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Planned Parenthood: Minding the Quick Woman in *All's Well*

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My subject is the mind of the pregnant woman—specifically that of Helena de Narbon, the only Shakespearean heroine to plan her pregnancy. By focusing on how the quick-witted Helena controls her body, I am departing from two popular critical views of early modern mothers: that their bodies were incontinent and that their imaginations were passive and impressionable.¹ In doing so, I am also separating myself from the majority of critics who insist that Helena's pregnant body literally takes over the stage at play's end—that it is a visibly swollen prop and necessary enabler for *All's Well That Ends Well's* “swell” finale.² Unlike her Boccaccian prototype, Helena does not

I am grateful to the members of the Harvard Humanities Center Seminar on Women and Culture in the Early Modern World and to the participants of the 2003 seminar “Performing Maternity” at the Shakespeare Association of America Annual Convention for their feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Gail Kern Paster's influential study of early modern humoralism solidified this reading of the female body as a leaky vessel (“effluent, overproductive, out of control”) and “the female imagination as dangerously impressionable” (*The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], 21, 181).

2. David McCandless, for instance, argues that “it seems clear that Helena must be *visibly* pregnant in the play's final scene, not simply because Diana's testimony that she ‘feels her young one kick’ places the pregnancy in its advanced stages but because Helena's claim to have fulfilled Bertram's conditions would otherwise lack substance” (*Gender and Performance in Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997], 180 n. 77). (I address the issue of fetal kicking later on in this essay.) E. A. J. Honigsmann similarly assumes that she would appear “padded and visibly pregnant” and goes so far as to suggest staging an ending in which Helena would appear with “a bundle containing a child, for nothing high-lights the division of the sexes better than the handling of a baby” (*Myriad-Minded Shakespeare: Essays on the Tragedies, Problem Comedies and Shakespeare the Man* [1989; London: Macmillan, 1998],

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come bearing indisputable proof of her maternity.³ Bertram's final line indicates that her body has yet to show itself: "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (5.3.315–16). While Shakespeare consistently identifies heroines who are in advanced stages of pregnancy by using terms that suggest visible markers, he describes Helena as simply "quick" (5.3.303). This verbal cue suggests that she is not swollen but is—like the "quick" Jaquenetta who is "two months on her way"—in an early and undetectable stage of her pregnancy (*Love's Labor's Lost* 5.2.676, 672–73).⁴ In the context of *All's Well* and its artful heroine, I will argue, this illegible "quickness" serves a specific dramatic purpose; for while a woman who was "quick" in the early modern period claimed that she could feel a fetus move inside her, she also possessed an agile mind capable of consciously, and sometimes secretly, shaping material forms. By choosing this term to identify Helena at play's end, Shakespeare explicitly leaves her body unmarked and ambiguous; in doing so, he foregrounds a larger debate about the creative and inscrutable powers of the female imagination to quicken, heal, and impress early modern bodies.

In his *Arte of English Poesie*, George Puttenham conflates mental and reproductive quickness when he defines synecdoche as "the Figure of quick conceite" because "it seemeth to aske a good, quick and pregnant capacitie, and is not for an ordinarie or dull wit so to do."⁵ This metaphorical connection grew out of an ancient material one: Pliny the Elder was one of many philosophers to grant men and women the power to impress fetal bodies during the act of generation with the marks of their "quicke thoughts, the agilitie of the mind, [and]

144–45). Modern stage productions of the play tend to show her as definitively pregnant in 5.3. A 1981 BBC television production was able to manipulate the camera to show the faces of those seeing Helena as she appeared without showing us her body at all.

3. Shakespeare's ultimate source was a tale in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but William Painter's translation of it in *The Palace of Pleasure* would have been the immediate source for him. References to Painter are from Susan Snyder's appendix E in her 1993 Oxford University Press edition of *All's Well*, 225–32. All citations from *All's Well* refer to this edition.

4. References to all Shakespeare plays other than *All's Well* are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). In the last part of the essay I discuss specific instances where Shakespeare marks the visibility of his other heroines' pregnancies using linguistic cues.

5. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Baxter Hathaway (Kent State University Press, 1970), 196. Subsequent references to Puttenham appear in the body of the essay.

the varietie of discourse in our wits.”⁶ By the early modern period, writers rarely granted fathers this “quicke” power over unborn bodies; instead they chose to focus on maternal impressions.⁷ Robert Burton summarizes in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* the two most popular beliefs in circulation at the time: “If a woman (saith Lemnius) at the time of her conception, think of another man present or absent, the child will be like him. Great-bellied women, when they long, yield us prodigious examples in this kind, as moles, warts, scars, harelips, monsters, especially caused in their children by force of a depraved phantasy in them. She imprints that stamp upon her child, which she conceives unto herself.”⁸

Here Burton describes two very different but equally prevalent notions of the maternal mind: one in which it is a passive conduit for objects in the outside world or for uncontrollable desires that ultimately produce fetal defects, and one in which a woman consciously controls fetal resemblance with thoughts that she “conceives unto herself.” In the first case, a pregnant woman’s longing for strawberries or surprise encounter with a hare could mark her future child with a strawberry-shaped birthmark or a harelip; these kinds of stories, present in ancient philosophical and Biblical texts, often appeared in early modern medical writings in chapters on monstrous births.⁹ In the second case, an adulterous woman could will her imagination to serve as an accomplice to her illicit behavior, imprinting a fetus with the image of her husband even when he did not father it. Whereas a child’s monstrous appearance clearly exposed a woman’s mental weakness, a child’s legitimate form could, conversely, mask its mother’s subversive activities and agile mind.

Scholars of early modern maternity typically overlook this self-conceiving mother and her methodical imagination and instead focus

6. *Plinies Naturall Historie* (London, 1601), bk. 7, chap. 12, 161. This connection between bodies and minds was apparent at all points in the cognitive process as it was imagined in the early modern period. As John Sutton argues, “Long before the Cartesian philosophy of the brain, Renaissance theorists of the mind . . . employed animal spirits to embed cognitive function in the body” (*Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism* [Cambridge University Press, 1998], 46).

7. In 1727, the debate in print over the maternal imagination’s powers reached a boiling point when James Blondel (*The Strength of Imagination in Pregnant Women Examin’d* [London]) and Daniel Turner (*The Force of the Mother’s Imagination upon her Foetus in Utero* [London]) took pointed swipes at each other’s opposing viewpoints.

8. Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (1621; repr., New York: Tudor, 1938), 221.

9. For an excellent overview of this transmission up until the Enlightenment, see Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

on an impressionable and distracted maternal mind.¹⁰ When critics do focus on a productive mind-womb connection, they turn primarily to rhetorical appropriations of pregnancy (like Puttenham's) and to the analogy of a creative male mind to a fruitful female body. In this model, the pregnant female's brain (at best passive and at worst the victim of hysteria) is simply not relevant. Katharine Eisaman Maus, for example, describes the association of womb and mind as paradoxical and asks, "Why should men imagine their poetic and intellectual endeavors in terms of . . . the very organ that is supposed to chill and dampen the female intellect?"¹¹ This sort of question suggests that early modern culture constructed the relationship between a woman's mind and her reproductive anatomy as either sterile or chaotic; the womb might move a woman to madness, but her mind could never have an intentional (much less a positive) influence over the operations of the womb.¹²

10. Recent studies of the maternal imagination tend to focus on the creation of monstrous or deformed births. See, for instance, Joanna Levin's "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," *English Literary History* 69 (2002): 21–55; Dennis Todd, *Imagining Monsters: Miscreations of the Self in Eighteenth-Century England* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); Julia Epstein, "The Pregnant Imagination, Women's Bodies, and Fetal Rights," in *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science, and Literature, 1650–1865*, ed. Susan Greenfield and Carol Barash (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 111–37; and Felicity Nussbaum, "Dumb Virgins, Blind Ladies, and Eunuchs: Fictions of Defect," in *"Defects": Engendering the Modern Body*, ed. Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 31–53. Mary Fissell's is one of the few studies to discuss the ways in which the maternal imagination and female desire were viewed as creative as well as destructive forces in the seventeenth century. See her *Vernacular Bodies* (Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 196–207; see, as well, Margrit Shildrick's analysis of maternal imagination tales as a "rare acknowledgment of female power" in her "Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions," *Rethinking History* 4 (2000): 243–60, quotation on 249.

11. Katharine Eisaman Maus, "A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in the Female Body," in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 266–88, esp. 268. See also Ruth Gilbert, "The Masculine Matrix: Male Births and the Scientific Imagination in Early-Modern England," in *The Arts of 17th-Century Science: Representations of the Natural World in European and North American Culture*, ed. Claire Jowitt and Diane Watt (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 160–76.

12. Robert Martenson does note the rise at the end of the seventeenth century of a neurocentric model that imagined "women were brain-directed and not womb-directed." He argues, however, that this model "naturalized social norms that were valued by a male subculture of scientific and religious leaders preoccupied with hierarchy, control and efficiency," a shift that resulted in "new constraints on women's intellectual life." See his "The Transformation of Eve," in *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 107–33, esp. 128.

