Workshop:
“Forgive Us Our Trespasses”: Approaches to Themes of Violation, Sacred Space and Geographies of the Early Modern Body

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Summary:
This workshop will address the broad conference theme of the body and its borders, providing a forum for discussion about how the application of differing theoretical approaches can render new readings of old texts, specifically texts associated with questions regarding social space and/or violation of the boundaries of the female body. The speakers, representing the overlapping yet distinct disciplines of semiotics, literary criticism, and rhetoric, will briefly present comparative methods of textual interrogation, using as concrete examples early modern texts by and/or about women across several genres and eras—inclusive of not only prose and poetry, but also drama, written both before and after the English Civil War.

PART I.
For the first section of the workshop, we reference the work of acclaimed Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman, as articulated in his *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Indiana UP, 1990).

KEY QUESTIONS:

1.) As the sole publication on breastfeeding written by a woman in the 17th century, Elizabeth Clinton’s *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* has received critical attention from historians and others interested in early modern attitudes toward the wet-nursing controversy, the fraught issue of maternal breastfeeding versus the practice of sending infants out to hired wet nurses.

If we attempt to look past the historical framework of the wetnursing controversy, however, what other—and different—ways might we find to understand this text? Can we approach this text on an entirely different plane, with entirely different schemata? What would a semiotic analysis of Clinton’s “nursing dyad” look like, and how could a semiotic assessment of Clinton’s metaphorical framework inform our understanding of the text?

2.) Why does Clinton feel the need to reclaim as sacred space the mother-infant nursing dyad? Consider the following:
   a. The ascendance (among the wealthy) of the cultural norm of the use of wet-nurses for infant feeding; accompanied by
   b. The post-Reformation loss of *Maria lactans* iconography, which had valorized (and indeed idealized) the nursing dyad.
   c. Clinton’s heavy reliance on biblical metaphors of believers as nursing infants and scriptures as “the sincere milk of the word.”

How does Clinton’s Puritan vision differ from Catholic visions of the nursing relationship?
3.) Theory: Yuri Lotman has theorized that the mother-child nursing dyad is the quintessential, elemental form of the dialogic situation (143).

Application: What are the necessary components of the dialogic situation, and how does Clinton’s “sanctified” vision of maternal breastfeeding illustrate this concept? [mutual desire]

4.) Theory: Lotman holds that the “outside world, in which a human being is immersed in order to become culturally significant, is subject to semioticization, i.e., it is divided into the domain of objects which signify, symbolize, indicate something (have meaning), and objects which simply are themselves” (143, our emphasis).

Application: Clinton’s reconfigures the nursing dyad to exclude the wetnurse. What rhetorical possibilities does this re-visioning open to Clinton, given her deep theological convictions? What aspects of breastfeeding does Clinton “semiotize” in a new way? As she situates maternal breastfeeding within a semiotically significant theological and allegorical context, what things are “lost” or pushed to the background—what realities are occluded?

5.) Theory: According to Lotman, “One of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation is the boundary, and the boundary can be defined as the outer limit of a first-person form” (131). In the “dialogic situation” of the nursing dyad, boundaries between individuals are uniquely breached, in that “the participants in this dialogue have just ceased to be one being but have not yet quite wholly separated” (143, emphasis in original).

Application: How do we understand the liminality inherent in the nursing dyad and what does this tell us about the boundaries and the geographies of the maternal body? What is the role of milk? What is the boundary between mother and child (what is the mother and what is the child)? Is the milk part of the mother or part of the child? And how does an understanding of this liminality—this property of being betwixt and between—inform our apprehension of Clinton’s semiotic figuration of believer as nursing infant and scripture as milk?

6.) Theory: Lotman characterizes sacred scripture of all kinds as “mythological texts” whose application results in “an elementary semiotic situation, namely every message has to be interpreted, or translated, as it is transformed into the signs of another level” (153). Lotman claims that mythological texts, at their core, are an “unwinding [of] cyclical texts into linear ones,” which results in “the appearance of character doubles,” as well as other pairings, twins, inversions, and binaries, such as is seen in many of Shakespeare’s plays.

