SECRET BIRTHS AND INFANTICIDE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND*

Childbirth in early modern England took place in a female world of ritual and secrecy. The private but communal event of a lying-in, where female companionship and help stood between the new mother and the male world outside, could also, it has been argued, constitute a time of rare female power, even 'festive inversion': labouring women were to be given what they desired, and the bonds between women created an exclusively female community and culture.1 But there are other sides to the history of pregnancy and childbirth than this. For unmarried women, the state of pregnancy was one in which other women — neighbours, friends, and midwives — were not companions, but threats; one from which male partners were largely absent; and one where pregnancy was an active problem for the household and the community, around which were built strategies of secrecy, exposure and confrontation. Here, the boundaries between women’s bodies and a watchful community were constantly open to question, and the secrets of the body divided women more than they united them.

In Skelton, a Yorkshire market town, in 1664, Sissily Linscale saw her cousin Ann give birth to a child, helped by her sisters and a midwife. The child was either stillborn or killed and then buried, the women threatening Sissily never to speak of it: ‘if thou dost we are all undone’. Sissily, her suspicions aroused by Ann’s refusal of a share of her cake at noon, had pushed her way into the house, where the women inside ‘did look strangely upon

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her, and did shut the door and kept her in'. She saw the midwife give Ann something from a bottle and paper and bring forth a child with 'a little life in it' but missing a leg and some fingers; then she saw Ann wrap the child's body in a rag, and later, at sunset, bury it, while Sissily watched 'and cried over it'. After the midwife's threat that 'if she heard any word she should speak of it she would be the death of her', Sissily went back to her master's house and kept quiet for nearly a year, until disputes between her cousins and her master made her tell him the story.

So, at least, she told her master and, later, the Justice of the Peace; and having shared the story with her master, she was emboldened to confront the aunt and cousin who threatened her on their way past the house. 'There are two doors', one of them said to her, 'and if we had thee out at either of them we would pull thy throat out'. Sissily looked out of the window and answered: 'Em is this not true that I have said, did I not see thee and thy sister Pegg bury the child hard by where thou standest, I pray god I may never see such a sight again'. They did not reply. Whether or not her tale was true — there is no record of a body being found, and Ann denied it — Sissily's testimony illuminates a female world of dangerous secrets and exclusions. Living out as a servant in her home town, Sissily told the story of a female, familial drama from which, as a marginal member of the family and a single, probably young, woman, she was excluded. It was a plausible tale, echoing secrets and fears that had a real power both in women's daily lives and in their imaginations.

Infanticide is, it is generally argued, a product of exceptional mental conditions. But it was also, in this period as in others, a product of unexceptional economic and social circumstances, where unmarried women might very well see no way in which they could bear and keep a child. Examinations and informations

2 Public Record Office, London (henceforth PRO), ASSI 45 7/2/77–8, informations of Henry Sole, Skelton, Yorks., 10 July 1665, and Sissily Linscale, 8 May 1665.

3 The term 'infanticide' is, as Mark Jackson has recently argued, anachronistic and often ill-defined: Mark Jackson, New-Born Child Murder: Women, Illegitimacy and the Courts in Eighteenth-Century England (Manchester, 1996), 5–6; I use it here only for accusations of murder of new-born infants.


(cont. on p. 89)
survive for seventy cases of neonatal infanticide tried at the Northern Circuit Assizes between 1642 and 1680, from across Yorkshire, Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland. Most of the women accused of murdering their new-borns were servants, living in, usually in agricultural communities, working at a variety of tasks including spinning, looking after animals, picking crops and making dairy products. Some lived with their parents, with other women, or alone; many led fairly mobile lives during pregnancy, stopping in service for short periods and planning to move on to friends, family or some potential harbour elsewhere. All, when suspicions of pregnancy arose, found themselves in different positions. Who noticed the signs of pregnancy and who ignored them, and whether they would be confronted, depended on their age, social position and living situation.