Reproduction (and its attending deceptions) was just one of many areas in which a woman's self-sufficient imagination allegedly operated. Others, which I discuss in what follows, included the acts of healing and sexual arousal. Sir Thomas Eliot's 1538 Dictionary defines the Latin verb for quickening, *vegeto*, *vegetare*, as "to recreate, to quicken, to conserve." For better and for worse, the female imagination allegedly held all of these powers: it could recreate paternity, quicken growing bodies, and conserve ailing ones.¹³ Helena, of course, engages in all three of these "quick" acts, and Shakespeare uses this term to describe her and her actions throughout the play, both before and after she pronounces herself pregnant. Hers is not the only body that she makes "quick": she will heal the King's using arts that can "Quick a rock" (2.1.72) in order to get to Bertram—a man who will "quicker be blown up" (to quote Paroles) once her virginity is "blown down" (1.1.125–26). Helena's scheme to "lose it to her own liking" is a central and, for many critics, troubling feature of the play (1.1.152–53).¹⁴ Shakespeare represents it in these examples as an act that will quicken a man's body with the explosive force of a woman's desire and planning. The playwright (along with his contemporaries) repeatedly underscores how female artfulness can ignite when a woman's mind and body work

13. Imagination in the early modern period was not considered to be a primarily eccentric faculty that promoted abnormalities. It was, as Jay Halio explains it, part of the normal operations of the mind: "one of three major powers of the intellect," it occupied the front ventricle of the brain and "conveyed impressions (in the form of images) from the senses to reason, situated in the central cavity of the head." To the Elizabethans, then, "the imagination was not in their view merely a reproductive faculty of the intellect, but was frequently, and even essentially, creative." See his "The Metaphor of Conception and Elizabethan Theories of the Imagination," *Neophilologus* 50, no. 4 (1966): 454–61, quotation on 455.

14. As Susan Snyder writes of the play, Helena "as desiring subject, drives its plot onward," a fact that has provoked a long history of critical uneasiness with her character ("*All's Well That Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Helens: Text and Subtext, Subject and Object," *English Literary Renaissance* 18 [1988]: 66–77, quotation on 75). Scholars traditionally have dealt with Helena's sexual aggressiveness by casting her as either a selfish virago or a redemptive saint. John Masefield describes her as "a woman who practices a borrowed art . . . for a selfish end" in his *William Shakespeare* (London: William Heineman, 1911), 148; and Bertrand Evans pities Bertram as a man who "has been scratched deep by the longest and stealthiest nails in Shakespeare" in his *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Oxford University Press, 1960), 166. On the opposite end of the critical spectrum, G. Wilson Knight views Helena as a "Saint Joan" fighting for "female honour, for 'virginity' as a conquering power" in *The Sovereign Flower* (London: Methuen, 1958), 112; and David McCandless reads her as a "saintly resurrected figure" in "Helena's Bedtrick: Gender and Performance in *All's Well*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994): 449–68, quotation on 450.

together, and Shakespeare specifically engages with his culture's concerns about the female mind's invisible operations—its creative self-sufficiency—when he creates Helena as a young woman with an active imagination and an unusual command over matter.¹⁵

Shakespeare mobilizes the multiple associations of the word “quick” with the female body and mind to define his most elusive and sexually assertive heroine; Puttenham similarly accesses “quick”'s multivalence in envisioning the most deceptive kinds of rhetorical operations. Synecdoche, the “Figure of quick conceite,” requires a wit that is not “ordinarie or dull” but rather agile enough to move from one thing to another. Shakespeare presents Helena's mind in just such a way: “the fated sky,” she argues, only “doth backward pull / Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull” (1.1.219–21). (Hamlet will, in fact, lament that his “dull” brains keep him “unpregnant of” his cause [2.2.567–68].) Like Puttenham's synecdoche—which he later describes as full of “darkenes and duplicitie” (205)—the adulterous woman dissimulates by making a part (the fetus she has imprinted) appear to stand in for the whole (her husband, the “father” of her child) or by making one act (sex with her husband) appear to lead to another (impregnation). To quote Puttenham, “by part we are enforced to understand the whole . . . by a thing precedent, a thing consequent” (196). Such was the synecdochal nature of paternity in a pre-DNA era. As Marie-Hélène Huet argues in her extensive study of the monstrous imagination, “inasmuch as resemblance alone answers for paternity, it attempts to close an unbridgeable gap: the distance between fathering and childbirth.”¹⁶ *All's Well That Ends Well* is driven by a young woman's plans to get pregnant and to make a man appear to be a father; as such, it exploits that gap and its attendant anxieties about paternity and the power of quick-witted women.

In the first part of this essay, I trace the medical debate surrounding the female imagination's role in shaping bodies; next, I focus on how this creative power was imagined to affect paternal resemblance and

15. Elizabeth Spiller notes Shakespeare's use of the medical debate surrounding the maternal imagination in her fascinating discussion of racial and generic miscegenation in *The Merchant of Venice*. See her “From Imagination to Miscegenation: Race and Romance in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Renaissance Drama* 29 (1998): 137–64. Simon Reynolds also argues that Shakespeare engages with the maternal imagination debate in his analysis of *The Winter's Tale*, but he focuses on a negative mind-body connection by likening Leontes to an impressionable pregnant woman: “an erroneous fantasy imprints itself upon a father's mind.” See his “Pregnancy and Imagination in *The Winter's Tale* and Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*,” *English Studies* 5 (2003): 433–47, quotation on 441.

16. Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, 34.

to mask adulterous activities; finally, I turn to an extended consideration of Helena and her formidably quick mind. Unique among Shakespeare's heroines in that she intends to get pregnant, she also stands out in that her sexual and reproductive activities require a series of mental substitutions on the part of the audience. Viewers must have more than "ordinarie or dull wits" to understand that her apparently virginal body is substituted for Diana's and that this act results in a lawful conception and pregnancy—although these alleged facts "appear not plain" by play's end (5.3.317). When the "quick" Helena appears with nothing but her words (and a ring) to show for herself, Shakespeare denies his audience the reassuring verbal cues that typically indicate an advanced and hence indisputable pregnancy. By deliberately riddling Helena's bodily rites of passage, Shakespeare foregrounds the simultaneous quickness and illegibility of the female mind's effects—and with it, its potential power to obscure men's matters with the stuff of women's dreams.

I

In his *Midwife Enlarged*, Nicholas Culpeper reports: "It is agreed upon by all Authors, yea, and Truth its self hath set its seal to it, That the imagination of the Mother operate[s] most forceable in the Conception of the Child."¹⁷ Men agreed that a woman's mind had a powerful effect on her fetus; what they debated was who or what controlled that mind. Popular opinion held that if a woman desired something too strongly the fetus would bear the mark of that object—whether that craving was for a pear or a rabbit.¹⁸ Writers often cautioned pregnant women against exposure to infectious ideas or images: "As Aristotle saith," wrote Dr. William Sermon in 1671, "a woman with child must have a settled and quiet mind" and should not "give ear to fearfull and lamentable stories, nor look upon persons or pictures which are ugly, or deformed, lest the imagination imprint upon the child the similitude of the said picture or person."¹⁹ Here, the maternal imagination is an unwitting conduit for external objects and emotions.

17. Nicholas Culpeper, *Culpeper's Midwife Enlarged* (London, 1675), 93.

18. The eighteenth-century case of Mary Tofts, who gave birth to seventeen rabbits after allegedly spending her pregnancy craving them, represents one of the most extreme consequences of this maternal mind gone wild. For more on this and other eighteenth-century representations of the maternal imagination, see G. S. Rousseau, "Pineapples, Pregnancy, Pica, and Peregrine Pickle," in *Tobias Smollett: Bicentennial Essays Presented to Lewis M. Knapp*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and P-G. Boucé (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 79–109.

19. William Sermon, *The Ladies Companion* (London, 1671), 43.

But this was not the only model in circulation. Culpeper, for example, presents a far more complicated narrative of maternal discontent:

How much better then were it for women to lead *contented* lives, that so their imaginations may be pure and clear, that so their Conception may be well formed, than to vex, and fret, and fume, and fling, and throw, and murmur, and repine, and fill their minds all full of distracting cares and fears, as an Egg is full of meat, making a tumult in their spirits, and bringing all their thoughts into such a confusion, that they look more like Beasts than Women.²⁰

Unlike Sermon's women, who passively take in stories and pictures, Culpeper's actively "lead . . . lives" of content or discontent and can "fill their minds" with cares that they have imagined. These minds are not empty shells waiting to be filled, but eggs full of meat that they have created on their own. In Culpeper's fantasy, women will opt out of exercising their bodies and minds in this fretful and confusing way (for fear, presumably, of looking like beasts); instead, they will have "pure and clear" imaginations through which men's offspring can pass "well formed" and uncontaminated.

As Culpeper's description makes clear, however, directing the female imagination was not a simple matter—particularly when one acknowledged that the woman herself could do so. Writers frequently circulated tales of female-willed metamorphoses that shaped unborn children into more "perfect" forms. In a chapter titled "How it may be wrought, that Women should bring forth fair and beautiful children," Giambattista della Porta describes how "the best means to produce this effect" is to "place in the bed-chambers of great men, the images of *Cupid*, *Adonis*, and *Ganymede*; . . . that whensoever their wives lie with them, still they may think upon those pictures, and have their imagination strongly and earnestly bent thereupon: and not only while they are in the act, but after they have conceived and quickened [*sic*] also." He then tells the story of a woman whose desire for a white-skinned child inspired her to try out this theory on her own: "there was a woman, who had a great desire to be the mother of a fair Son, that heard of it, and put it in practice; for she procured a white boy carved of marble, well proportioned every way; and him she had always before her eyes." After gazing on the statue as she lay with her husband, and later as she quickened, she indeed brought forth the object of her desire, "as pale and as white, as if he had been very marble indeed." In the context of della Porta's chapter, the woman's independent imaginative act (one that "many other women," he tells us, have used

20. Culpeper, *Midwife Enlarged*, 94.

their “skill” to perform) is commendable because it also supports the desires of “great men” to “breed and bring forth children of the same comeliness and beauty.”²¹

Clearly more is at stake when a woman transforms skin color than when she impresses an unsightly birthmark. Men depended on the quickness of women to support their culture’s dominant values, including those organized around hierarchies of race.²² The more clear and pure a woman’s imagination—the more content she was to transmit the values of her culture’s great men—the more clearly her child embodied its racial ideas. At the same time, the metamorphoses that these maternal imaginations enact obviously trouble the referential stability of racial and paternal markers: della Porta’s wife must mask the child’s racial origins (in the sense of its biological lineage) in order to “breed” a child whose race is considered most fair (in the sense of one’s skin color). A more overt expression of this problem appears in the popular tale of an Ethiopian queen who (unbeknownst to her black husband to whom she lies to avoid the charge of adultery) bore a white child because (as Ambroise Paré tells it) “at the time of copulation with her King, she thought on a marvelous white thing, with a very strong imagination.”²³ The maternal mind, it seems, could wash the Ethiop white.²⁴ The queen’s imaginative power is especially problematic because it involves tampering with a royal race behind her husband’s

21. Giambattista della Porta, *Natural Magick* (London, 1658), 53–54. This is an anonymous English translation of the 1558 Latin text.