Application: Part of Clinton’s vision for the “reformation” of the nursing dyad is her project of realigning cultural practice with what she sees as the Biblical mandate. Clinton’s Calvinist vision of an ordered universe requires the redefinition of the current world as a lost Eden needing restoration back to its original pristine state. In this semiotization of cultural practice, what binaries or inversions is Clinton setting up? (For example: Eden/Fallen world; good/bad; order/disorder; mother/wet-nurse; motive of love/motive of profit.) What other binaries or oppositions does Clinton’s vision entail? Are these binaries useful for Clinton’s rhetorical project? What do they reveal, and what do they occlude?
Because it hath pleased God to bless me with many children, and so caused me to observe many things falling out to mothers, and to their children; I thought good to open my mind concerning a special matter belonging to all child-bearing women, seriously to consider of: and to manifest my mind the better even to write of this matter, so far as God shall please to direct me;

In setting downe whereof, I will first shew that every woman ought to nurse her owne childe; and secondly, I will endeavour to answer such objections, as are used to be cast out against this dutie to disgrace the same.

The first point is easily performed. For it is the expresse ordinance of God that mothers nurse their owne children, and being his ordinance they are bound to it in conscience. This should stop the mouthes of all repliers, for God is most wise and therefore must needs know what is fittest and best for us to doe: & to prevent all foolish fears, or shifts, we are given to understand that he is also All sufficient, & therefore infinetely able to bless his owne ordinance, and to afford us meanes in our selves (as continuall experience confirmeth) toward the observance thereof.

If this (as it ought) bee granted, then how venterous are those women that dare venter to do otherwise, and so to refuse, and by refusing to dispise that order, which the most wise and allmighty God hath appointed, and in stead therof to chuse their owne pleasures? Oh, what peace can there be to these womens consciences, unlesse through the darknesse of their understanding they judge it no disobedience?

And then they will drive me to prove that this nursing and nourishing of their owne children in their own bosoms is Gods ordinance; they are very willfull, or very ignorant, if they make a question of it. For it is proved sufficiently to be their dutie, both by Gods word, and also by his works.

By his word it is proved, first by Example, namely the example of Eve. For who sucked her sonses Cain, Abel, Seth, &c. but her selfe? Which shee did not only of meere necessity, because yet not other woman was created; but especially because shee was their mother, and so sawe it was her dutie: and because shee had a true naturall affection, which moved her to do it gladly.

Next the example of Sarah the wife of Abraham; for shee both gave her sonne Isaac suck, as doing the dutie commanded of God: And also took great comfort and delight therein, as

But now to another worthy example, namely that excellent woman Hannah, who having after much affliction of minde obtained a sonne of God, whom she vowed unto God, shee did not put him to another to
nurse, but nursed him her owne selte untill she had weaned him, & carried him to be consecrate unto the Lord: As well knowing that this duty of giving her childe sucke, was acceptable unto God, as for the cause thereof shee did not sinne in staying with it at home from the yearly sacrifice: but now women, especially of any place, 33 and of little grace, doe not half this duty acceptable to God, because ut us unacceptable to themselves: as if they would have the Lord to like, and dislike, according to their vaine lusts. 34

To proceed, take notice of one example more, that is, of the blessed Virgin: as her womb bare our blessed Savior, so her pappe gave him sucke. 35 Now who shall deny the owne mothers suckling of their own children to bee their duty, since every godly matrone hath walked in these steps before them: Eve, the mother of al the living, 36 Sarah the mother of al the faithfull, Hannah so gratiously heard of God, Mary blessed among women, 37 and called blessed of al ages. And who can say but that the rest of holy women mentioned in the holy Scriptures did the like, since no doubt the speech of that noble dame, saying, who would have said to Abraham that Sarah should have given children sucke? 38 was taken from the ordinary custome of mothers in those lesse corrupted times. And so much for prove of this office, and duty to Gods ordinance, by his own Word according to the argument of Examples: I hope I shall likewise prove it by the same word from plaine Precepts 39 . First from that Precept, which willeth the younger women to marry, and to Beare children, that is, not only to Beare them in the wombe, and to bring the forth, but also to Beare them on their knee, in their armes, and at their breasts 40 : for this Bearing a little before is called nourishing, and bringing up: and to infore it the better upon womens consciences, it is numbered first of the good workes for which godly women should be well-reported of. And well it may be the first, because if holy Ministers, or other Christians doe heare of a good woman to be brought to bed, and her child to be living, their first questions usually is, whether she her selfe give it sucke, yea or no? if the answere be she doth, then they commend her: if the answere be she doth not, they are sorry for her. 41

And thus I come to a second Precept. I pray you, who that judges aright; doth not hold the suckling of her owne childe the part of a true mother, of an honest mother, of a just mother, of a syncere mother, of a mother worthy of love, of a mother deserving of good report, of a vertuous mother, of a mother winning praise for it? 42 All this is assented to by any of good understanding. Therefore this is also a Precept, as for other duties, so for This of mothers to their children, which saith, 43 what soever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are worthy of love, whatsoever things be of good report, if there be any vertue, if there be any praise, thinke on these things, these things do and the God of peace shall be with you.

