

plead the belly:
Stories of Crime, Death, and Pregnancy
in Early Modern England and Today

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Abstract

In Early Modern England, if a woman convicted of a capital offense could convince the court that she was pregnant, she would be awarded a stay-of-execution until she had given birth. This process was known as “pleading the belly.” My project examines the role that fiction and story-telling played in the act of pleading the belly and the subsequent trial, as well as in popular printed texts that depicted these women’s crimes and executions. Because pregnancy was nearly impossible to prove during this time period, a woman’s claim had to originate in the form of personal testimony. More often than not, however, her testimony does not survive, and much of what we want to know about the case is simply not on the historical record. Instead, 21st century researchers must rely on heavily skewed and fictionalized pamphlets written by third parties hoping to make a profit off of her story. My work uses both historical and literary sources, research and invention, to explore these areas of uncertainty and to bring the Early Modern law to life through the same medium that has been its heart since the very beginning: fiction.

Introduction

Our fascination with the body’s potential for concealing (and revealing) hidden truths is never more apparent than when it concerns the belly of the pregnant woman. We might, for example, look to early modern England (1500-1700), where unmarried women were routinely searched for signs of pregnancy; their neighbors exposed their breasts and stomachs in public, then squeezed, scrutinized, and evaluated them for signs of swelling or lactation (Gowing, “Secret Births” 90-91). These women’s bodies were a public concern, as the concealment of an unmarried woman’s pregnancy was both a social and criminal offense (Gowing, “Secret Births” 89).

Modern women must be grateful, then, for the advent of hormonal pregnancy tests and laws prohibiting rather than encouraging the accosting and stripping of women in the street. Yet it is not uncommon for one to pay for groceries while surrounded by photographs of female celebrities with circles and arrows drawn around their bellies, asking readers to question whether the “bump” we see is a sign that these women are hiding something from us. These accusations suggest that, even today, there is something deeply troubling about the power of a woman’s body to keep secrets from those who wish to expose, and therefore control, the story her body tells. My collection of short stories, informed by historical research,

explores the mysteries of the belly, tracing the ways in which women's bodies have been read and represented through narratives both in the early modern period and in present day.

From 1387 until 1931¹, English common law held that if a woman convicted of a capital offense could convince the court that she was pregnant, she would be awarded a stay-of-execution until she had given birth (Oldham 1). This process was known as "pleading the belly." Because pregnancy was difficult (if not completely impossible) to prove during this time period, a woman's claim had to originate as a kind of story, told in the hopes of convincing both the appointed judge and the gathered community of its veracity. This story was then evaluated and retold by a group of randomly selected women referred to as a "jury of matrons" (Forbes 29). The judge ordered these women to examine the accused in a private room until they could ascertain whether or not she was with child, using whatever means they deemed necessary (Gowing, *Common Bodies* 43).

One can imagine that this created a rather complicated power dynamic within the courtroom—as the court was obligated to take the matrons at their word, these women were, essentially, given the ultimate power over the fate of the accused. However, we must remember that these were not voluntary positions, and that the jury of matrons was forced to wield this power on behalf of the court. Indeed, there is one record of a case in which a condemned woman announced that she was with child, only to have the judge order all the courtroom doors sealed, so that no women could escape his command to

serve on her jury of matrons (Johnson 724).

Typically, at this point in the proceedings, all available records stop in their tracks. The findings of the jury of matrons were often not recorded, and the history of "pleading the belly" is comprised of noticeably sparse court documents, hearsay, sensationalized press, and unverifiable confessions. Modern researchers, just like the early modern judges and spectators before them, are forbidden access to these private examinations, forced to fill these crucial gaps in fact with speculation. For example, one can imagine that while there may have been many cases in which the jury made an honest effort to inspect a woman for signs of pregnancy, there must also have been instances in which the private and mysterious nature of these examinations made the process vulnerable to subversion. The matrons' own understanding of pregnancy and sexual reproduction varied wildly based on their age, income level, literacy, experience, marital status, and, perhaps, even their relationship to the accused. In small communities, it was very likely that some, if not most, of the women charged with the task of reading the defendant's body knew her personally. While any one of these details could quite literally mean the difference between the accused's life and death, this sort of information was never recorded by the courts, let alone preserved.

Strangely enough, the majority of the information we have about these women's trials does not come from inside the courtroom at all, but from literature—specifically, popular printed documents known as "execution pamphlets." These supposedly didactic, semi-biographical papers were often sold to the crowds gathered at both men's and women's executions, which were, in those times, very theatrical and public affairs (Dolan 149).

1 There are at least four recorded cases, however, of women being granted reprieves on the grounds of pregnancy prior to this clause, two as early as 1228 (Forbes 26).

