Bu. 9, 1536.

⁹⁴ *Widmans Chronica*, ed. C. Kolb (Wurttembergische Geschichtsquellen, vi, Geschichtsquellen der Stadt Hall, ii, Stuttgart, 1904), p. 106

⁹⁵ *Die Chroniken der deutschen Städte vom 14. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. K. Hegel et al., 36 vols. (Leipzig, 1862-1931), vii, p. 229

mercy for the sake of the children they carried.⁹⁶ In a theology which focused on Mary rather than on Eve, women were honoured as the bearers of humanity. Childbirth and the pain involved in it were regarded as an unparalleled gift to humankind, outside any logic of rational exchange. This entitled pregnant women to insist that generosity should temper retributive justice. When in 1501, for example, a woman in the Bregenz area was about to be buried alive, many virgins and pregnant women joined the rest of the community to plead successfully for mercy.⁹⁷ In 1509, friends and neighbours of a man about to be executed for homicide arrived in Villingen with many pregnant women, who cut him from the hangman's rope.⁹⁸ At executions women could thus gain a rare public voice in matters of justice. They were recognized as part of the political community. However, during the sixteenth century their interference was increasingly suppressed or ignored. In 1530, the women and girls of Hall were forbidden to attend executions.⁹⁹ In Catholic Constance, by contrast, the custom persisted well into the seventeenth century. In 1596 "many pregnant women" asked Constance magistrates to spare the life of a woman about to be executed for theft.¹⁰⁰ But such petitioning was now unsuccessful, a mere relic, it seems, of old times. However, there were still pregnant women to whom the custom made sense, who felt that they could request mercy because they carried new life in them. Thus, no fewer than fifty-two pregnant women gathered in Constance in 1620 and begged for an offender's life.¹⁰¹ As late as 1668, the brothers of a prisoner about to be executed for homicide found "several pregnant women" to support their petition.¹⁰²

Responses to military invasion provide another striking example of pregnant women's sensitivity to political violence. In the Black Forest town of Villingen the terror caused by Duke Ulrich's attack on the Imperial city of Reutlingen in 1519 was

⁹⁶ E. Osenbrüggen, *Das alemannische Strafrecht im deutschen Mittelalter* (Schaffhausen, 1860), p. 180.

⁹⁷ C. Ulbrich, "Unartige Weiber. Präsenz und Penitenz von Frauen im frühneuzeitlichen Deutschland", in R. von Dülmen (ed.), *Arbeit, Frömmigkeit und Eigensinn* (Studien zur historischen Kulturforschung, ii, Frankfurt-on-Main, 1990), p. 34.

⁹⁸ *Heinrich Hugs Villingen Chronik von 1495 bis 1533*, ed. C. Roder (Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, clxiv, Tübingen, 1883), p. 39.

⁹⁹ StAH, 4/490, Decretsammlung, 1530.

¹⁰⁰ StAKN, RP 1596-8, BI 80, fo. 146^r, 19 Oct. 1596.

¹⁰¹ StAKN, A 1/28a, Franz-Bickel-Chronik, p. 55, 8 Feb. 1620.

¹⁰² StAKN, RP 1668, BI 148, fo. 100^r, 16 Feb. 1668.

conveyed in the news that fourteen women miscarried because of it.¹⁰³ In other instances, occupiers were forced to listen to childbearing women intercede for mercy. When, in 1689, Louis XIV ordered the city of Speyer to be burnt and all its citizens to move to France, two hundred mothers and pregnant women assembled to plead for the city's preservation.¹⁰⁴ Soon they found themselves homeless, their children crying for food; none the less, the incident shows that mothers were acknowledged as a distinct group within political communities, capable of making their own cases against violence.