When formal, legal investigations into the death of a new-born began, suspects and their neighbours, employers or family told stories that obscure as much as they reveal. Both the witnesses’ informations and the examinations of suspects have their own deceptions and omissions, and their own narrative agendas; both also represented stories which had probably been told already in other local contexts and which would continue to circulate. Sissily Linscale’s story suggests the peculiar significance that this process of constructing a narrative had in cases of infanticide. Stories of secret birth or suspected infanticide were part of the currency of oral culture, particularly among women. Popular literature, ballads and drama furnished stories of the nurturing and killing of older children, but rarely presented the far more common neonatal murders by servants and spinsters; women must have told stories that were based instead on local tales. The testimonies of modern cases are discussed in R. W. Malcolmson, ‘Infanticide in the Eighteenth Century’, in J. S. Cockburn (ed.), Crime in England, 1500–1800 (Princeton, 1977).

witnesses give some idea of how such troubling stories were shaped, how they ended, and how, like the stories in cheap print, they negotiated guilt, sympathy and pathos. What shapes the suspects' stories most of all is the maintenance of secrecy, central to understandings of infanticide in law as well as in popular culture. The story with which a suspect was confronted was one which she had found it impossible to tell: to herself, to her neighbours, to her employers or to her family.

A history of reproduction that focuses entirely on the legitimate and the acknowledged will erase many of the anxieties, conflicts and dramas that were part of the early modern culture of childbirth. The histories of pregnancies that were hidden or ended in suspected infanticide expose another history of childbirth, characterized by narratives of concealment, fear, confrontation and exposure. The social history of pregnancy is, I want to suggest, more ambiguous than historians have tended to acknowledge; women's experiences of secret pregnancies, labours and alleged infanticides were shaped by some profound cultural and social tensions about the reproductive body and about maternity.

I

THE PREGNANT BODY

When secret pregnancies and births were suspected, women and some men attempted to make the body of the female suspect reveal its secrets. But the signs of pregnancy, and even the signs of having given birth, could be ambiguous ones. Nothing was certain until a child was born: if some neighbours watched a woman who looked pregnant, many others ignored her or denied knowledge of her situation. Pregnant women themselves marshalled a variety of explanations for their swelling bellies and breasts, for moments of pain and sickness. Within and outside the female world of gynaecological experience and knowledge, pregnancy was very often a disputed condition whose signs could be guessed, and contradicted, watched or ignored, and which made the bodies of certain women open to various kinds of public scrutiny and inspection.

The link between secret pregnancies and infanticide had been made explicit by the statute of 1624, which made the concealment of an infant's death the essence of the crime; at least some commentators saw the failure to engage help in labour as evidence of guilty intent: Jackson, New-Born Child Murder, 32.
Neighbourly surveillance focused on watching women's stomachs and, more definitively, on inspecting their breasts. The formal test of pregnancy used by juries of matrons—squeezing the breasts for signs of milk—was also used at a much less formal level: with no official prompting women asked to see each other's breasts, or squeezed them without asking. Isabel Barton was visited at her mother’s house by first two, then four more, village women, who told her that she should let her breasts 'be seen drawn' to clear herself of the rumours that she was with child. She refused, saying 'none should see her breasts', but eventually showed them 'one of her breast heads, but very covertly, which this examinate [one of the wives] saw to be black and purpled, so that she feared the more, and desired the neighbours that were there, to draw her breasts'; Isabel then 'did hastily put up her breasts, and said that none of them should draw them, but if her mother were there she could say more'. That night Isabel left the town and returned only two months later, confessing eventually to having had a miscarriage just before the women's visit. When Mary Ryley, a thirty-two-year-old woman, from Hetton in the North Riding, was accused of infanticide for the second time in twelve years, she was just as unwilling. The midwife told her mother, 'I charge thee to look to her and to her birth, for with child she is', but Mary 'did neither confess, nor absolutely deny her being then with her child, but asked this and the rest of the wives what they intended if they meant to make her, to make herself away'. Like Isabel, Mary slipped away, but was later found, in her father's barn, though she continued to deny having borne a child.

7 Although 'the rising of the apron' was a well-established metaphor for pregnancy and the stomachs of women suspected of pregnancy were certainly watched by neighbours, clothing seems both to have disguised pregnancy to some extent and to have made stomachs more difficult of access than breasts. It also seems that, here, touching the breasts of a woman who might be pregnant was culturally more acceptable than touching her stomach; early modern women were also likely to gain less weight than modern women and the weight gain of pregnancy might have remained unnoticed for longer.

8 Since at least some people expected milk to be present in the breasts from around the fourth month of pregnancy, the test served to check for a current pregnancy as well as a recent birth or miscarriage: Audrey Eccles, Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England (London, 1982), 153.