However, the details of these women's crimes and tearful pleas for their unborn children were occasionally altered in order to reflect trends of the day (anti-Catholic paranoia, for example)², in order to sway public opinion about the condemned, or, in the case of clergymen-turned-pamphleteers, as a way to monetize the author's personal sermons.

These discrepancies between fact and fiction are most easily seen in the pamphlets that claim to detail an executed criminal's final confession there at the gallows³. Due to the fact that these pamphlets were often sold during the executions themselves, the recorded "last words" were no doubt invented and printed by the author days before they were supposedly uttered. Nevertheless, these fictionalized and reductive stories proved incredibly popular, and no doubt had an enormous impact on how, when, and why future women decided to attempt to plead their bellies, altering both their own "stories" and the language and context with which the jury of matrons would read their bodies

2 See the case of Perotine Massey, executed in 1556 for her Protestant faith. Massey's story was retold by John Foxe in his *Book of Martyrs*, which claims that a near-fully developed infant burst forth from her stomach as she burned at the stake. A Catholic guard then seized the infant and cast it back into the fire to die (Foxe 1968-1969). While Massey's execution is certain, given the barbaric nature of these events, coupled with fact that Foxe's account was intended to serve as a piece of anti-Catholic propaganda, one must be skeptical when considering their historical accuracy.

3 An author's description of these last moments helps us to understand how large a role personal bias and artistic license played in the relation of even eyewitness accounts. John Quick's *Hell Open'd, or, the Infernal Sin of Murder Punished* describes the 1676 execution of two female servants, one young, pious and repentant, and the other considerably older and unwilling to offer him her confession. Quick dedicates seven pages to the rapturous prayers he made on behalf of the former, and then memorializes the latter by declaring that "she went out like the snuff of a candle, leaving a stench behind her" (Quick 79).

when it came time to put that story to the test.

Perhaps a narrative's ability to influence and mobilize public opinion of female criminals has never been so apparent as in the case of Anne Greene. On December 14th, 1650, Greene was hanged for the murder of her infant child, whose body had been discovered buried beneath some ashes beside the fireplace of the home in which she was a maid (Hughes 1792). Greene testified that the child was stillborn, claiming that she had suffered a miscarriage while carrying out her duties and, terrified for her life⁴, had decided to conceal the fetus until she could figure out how properly to dispose of it. On the day of her execution, Greene was hanged for fifteen minutes (her friends and family helping to hasten her death by tugging on her legs) before being cut down and taken to a group of physicians to be anatomized. Just before the first incision was made, one of the attending witnesses cried halt—the supposedly dead woman had begun to breathe again (A Declaration From Oxford 1).

One of Greene's attending physicians, Sir William Petty, kept a written account of this discovery and subsequent treatment of Greene, who went on to make a full recovery⁵ (BL, Add. MS 72892, fols. 2–9). Perhaps even more fascinating than Petty's account of this medical history, however, is his account of Greene's supposed crime. When visiting the British Library in March, I found, in a collection of Petty's unpublished manuscripts, what appears to be a handwritten draft of a plea

4 A 1624 statute declared that any unmarried woman whose infant died either during or shortly after childbirth was automatically assumed guilty of infanticide (Gowing, "Secret Births" 90).

5 It is believed that Anne Greene's life was saved by those who "stomped heavily" on her chest as her body lay on the ground, unconsciously performing a kind of violent cardiac massage (Breathnach and Moynihan 35-38).

for Greene's pardon. Petty declares, in spite of the fact that he probably had not seen Greene's miscarried fetus, that the partially developed body suggested that the fetus was never viable in the first place, therefore negating the charge of infanticide (BL, Add. MS 72892, fol. 7). What is particularly remarkable, however, is that Petty cites the testimony of numerous midwives as evidence for this claim (BL, Add. MS 72892, fol. 6-7), a profound gesture during a time in which male physicians were attempting to discredit and replace midwives as the true authority on pregnant female bodies (Gowing, "Common Bodies" 48-49).

As soon as word of Greene's survival reached the public at large, the alleged "facts" of the case underwent a sudden and thorough transformation. Anne's miraculous resurrection was regarded not as an accident, but as an act of God. The unmarried, fornicating servant who murdered her infant son was now assumed to be a victim of the court's incompetence, innocent as the child the public was now convinced she had miscarried. Petty's own edits to his drafted account suggest the importance in preserving this image of Greene's innocence, both criminal and corporeal. A reference to Greene's sexual history is reworded, and then eventually crossed out, along with a passage that discusses (and attempts to disprove) the possibility that she had had an abortion rather than a miscarriage (BL, Add. MS 72892, fols. 7-9). Petty may have also been toying with the possibility of publishing his narrative as a pamphlet of some kind, as he appears to have scrawled a potential title ("History of the Mayd") in the margins of his notes. This title, combined with his selective editing, suggests that Petty recognized the need to portray Greene as a kind of born-again virgin, not

only innocent of the crime of infanticide, but cleansed of her sexual sins by the grace of God.