On a lesser scale, a miscarriage could expose anger about imprisonment for political disobedience. In 1666, a pregnant woman had miscarried in prison, where she had been confined for a small misdemeanour. The midwife explained that a "flux from anxiety, anger and coldness" was the cause. A claim like this carried weight; the mayor's recklessness in imprisoning the mother had killed a baby. Another citizen had been sentenced to imprisonment for declining to do his feudal labour. His pregnant wife, deeply shocked, had been unable to feel the child. Both instances were reported at the district court.¹⁰⁵ Not surprisingly, therefore, pregnant women sometimes defied the law because they assumed that nobody would dare imprison them. A striking example of such defiance occurred when a day-labourer was employed to help build a Württemberg councillor's house in 1676. With a load of oak-trees he drove to the sawmill near the junior bailiff's house. When some trees fell from the cart, the bailiff lost his temper and accused him of ruining the councillor's property, though the sawmiller insisted that no damage had been done. The sawmiller's pregnant wife thrust her head out of the window to join in the row and shouted, "Herr Vogt, I have an honourable man, and he is neither a fool nor a thief". The bailiff called her a witch and threatened to lock her up in prison. When, that afternoon, he sent the village marksman (*Dorfschütze*) to arrest the sawmiller, the man insisted on going to Stuttgart to ask the ducal building-master whether the bailiff was acting within his rights. In his absence, the bailiff broke into the mill to

¹⁰³ *Heinrich Hugs Villinger Chronik von 1495 bis 1533*, ed. Roder, p. 71.

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous contemporary report printed in K von Raumer, *Die Zerstörung der Pfalz von 1689 im Zusammenhang der französischen Rheinpolitik* (Munich and Berlin, 1930; repr. Bad Neustadt an der Saale, 1982), p. 319

¹⁰⁵ HStASt, A 206, Bu. 5215, 1666.

get the sawmiller's gun, again calling his wife a witch and threatening to imprison her and put a shaming instrument round her neck. She replied that "regardless of whether she was a whore or a witch, she would like to see him imprison a defenceless pregnant woman". He ordered her imprisonment notwithstanding, and beat her down the steps. It was only the protests of the bailiff's wife that saved her from imprisonment. In the end the ducal supreme council fined the bailiff heavily.¹⁰⁶

Political opposition was often made similarly visible. Claims for the respectful treatment of pregnant and lying-in women were made tactically by communities. A man called Gugelbastian whose wife was pregnant during the Swabian "Poor Conrad" revolt in 1514 demanded that husbands of pregnant women be allowed to fish in the brook "without being punished for it".¹⁰⁷ This assertion of a customary fishing right was repeated during the Peasants' War.¹⁰⁸ In 1533, the Württemberg estates similarly petitioned against a forest ordinance which deprived people of common-rights. They protested that forest officers behaved like lords in fining "pregnant women who had eaten acorns because of their female stupidity".¹⁰⁹ This was clearly a camouflage excuse for women and children who gathered acorns as animal fodder. Again, during the Thirty Years War citizens of Waiblingen complained that the senior bailiff forced them to do strenuous military exercise even at night, "[as if] troops already stood before the gates". They argued this was dangerous because pregnant women might mistake mock alarms for real.¹¹⁰

Pregnant women's needs had thus become a feature of "polit-

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Bü. 1517, 1676.

¹⁰⁷ *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs*, ed. G. Franz (Ausgewählte Quellen zu der Geschichte der Neuzeit, II, Darmstadt, 1963), p. 54.

¹⁰⁸ Kobelt-Groch, *Aufsässige Tochter Gottes*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁹ R. Kiess, *Die Rolle der Forsten im Aufbau des württembergischen Territoriums bis ins 16. Jahrhundert* (Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für geschichtliche Landeskunde in Baden-Württemberg, Reihe B, Forschungen, II, Stuttgart, 1958), p. 13.

¹¹⁰ HStASt, A 206, Bü. 5192, c.1630. For the ways in which vagrant women used false pregnancies, see R. Jütte, "Dutzbetterinnen und Sündfegerinnen: Kriminelle Bettelpraktiken von Frauen in der Frühen Neuzeit", in O. Ulbricht (ed.), *Von Huren und Rabenmüttern: Weibliche Kriminalität in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne, 1995), pp. 126-7; the *Liber vagatorum* noted that female vagrants commonly lay down in front of churches, pretending to lie in after having delivered a stillborn baby: "Von den Dutzbetterin", in *Von der falschen Betler büberey, Mit emer Vorrede Martini Luther Vnd hnden an ein Rotwelsch Vocabularius* (Wittenberg, 1528), sig. B3. Examples of the tactical use of false pregnancies could be multiplied. For collective political actions, see Wunder, "Er ist die Sonn', sie ist der Mond", pp. 232, 235.