So farre for my promise, to prove by the word of God, that it is his ordinance that women should nurse their owne children: now I will endeavour to prove it by his workes: First by his workes of judgement; if it were not his ordinance for mothers to give their children sucke, it were no judgement to bereave them of their milke, but it is specified to be a great judgement to bereave them thereof, & to give them dry breasts, 44 therefore it is to be gathered, even from hence, that it is his ordinance, since to deprive them of meanes to doe it, is a punishment of them.

I adde to this the worke that God worketh in the very nature of mothers, which proveth also that he hath ordained that they should nurse their owne children: for by his secret operation on the mothers affection is so knit by natures law to her tender babe, as she findes no power to deny to suckle it, no not when she is in hazard to lose her owne life, 45 by attending on it, for in such a case it is not said, let the mother fly, and leave her infant to the peril, as if she were dispensed with: but only it is said woe to her. As if she were to be pitied, that for nature to her child, she must be unnatural to her selfe: now if any then being even at liberty, and in peace, with all plenty, shall deny to give sucke to their owne children, they goe against nature: and shew that God hath not done so much for them 46 as to worke in any good, no not in their nature, but left them more savage then the Dragons, 47 and as cruell to their little ones as the Ostriches. 48
Now another worke of God, proving this point is the worke of his provision, for every kinde to be apt, and able to nourish their own fruit: there is no beast that feeds their young with milke, but the Lord, even from the first ground of the order of nature, *Grove and multiply*, 49 hath provided it of milke to suckle their own young, which every beast takes so naturally unto, as if another beast come forward to offer the office of a Damme unto it, they show according to their fashion, a plaine dislike of it: as if nature did speake in them, and say it is contrary to Gods order in nature, commanding each kinde to increase, and multiply in their owne bodies, and by their owne breasts, not to bring forth by one Damme, and to bring up by another: 50 but it is his ordinance that every kinde should both bring forth, and also nourish its owne fruit.

Much more should this work of God prevale to purswade women, made as man in the image of God, 51 and therefore should be ashamed to be put to schoole to learne good nature of the unreasonable creature. In us also, as we knowe by experience, God provideth milke in our breasts against the time of our childrens birth, and this he has done ever since it was said to us also, *Increase and multiply*, so that this worke of his provision sheweth that hee tieth us likewise to nourish the children of our owne wombe, with our owne breasts even by the order of nature: yea, it sheweth that he so careth for, and regardeth little children even from the wombe, 52 that he would have them nursed by those that in all reason will looke to them with the kindest affection, namely their mothers; & in giving them milke for it, hee doth plainly tell them that he requires it.

Oh consider, how comes our milke? 53 is it not by the direct providence of God? Why provides he it, but for the child? The Mothers then that refuse to nurse their owne children, doe they not despise Gods providence? Doe they not deny Gods will? Doe they not as it were say, *I see, O God, by the meanes thou hast put in to me, that thou wouldst have me nurse this child thou hast given me but I will not doe so much for thee*. Oh impious, and impudent unthankfullnesse; yea monstrous unnaturalnesse, both to their own natural fruit borne so neare their breasts, and fed in their owne wombes, and yet may not be suffered to sucke their owne milke.