Though Greene insisted that she had no memories of any events preceding her execution up through her subsequent recovery, pamphlets were published that claimed to contain her personal testimony about her experiences in Heaven⁶. One such pamphlet, claiming to be a "true and exact relation" of those experiences, also contained numerous poems written in her honor, describing her as a hero, a martyr, and indeed, in spite of her evident sexual history, a "virgin" once again (Watkins 11, 12, 14). Others likened her to a phoenix, or to Eurydice of Greek myth (the beautiful nymph whom Orpheus attempted to rescue from the underworld). Still another suggests that Greene's resurrection is proof that women, like cats, have multiple lives, able to "bite and scratch" even after being killed, and therefore never to be trusted (Watkins 14). Regardless, the publically endorsed narrative that portrayed Greene's survival as divine proof of her innocence won out—she was eventually pardoned of her alleged crimes, and allowed to go free.

While sensationalized (and even fictionalized) accounts of Anne Greene's experience had the power to vindicate her in the court of public opinion (and then, subsequently, the criminal court itself), the public's interpretation of a woman's story also had the potential to condemn her before a trial had even taken place. Perhaps this is all the more apparent today with the prevalence of 24-hour news channels, gossip blogs, and social media. During a time in

⁶ See W. Burdet's 1651 pamphlet *A Wonder of Wonders. Being a faithful Narrative and true relation by one Anne Greene ...* for a transformation of historical facts into a fantastical tale told for the purposes of entertaining pious readers.

which the public has more control over the narrative of criminal proceedings than ever, we can find evidence that women's bodies are still being read today in much the same way that they were in early modern England.

On October 17th, 2013, seventeen year old Tiona Rodriguez was arrested for shoplifting from a Manhattan Victoria's Secret. The security guard who apprehended her testified that he smelled a "strong odor" (Carreras) coming from her backpack, in which arresting officers soon discovered the body of a dead infant. Rodriguez, also the mother of a two year-old boy, claimed that she had had a miscarriage, and could not bring herself to dispose of the fetus. Seizing upon the story's gruesome appeal, media outlets took what little information was available to the public and spun elaborate narratives about Rodriguez's pregnancy, delivery, and alleged crime. Almost immediately after the arrest was made, a wide variety of accounts were offered either corroborating the defendant's claim of miscarriage, or declaring her guilty of infanticide. NBC New York and the New York Post insisted that the body was that of a full-term and successfully delivered baby (Dienst, Schram), while others, such as CBS News, referred to it as a fetus (Carreras). Some news outlets, such as the New York Daily News and the International Business Times, decided to maneuver around this crucial gap in information by simply alternating between the use of "fetus" and "baby" several times throughout the same article (Tracy et. al, Mintz). And as sex is an equally successful way of increasing circulation (and therefore profit) today as it was for the pamphlets of early modern England, virtually every article about the death of Rodriguez's child managed to squeeze a reference to Victoria's Secret somewhere

within the bolded headline (Carreras, Dienst, Schram, Tracy et. al, Mintz, Daly).

Without forensics, witness testimony, or medical expertise to rely on, media outlets, much like a modern-day jury of matrons, resorted to reading the body of the accused at her arraignment. An article at The Daily Beast described Rodriguez's eyes as "blank," and "showing nothing at all. She could have been awaiting the arrival of a bus, or perhaps that part of herself that must have departed" (Daly). She was said to have "remained expressionless" throughout the proceedings, with "an absence of manifest feeling that seemed to reflect a heart that is not so much cold as closed off" (Daly). Rodriguez's Facebook was pried open, her statuses devoured by commenters who debated whether or not her pregnancy was obscured by her excess weight, whether or not she displayed appropriate signs of grieving, and whether or not a status update complaining about menstrual cramps could have been referring, instead, to a miscarriage (Daly, Mintz).

Although hundreds of years have passed since women like Anne Greene were subjected to the kind of scrutiny and subsequent storytelling one might expect in a world without ultrasounds or reliable forensic analysis, Tiona Rodriguez's body has been read in much the same way in 2013 as it would have been in 1650. What, then, compels modern readers to look to a woman's body for evidence of her hidden guilt? Is it a desire to maintain control in the face of shifting female agency and bodily autonomy? Or is it, perhaps, a reflection of the troubled relationship between body and self, and an inability to reconcile our bodies' mysteries with the stories told in the hopes of better understanding them? It is my hope that, by exploring the mysteries of the belly—both past and present—in the

form of short stories, I can demonstrate the different ways in which pregnant female bodies have been read and repurposed in narratives from across the centuries.