22. “Race” in the early modern period, as critics extensively have argued, was a complex and unstable term that denoted everything from class, gender, and religious difference to skin color and national origin. As Sujata Iyengar notes in her work on the science of race, however, there was an “emerging pseudo-scientific discourse that *did* connect color with race.” This tale of a mother who uses her mind to “breed” a child more beautiful and “white” than she and her husband would otherwise produce suggests that skin tone is connected in the period to an understanding of racial difference. See Iyengar, “Royalist, Romancist, Racialist: Rank, Gender, and Race in the Science and Fiction of Margaret Cavendish,” *English Literary History* 69 (2002): 649–72, quotation on 650. Peter Erickson outlines this critical debate about early modern conceptions of race in “The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies,” *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998): 27–36.

23. *The Works of that Most Famous Surgeon, Ambrose Parey*, trans. Thomas Johnson (London, 1634), 888. Nearly every author writing on the topic of maternal imagination repeated some version of this tale. The story has been attributed to Heliodorus’s third-century AD novel the *Aithiopika*, in which the black Queen Persinna of Ethiopia looks at a painting of the white Andromeda when her child is conceived and so gives birth to a white daughter.

24. The early modern proverb that expressed the impossibility of washing an Ethiopian white is discussed most notably by Karen Newman in her chapter “‘And Wash the Ethiop White’: Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*,” in *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76–77.

back. It also undermines Paré's claim three lines earlier that "in the time of copulation, the minde of the woman is more fixed on her husband, than the minde of the husband on, or towards his wife."

In response to this potentially subversive maternal imagination, writers spent a good deal of time providing examples of men who methodically and successfully did control its operations and productions. Della Porta, citing the Biblical story of Jacob and the spotted ewes, concludes that "Such is the industry and practicednesse of mans wit, that they can alter the color of the young ones from the mother, and even in the wombe of the Dam procure them to be of divers colors."²⁵ In a similar vein, the physician Helkiah Crooke repeats a story from Galen that resembles della Porta's but gives all credit for the scheme's success to the husband, not his wife: "*I counseled (saith he) an Aethiopian, that he might beget a white and beautifull child, to set at his Beds-feet a fair Picture, upon which his wife might wishly look in the time of her conception. He obeyed my counsel and obtained his desire.*"²⁶

These two models of the female imagination—one in which the female mind is easily directed by a man and the other in which women control and direct it where they please—were in obvious tension as men grappled with a concept of autonomous female creativity that they themselves had underwritten. When Crooke explains how the mark of a desired object moves from the maternal mind to the fetus, for example, he acknowledges a highly organized and artful process that operates independently of any male engineer: "a strong imagination doth instantly move airy spirits . . . and in these it setteth the stamp of the thing desired; the spirits being mingled with the blood . . . of the infant, do imprint in it the same Figure they received from the Imagination" (228). Here Crooke describes a decidedly methodical and coordinated mental operation (one that moves, sets, receives, mingles, and imprints) using terms that are virtually identical to Shakespeare's well-known portrait of the "strong imagination"—a faculty that "bodies forth / The forms of things unknown." In Crooke's model, the maternal mind holds the same potentially creative and autonomous powers as "the poet's pen" that can turn invisible forms "to shapes, and gives to aery nothing / A local habitation and a name" (*Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.14–18).

When we first meet Helena, she is engaged in just such an imaginative act. Having drawn Bertram's "archèd brows, his hawking eye, his

25. della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 52. The frequently cited tale of Jacob and the ewes is in Genesis 1:30. Jacob places spotted rods before Laban's ewes in order to make them bear speckled offspring.

26. Helkiah Crooke, *Microcosmographia* (1615; repr., London, 1651), 226. Future page references appear in the body of the essay.

curls / In our heart's table," she now carries his face in "My imagination" (1.1.96–97, 84). She has imprinted his figure in the meat of her very full mind. Once Bertram leaves Rousillon, the force of her desire becomes all consuming. As such, Helena resembles the pregnant woman who longs for absent objects: "The conceit of the mind, and the force of the Imagination is great," della Porta explains, "but it is then most operative, when it is excessively bent upon any such thing as it cannot attain unto."²⁷ Helena's desire for what is absent, for what she has drawn in her heart and impressed on her imagination early on, shapes the course of the dramatic action. Unlike some of the passive female minds medical texts described, hers is decidedly operative and—once she channels her longing into action—decidedly under her control. She will use her wits to attain what she is "excessively bent upon" getting.

As some of the tales above demonstrate, such forceful and controlled works of the female imagination were not necessarily represented as transgressive. Writers frequently described the imagination's positive effects not only on the unborn but also on the world and people beyond a woman's womb. Mixed in with his discussion of the imagination's power, Crooke writes that the Arabians "attributed so much to Imagination, that they thought the Soul might so far be elevated by Imagination that it should not only work upon its own body, but also upon another's: and that Souls so elevated and ennobled were able to change the Elements, to heal diseases, to weaken whom they listed, to work miracles, and finally to exercise a kind of command over all kindes of matter" (226). Once again, this description recalls Helena, who exerts a similar miraculous command over the matter of the King's body, using a remedy that she has "store[d] up as a triple eye" in her mind (2.1.106). Lafeu states that her "medicine" can "Quickene a rock, and make you dance canary / With sprightly fire and motion" (2.1.72–73). The same quickening power that could shape unborn children might also heal great men; the discourse surrounding the maternal imagination must therefore be considered as part of a complex engagement with the imagination's larger creative operations and long-term effects on patriarchal structures.

II

The high stakes of acknowledging a powerful female mind emerge most vibrantly—and inconsistently—in debates over the resemblance between a woman's child and her husband. As John Sadler explains in his *Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse*, "the children of an adulteresse

27. della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 51.

may be like unto her husband though begotten by another man; which is caused through the force of the imagination which the woman hath of her owne husband in the act of coition.”²⁸ Paré’s fantasy of wifely attentiveness transforms here into a patriarchal nightmare in which the wife’s mental focus on the husband undermines his physical control over her and her offspring. Writers were equally concerned about the absence of resemblance between a man and his wife’s children, and blamed the active maternal imagination for such discrepancies. John Lyly’s *Mother Bombie* (1594) is just one of many early modern texts to address the topic. The play opens with Memphio wondering why his son is such an ass, since “hee takes it not of his father” (1.1.130). Dromio suggests that perhaps he is not the father, or that his wife is “fantasticall of her mind, and it may bee when this boy was begotten shee thought of a foole, & so conceived a foole” (1.1.37–39). Dromio goes on: “Your son may be a bastard and yet legitimate, your selfe a cuckolde, & yet my mistres virtuous, all this in conceit” (1.1.44–46).²⁹ Like Puttenham’s figure of quick conceit, this one (engendered by the wife’s fantastical mind) enables a virtuous reputation to stand in for a whorish one and a legitimate child to stand in for a bastard. Of course, this power also could work to create an act of cuckoldry where one had not occurred. As Valeria Finucci argues in her insightful study of maternal imagination in early modern Italy, “all that a legal husband could hope for in matters of paternity was that his pregnant wife would not make him a laughing stock by choosing to have a child not resembling him, whether or not he was the biological father.”³⁰

As we have seen, stories of racial metamorphosis (and racial obfuscation) pointed to the pregnant woman’s pivotal role in transmitting particular cultural values; they also, of course, underscored the troubling power of women over the legibility of paternity. In her discussion of the black mother’s erasure of the white father, Lynda Boose argues that the black mother represents “all free-floating anxieties about ‘the mother’s dark place’ contaminating the father’s designs for perfect self-replication.”³¹ Although it is the black father who disappears in Paré’s, Crooke’s, and della Porta’s tales of racial whitening,

28. John Sadler, *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse* (London, 1636), 138.

29. John Lyly, *Mother Bombie* (London, 1594).

30. Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 141.

31. Lynda Boose, “‘The Getting of a Lawful Race’: Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman,” in *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), 35–54, esp. 46.

these stories connect to the larger patriarchal fear of the male partner's erasure by the pregnant woman that Boose identifies. But because the children in these stories (unlike those in Boose's discussion) do not resemble either parent, they present the man with an even starker choice: either admit that he has been cuckolded or accept that he can neither know nor control his wife's mind and body.

When medical writers compiled their various tales of maternal impressions, they often placed the adulteress beside the passive wife and so exacerbated this ontological dilemma. Sadler, for instance, elaborates on his description of the imaginative adulteress with a report from Aristotle "of a woman, who at the time of conception beholding the picture of a Blacke-more, conceived and brought forth an *Aethiopian*." In this second story, the woman who beholds and then gives birth to an Ethiopian is a permeable, passive conduit for external images; in contrast, the first story presents an "adulteresse" who actively imagines her absent husband at the time of intercourse with another man and so conceals her illicit behavior and her child's paternity in one fell swoop of the imaginative faculty. Read alongside one another, however, and against the other maternal minds that medical texts had popularized, the different women blur together. Is this woman who gazes at the picture of a blackamoor closer in kind to the adulteress who consciously erases paternity, to the woman who orchestrates the whitening of her child (apparently for a greater aesthetic/racial good), or to the malleable wife whose husband puts a fair picture at the foot of her bed? What all these stories suggest is that a man can never see inside his wife's mind to discover a definitive answer to this question. And when that woman is white, that truth hits dangerously close to home for the intended readers of these early modern tales.