And this unthankfullnesse, and unnaturalnesse is oftner the sinne of the Higher, and the richer sort then of the meaner and the poorer, except some nice 54 and proud idle dames, who will imitate their betters, till they make their poore husbands beggars. And this is one hurt which the better ranke doe by their ill example, egge, and imbolden the lower ones to follow them in their losse: were it not better for Us greater persons to keepe Gods ordinance, & to shew the meaner their dutie in our good example? I am sure wee have more helpes to performe it, and have fewer probable reasons to allege against it, then women that live by hard labour, & painfull toile. 55 If such mothers as refuse this office of love, & nature to their children, should hereafter be refused, despised, and neglected of those their children, were they not justly requited according to their unkind dealing? I might say more in handling this first point of my promise, but I leave the larger, and leardener discourse hereof unto men of art, and learning: only I speake of so much as I reade, and knoe in my owne experience, which if any of my sexe, and condition do receave good by, I am glad: if they scorne it, they shall have the reward of scorners. I write in modestie, and can reape no disgrace by their immodest folly. 56

And so I come to the last part of my promise, which is to answere objections made by divers 57 against this duty of mothers to their children.

First it is objected that *Rebeckah* had a nurse, and that therefore her mother did not give her sucke of her owne breasts, 58 and so good women, in the first ages, did not hold them to this office of nursing their owne children. To this I answer, that if her mother had milke, and health, and yet did not put this duty from her to another, it was her fault, & so proveth nothing against me. But it is manifest that she that *Rebeckah* calleth her nurse, was called so, either for that she most tended her while her mother suckled her: or for that she weaned her: or for that during her nonage, 59 and childhood, shee
did minister to her continually such good things as delighted, and nourished her up. For to any one of these
the name of a nourse is fitly given; whence a good wife is called her husbands nourse: and that Rebeckahs
nurse 60 was only such a one, appeareth, because afterward she is not named a nourse, but a maide,
saying: Then Rebeckah rose and her maides, now maides give not suck out of their breasts, never any
virgin, or honest maide 61 gave suck, but that blessed one from an extraordinary & blessed power. 62

Secondly it is objected, that it is troublesome; that it is noysome 63 to ones clothes; that it makes one looke
old, &c. 64 All such reasons are uncomely, and unchristian to be objected: and therefore unworthy to be
answered, they argue unmotherly affection, idlenesse, desire to have liberty to gadd from home, pride, fool
finesse, lust wantonnesse, & the like evills. Aske Sarah, Hannah, the blessed Virgin, and any modest
loving mother, what trouble they accounted it to give their little ones sucke? behold most nursing mothers,
and they be as cleane and sweet in their cloathes, and carry their age, and hold their beautie, as well as
those that suckle not and most likely are they so to doe, because keeping God's Ordinance, they are sure of
Gods Blessing: and it hath beene observed in some women that they grew more beautiful, and better
favoured, by very nursing their owne children. |

But there are some women that object feare; saying that they are so weake, & so tender, that they are afraid
to venter to give their children sucke, lest they indanger their health thereby. 65 Of these, I demand, why
then they did venter to marry, and so to beare children, and if they say they could not chuse, and that they
thought not that marriage would impaire their health, I answere that for the same reasons should they set
themselves to nurse their owne children, because they should not chuse but doe what God would have them
to doe: and they should beleive that this worke will be for their health also, seeing it is ordinary with the
Lord to give good Stomache, health, and strength to almost all mothers that take this paines with their
children. 66

One answere more to all the objections that use to be made against giving children sucke, is this, that now
the hardness, to effect this matter, is much remooved by a late example of a tender young Lady, 67 and
you may all be encouraged to follow after, in that wherein she hath gone before you, & so made the way
more easie, and more hopefull by that which shee findeth possible and comfortable by Gods blessing, and
no offense to her Lord nor her selfe: she might have had as many doubts, and lets, 68 as any of you, but she
was willing to try how God would enable her, & he hath given her good successse, as I hope he will doe to
others that are willing to trust in God for his helpe.

Now if any reading these few lines returne against me, that it may bee I my selfe have given my own
children suck: & therefore am bolder, and more busie to meddle in urging this point, to the end to insult
over, & to make them bee blamed that have not done it. I answer, that whether I have, or have not
performed this my bounden duty, I will not deny to tell my owne |

practise. I knowe & acknowledge that I should have done it; it was not for want of will in my selfe, but
partly that I was overruled by anothers authority, 69 and partly deceived by some ill counsell, & partly I
had not considered so well of my duty in this motherly office, as since I did when it was too late for me to
put it into execution. Wherefore being pricked in hart 70 for my undutifullnesse, this way I study to
redeeme my peace, first by repentance towards God, humbly and often craving his pardon for this my
offence: secondly by studying how to shew double love to my children to make them amends for neglect of
this part of love to them, when they should have hung on my breasts, & have been nourished in mine owne
bosome: thirdly by doing my endeavour to prevent many christian mothers from sining in the same kinde,
against our most loving and gratious God.