One of these stories, included here in *Explorations*, is “A Proposed Manuscript for the Captivity and Misfortunes of Miss Mary Rowlandson.” It was inspired by the infamous captivity narrative of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682), my titular character’s mother. Specifically, it is based on the narrative’s short, conspicuous reference to the abduction of Rowlandson’s ten-year old daughter, whom she claims was eventually returned under mysterious and unexplained circumstances (Rowlandson 108-109). As I imagine the story, however, her daughter’s account, while equally as prejudiced against and baffled by her so-called “heathen” captors as her mother’s, explores the role that childhood naivety, the trauma of a violent abduction, and a strict, Puritan upbringing play in obscuring young Mary’s understanding of marriage and pregnancy, particularly in the context of pleading the belly in an (albeit unconventional) criminal proceeding.

What is the value of writing fiction in order to engage with historical truth? We know that a large portion of the processes that governed early modern female bodies, from the act of pleading the belly, to the diagnoses of pregnancy, miscarriage and infanticide, and even the literature published after the fact, was facilitated by question, “What makes a good story?” Sometimes the answer to that question is simply “the truth.” But in the case of the early modern female body, so many different stories are told about the same truth or untruth, and by many different people with many different motives, that by the time the information is read by 21st century read-

ers, there is likely to be just as much fiction as fact. What’s more, much of what we want to know about this practice is simply not on the historical record--the reader is forced to create their own version of events in the large gaps left between incomplete court documents, sporadically available trial transcripts, and alleged “true relations.” By exploring these areas of uncertainty using historical and literary sources, research and invention, story-telling can help bring the mysteries of the belly to life through the same medium that has been at its heart since the very beginning: fiction. In doing so, writers and readers alike are asked to become cognizant of the ways in which even contemporary representations of female bodies, fictional or otherwise, continue have the potential to grant and seize narrative power. Perhaps thus armed with knowledge and a pen, women will insist on telling their own stories.

A Proposed Manuscript
for
The Captivity and
Misfortunes
 OF
 Miss MARY ROWLANDS
 ON,
 Eldest Daughter of Mrs. Mary
 Rowlandson,
 or
 The true History of her Violent
 Abduction at Ten years of age:
 Months of Abuse at the hands of
 the *Heathens* followed by her
 escape and Repentance.

*For your consideration for immediate and
 widespread publication.*

The reader will no doubt recall that it has been some decades since the publication of my mother's narrative of her weeks as a captive in King Phillip's War, the conclusion of which details the escape I myself made, at ten years of age, from my Indian captors. I have often expressed my desire to publish my own tale, and I have received enough inquiries from friends, relatives, and even perfect strangers to suggest there would be an interest in such a publication, though *my* inquiries to those with the means to make this aspiration a reality have all been met with stern refusal. I have come to understand that the initial interest that is sparked at the sight of my name on the cover of the manuscript wanes somewhere within the pages themselves, yet it seems that no man is able to articulate why this is the case, for all of my letters on the subject have gone unanswered.

My mother's own narrative is highly cherished to this very day by all who possess a copy, and I must say that while she has done her experience a great justice, she has greatly *neglected* mine. It is true that I was redeemed under the circumstances that she outlined to you; I followed a squaw for three days until we reached an English town where I was collected by Mr. Newman, who did, indeed, ferry me to my grateful parents in Dorchester. However, my mother completely neglects to mention any of the circumstances leading up to my escape and redemption, save for our brief reconnection in the woods that, frankly, I have no significant memories of. It is to be expected that a mother might possess a more complete memory of a traumatic situation than her young, impressionable child, though this does not explain her refusal to include all of the situations that I relayed to both her and my father in great detail. Now that I am both an orphan and a widow, and fully in possession of

my own fortune, I am at last able to relay these situations directly to you, the obliging reader, without the exasperated moans and oaths of my beloved parents and husband to prevent me.

I was abducted through the most violent and despicable of means, and the forceful separation of myself from my mother is, perhaps, the most devastating circumstance that I can recall of my ordeal. However, it appears that the Lord was kind enough to take particular pity on me in those weeks, and while I was plagued nightly by the memory of my friends and neighbors being disemboweled before my very eyes, I was not beaten much by my captors, nor was I, in the beginning, treated particularly unkind.

I was mostly ignored by the Indians at first, until one night when an impertinent brave who had managed to learn some of the English tongue asked me why the Lord had not come for me thus far, at this point having had two weeks within which to accomplish the task. He claimed that a minister had told him that the Lord had made the Earth and the men and the plants and all His glorious creations in six days. Would not nearly two times as many days as that be enough for Him to retrieve one creation already made? I had no Bible with me, and no other Christian soul with whom to consult on the matter, but all the same, I knew his words to be false. I told him that I was not privy to the particulars of the Lord's plan, but that His powers were infinite, and that were I to be rescued, it would be by His machinations, on His terms, and not my own.