What does become clear in these often convoluted collections of conception and birth stories is that their compilers are preoccupied with two connected concerns: paternity and fidelity. Can your wife use her imagination to make your children seem like yours and, in the process, obscure her adulterous activities? In her discussion of the mother's power to erase paternity, Finucci further deepens this problem by pointing out that "at the very moment in which woman performs her most clear-cut role in society, and her most recommended one biologically—that of reproducing—she manages to set herself free from patriarchy."³² Just when you thought your wife was in her proper

32. Finucci, *Manly Masquerade*, 141. Finucci brilliantly connects this power to erase paternity (whether via the mind or, more recently, technology such as in vitro fertilization) to early modern and modern-day efforts to define the embryo as a separate entity from the pregnant woman.

place—when she most looks like a good wife—she may actually be the exact opposite.

The most frequently named figure in the debate over how much power women had over the illusion of paternity was Julia, daughter of Caesar Augustus. As the only natural offspring of Augustus, Julia held the future of his hopes for a “pure” imperial line in her womb. She was forced to marry in succession each of the men her father had selected to inherit his position: Marcellus, Agrippa, and eventually Tiberius. She had children with the latter two men and was accused of committing adultery with both of them. In 2 BC, the same year that Augustus was named *pater patriae*, the emperor banished his daughter on the grounds of her adultery and other lewd public behaviors. Ten years later he also banished “her daughter Julia his grandchild, who tooke something too much after the mother,” according to Thomas Heywood.³³ Julia appears in ancient and early modern sources as an adulterous prostitute incapable of reform and intent on contaminating the empire and the emperor’s newfound status as father of his country.³⁴ Her power to upset both father and fatherland resides in her sexual agency and seems to spill over into the next generation with her self-replicating daughter.

Yet it is Julia’s ability to disguise these acts of adultery by producing children that resemble her husband that generates the most anxious and conflicted narratives. Crooke, like many of his medical contemporaries, includes Julia in his section on parental resemblance—the same section in which he discusses the imagination’s powers. Crooke writes that, “although she plained false and had many Copesmates, yet all her Children were like her Husband.” In a move that seems directly aimed at discounting the power of Julia’s imagination to forge this paternal resemblance, Crooke uses Julia’s own words to reveal her strategy as purely biological: “Being asked what Art she had for that conveyance, she answered wittily and in some sort honestly in respect of others of her profession: *That she never took in her Passengers till her*

33. Thomas Heywood, *Gynaekeion: or, Nine booke of various history. Concerning women* (London, 1624), 299. All references to this work are to this page.

34. For a discussion of the ancient descriptions of Julia available to early modern readers, see David Bergeron, “*Cymbeline*: Shakespeare’s Last Roman Play,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980): 31–41. Citing translations of Tacitus and Suetonius available to Shakespeare, Bergeron makes the case that *Cymbeline*’s Imogen is connected to Julia by the accusations of adultery leveled against her. Furthermore, he argues, *Cymbeline* echoes Augustus in that both “confront the lack of a male heir, and their daughters disappoint them” (36). See, as well, Sandra R. Joshel’s discussion of adulterous Roman women and their literary afterlives in “Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus’s Messalina,” *Signs* 21 (1995): 50–82.

Ship were full fraughted" (226). Here Julia is used as a counter to the other anonymous adulteresses who strut across the pages of literary and nonliterary texts and obscure paternity with the force of their imaginations. In Crooke's telling of the story, women may deceive men with crude biological planning but not with any artful mental powers. Julia seems so artless, in fact, that she reveals her strategy without hesitation. At least she is an "honest" and legible whore—so legible, in fact, that she will tell you she's sleeping with other men *and* give you solid biological evidence that her children are yours.

The plot thickens, however, as Crooke moves deeper into the controversies of parental resemblance and inadvertently lets the bogey-woman rear her witty head. Relying on some writers' belief that paternity cannot be obscured by the female imagination, he writes: "methinks it is very hard to make imagination the only cause of this similitude." Since "we know that a child often resembleth one whom the mother never knew," and we know that imagination is not able to work "unless it have his object present by which it may be moved," then we also know that the female imagination does not have sole and sovereign power over resemblance (227). On the one hand, the message here is that men should not worry: children who resemble them must be theirs because women cannot use their minds to substitute their absent husbands for the men with whom they are cheating. Julia couldn't do it, he seems to be saying, and neither can your wife. On the other hand, a husband can never know who his wife has "known," so if a child resembles an apparently unknown man, it may in fact be that man's and not the husband's. This concern emerges most overtly when Crooke ends this section with examples of women who indeed can imagine what isn't there: mothers who "ardently desire" foods that then leave an impression on the child as if it were "soft wax," for example. An infant "will become unlike the Parents," he concludes, when "the Imagination commandeth the forming faculty" (228). The faithful woman whose children resemble men she has never known and Crooke's Julia, the "honest" whore who couldn't fake paternity if she tried, here slip into the realm of wishful thinking. In his attempt to navigate, as Crooke puts it, "through the waves of this turbulent Sea of opinions" and "arrive in a safe harbor," he has reminded his readers that no husband can rest easy in his paternity when faced with a quick wife and her full-freighted ship (227).

It would take a female author to flesh out Julia's imaginative potential. In 1671, Jane Sharp, the first woman in England to publish a midwifery text, told the same story of the devious Julia. Clearly working from Crooke's text (or from one of the many borrowings from it by later writers), Sharp makes a deft editorial move: whereas

Crooke writes that Julia's children resembled her husband, Sharp claims that she "had no children *but resembled herself*, for she was so cunning, that she would admit of none besides her husband till she had conceived" (emphasis mine).³⁵ Sharp's wife does not imagine her husband but rather focuses on an image of herself. The move is fascinating, for it undermines the example's original emphasis on Julia's adultery and her purely biological strategy. Sharp's version focuses on the erasure of fathers altogether and on the dominant and "cunning" influence of the mother over the shape of her child—her ability to conceive unto herself.

Like all early modern medical writers, Sharp drew her ideas about maternal resemblance from ancient theories of reproduction. The Aristotelian picture of the male seed giving form and action to the female matter at conception was not the only one in circulation in the early modern period.³⁶ Medical writers and philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also promoted the ideas of ancients such as Galen and Hippocrates, who had asserted that male and female seed were equally necessary to generation.³⁷ Ancient theories often gave more weight, in fact, to the mother's biological role in shaping the fetus to look like either the mother or the father. Galen, for instance, discusses how it is the uterus, and not the semen, that ultimately determines sex: "it sometimes happens that the female-producing semen, warmed by the right uterus, is made into a male fetus, or that the male-producing semen, chilled by the left uterus, changes into the opposite sex." He concludes that "generally the uterus is the better able of the two [the other being the testes in the male] to make the fetus like unto itself because it is associated with it for a longer time."³⁸ This model of generation, in which prolonged association with the uterus makes the fetus "like unto itself," is important to keep

35. Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, ed. Elaine Hobby (Oxford University Press, 1999), 95. Future references to Sharp appear in the body of the essay. For recent scholarship on Sharp's revisionist strategies, see Eve Keller, "Mrs. Jane Sharp: Midwifery and the Critique of Medical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century England," *Women's Writing* 2, no. 2 (1995): 101–11; and Caroline Bicks, "Stones Like Women's Paps: Revising Gender in Jane Sharp's *Midwives Book*," forthcoming in *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*.

36. See Aristotle *De Generatione Animalium* 1.18–20, 725a11–728b22; 2.3.737a27–29.

37. Virtually every early modern writer addressing the topic of generation references this belief, and some give explicit directions on how to arouse one's wife in order to ensure the ejaculation of her seed and hence conception. See, for representative examples across the period, Thomas Vicary, *The English-Mans Treasure* (London, 1587), 50; Sadler, *Sicke Woman's*, 118; and Anne Conway, *The principles of the most ancient and modern philosophy* (London, 1692), 79.

38. Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, vol. 2, trans. Margaret Tallmedge May (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 637.

in mind as we address the question of the female imagination's role. No doubt working from these traditions that gave women an equal if not superior power over parental resemblance, Anne Conway wrote in 1692 that external appearance depends upon the strength of the man *or* the woman's seed: "whatsoever Spirit is the strongest, and hath the strongest Image or *Idea* in the Seed, whether it be the Masculine or the Feminine . . . the Spirit is predominant in the Seed, and forms the Body, as near as may be, after its own Image."³⁹ This description of resemblance as a victory of the Idea of one parent over that of the other fruitfully informs a reading of Sharp's Julia and her strong will.

As these medical theories demonstrate, the relationship between female ideas and the fetus's matter was not just transgressive; it was central to the successful operations of generation. A strong imagination, in fact, was necessary to the initial act of ejaculation in men and women, since it prefigured the act of sex in the mind of the lover and excited his or her body.⁴⁰ In describing the mechanics of erection in his immensely popular *Directory for Midwives*, Culpeper describes the sights and sounds that provoke the imagination: "the delights or desire of Venus ads heat to these [Spirits in the blood of the penis], which causeth the Yard to stand; and that's the reason venereal sights, and venereal tales wil do it."⁴¹ Crooke gives equal time to female desire, explaining how "the imagination is carried to the spermatick vessels by the motion and attrition of the Clitoris" so that "their imagination is wrought to call that out that lyeth deeply hidden in the body" (176). Here female imagination does not simply convey external images to the reproductive organs: with its power to arouse, it calls the seed out from hiding.