And for this cause I add unto my performed promise, this short exhortation: namely I beseech all godly
women to remember, how we elder ones are commanded to instruct the youngor, to love their children, 71
now therefore love them so as to do this office unto them when they are borne, more gladly for love sake,
then a stranger, who bore them not, shall do for lucre sake, 72 Also I pray you to set no more so light by
Gods blessing in your owne breasts, which the holy Spirit ranketh with other excellent blessings, if it be
unlawfull to trample underfeet a cluster of grapes, 73 in which a little wine is found; then how unlawfull is
it to destroye and drie up those breasts, in which your owne child (and perhaps Gods very elect, to whom to be a nourishing |  

17 father, is a Kings honour; and to whom to be a nourishing mother, is a Queens honour) 74 might finde food of syncere milke, 75 even from Gods immediate providence, untill it were fitter for stronger meat? 76 I doe knowe that the Lord may deny some women, either to have any milke in their breasts at all, or to have any passage for their milke, or to have any health, or to have a right minde so that they may be letted from this duty, by want, by sicknesse , by lunacy, &c. 77 But I speake not to these: I speake to you, whose consciences witness against you, 78 that you cannot justly alleage any of those impediments.

Doe you submit your selves, to the paine and trouble of this ordinance of God? trust not other women, whom wages hyres to doe it, better then your selves, whom God, and nature ties to do it. 79 I have found by grievous experience, such dissembling in nurses, pretending sufficiency of milke, when indeed they had too much scarcite; pretending willingnesse, towardnesse, wakefullnesse, when indeed they had been most wilfull, most froward, and most slothfull, 80 as I feare the death of one or two of my little Babes came by the defalt of their nurses. Of all those which I had for eighteene children, I had but two which were but throughly willing, and carefull: divers have had their children miscarry in the nurses hands, 81 and are such mothers (if it were by |  

18 the nurses carelesnesse) guiltless? I know not how they should, since they will shut them out of the armes of nature, and leave them to the will of a stranger; yea to one that will seeme to estrange her selfe from her owne childe , to give sucke to the nurse-child. This she may faine to doe upon a covetous composition, but she frets at it in her minde, if she have may naturall affection.

Therefore be no longer at the trouble, and at the care to hire others to doe your owne worke : bee not so unnaturall to thrust away your owne children: be not so hardy as to venter a tender Babe to a lesse tender heart: bee not accessory to that disorder of causing a poorer woman to banish her owne infant, for the entertaining of a richer womans child, as it were, bidding her unlove her owne to love yours. 82 Wee have followed Eve in transgression, let us follow her in obedience. When God laid the sorrowes of conception, of breeding of bringing forth and of bringing up her children upon her, 83 & so upon us in her loynes, did shee reply any word against? Not a word; so I pray you all mine owne Daughters, 84 and others that are still child-bearing reply not against the duty of suckling them, when God hath sent you them.

Indeed I see some, if the wether be wet, or cold; if they way be fowle; if the Church be far off, I see they are so coy, so nice, so lukewarme, they will not take paines for their own soules . alas, no marvell if these will not bee at trouble, and paine, to nourish their childrens bodies, but feare God, bee diligent to serve him; approve all his ordinances; seeke to please him; account it no trouble, or paine to do any thing that hath the promise of his blessing; and then you will, no doubt, doe this good, laudable, naturall, loving duty to your children. If yet you be not satisfied, |  

19 inquire not of those that refuse to doe this: consult not with your owne conceit; advise not with flatterers: but aske the counsell of sincere, and faithfull Preachers. If you be satisfied; then take this with you, to make you do it cheerefully. Thine always, having the child at your breast, and having it in your arms, you have Gods blessing there. For children are Gods blessings. Thine againe how your Babe crying for your breast, sucking hartily the milke out of it, and growing by it, is the Lords owne instruction, every houre, and every day, that you are sucking it, instructing you to shew that you are his new borne Babes, 85 by your earnest desire after his word, & the sincere doctrine thereof, and by your daily growing in grace and goodnesse thereby, so shall you reape pleasure, and profit. Againe, you may consider, that when your childe is at your breast, it is a fit occasion to move your heart to pray for a blessing on that worke; and to give thanks for your child, and ability & freedom unto that, which many a mother would have done and could not; who have tried and ventured their health, & taken much paines, and yet have not obtained their desire. But they that are fitted every way for this commendable act, have certainly great cause to be thankfull: and I desire that God may have glory and praise for every good worke, and you much comfort, that doe seeke to honour
God in all things. Amen.