We walked for three days complete, and save for the occasional knocking of my head in the hopes of further encouraging my feet, the heathens did not subject me to much in the ways of physical abuse. It was eventually communicated to me, by a squaw who would,

on occasion, furtively drop bits of jerky and ground nuts into my apron pocket, that I was either to be sold or ransomed, depending on which arrangement would be deemed most financially advantageous to the assembly.

At length, the Indian council asked me whether my father was alive or dead, and I replied truthfully that I did not know, for I had not been told, nor had I seen his body lain beside Mr. Talboys' henhouse with the others. They then asked if my family had much in the way of wealth, and I began to tremble, for I did not know what sort of answer to give. I replied that, while my family did not want for food or shelter or linens, Matthew tells us that man cannot serve both God and money. The council then quickly bid me to be silent, apparently having deemed by this response that I would make a better servant than an object of ransom.

There was much deliberation amongst the heathens in the following days as to whom I would be made to serve, followed by a haggling as to the price. In the midst of one of these discussions, I noticed a young heathen boy, but a few years older than I, watching me most intently. He spoke to the others in a quiet but assertive voice, and though I could not understand his language, I was moved by his tender delivery. The boy's words were met with not but a commotion of hearty laughter from the others, who relayed his request to me in English, revealing that he had expressed a desire to have me for himself as a wife!

I was but ten years old, yet I knew several girls in Lancaster who were married as young as fourteen. I always considered myself to be well ahead of my peers in all the tasks set before me by my mother; needlework and mending, adding sums, salting meats, and harvesting the grains from our family's plot. It stood to reason, to my mind, at least,

that I would be equally as equipped to the task of marriage as those girls I knew who called themselves wives, if not more so.

I do not know what gave me the courage to issue the following request to my captors, being in a perilous situation such as mine. Perhaps it was the knowledge that I would likely die before seeing my home again that spurred me, for I knew that I had but to live in virtue a short while longer before these burdens were lifted from my small shoulders and I was welcomed into the Lord's embrace. Thus was the inducement that led me to announce to the company that, were I to wed an Indian, he must be made a proper Christian first. They laughed uproariously at this, but the strength of the Lord held me firm in my conviction, and I refused to relent on the matter. To the great surprise of those heathens gathered there, the boy who would be my husband was not deterred, and he stepped further towards me, bowing his head in humble acquiescence to my request.

There was a great ruckus then, as the Indians began to stand and shout in protest. The boy's father knocked him several times on the head, and a group of braves rushed to push the child back and forth, shouting and tumbling to the ground with their fists raised. He remained silent through all of this, never taking his eyes off of me, even as they began to fill with drops of blood from the blows to his forehead. I must admit that I was moved to pity to see it, for had he been a Christian child, perhaps he would have been considered a proper martyr, and a handsome one at that.

So it was that I was not wed to the quiet Indian boy, but sold, instead, as a servant to an old Indian man. He had no squaws nor children, and it was perhaps for these reasons that his purchase of me was later looked upon in such a suspicious light, but I will make this

claim in writing and say that the old man was never once unkind or lecherous toward me. He was skinny and feeble, and being unable to hunt for himself and having no wife to help gather nuts and plants, he was forced to live primarily off of the generosity of his younger neighbors. It was, in fact, their generosity that procured me for him in the first place; I was to feed and care for the man so that his neighbors would no longer have to perform those tasks themselves, selfish barbarians that they were.

I pride myself on having been an excellent servant, right until the very end of my time in the wilderness, although it was this pride in my duty that ultimately led to my master's undoing. He was exceedingly kind, and very appreciative of having someone upon whom he could rely for company and care. I was allowed to sleep on his mat, and never wanted for a smile or a comforting word. He preferred to treat me more as his daughter than as his slave, although I must confess that I had been so flattered and animated by the earlier prospect of matrimony that I instead preferred to imagine myself as the old man's wife. Our situation was such as had been explicitly described to me by the minister back home as the very picture of nuptial bliss: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its savior. Now as the Church submits to Christ, so also Wives should submit in everything to their Husbands."

Therefore I viewed my role amongst the barbarians as one prescribed by a holy injunction, and I took to my duties with a zeal I had not previously harbored for my chores back home. Soon enough, the stores of food that had been made before my arrival were much depleted, and I was commanded to

go into the woods with the heathen squaws to replenish them. As I have previously mentioned, I excelled in both the harvesting and preparation of food back in Lancaster, and so I kissed my master on the cheek and followed the women out into the trees, basket in tow, my heart light with gratitude to the Lord for allowing me an opportunity with which to prove myself worthy of such a virtuous task.