When the power of the female mind is used to reach the purely physiological goal of ejaculation and conception, it poses no threat to the patriarchal household; in fact, it strengthens it by encouraging the conception of the husband's child. When a woman's imagination obfuscates paternity, however, it strikes at the foundation of male supremacy. In his description of the body's changes at age fourteen, for instance, Crooke limits the autonomous power of the female imagination in the interest of maintaining the husband's centrality. He explains how "men beginne to grow hairy, to have lustfull imaginations and to change their voice; womens paps begin to swell and

39. Conway, *The principles*, 79.

40. This notion probably came from the medical idea expressed in Salernitan medicine that the imagination, as Mary Wack explains it, "is one of four factors necessary for intercourse, the others being heat, moisture and *spiritus*." See her "Imagination, Medicine, and Rhetoric in Andrea Capellanus' 'De Amore,'" in *Magister Regis*, ed. Arthur Groos (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 101–15, quotation on 105.

41. Nicholas Culpeper, *Directory for Midwives* (London, 1656), 19.

they think upon husbands" (192). In this construction (reminiscent of Paré's claim that "the minde of the woman is more fixed on her husband, than the minde of the husband on, or towards his wife") women can turn their imaginations to men they have never met—as long as they imagine them as their future masters.

Later in the century, Sharp again makes a notable change to Crooke: at fourteen, she writes, men "begin to change their faces and to grow downy with hair, and to change their notes and voices; Maids breasts swell; lustful thoughts draw away their minds, and some fall into Consumptions, others rage and grow almost mad with love" (69). In this example, women are fully capable of lustful imaginations that have no specific relation to future husbands; in fact, Sharp takes the "lustful" imaginings away from Crooke's young men and gives it to her young women. On one hand, this is a radical move, since it counters the early modern definition of marriage as the erasure of the wife's desire and will by the husband's. On the other hand, Sharp describes this autonomous imagination as potentially harmful to a woman's mental integrity: it can "draw away [women's] minds." A few chapters later, however, as Sharp describes the by-now familiar powers of the imagination to shape unborn children and to "do as much as the Heavens can to make plants and metals," this self-destructive vision is gone: "How the imagination can work such wonders is hard to say, but there must be some strength of mind" (92–93).

III

Sharp's conflicted articulation of the female mind's creative power echoes *All's Well's* engagement with it as both a productive and a disabling force. In and through Helena's wits, Shakespeare brings this contentious discourse about women's imaginative operations to bear—but, appropriately, not to fruition. Helena is a character defined by her quick mind, yet she, like Sharp, expresses ambivalence toward its operations. When we first hear about her active imagination she appears as an amalgam of both Crooke's and Sharp's models of the lustful female adolescent: she imagines her future husband, Bertram, and this act does indeed "draw away" her mind in an initially debilitating way. When Bertram first takes leave of Helena to go to the King's court, she claims that "My imagination / Carries no favor in't but Bertram's" (1.1.84–85). In his absence, she is left to imagine his face: "His archèd brows, his hawking eye, his curls" (1.1.96).

At the same time, Helena's imagining of Bertram replaces all thoughts of her father and so links her to those maternal minds that actively disrupted patriarchal origins: "I think not on my father," she remarks. "What was he like? / I have forgot him" (1.1.81–84, *passim*).

As the scene continues, it becomes clear that her father is not the only man whose traditionally masculine position is endangered by Helena's mind. Once she is joined by Paroles, she engages in her most immodest explorations of how she might bring her desires to bear on Bertram's body. Paroles explains that once a woman's virginity is lost, a man will "quicklier be blown up" (1.1.125–26), a gendered reversal of the conventional quickening process that, as we shall see, epitomizes the scene's and the play's treatment of the female will's power.

In one of the play's most contested lines, Helena responds to Paroles' question "Will you anything with it?" with "Not my virginity yet—There shall your master have a thousand loves." Editors traditionally grapple with this abbreviated line and have posited a variety of meanings and emendations to create a logical bridge between Helena's dangling virginity and the loose adverb "There."⁴² But Helena's abrupt shift from her virginity to her extended imagination of Bertram's love life "There" at court is entirely in keeping with Shakespeare's treatment of her desiring and quick mind. As Paroles' line suggests, she potentially can "will . . . anything" when it comes to bodies—virginal, pregnant, or otherwise.

Helena ends her ten-line description of Bertram's imagined lovers at court with another interrupted series of thoughts that brings this connection between a woman's mind and the bodily expression of her desires into focus:

Helen:

The court's a learning place, and he is one—

Paroles: What one, i'faith?

Helen: That I wish well. 'Tis pity—

Paroles: What's pity?

Helen:

That wishing well had not a body in't

Which might be felt, that we the poorer born,

Whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes,

Might with effects of them follow our friends

And show what we alone must think, which never

Returns us thanks.

(1.1.179–88)

On the one hand, Helena resembles Sharp's lustful and distracted young woman here. Her imagination sustains the figure of her unrequited love, but it cannot "wish" Bertram "well" enough to effect a material change in him—to turn an idea into something with "a body

42. See Snyder's comments on this line in her edition of *All's Well*, 87 n. 167.

in't / Which might be felt." Her thoughts are her prison at this point. On the other hand, soon she will follow her higher-born love and use her wishes to ignite "effects." As we shall see, her wishes will lead her to quicken the body of the King and so ensure that Bertram will be "quicker blown up" by her desire.

Helena often appears to move between these two views of the female mind's powers: one in which her imaginative acts are willed self-conceptions, and the other in which they are creations beyond her control. This vacillation is, I believe, part of Shakespeare's strategy for dramatizing the ambiguous operations of the female imagination. Alone, Helena claims that "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven" (1.1.218–19). But she tells the Countess that the cure passed on to her by her father has "something in't / More than my father's skill" and "that his good receipt / Shall for my legacy be sanctified / By th'luckiest stars in heaven" (1.3.242–46). Regardless of how her healing powers are described, however, the father's influence is superseded by other forces. Later, when Helena describes how she has "store[d] up as a triple eye" this receipt, which she calls "the dearest issue of his practice" (2.1.106, 104), the danger to patriarchy posed by quick daughters becomes clear. These terms turn the father's prescription into a child that Helena now stores inside her mind and defines as "my legacy," not his.⁴³ The King furthers this analogy when he tells Helena that not even the "labouring art" of medicine could change nature's "inaidable estate" (2.1.116–17). But, of course, nature does change because of Helena's laboring art. Lafeu describes how her "simple touch / Is powerful to araise King Pépin, nay, / To give great Charlemagne a pen in's hand / And write to her a love-line" (2.1.73–76). Her ability to bring great men's fathers to life, to "araise" paternity and the suggestive "pens" that enable its passage from generation to generation (and, notably, to direct men's erotic energies toward her) is analogous to the power of the female imagination both to "call that out that lyeth deeply hidden in the body" and to shape her child's father—to construct arousal and paternity

43. Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. argues that Helena must forget her father in order to forget who she is and so reinvent herself as a woman good enough to marry Bertram. Although she clearly states that she has forgotten her father, however, Helena gives no indication that she has forgotten herself in the process. As this description of her turning his legacy into hers using her mind's eye shows, she is asserting a power over her future that is akin to a mother's influence over her child's at the expense of the father's. See his "'Be this sweet Helen's knell, and now forget her': Forgetting, Memory, and Identity in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999): 51–69, quotation on 52.

and, by extension, manhood. Or, of course, to “araise”/erase them. As Lavatch states, “The danger is in standing to’t; that’s the loss of men, though it be the getting of children” (3.2.41–42). Men indeed can get lost when they get (and not necessarily beget) their wives’ children, just as fathers can get lost when quick women store up legacies in their minds for their own erotic purposes.

At the same time, Helena uses her wits to enact positive physiological changes and to heal the play’s highest-ranking patriarch. Lafeu’s description of her powers as “Doctor She” over the King’s ailing body is echoed both in her “quick”-ness at play’s end and in the medical writings that cite the healing powers of the imagination. Lafeu explains that “I have seen a medicine / That’s able to breathe life into a stone, / Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary” (2.1.70–72). Although Helena appears here to possess an autonomous creative power, it is important to note that she does not always take responsibility for her plans to “quicken” the King. She tells the Countess that “your son made me to think of this; / Else Paris, and the medicine, and the King / Had from the conversation of my thoughts / Haply been absent then” (1.3.232–35). Given her earlier assertion (made when alone) that “Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie” (1.1.218), this claim should be seen as part of her masquerade, her performance of an impressionable woman whose mind is controlled by men and her desires (not one who willfully uses her mind to give body to those desires). She wants Bertram so badly, she would have an on-stage audience believe, that he makes her think about going to Paris and disrupts the “conversation of [her] thoughts.” In a similar gesture, she will downplay to the King her part in curing him, arguing that “it is presumption in us when / The help of heaven we count the act of men” (2.1.149–50).

Helena’s public equivocations concerning her ability to quicken matters are best read in light of the theme that dominates the opening scenes of *All’s Well*: the power of female artfulness to shape bodies and revise paternity. The assurance the King gives Bertram that he “bearst thy father’s face” is undercut by the claim that “Frank nature, rather curious than in haste, hath composed thee” (1.2.20–21), since Nature often appears in Shakespeare’s plays as a female artisan who, like the pregnant woman, shapes or misshapes at will. Richard Gloucester famously complains that Love “did corrupt frail Nature with some bribe, / To shrink mine arm up like a wither’d shrub, / To make an envious mountain on my back, / Where sits deformity to mock my body” (3 *Henry VI*, 3.2.155–58); and in *The Winter’s Tale*, Paulina praises the “good goddess Nature, which has made it [Perdita] / So like to him that got it” (2.3.104–5). In Bertram’s case, Nature has been similarly “frank” or generous in making him resemble his father, a notion that

suggests "Nature" could just as easily have withheld her favors and cast doubt on his paternity.