FINIS

PART II.
Representing the literary critic’s approach of addressing adaption history, this section of the workshop will invite forum attendees to consider the symbolism of honor killing in John Webster’s *Tragedy of the Dutchess of Malfi* in relation to the broader Renaissance literary tradition in Webster’s *Appius and Virginia*, Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, and Seneca’s *Thyestes*. We will discuss how directives to obedience—whether chastity, fidelity, or death—echo throughout the adaptation history of Shakespeare and Webster, and how the literary phenomenon of the ritual of honor killing echoes paternity anxieties and religio-medical attempts to regulate and control sexuality and the maternal body as tied to economic concerns over inheritance and control in a patrilineal society. We will conclude by considering how this refusal of traditional violence and reversal of normatives stands reflects the heart Webster’s work, his gaze moving away from religious belief and social order for the purpose of more precisely examining the sources of individual virtue that can, ultimately, bring about the necessary cataclysm and a renewed society.

KEY QUESTIONS:

1.) Consider the implications of the duchess’s remarriage and her brothers’ economic and incestuous concerns over control and legacy for adaptations of Webster that shift the cultural dynamic – for example, Lewis Theobald’s eighteenth-century version that gives the duchess a happy ending, or Mike Figgis’s 2001 film *Hotel* that refractures the story through postmodern framing devices (so that her death is overtly fictionalized).

2.) Webster’s villains in *The Duchess of Malfi* are princes of the church and state. His protagonist is a duchess, and her assertion of that state identity is one of her last mental defenses. Consider how he approaches the individual in light of religious and social institutions.

3.) Consider how a study of the duchess might reframe Kristevan ideas of the maternal function. How do mother and lover intertwine?

TEXTS:


First, what is it about the representation of the Maternal in general, and about the Christian or virginal representation in particular, that enables it not only to calm social anxiety and supply what the male lacks, but also to satisfy a woman, in such a way that the community of the sexes is established beyond, and in spite of, their flagrant incompatibility and permanent state of war? Second, what is it about this representation that fails to take account of what a woman might say or want of the Maternal, so that when today women make their voices heard, the issues of conception and maternity are a major focus of discontent? Such protests go beyond sociopolitical issues and raise “civilization’s discontents” to such a pitch that even Freud recoiled at the prospect: the discontent is somehow in the species itself. . . .

The Mater dolorosa knows no male body except that of her dead son, and her only pathos (which is sharply distinguished from the sweet and somewhat absent serenity of the lactating Madonnas)
comes from the tears she sheds over a corpse. . . . Is the love of women who weep over the bodies of the dead a love as obscure as it is ancient, nourished by the same source as the aspiration of a woman whom nothing satisfies, namely, the desire to feel the thoroughly masculine pain of the male who, obsessed with the thought of death, expires at each moment of ecstasy? Still, Mary’s suffering has nothing of tragic excess about it: joy and indeed a kind of triumph supplant her tears, as if the conviction that death does not exist were an unreasonable but unshakeable maternal certainty, upon which the principle of resurrection must have rested for support. . . .

Man surmounts death, the unthinkable, by postulating instead – in the stead and place of thought as well as of death – maternal love. That love, of which divine love will be no more than a not always convincing derivative, is psychologically perhaps just a memory, prior to the primary identifications of the primitive shelter that guaranteed the survival of the newborn child. Logically in fact, that love is an unfurling of anguish at the very moment when the identity of thought and the living body breaks down. When the possibilities of communication are swept away, the last remaining rampart against death is the subtle spectrum of auditory, tactile, and visual memories that precede language and reemerge in its absence. Nothing could be more “normal” than that a maternal image should establish itself on the site of that tempered anguish known as love. No one is spared. Except perhaps the saint or the mystic, or the writer who, by force of language, can still manage nothing more than to demolish the fiction of the mother-as-love’s-mainstay and to identify with love as it really is: a fire of tongues, an escape from representation. For the few who practice it, then, is modern art not a realization of maternal love – a veil over death, assuming death’s very place and knowing that it does? A sublimated celebration of incest. . . .