I was not in the woods but fifteen minutes when I was startled from my pious reverie by the shriek of a nearby squaw, who ferociously knocked the basket from my hands. She proceeded to shout madly in the heathen tongue, declaring that the plants I had been gathering were deadly poisonous, and that had but one leaf touched my lips, I would have died in agony. The others grabbed me by the wrists and plunged my hands into the nearest stream, scrubbing them with wet leaves as the eldest chanted what I assumed to be a plea to the Devil to preserve my life. I loudly protested, accusing them of lying so that I might be made to starve. I was allowed to carry on in this manner until one of the squaws grew weary and slapped me hard across the face, handing me the empty basket in silence. I must confess to you now, dear reader, that my master and I went hungry that night, and many nights to follow. Although our neighbors made it known how much they resented the unwelcome addition of a hungry mouth to feed, the whole point of my purchase being that they would have one less, my master only laughed at this development, and kindly assured me that he was merely grateful that I had escaped the woods unharmed.

One night, my master permitted me to sit with the Indian children down by the fire, suspecting that I missed the company of persons my own age. I declared that it was the company of decent Christians I

missed, a longing that would be by no means satisfied by time spent amongst any number of barbarous children, but he would hear none of this insolence, and kicked at my heels and shouted for me to go, so I obeyed.

It was that night that a young brave offered me a rather large strip of meat, weakening my resolve with the handsomest smile I had seen in the weeks following my abduction. Having eaten not but the small handful of nuts I had managed to thief from a sleeping squaw earlier that day, I accepted his offer. However, immediately after he placed the morsel into my open mouth, he and the other children began to laugh in a way that made me tremble. The boy revealed that the meat he had given me was a particular organ of a horse, and then gave as foul and lecherous a speech as would make any Christian weep for shame.

The monstrous child told me that if I swallowed the mouthful, I would be made with child, and that what grew in my belly would not be a babe at all but a hundred tiny foals. He said that they would all stomp and kick their way out of my womb and tear me apart with their legs. I wept and replied that this was not true. He said that it was, and that when the foals had grown large enough the Indians would ride them into battle against the white men, and that each horse would have my face so that the white men would know what I had done.

This was too much for me to bear, young girl that I was and unaccustomed to the vile fantasies of Indian boys. I had seen many babes born in Lancaster, and I had even felt the kicking of my sister's feet against our mother's swollen stomach, which frightened me immensely at the time. I first witnessed a birth at six years of age, the event having taken place, of all wonders, in our very own Church. I was but a dull creature in those days,

and I must admit that I was much relieved when the sermon, which was very boring to my mind, was silenced by the violent cries of Mrs. Bradshaw, whose babe had turned itself around inside of her and refused to turn back. Her face had gone green and slick, and she let forth such pitiable moans of agony that I shudder to remember them even now. To this day, I do not know if I genuinely saw a twisted foot burst out of her person as she writhed in the throes of death, or if this was but a monstrous vision that had been conjured by the Indian's story. Such is the torment to which that heathen's tale subjected a good, trusting child such as I, with no mother or father to set her impressions right. The reader must indulge my choosing to dwell on that gruesome event, for while it is of no direct consequence to my tale, it did make a great impression on my young mind in matters of childbirth and thus weighed heavy in my thoughts that night. I do remember that the men were most distressed, and tried to have Mrs. Bradshaw removed from the church so that she might carry out the birth in the privacy of her home. However, it was determined by Mrs. Adrian and Mrs. Barker that she should not be moved during the labor, and thus all of the men were asked to leave the Church instead, save the Minister.

He was covered in sweat and looked as ill as Mrs. Bradshaw herself, lying but a few pews over, although his eyes remained fixed upon the laboriously composed manuscript of his sermon and not the moaning woman. He asked me my age, and I told him that I was but six years old. He then asked if I had been made familiar with Eve's sorrow at having disobeyed our Lord in the Garden of Eden. I replied that I had, but perhaps he did not believe me, for he continued, quoting Genesis: "To the Woman He said: 'I will greatly multiply your

sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth Children; Your desire shall be for your Husband, and he shall rule over you.'" I then asked the minister if *men* had not also incurred a punishment for the Sin of *Adam*, but I never learned the answer because it was then that he noticed Mrs. Bradshaw's fresh blood on my apron and fainted to the ground.

It was this memory that haunted me that night by the fire, for I naively understood there to be a Biblical precedent for the monstrous tale the heathen boy had told me. My thoughts were filled with violent imagery and the shame of knowing my virtue had been tarnished by such depraved and bestial means. In fear, I had not yet swallowed the bite of flesh, yet I was also afraid to spit it away, that I might, like Onan, be slain by God for having spilled seed onto the ground. It was out of fear for my life and not my soul that I finally resolved to swallow the flesh, though I wept for shame at the thought. The longer I wept, surrounded by the hated laughter and dancing of the Indian children, the more I could feel the kicking and stamping of the foal's hooves in my belly.