Along these lines, it is instructive to turn briefly to the play's most relentlessly present mother, the Countess, for she dramatizes the many ways in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries imagined how maternal influence could shape impressionable offspring. Like the imaginative mothers who haunt the pages of medical texts, the Countess claims that she can "wash his [Bertram's] name out of my blood" and make Helena "all my child" (3.2.67–68). Like Nature herself, she impedes her son's ability to develop into his own man, an idea that Shakespeare figures as an interception on her part of Bertram's self-made and self-making thoughts. Once in Italy, Bertram calls out to Mars to "Make me but like my thoughts, and I shall prove / A lover of thy drum, hater of love" (3.3.10–11); but in the next scene, his mother sets down in a letter her "greatest grief" over his abandonment of love (3.4.32), a missive that, as a Lord later describes it, will "sting his [Bertram's] nature, for on the reading it he changed almost into another man" (4.3.4–5).

In important ways, the Countess with her man-changing letter evokes the maternal figures who imagined and wrote mothers' legacies at the start of the seventeenth century. Mary Beth Rose links maternal authority in *All's Well* to this genre, describing the primary discursive strategy of the mother's legacy as "self-cancellation followed by self-presentation."⁴⁴ Rose points to this as the primary mode in which Shakespeare presents maternal authority, citing early modern authors like Elizabeth Grymeston who calls herself "a dead woman among the living." The book that Grymeston leaves behind for her son will allow him to see "the true portraiture of thy mother's minde," but only after her body is gone.⁴⁵ But the Countess challenges this notion of the female mind's separation from the mother's body, as does Helena. Before Helena makes her dramatic entrance in the final scene, Diana describes her with the following lines: "Dead though she be, she feels her young one kick. / So there's my riddle: one that's dead is quick" (5.3.302–3). By representing Helena as both quick and dead at the

44. Mary Beth Rose, "Where Are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 291–314, quotation on 312. Wendy Wall similarly reads the voicing of maternal power in these legacies as a "strangely performative and self-constituting gesture dependent on the erasure of the subject at the very moment of powerful self-assertion." See her *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 286.

45. Elizabeth Grymeston, *Miscelanea, Meditations, Memoratives* (London, 1604), A3r–v.

end of the play, Shakespeare engages with this discursive strategy of the mother's legacy but significantly amends it by emphasizing the indelible power that the quick woman had over all kinds of matter.⁴⁶ Helena's final line brings this riddling power to a mysterious climax as she asks, "O my dear mother, do I see you living?" (5.3.319).⁴⁷ Mothers are alive (and their creations apparently kicking) at play's end.

IV

These connections to quick maternal figures are significant; at the same time, Helena spends the bulk of the play not pregnant. This fact makes her an ideal character through whom to explore the multifaceted abilities (and potential deceptions) of the quick female mind. Once Helena attains her goal of marrying Bertram, her thought processes become more and more illegible. We never learn Helena's motives for going to Florence, for instance, and this, as Susan Snyder puts it, "is a deafening silence, all the more noticeable because the early acts have been so firmly centered in Helena's subjectivity."⁴⁸ From this point on, we and the characters are often left in the dark (sometimes literally) when it comes to her thoughts and actions.

The obscured act that primarily preoccupies critics of the play is, of course, the bed-trick that Helena plans in order to get pregnant and force Bertram to acknowledge her as his wife. Janet Adelman rightly points to the elusive nature of this impregnating act that drives the

46. Lafeu forges another connection between the dead and the quick when he substitutes Helena "that's dead" and who wore "such a ring as this" (in fact the same ring) for his daughter who "may quickly come" if Bertram gives the ring to her (5.3.76–77). The Clown also toys with the Countess's quickness in the context of her suspension between life and death: "she's not in heaven, whither God send her quickly," and "she's in earth, from whence God send her quickly" (2.4.11–13). Kristen Poole offers a reading of mothers' legacies that supports the self-affirming physiological influence of the mother over her children. She explores how Dorothy Leigh, for instance, "continually alludes to her body," a strategy that "reaffirms Leigh's position of authority to write for her children: she writes to what was once her own self." See Poole's "'The fittest closet for all goodness': Authorial Strategies of Jacobean Mothers' Manuals," *Studies in English Literature* 35 (1995): 69–88, quotation on 75.

47. As John Robinson observes, editors tend to ignore this puzzling line. He postulates that the second part of the line should be ascribed to the Countess, and that Compositor B, in charge of setting this play for the Folio, commonly made such mistakes in speech prefixes. See his "Helena's Living Mother," *English Studies* 80 (1995): 23–27. If he is right, and the women share the line, then the play points even more to Helena's connection to and transformation of the "dead woman among the living" paradigm evident in the mothers' legacies.

48. Snyder, "Shakespeare's Helens," 69.

female-engineered plotline of the play: "Whatever it was that happened in that bed is done and undone in our imaginations. . . . As we witness the multiple undos of the last scene, the sexual act itself becomes increasingly elusive, as though it had not happened at all, not with Diana and not with Helena."⁴⁹ Adelman is not alone in arguing that this elusiveness is a way to rescue Diana, Bertram, and Helena from sexual contamination. David McCandless is representative of this critical trend; he argues that Shakespeare "desexualizes her [Helena's] erotic agency in the bed-trick" in order to have her become "a saintly resurrected figure whose visible pregnancy sanctifies her sexuality."⁵⁰ But to run from the act's sexuality and its contaminating potential is to run from the multivalent female quickness that Shakespeare can be seen as foregrounding in this play: if anything, the elusiveness of the bed-trick dramatizes the obfuscating substitutions that a woman's mind and body together could generate in matters of paternity and sexuality.

As Marliiss Desens points out in her study of the bed-trick convention, *All's Well* marks one of the earliest uses of it on the English stage. She asks why dramatists, "who were not averse to borrowing other plot conventions from nondramatic literature, waited so long to borrow one that thereafter enjoyed great popularity."⁵¹ Earlier plays had allowed for the substitution of one body for another but had stopped short of sexual consummation. Furthermore, as Desens notes, these earlier examples use far more men than women to engineer these substitutions. What these earlier trends suggest is that *All's Well*, with its female mastermind and its illegible yet impregnating bed-trick, may have inaugurated a new way of responding to what was clearly a growing concern at the turn of the seventeenth century about the powers of a woman's imagination.⁵² Invisible to the play's spectators and participants, the bed-trick dramatizes every husband's worst fear: that he will be deceived by his wife and her inscrutable mind. Although Helena is evidently bringing two married bodies to their rightfully conjoined states, she does so through means that recall the accusations of a

49. Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 84.

50. McCandless, "Helena's Bed-Trick," 450.

51. Marliiss Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 39.

52. There is no critical consensus regarding which play came first, *All's Well* or *Measure for Measure*. Alexander Leggatt notes that "critics infer the order of composition according to which play seems to present the more refined treatment" of the bed-trick in his introduction to *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. Russell Fraser (1985; repr., Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

“strumpet’s boldness” that she oddly had ventured when she first gambled for Bertram (2.1.169). Like her notorious namesake, Helen of Troy, and like the unchaste Julia (whose planned pregnancies elicited increasing fear and disgust in seventeenth-century writers), Helena is linked to a variety of sexual deceptions that have larger implications for the security of men’s states.

Just as philosophers and medical writers attempted to deflect the effects of the thinking sexual woman, so too have critics of the play. Countering this trend, Barbara Hodgdon argues that the play’s double view of marriage as “giving sensual satisfaction but also leading to cuckoldry—suggests a potential register of Helena’s suppressed discourse, one that critics, anxious to stress her selfless, saint-like perfection and humility . . . have themselves suppressed.”⁵³ This register consistently emerges in the play, provoked by the very figures that critics have tried to rescue from sexual contamination. As Bertram attempts to seduce Diana, he ironically invokes the conjoined mental and reproductive repercussions of female quickness:

If the quick fire of youth light not your mind
You are no maiden but a monument.
When you are dead you should be such a one
As you are now; for you are cold and stern,
And now you should be as your mother was
When your sweet self was got.

(4.2.5–10)

In order for Diana to be the sexual creature Bertram desires, “quick fire” must light her mind, and, like the offspring of Sharp’s self-conceiving Julia, she must be just like her mother. No father appears in this image of begotten girls. Once again, the quick and the dead align, and the cunning mother enters into the sexual storyline. Getting a woman, in other words, inevitably means grappling with the woman

53. Barbara Hodgdon, “The Making of Virgins and Mothers: Sexual Signs, Substitute Scenes and Doubled Presences in *All’s Well That Ends Well*,” *Philological Quarterly* 66 (1987): 47–71, quotation on 51. See, as well, Patricia Parker’s argument that Helena “is disturbing to more ‘simple’ or singular conceptions, because she embodies the fear that women are always double or duplicitous” (*Shakespeare from the Margins* [University of Chicago Press, 1996], 208). Carol Thomas Neely argues that the play’s conflation of Diana and Helena, “one a confirmed virgin, the other the embracer of a degraded and deceitful sexual encounter,” enacts a “reconciliation of loving wife and sexual partner” in the body of a single woman. Such a conflation, of course, returns us to the unsettling blurring of the adulteress and the passive wife that I have been tracing in tales of the female imagination. See Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 93.

who first got her. And, to recall Lavatch's words, "that's the loss of men, though it be the getting of children."

