Gender, Pregnancy and Power in Eighteenth-Century Literature: The Maternal Imagination
JENIFER BUCKLEY (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 292 pp., ISBN 978 3 319 53835 8, £89

Jenifer Buckley's *Gender, Pregnancy and Power in Eighteenth-Century Literature: The Maternal Imagination* explores the literary, scientific, social and cultural conceptualisation of 'maternal imagination', or the belief that 'a woman's mind could affect the development of her foetus' (5), during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While certain examples of maternal imagination have long been familiar with medical and political historians who have sought to understand the history of 'the imagery of monstrous births' (14), Buckley argues that maternal imagination did not exist as a stable or constant paradigm, but rather constituted a changeable and shifting discourse that existed in many forms. The various impacts of this discourse on public and intellectual understanding have remained largely unseen, Buckley explains, but are significant to areas including theatre, literary and medical publishing, and philosophies of the imagination. Further than mapping the impact of conceptualisations of maternal imagination in these areas, the book also explores the centrality of questions relating to how much agency, conscious or unconscious, women were perceived to exercise over their imaginations in the context of pregnancy.

The chronology of Buckley's examination is almost as wide-ranging as the number of potential applications of her theme to eighteenth-century public debate in all its forms. Previous scholarship has focused on only limited elements of this 'protean discourse' (67), and in doing has limited much analysis to exploring publications and events of the 1720s rather than attempting to identify any continuation or subsequent transformation of those beliefs. Buckley's approach seeks to fill this gap, making the 1720s a starting point rather than a self-contained chronology for consideration. Beginning with the occurrence of the infamous 'Mary Toft Affair' in 1726, she traces the influence of the discourse through to the publication of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* in 1818. The impact of broadening the chronology used to investigate maternal imagination is significant, and changes how we view medical and cultural dialogues about the connection between women's minds and the outcomes of their pregnancies.

The book opens with a neat and accessible precis of the history of maternal imagination, as well as the broader history of theories of imagination itself that would be a useful addition to any reading list concerning itself with intellectual history. In the second chapter, 'Mary Toft's Performance: Imagining Powerful Pregnancies in Pantomime and Pamphlets', Buckley follows this with many interesting insights into the interpretation of pregnant women's behaviour as having been connected to their emerging role within theatres and as performers in the wider world. In order to do this she draws on a wide range of materials including eighteenth-century theories of acting, performed plays, as well as medical and pamphlet literature, and journalism. There is much to be admired about Buckley's efforts to weave so many relevant sources into her argument, though the inevitable by-product of covering such a breadth of material is that the amount of detail that can then be dedicated to any one area becomes limited. Her exploration of the relationship between maternal imagination and stage culture is a particular strength of this chapter and the use of pantomime as a primary vehicle for analysing Toft's infamous behaviour offers a refreshing perspective on a well-known tale. Conversely, Buckley's argument for connections between the history of women's emotions and agency and the reception of actresses as an emerging elite on the professional stage deserves more attention than it receives. If space was the determining constraint here, those observations on the careers of theatrical figures

such as Sarah Siddons and Dora Jordan that feature in this chapter serve as an inviting taste of what Buckley's research might offer eighteenth-century studies in the future.

The book's third chapter analyses fiction from Samuel Richardson and Tobias Smollett, as a means of creating an imaginative space for cultural debate about the positive aspects of maternal imagination. Buckley is adept at appreciating the overlap between the shared concerns of different types of printed text during the period without flattening the rich literary landscape of emerging genres of the period. One of her most valuable contributions here lies in discovering how debates surrounding maternal imagination moved so fluidly between medical and literary communities, specifically citing the novel as having created 'a space to explore pregnant women's power' (116). While not the first to suggest these connections, Buckley's choice of James Blondel's pamphlet as a case study is an effective one, offering much to scholarship that focuses on the repercussions of medical practitioners writing increasingly for the public at large by the early eighteenth century, instead of for the medical elite.

Moving these debates on, though remaining in the world of prose fiction, Buckley then turns her attention to the work of Laurence Sterne. Though an oft-considered text for its interaction with medical cultures of its own time, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-68) continues to offer new possibilities to the literary scholar examining socio-medical ideas. This chapter exposes Sterne's willingness to play with satire in the context of men as well as women to make a political point about maternal imagination. Buckley makes her own contribution, claiming that by Tristram being 'allegedly doomed from the start as a result of his father's imagination, Sterne implicitly challenges the popular notion that an expectant mother should be blamed for an imperfect child' (176). This chapter presents a convincing reading of Sterne's text, consistent with other medical and gendered readings produced within Sterne scholarship in recent years, and adds weight to the argument that maternal imagination remained part of public thought beyond the early eighteenth century.

Finally, chapters five and six of this study focus on Romantic understandings of maternal imagination. Buckley proposes in chapter five that the specific interest of Romantic era poetry in imagination allowed authors to 'bring the tensions of pregnancy into sharper focus' (190), addressing issues including fears of painful birth, complications in delivery and stillbirth. This is, she explains, against a backdrop of cultural norms that otherwise saw the status of motherhood elevated as one of the ideals of the growing culture of domesticity in the latter half of the eighteenth century, making such anxieties difficult to voice in other forms. The works of Elizabeth Boyd, Jane Cave, Isabella Kelly and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, along with Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' (1798), are examined for their accounts of these concerns. The specific inclusion of Wordsworth's text permits Buckley to indicate key differences in the ways in which male and female poets discussed these apprehensions about reproduction. Though women's poetry appears to have resisted the idea that women are in any way to blame for any outcome of pregnancy perceived to be negative it is Wordsworth, she claims, who is most able to 'access the danger and power of maternal imagination in a way that was culturally unacceptable for women authors of maternal poetry (226)'. Free of the possibility that 'The Thorn' would be received as an autobiographical account of childbearing, he is able to 'criticise the disproportionate responsibility placed on the pregnant woman' (225) without dismissing the ambiguous influence of maternal passions on foetal health, or attracting the types of unwanted personal criticism that his women contemporaries might have received.

The book completes its enquiry with one of the most famed narratives of human creativity intersecting, even eclipsing, biological processes: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Casting Victor Frankenstein in the role of the maternal figure whose imagination has produced an imperfect neonate, Buckley makes a case that the novel 'voices the idea that the cultural guilt increasingly attached to the theory of maternal imagination was unfair' (247). This guilt, she explains, stemmed from societal pressures placed on women, Shelley herself among these, to assume primary responsibility for any negative outcomes of pregnancy whilst coping with their own personal loss or anguish. While further contextual analysis of the medical, legal and gendered frameworks that influenced such pressure may have proved useful to student readers, this does not detract from the fact that Buckley's close reading of the text which is compelling. Viewing *Gender, Power and Pregnancy* as a whole, what is offered to scholars of eighteenth-century studies and associated fields makes for interesting reading, and provokes discussion in ways that will continue to further the role of literary studies within medical humanities.

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