I returned to my master in tears, exhausted from hunger and fits, and protested bitterly as he demanded to know what had happened. The reader can imagine my shame in confessing what I had done, for though this man was but a heathen, he was the closest thing I had to a guardian in these woods, save for the watchful eyes of our Lord. To my surprise, however, my story was met with not but heartfelt laughter from the old man, who explained that the boy was merely trying to make a fool of me. He then drew me into his arms and stroked my matted hair until I fell asleep, blushing for shame, though I tell you now that it was the finest bit of comfort I had received in some weeks.

It seemed to me that my master was the only ally I had, for I now knew that the rest of the heathens were not to be trusted with regards to any single thing. I found myself unable to sleep that night, suddenly conscious of how light and hollow my master's arms felt across my back. Even his loose frock failed to conceal his increasing gauntness, for I was quite unskilled with the heathen's particular methods of garment-making, and through the holes and tears I had allowed to go un-mended, one could easily make out the distended belly of an old and hungry man. But what was I to do to ease his hunger? How was I to feed a husband with not but tainted horse and poison?

The Lord was not long in suspending a great resolution: I reasoned that, if that wicked boy had so freely lied about the meal I had been given, it was likely that the squaws, too, had lied about the deadliness of the plants I had been gathering in the woods. I was soon determined to return to the forest, alone, and gather as much food as I could find, nurturing my husband back to health, and thus making fools of all the barbarians who had laughed at my virtue and devotion.

Dear reader, you must forgive a young girl her foolishness, for again, I had no one to guide my actions but my old master, who knew very little in the ways of domestic work. You must not blame me, then but a child, for the ghastly events that follow. O but my heart breaks to think on them! I have been told, by some, that it was God Himself who guided my hand when collecting the plants I was to feed to my dear old master that night, although I do not know what to make of this claim. I can assure you that it was only love for my master, and gratitude for his kindness, that motivated me to share my bounty that night. In spite of all that has been said, I sleep soundly,

knowing that my virtue is preserved in the Lord's eyes, for it was only my obligations as a servant, and not any inclination to evil, that prompted me to feed my master his portion of the meal before I had tasted mine.

The Lord's providence is strange and mysterious, and we are not meant to question the nature or timeliness of the events that He has chosen with which to shape our lives. That evening, I proudly placed the bowl of stewed plants in my master's hands, and I swear that the look of joy and of gratitude on his face was so satisfying that I no longer felt any pangs of hunger in spite of having not broken my fast since that night before.

But this happy scene, this paragon of domesticity, was shattered the moment he took his first sip of that broth which I had so lovingly prepared. I knelt before my master and closed my eyes in rapture, awaiting his satisfaction, only to have my ears detect the noxious rumble of a man seized in the grips of intestinal agony. I looked upon him just in time to see his lips part into a grimace from which a horrible moan escaped, following by a fountain of vomit, as his frail body toppled forward and pinned me underneath. Get off me, O help, I cried; but it was to no avail! My old master was shaking, his complexion suddenly as pale as mine. I pushed and writhed underneath him, but he would not budge, his muscles tensed, and thus I was forced to watch as his eyes strained and the vessels burst inside them, the globes themselves threatening to fly from the confines of his skull.

At length I began to scream: O how could this have happened! Have I not been a good wife? I have served you most obediently—had I not, it would be *I* who was dying in such a dreadful manner, not you! But the old man made no reply, and only sank lower

onto my person. They found him the next morning with a terrible foam in his mouth, his eyes frozen wide, and the bowl of stewed plants spilled across the mat upon which I was forced to lie, squashed underneath his corpse, all the night before. I can only assume, with a grateful heart, that it was the Lord's own hand that pushed my master forward instead of backwards as he died, for had I not been thus trapped beneath his person, I may have attempted to escape into the forest and been killed by a wild animal or, perhaps, a wayward spear.

The heathens, having examined the bowl and immediately discerning the cause of death, tied me at the wrists and bade passersby to kick and abuse me at length as the council deliberated my fate. It was decided that I was not worth ransoming, it being far simpler to have me dismembered and thrown in a hole. No one doubted that I had knowingly murdered the old man, the squaws having testified that they explicitly informed me of the poisonous properties of those very plants not a week before.

It was then, for the first time since the ordeal, that I remembered my poor mother, and was forced to acknowledge the prospect that I might truly never see her again. I wept bitterly to think of how her heart would break to hear the untruths the heathens would inevitably tell: that I had been so kindly taken in by a man whom I then conspired to murder in cold blood. Would she believe such an act to be possible from her own dear daughter? Or would she know better than to trust the spiteful word of an Indian?

Suddenly, I was overcome by a realization so horrifying that, all at once, my grief became too powerful to bear, and I cried aloud. What if the heathens had not lied at all! Were the squaws not correct about the plants I had gathered?