ical” arguments around which rights could be negotiated. The language of pregnancy was one by means of which, inside or outside the home, opposition to domination could be cunningly expressed. Single women, even post-menopausal ones like Drutgin Weinsberg, would sometimes invent a pregnancy for their own advantage. A feigned miscarriage enabled them to show how disrespect hurt them. Hence, as a final example, a vignette from the life of an unmarried Constance seamstress, who in 1603 earned money by selling cloth to tailors. One day the tailor in whose house she lodged accused her of having sold him too little cloth for the money he gave her, and for not having paid her rent. When she replied that he owed her money, the tailor insulted her as a liar and a thief, knocked her down and pulled at her plaits. Women were confined to the fringes of the textile trade: fairness had to be fought for, and violence answered with womanly guile. So some weeks later the seamstress told the council that she had been pregnant when the brawl occurred, and (it seems) as a result she had suffered a miscarriage. When another tailor told her to make peace, she answered that the mayor and councillors “had not advised her to proceed that way”, and that midwives and the civic doctor were going to examine her in court. The “mediating” tailor was furious that she had brought the matter to court: “What kind of dirty behaviour was this?” But she would not give in.¹¹¹

VII

In developed economies today, pregnancy and miscarriage, birth and death, are seldom thought to be “rich with meanings which penetrate the whole of social life”.¹¹² Needless to say, a woman’s

¹¹¹ StAKN, HIX, F.43, 1603, *Martin Neubrandt v. Böhin*.

¹¹² C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. S. Wolfram (Chicago, 1966), paraphrased in S. Kitzinger, “The Social Context of Birth: Some Comparisons between Childbirth in Jamaica and Britain”, in C. P. MacCormack (ed.), *Ethnography of Fertility and Birth* (London, 1982), p. 194; G. Böhme, “Wissenschaftliches und lebensweltliches Wissen am Beispiel der Verwissenschaftlichung der Geburtshilfe”, in his *Alternativen der Wissenschaft*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1993), pp. 27-53. For women’s different understanding of physical symptoms in non-Western countries today, see P. Farmer, “Bad Blood, Spoiled Milk: Bodily Fluids as Moral Barometer in Rural Haiti”, *Amer. Ethnologist*, xv (1988), pp. 62-83; A. E. Becker, “Nurturing and Negligence Working on Others’ Bodies in Fiji”, in T. J. Cordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 100-15

emotional experiences of childbirth retain many private meanings, but — at least in the senses which this article has explored — they do seem to have a diminished “political” relevance. Pregnant women are not granted a privileged voice against political violence, for example; and miscarriages no longer indicate the extent of military aggression. People do discern interconnections between emotional, social and physical experiences, but in no way as intensely, one suspects, as early modern people did. Envy of or grudges against others are seldom now assumed to choke a woman when she gives birth; sick people are not cleared from streets to prevent pregnant women being shocked. Healing and care are the task of professionals, who interpret “disordered experience, communicated in the language of culture . . . in the light of disordered physiology”.¹¹³ Medicine has transformed the womb into “a field of operations”;¹¹⁴ miscarriage indicates that a woman, the foetus’s life-support system, has mechanically failed.

In the early modern period, by contrast, pregnancy and lying in were highly unstable and risky processes for mother and child — “rough passages” indeed. The threat of death was closely linked to the ability to give life. If it came to the worst, little could save mother and child from death. A body was not a site of predictable processes but of sudden changes. Organs were less prominent in people’s perceptions of physical experiences than fluids were, especially blood. Blood could easily clog, become impure, flow too fast or too slowly, or in wrong directions. Social and emotional experiences would affect this inner flow directly. Troublesome experience closed a body off, made women turn inwards instead of outwards, and hindered any open engagement with the material and social world. Boundaries between inside and outside, the individual and the social, the emotional and the physical, were generally experienced as permeable, not firm. This permeability was even more marked during pregnancy and childbed, as a woman dramatically expanded into space, opened to deliver a child, and closed and contracted again. Women’s responses to terror and fear during this time generated statements about the role of force in marital, social and political relationships:

¹¹³ B. J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 8. On female resistance to this treatment, see E. Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Milton Keynes, 1987).

¹¹⁴ B. Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, trans. L. Hoinacki (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 107.

they affected attitudes, diversely, to the execution of justice and to husbands' abuse. They disclosed the costs of disregard and showed that life depended on care, respect and company. In short, a history of the body has to ask how early modern people gave meaning to their physicality and their needs in social interaction, and how different those meanings were from ours.

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