The bed-trick and its apparently fruitful results raise yet another issue fueled by the fire of female quickness: although she mentions using her medical knowledge only to cure the King, Helena clearly knows how to use her wits to get pregnant in one shot and may know how to feign pregnancy—a troubling possibility for the play's not so swell finale. Medical writers circulated the theory that women could falsely conceive a *Mola* that could grow and stay in their bodies for up to four years. By some reports, according to Crooke, a woman could do this on her own: "*Plutarch* saith, that a *Mola* may be generated without the company of a man, whom many follow who think it may be generated only of the seed of a woman" (218). Crooke discounts this theory, but does so via the same tempest-tossed reasoning that dominated his discourse on Julia: "If a *Male* [*sic*] could be conceived only of the seed of the woman, then those Virgins which doe suffer nightly pollutions might conceive the same, which never yet was heard of." Crooke's (or his typesetter's) slip—one that makes a *Mola* into a *Male*—is a provocative one: the thought of a masturbating virgin conceiving unto herself appears to disrupt the text itself and threatens to turn a deceptive pregnancy into a male—to falsify manhood at the moment of its creation.⁵⁴

Crooke concludes that "the Mole is never made without copulation" and cites Hippocrates to support this view: "*when a great aboundance of bloud [from the woman] cloyeth a little ill disposed seed [from the man], there cannot be a lawfull conception, yet the belly swelleth as if the woman were with Child*. What could be said more succinctly," Crooke asks, "what to better purpose?" Although Crooke has purposely removed the self-conceiving woman from the realm of lawful conceptions and reasonable science, he has left ample room for the woman who "*swelleth as if . . . with Child*"—possibly for a full nine months—after the act of copulation. Is this image any less problematic for those men seeking knowledge of their wives' bodies? And is it enough to banish the possibility of a lustful self-conceiving woman? Although Crooke claims that he has never heard of such a case, Jane Sharp—again disagreeing with Crooke—claims otherwise: "Widows have been known to have had these Moles formed in their wombs by their own seed and blood that flows thither" (84–85). Could Helena, the virgin who seeks to "lose it to her own liking," be such a woman? Just what *did* the physician's daughter know?

54. In the original 1615 edition, the "l" and the "o"/"a" are occluded, making the word open to interpretation (298). The 1631 edition opts for "Mole" (298).

All that we, as readers of the play, know is that Helena orchestrates the bed-trick without a hitch; and what we are meant to believe is that this one night results in a conception ("lawfull" or otherwise).⁵⁵ What we may not see as readers is that Shakespeare presented Helena's allegedly pregnant body to early modern audiences in a notably unmarked form. Although we have no firm evidence as to how pregnancy was staged in Shakespeare's time, we do know that he used verbal and visual cues to embody his very pregnant heroines. His characters consistently refer to staged bodies in advanced pregnant states by using terms that point to visible markers: Hermione's Ladies describe how she "rounds apace" and is "spread of late / Into a goodly bulk" (*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.16, 19–20); and Claudio tells us that the result of his and Juliet's sexual activity "too gross is writ" upon her body (*Measure for Measure*, 1.2.155). Other playwrights employed similar verbal cues to mark bodies that are indisputably gravid: Webster's Duchess of Malfi, for instance, "waxes fat i'th'flank"—a sign of pregnancy that even her "loose-bodied gown" is unable to disguise (2.1.69, 71); and Middleton's Mistress Allwit "shows gallantly, like a moon at full" (1.2.138).⁵⁶ Peter Stallybrass suggests that there is "no solution" to questions such as "Did boy actors wear false breasts?"⁵⁷ We can assume, however, that some kind of prosthetic device or costuming effect would have been used to show the very pregnant bodies that early modern play-texts so specifically describe and, in more than one case, direct. The dumb show that opens act 3 of *Pericles* indicates "enter THAISA with child," and similar stage directions indicating that a female

55. Shakespeare departs from one of his source's major plot points here: Boccaccio's Giletta has numerous sexual encounters with Beltramo and waits until she knows she is pregnant before ending them.

56. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (London: Black, 1987); Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, ed. Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor (London: Penguin, 1988). For an analysis of the Duchess's pregnant body as a negatively conceived spectacle, see Lori Schroeder Haslem, "'Troubled with the Mother': Longings, Purgings, and the Maternal Body in 'Bartholomew Fair' and 'The Duchess of Malfi,'" *Modern Philology* 92 (1995): 438–59. Theodora Jankowski gives similar critical weight to the Duchess's "vastly (and continuously) changing bodily shape," as it represents how "the female body—in direct contrast to the male body—is a body in a state of constant flux." See her "Defining/Confining the Duchess: The Female Body in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Studies in Philology* 87 (1992): 221–45, quotation on 238.

57. Peter Stallybrass, "Transvestism and the 'Body Beneath': Speculating on the Boy Actor," in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 64–83, quotation on 70. Phyllis Rackin further explores the implications of staging female breasts using boy actors in her "Staging the Female Body: Maternal Breastfeeding and Lady Macbeth's 'Unsex me here,'" in *Corps/Décors: Femmes, Orgie, Parodie*, ed. Catherine Nesci (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 17–29.

character is “with child” appear in at least three other non-Shakespearean plays from the period.⁵⁸

Stallybrass’s argument that there is an “indeterminacy of gender at the verbal level” in stage references to breasts simply does not apply when we consider the female character in an advanced stage of pregnancy. There are definitive verbal markers that expose that body to the mind’s eye and that do not indicate the “motivated absorption of the female body” into a transvestite theatrical tradition that Stallybrass’s analysis of boy actors’ breasts suggests. Furthermore, there was an iconographic tradition that displayed heavily gravid bodies in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English portraiture. Karen Hearn has uncovered a large number of these portraits painted between 1580 and 1620 that show pregnant women with unambiguously swollen bellies.⁵⁹ This artistic tradition of visible advanced pregnancy makes it more likely that this physical state would have been represented on stage as well.

Clearly there were verbal and visual ways to embody pregnancy in the early modern period, on stage and elsewhere, and Helena’s body stands outside these systems of representation.⁶⁰ The only evidence we

58. The stage direction appears in all quarto versions of the play. As Suzanne Gossett observes in her gloss of this direction, “The emphasis on the fruitfulness of the marriage . . . and the consequent provision of an heir for both kingdoms, is conveyed visually.” See her 2004 Arden edition. I am indebted to Gossett for calling my attention to three other examples of stage directions: Thomas Dekker, *The Witch of Edmonton*, “Enter Frank Thorney, Winnifride with child” (1.1); Thomas Goffe, *The Tragedy of Orestes*, “Miander crownes him: Clytem great with child” (3.3); and Samuel Rowley, *When You See Me, You Know Me*, “Enter King Harry [*sic*] the Eight, Queen Jane bigge with Child” (line 135). René Breier makes the argument that the figure of *Titus Andronicus*’s Tamora in Henry Peacham’s sketch appears to have a body that is “disproportionately larger” than that of the male figures and that this “implies a pregnant body,” but her evidence is obviously open to interpretation (“The Longleat Manuscript: Tamora’s Great Belly,” *English Language Notes*, March 1998, 20–22). Tamora’s is the only very pregnant body in Shakespeare’s works to remain unmarked by any stage directions or verbal cues; given that hers is the only maternal body in his plays whose past activities are indisputably legible (the dark child that she births and that appears on stage proves her adultery with Aaron the Moor), the playwright may have seen no need to mark her pregnant body in other ways. Unlike the quick Helena (who has yet to make anything clearly known about her pregnancy by play’s end), Tamora is entirely unable to disguise the circumstances of her baby’s production.

59. See Hearn’s chapter, “Pregnancy Portraits,” in Marcus Gheeraerts II: *Elizabethan Artist in Focus* (London: Tate, 2002), 41–51.

60. One could also make the argument that there is not enough time for Helena’s pregnancy to show itself. As David Thatcher notes, Shakespeare’s drama “cannot accommodate the full gestation period” allowed in his narrative source. For Helena, “there is no narrative space in which to give birth to a child, and hardly enough time to assure herself she is pregnant” (David Thatcher, “Shakespeare’s *All’s Well*: The Case of

have of Helena's pregnancy lies in Diana's comment that she is "quick" and "feels her young one kick." Both of these details are, by definition, reliant on a woman's say-so. As Julia Epstein notes in her study of the pregnant imagination, English law stated that "a pregnancy did not exist until there was a quickening, as announced by the pregnant woman."⁶¹ The kicking that indicated quickening did not necessarily indicate a visibly advanced stage of pregnancy: medical texts from the time describe how pregnant women felt movement as early as the third month for boys and the fourth for girls.⁶² The marking of pregnancy, then, initially depended upon a woman's word and not upon visible evidence.⁶³

This need to take a woman's word for it (a need that Helena's indecipherably quick body so effectively represents at play's end) is precisely the fear that animated early modern debates over the maternal imagination's power to plan the illusion of a child's patriarchal origins. It is also the fear that sparks the interpretive crises of the play's final scene. Is Helena Bertram's true spouse and the mother of his child or just "the shadow of a wife you see" (5.3.307)? Can she "make me [Bertram] know this clearly" when the child's paternity and the pregnancy itself, as of the end of the play, "appear not plain" (5.3.315, 317)?

Bertram's Letter," *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 53 [1998]: 77–80, quotation on 79). Given the play's focus on how Helena's pregnancy is so unclear, I am not convinced that pointing to dramatic time compression adequately counters Thatcher's argument.

61. Epstein, "Pregnant Imagination," 112.

62. Crooke cites Hippocrates when he details how "The first beginning of this motion . . . is in Male children at the 3. month, in Females at the 4." (197).