My master's knowledge of food having been proved to be so lacking thus far, perhaps he was equally as ignorant about the horse!

I had no sooner arrived at this horrid conclusion than I was startled by a series of pangs in my stomach that I understood now to be the stamping of foals. I fell to my knees before the council and cried: O take pity on me, heathens, please! I am with child! If you will not spare my life for my own sake, perhaps you will spare it for what grows inside me, for I know not how many lives you will take with the conclusion of mine!

The Indians fell silent at this, and stared down at my wretched form in horror. How many lives? they asked, what do you mean? O please, I said, I do not know. I have not pleaded the belly before. For all I know, there may be hundreds inside me now! There was a great commotion then, and I know not quite what happened next. I heard one squaw scream in horror as a second pulled me into her arms and wept against my cheek. A few braves turned in a rage upon the spot where they had laid the corpse of my poor master, shouting in a heathen tongue as their squaws threw clumps of dirt onto his face and spat out oaths on my behalf. The neighbors who had procured me for my master looked as white as corpses themselves, each of them fixing me with a pitying and remorseful gaze.

It was quickly decided that I was not to be executed after all, given the circumstances of my treatment at the hands of the old man. My actions, they determined, were only to save myself. I was given over to a widowed old squaw who agreed to care for me and my babes, and protect me from any further misconduct. I believe it likely that, at this point in the narrative, my obliging readers will have assumed that this is the squaw with whom I eventually

made my escape; I will relieve your suspension now, dear reader, and reveal that she was.

We had walked not but six days when she first began asking me questions about my condition. I was very eager now, and told her that I was much looking forward to the birth on account of my aching feet, knowing that we had many more miles yet to walk before we settled down for good. She asked me what I could possibly mean by such a statement; surely the weight of a babe in my arms would be no comfort to my aching feet? I replied that I did not intend to carry my babe, but to ride it, and that, should my bounty be blessed, I would gladly provide a babe for her to ride as well.

She stopped suddenly at this. Ride your babe? she asked. Yes, I said, if you think the heathens would be so kind as to fashion me an appropriate saddle. She replied that she did not understand, and I confess that at the time I thought her rather stupid. I explained the situation to her most patiently, and when I reached the matter of the horse flesh, she fell to her knees and began to laugh like a Devil.

O you stupid, stupid girl! she cried, shaking her head. Do you know nothing? Have you been taught nothing about your sex?

I took great offense at this, and explained that I knew a great deal about marriage and motherhood, that I performed numerous domestic duties back home in Lancaster, that I had been an excellent servant and wife to my master, and that not two weeks ago a young boy of her own acquaintance had asked me to be his bride. She asked just how I had been a wife to my master, in what manner did I mean, and I told her that I fed him and cleaned his dwelling and listened to his stories. She buried her face in her hands, and I confess I did not know if she then laughed or wept, for the woman would not face me for some time.

At length she whispered, You are not but a babe yourself, and she said no more to me that day.

The old squaw and I traveled one week with the Indians before they decided to establish a new, more permanent camp. She requested that I assist her with gathering acorns and huckleberries for our supper that night, in the hopes that I might finally learn how to fend for myself. I was given my own woven basket, albeit a different one from before, the previous having been destroyed for fear of contamination. We walked into the wilderness together, and I quietly gathered nuts from amongst the heaps of leaves upon the ground, careful to avoid any specimens that were soft or moss-covered. She watched me, disinterested, it seemed, in the task for which she had volunteered. I worked alone in silence. At length, the forest began to grow dark, and I protested that I could no longer see what I was doing. The woman rose from her heels, considered me for a moment longer, and asked if I had yet bled.

I thought of the heathen boy who had asked for my hand, and the way his eyes blinked as his father's fist came hurtling towards his face. I thought of Mr. Adams, the miller, his arms tossed into a burning henhouse as my captors threw a bag over my head. I thought of my Mrs. Bradshaw's blood on my apron, and the squalling of her dying babe.

No, I said, and she seemed satisfied.

The Indian woman took me by the hand that night, leading me away from the company into the darkness of the forest, and there we lay together under the stars in utter silence. I often woke to find her brown hand clasped tight around mine, her eyes wide and sorrowful.

My mother and father often wondered, most intensely, as to how the squaw knew where the nearest township was, and how we managed to avoid being followed by the

Indians from whom we had so easily escaped. I confess that I do not know. I can only reply that I spent three days following her in silence, eating not but what she gave to me to eat, resting only when she bade me to rest, and that I did, not once, encounter any other being there in those woods. It was prayer, they concluded; it was the Lord himself who led me out of those woods unharmed. At long last, she and I came into Providence, but when I turned from the glowing city to face the redeemer who had led me thus, she was gone.

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