Those interested in what maternity is for a woman will no doubt be able to shed new light on this obscure topic by listening, with greater attentiveness than in the past, to what today’s mothers have to say not only about their economic difficulties but also, and despite the legacy of guilt left by overly existentialist approaches to feminism, about malaise, insomnia, joy, rage, desire, suffering, and happiness . . .

Women imbued with the desire to reproduce (and to maintain stability); women ready to help our verbal species, afflicted as we are by the knowledge that we are mortal, to bear up under the menace of death; mothers. For what is ethics divorced from morals? Heretical ethics – herethics – may just be that which makes life’s bonds bearable, that which enables us to tolerate thought, and hence the thought of death.

B. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (performed ca. 1613-14; published 1623)

1.
Ferdinand: You are a widow: You know already what man is; and therefore Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence –
Cardinal: No, Nor anything without the addition, honour, Sway your high blood.
Ferd. Marry! they are most luxurious, Will wed twice. . . .
Duchess: Diamonds are of most value, They say, that have past through most jewellers’ hands.
Ferd. Whores, by that rule, are precious.
Duch. Will you hear me? I’ll never marry.
Card. So most widows say; But commonly that motion lasts no longer Than the turning of an hour-glass: the funeral sermon And it, end both together. (1.1)

2.
Duch. . . . This is flesh and blood sir; ‘Tis not the figure cut in alabaster, Kneels at my husbands tomb. Awake, awake, man! I do here put off all vain ceremony, And only do appear to you a young widow That claims you for her husband, and like a widow, I use but half a blush in’t. (1.1)

3. Ferd. Foolish men, That e’er will trust their honour in a bark Made of so slight weak bulrush as is woman, Apt every minute to sink it!
Card. Thus Ignorance, when it hath purchas’d honour, It cannot wield it.
Ferd. Methinks I see her laughing: – Excellent hyena! Talk to me somewhat, quickly, Or my imagination will carry me To see her in the shameful act of sin.
Card. With whom?
Ferd. Happily with some strong-thigh’d bargeman, Or one o’th’ wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge, Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.
Card. You fly beyond your reason.
Ferd. Go to, mistress! ‘Tis not your whore’s milk that shall quench my wild-fire, But your whore’s blood. (2.5)

4. Duch. Why might not I marry? I have not gone about in this to create Any new world or custom.
Ferd. Thou art undone; And thou hast ta’en that massy sheet of lead That hid thy husband’s bones, and folded it About my heart.
Duch. Mine bleeds for’t!
Ferd. Thine! thy heart! What should I name’t, unless a hollow bullet Fill’d with unquenchable wild-fire?
Duch. You are in this Too strict; and were you not my princely brother, I would say, too wilful: my reputation Is safe. (3.2)

5. Enter TWO PILGRIMS to the Shrine of our Lady of Loretto. [This shrine, dating at least to the twelfth century, is supposed to be the house of Mary – the locale of the annunciation and incarnation (“Here the word became flesh”) – carried by angels from Israel to Loreto, Italy.] (Here the ceremony of the Cardinal’s instalment, in the habit of a soldier, performed in delivering up his cross, hat, robes, and ring, at the shrine, and investing him with sword, helmet, shield, and spurs: then Antonio, the Duchess, and their children, having presented themselves at the shrine, are, by a form of banishment in dumb-shew expressed towards them by the Cardinal and the state of Ancona, banished. . . .)
First Pilgrim: Here’s a strange turn of state! who would have thought So great a lady would have match’d herself Unto so mean a person? yet the cardinal Bears him much too cruel.
Second Pilgrim: They are banish’d.
First Pil. But I would ask what power hath this state Of Ancona, to determine of a free prince?
Second Pil. They are a free state, sir, and her brother shew’d How that the Pope fore-hearing of her looseness, Hath seiz’d into the protection of the church The dukedom, which she held as dowager. (3.4)

6. Ferd. Damn her! that body of hers, While that my blood ran pure in’t, was more worth Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul. I will send her masks of common courtesans, Have her meat sev’d up by bawds and ruffians, And, ‘cause she’ll needs be mad, I am resolv’d To remove forth the common hospital All the mad-folk, and place them near her lodging; There let them practise together, sing and dance, And set their gambols to the full o’th’ moon: If she can sleep the better for it, let her. Your work is almost ended. (4.1)
7.
Ferd. . . . let me but examine well the cause: What was the meanness of her match to me? Only I must confess I had a hope, Had she continu’d widow, to have gain’d An infinite mass of treasure by her death; And that was the main cause, her marriage, That drew a stream of gall quite through my heart. (4.2)