63. Shakespeare alludes to this problematic reliance on the pregnant woman's word in *1 Henry VI*, when Joan la Pucelle "pleads the belly" in order to postpone her death. Her pregnancy, like Helena's, is not clearly detectable, although Joan is a more obviously unreliable speaker. Naming multiple fathers, Joan becomes the "Strumpet" that Helena suggests she might be when she bargains with the King (*1 Henry VI*, 5.4.84). Laura Gowing discusses cases of seventeenth-century women who describe the feeling of quickening and notes that "early modern pregnancies were necessarily felt internally and apprehended gradually, rather than seen." See "'The child in me': Perceiving Pregnancy," chap. 4, in her *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 111–48. Cristina Mazzoni provides a fascinating reading of quickening's relevance to feminist theories of pregnancy and subjectivity, analyzing its appearance from the Visitation to present-day pregnancy books. See "Quickening, or the Knowing Body," chap. 2, in her *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 60–111. See as well Kathryn Moncrief's forthcoming work on the potential illegibility of the pregnant body on the early modern stage: "'Show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to': Pregnancy, Paternity and the Problem of Evidence in *All's Well That Ends Well*," in *Shakespeare and All's Well That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*, ed. Gary Waller (New York: Routledge).

Bertram does not have the luxury at this point to walk away from Helena in the absence of firm evidence of either her pregnancy or its origin; he has just been exposed in front of the King and his court by Diana as a liar and a fornicator and is under enormous pressure to accept Helena's word when she appears. In the source story, Beltramo does not have to rely on his wife's say-so: "perceiving her constant mind and good wit and the two fair young boys" who were "so like him," he happily acknowledges his lawful wife. These carbon-copy babies and the perceptible mind of their mother are entirely obscured in Shakespeare's tale as Helena's wit turns the twins into a victorious pun: rather than showing him two babies, she shows him his ring and his letter and claims him "doubly won" (5.3.314). As Joseph Westlund argues, critics tend to ignore this alteration of "the actual, realized child of Bertram's instructions (and the source) into a potential child" as they search for "an unambiguously happy, or unhappy, ending." The fact that Helena is only pregnant (if indeed she is) "suits the insistently tentative quality of the play" and the conditional tone of the final scene in particular.⁶⁴

A useful way to think about Helena's "quickness" here is to consider Adelman's comment (that the sexual act in the play exists only in our imaginations) alongside Puttenham's description of synecdoche as an allegorical figure: "this conceit being drawn aside, and (as it were) from one thing to another, it encumbers the minde with a certain imagination what it may be that is meant, and not expressed" (205). By bringing an indecipherable body to Rousillon at the play's end, Shakespeare uses the "quick" Helena to demand such "encumbering" acts of the audience.⁶⁵ While on one level her "resourceful deeds," as Maurice Hunt states, "must flesh out the riddle—the word [of

64. Joseph Westlund, *Shakespeare's Reparative Comedies: A Psychoanalytic View of the Middle Plays* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 145.

65. Lori Schroeder Haslem argues that Helena's body (obviously pregnant in her opinion) is emblematic of the ambiguity Puttenham references in his description of riddles and that both the visibly pregnant Helena and the riddle work with which *All's Well* concludes serve to underscore the ambiguity of female sexuality. My application of Puttenham is certainly sympathetic to Haslem's; however, I see Helena's indecipherable body as central to the synecdochal operations that trigger the play's crises of interpretation and point to the power of female quickness at the end. See Haslem's "Riddles, Female Space, and Closure in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *English Language Notes*, June 2001, 19–33. William C. Carroll notes that "Bertram's riddle . . . relies on synecdoches and verbal dislocations to encode Helen's aggressive (in his view) sexuality" ("Language and Sexuality in Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare and Sexuality*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells [Cambridge University Press, 2001], 14–34, quotation on 17). From this perspective, Helena's synecdochal pregnancy becomes even more disruptive of Bertram's desires and intentions.

Bertram]—for the relatively happy conclusion of this comedy to become a reality,” on another level her audience must flesh out what she has asked them to imagine as she stands before them in the final scene with nothing but a ring and a letter to show for herself.⁶⁶

Even this letter bears the signs of Helena’s imaginative manipulation. When she first quotes from it in act 3 we hear: “When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband” (3.2.57–60). The second time she reads it, Helena changes it to “‘When from my finger you can get this ring, / And are by me with child, etc.’” (5.3.312–13). “This is done,” Helena immediately asserts. The alterations are significant. Like the adulterous woman who creates paternity with her mind, Helena presents her material as his: in fact he has not created this letter (if we are meant to believe that he wrote the first one), but no one (including Bertram) seems to notice.⁶⁷ This second version (which turns Bertram’s prose into poetry, a form that Helena had used when writing to the Countess in 3.4) erases his call for literal evidence (“show me the child that I am father to”) and substitutes for it Helena’s own inconclusive constructions: “by me,” “etc.,” and “This is done” have many meanings. She may be standing by him and even be “with child,” in which case the deed as she has phrased it is technically “done,” but not necessarily by Bertram. Or perhaps what is “done” is just the first condition—the getting of the ring—while the rest will follow once Bertram takes her willingly into his bed. The “etc.” that ends what is now a letter in verse suggests that Helena has the power to transform content as well as style—to impress any number of means and ends onto the narrative he is trying to enact. Helena’s mind and body figure synecdoche’s allegorical function in all of its “darknes and duplicitie.” Her ambiguous wording and illegible body require her audience to put faith in a figure of quick conceit: they (and we) must perform Puttenham’s encumbering mental operation in order to reach the conclusion that Bertram’s paternity is what her

66. Maurice Hunt, “*All’s Well That Ends Well* and the Triumph of the Word,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (1988): 388–411, quotation on 401.

67. David Thatcher outlines the history of editorial responses to this discrepancy, which range from blaming Shakespeare’s faulty memory to blaming his audience’s, and even (Thatcher’s own strangely forgiving interpretation of Bertram’s character) to arguing that Bertram does not want to embarrass Helena by calling attention to her misreading (“The Case of Bertram’s Letter,” 78). Helena appears to be the only one who reads the letter the first time as well, so it is possible that the contents of the original are not verifiably Bertram’s words either—an interpretation that fits Shakespeare’s larger interest in exploring how men’s creations are always obscured when they must pass through women.

words and body mean and that “by a thing precedent” (a bed-trick) we can now understand “a thing consequent” (a pregnancy and a child that Bertram has fathered).

In this sense, Helena’s pregnancy is radically different from those in *Measure for Measure*, the play to which *All’s Well* is most often compared. For the most part, *Measure* represents pregnant minds and bodies as permeable and passive rather than self-conceiving.⁶⁸ Mistress Elbow is an exception in that she does provoke concerns about the agency of pregnant women (she visits a bathhouse/whorehouse while she is pregnant [2.1.65–66]). Unlike our constant awareness of Helena, however, we never see or hear from Mistress Elbow during the play; Elbow’s agency is refracted through the anxieties of the male characters. Mario DiGangi argues that “Shakespeare’s presentation of Mistress Elbow, dangerous in either her feverish irrationality or her cold calculation, provides ammunition for male fears about a woman’s power in pregnancy.” At the same time, DiGangi argues, Juliet’s sexuality is reined in; he cites Claudio’s claim to have “upon a true contract . . . got possession of Julietta’s bed,” and argues that this “legalistic use of synecdoche reduces Juliet’s loose sexual energies to the status of an object that can be bound ‘fast’ to the conjugal bed.”⁶⁹

But in *All’s Well*, the quick conceit of synecdoche grants enormous agency to the allegedly pregnant woman. Unlike Juliet’s body, “the stealth of our most mutual entertainment” (as Claudio describes it) is not “with character too gross . . . writ” upon Helena’s (1.2.154–55). Although Claudio and Juliet’s acts were done in “stealth,” they both knew what they were doing and with whom they were doing it. The “gross” pregnancy is a clear marker of their mutual desire. Bertram, however, is the cozened victim of Helena’s quickness. Her pregnancy, like the obscured act of consummation, resides only in the mind at play’s end; there is nothing definite to measure.

Susan Snyder identifies this “persistent tendency in *All’s Well* toward displacement and (more or less inadequate) substitution” and describes how Helena’s pregnancy “transmutes the accomplished motherhood of her prototype . . . into another postponement, the promise of a child that must wait for the future to be realized.”⁷⁰

68. As Mary Crane observes, “the language and imagery of pregnancy in the play represents the conception of children and ideas as deeply analogous processes and the body as subject to impression or penetration by sexual organs, disease, and language” (*Shakespeare’s Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* [Princeton University Press, 2001], 162).

69. Mario DiGangi, “Pleasure and Danger: Measuring Female Sexuality in *Measure for Measure*,” *English Literary History* 60 (1993): 589–609, quotations on 603 and 593.

70. Susan Snyder, “‘The King’s Not Here’: Displacement and Deferral in *All’s Well That Ends Well*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (1992): 20–32, quotations on 21 and 29.

Although this play is full of inadequate substitutions, Helena's ambiguous maternity at the end is, I would argue, not one of them. She has not seen Bertram from before the conception until after the quickening. Having seen her husband only in her mind's eye, she, like the adulteresses who animated early modern medical tales, seems to have created his paternity out of thin air. The refusal of the drama to present a swollen maternal body does not detract from Helena's accomplishments; it in fact forces its viewers to engage with Helena's riddling quickness and the formidable powers of the female mind.

At the end of the play Helena is apparently back within the patriarchal structure, her pregnant body (as we are asked to imagine it) safely by her husband's side. But her mind, whose motivations have frustrated critics through the ages, remains a free agent. When she appears on stage, allegedly quick with Bertram's child, the wish she first made in act 1 seems to have come true: "wishing well" now has "a body in't / Which might be felt . . . / . . . And show what we alone must think." She has managed to plan parenthood and fulfill her desires while still remaining entirely within her legally and culturally prescribed role. Helena's earlier claim that "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" has served her ends remarkably well—even as it points to the unmarked and inscrutable nature of her quick means.