8.
Card. I must feign somewhat: – Thus they say it grew. You have heard it rumour’d for these many years, None of our family dies but there is seen The shape of an old woman, which is given By tradition to us to have been murder’d By her nephews, for her riches. Such a figure One night, as the prince sat up late at’s book, Appear’d to him . . . (5.1)

9.
Ferd. My sister, O my sister! there’s the cause on’t. Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust. (5.5)


1. When I first read [Webster’s] Scenes, I found something singularly engaging in the Passions, a mixture of the Masculine, and the Tender, which induced me to think of modernizing them . . . If the Piece has any Praise, it is, in my Opinion, that it had Power to draw Tears from fair Eyes. The Poet, who writes for the Stage, should principally aim at pleasing his female Judges: for the best Proof, whether he can draw a Distress, is, how far their Nature and Virtues are touch’d with his Portrait. (Preface)

2. Pescara: . . . her State of Power is circumstanc’d By her late Consort’s Will, that know, young Man, Her Rule determines with her Widowhood: And should she take another Lord, the Pope May seize into Protection of the Church The Dukedom, which she holds as Dowager, And Guardian to her Son. (1.1)

3. Bosola: This Fellow, sure, breeds Basilisks in his Eyes; He’s nothing else but Murther. For the Hire Of both their Dukedoms, I’d not be the Villain This Pair of Brothers think me. – Poor Antonio! Thou’rt mark’d for Death. Tho’ nothing be so needful To thy lost State, as Pity; yet I find Nothing so dang’rous: – But, howe’er, I’ll seek thee; And make it, if thou dar’st be found, my Care To put thee into Safety from the Reach Of these most cruel Tygers. (5.1)

4. Bos. . . . I cheated Her credulous Brother with a waxen Image: That beauteous Waxen Image so admir’d, Fram’d by Vincentio di Laureola, When her Grace married first. (5.1)

5. Duke. My Mother! O, what Words can speak my Joy? Let my Tears answer for my Heart’s big Pleasure. What Miracle has giv’n you back to Life?
Duchess: This Man, appointed to my Death, preserv’d me.

[To Bosola, who kneels.]
Duke: O think, what Honours can requite thy Virtue.
Dutch. Preserv’d me from a Fate, had giv’n me Peace; But now I’m doom’d the Slave to lasting Sorrows: A mourning Widow, past the Help of Comfort, For poor Antonio’s Loss.
Bos. Ev’n there I’m pleas’d To lend a Dawn of Hope. That fatal Ring, Which you suppos’d sent
from your murther’d Lord, Came from his Hand t’assure you of his Safety. A Pilgrim brought it; gave it to your Servants; But, intercepted by your cruel Brother, ‘Twas us’d in Aggravation of your Tortures.

Duke. Be still the Messenger of farther Comfort, And heighten, if thou can’st, thy countless Merit. Ten thousand Ducats crown the virtuous Man, Who brings Antonio to us.

Antonio: O my Princess! Look up, and once more bless the lost Antonio. [Throw down his Pilgrim’s Staff, and opens his Frock.

Dutch. ‘Tis He: – O Ecstasy, too strong for Sense! Joy crowds about my Heart in such Excess, The Torrent quite o’er-bears me. (5.1)

Part III.

This final section utilizes conceptual metaphor and mapping theory to interrogate a series of poems in Margaret Cavendish’s Poems and Fancies (1653), which are fascinating for both their hybrid form as poem-recipes and their main ingredient: the female body. Both erotic and grotesque, the poems interrogate contemporary ideas of poetry, beauty, and creation. Rather than presenting the disembodied female object, as the traditional blazon often does, Cavendish’s recipe poems create a unified poetic subject. The recipe poems become an element in Cavendish’s larger project of using domestic metaphor and imagery to explore and navigate a literary landscape which was often hostile to women writers. Cavendish uses the female body as metaphor and map to understanding constructions of power in the literary and real worlds.

KEY QUESTIONS:

TBD

Suggested readings:
Cavendish, Margaret. Poems and Fancies (1653) pages 126-134.