9 PRO, ASSI 45 7/1/11, information of Katherine Storr, Hurrun Bushel, Yorks., 8 Mar. 1663/4.

10 PRO, ASSI 45 7/2/119, information of Frances Cockit, Hetton, Yorks., 13 Feb. 1664/5; for the earlier case, ASSI 45 4/3/25, examination of Mary Broughton, alias Ryley, Hetton, Yorks., 8 Oct. 1653. No indictment survives for the second trial.
It was crucial to these sorts of interventions that there was someone there to be ‘charged’ with the woman and her birth. Daughters who lived at home and, especially, servants were much likelier to be confronted and forced to reveal their bodies than widows and older single women. Servants were the most vulnerable to rumour, as well as the largest group of women accused of infanticide. Their living situations and their material and economic circumstances made them especially open to intervention and observation. Their employers were frequently exercised about their situations and questioned or confronted them, but there seems also to have been a sense in which, more than with girls living with their mothers, their sexuality was public property and a public threat. The economic and domestic situations of servants made them the most likely to produce children who they could not support and to become indigent themselves, and their potential or actual mobility gave rise to fears that they might disappear leaving a child, or have left the child’s father so far behind that he could not be traced. The case of Isabel Trooit, a servant in West Ayton, was typical. Her mistress suspected she was pregnant and questioned her. Isabel denied ‘that any man had had to do with her’ but ‘affirmed that she had not her health as formerly’, and three months later her mistress, finding evidence of a miscarriage or birth in her bed, forced Isabel to show her breasts, and she confessed that she had ‘parted with a child long before her time’, which she had thrown into the river by the house ‘while her dame was at Scarborough market’.11 The life of female servants was one in which searches of both bodies and bedchambers were taken for granted.

It was not always clear, though, whose was the authority over the suspicious bodies of women in service. Families’ and employers’ interests and responsibilities might conflict. When Isabel Nicholson’s family suspected she was pregnant, her mistress Mary Holme persuaded Isabel’s sister that she was not and allegedly stopped Isabel’s mother from examining her breasts: Isabel’s mother ‘demanded ... what was become of the whore her daughter, and desired if she might see her breasts ... but Mary Holme replied ... saying “Let’s see who dare be so bold

as view her maid’s breasts without her consent” . Along with her responsibility for a maid’s behaviour and reputation, a mistress might also claim authority over her body — an authority which might be supportive and protective.

While men also knew and watched for the signs of pregnancy, they rarely claimed the authority to interpret those signs. One account of a young woman’s pregnancy in a largely male household reveals the difference in the ways women and men watched and noticed the signs of pregnancy. Ann Wright, household servant to William Wriglesworth, was twice suspected of pregnancy and concealment of a birth, in 1679 and 1681. Thomas Suckett, a labourer working for William, told him that ‘Ann Wright was heavy and went heavily’, and he responded, ‘yes she had been trading with somebody for her belly was as big and large as his mare’. Thomas reported hearing and seeing Ann in labour, but he intervened neither then nor later; instead, he left the parlour where she was ‘sick and crying of pain’, which he took to be ‘in travail and pains of childbirth’, and looked through the window, where he saw her with a child he thought was alive. He told neighbours, but ‘neither this informant nor any other neighbour durst at all meddle to search or busy themselves about the matter by reason the said William Wriglesworth her master was a troublesome man’. Less than two years later he suspected Ann was with child again: ‘she brought this informant his dinner to the hall garth he being then mowing for William Wriglesworth and her bodice being close and hard tied this informant then saw milk come out of her breasts and come through her shift and down her bodice’. Neither of these men touched Ann’s breasts or stomach, but watched them press against her clothes. To them she looked like a mare, and the metaphor — ‘trading’ — used by her master transposes the sexual act into another kind of sphere. There was no possibility here of the kind of physical confrontations and interventions that women used. Masters might also be less enmeshed in the networks of communal authority and responsibility that seem to have shaped mistresses’ relationships with their pregnant servants: Anne Smith said that, a month after giving birth to a stillborn child which they concealed, she

12 PRO, ASSI 45 8/1/81, information of Ann Porter, Hawkesdale, Cumb., 13 May 1666.
13 PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/105, examination of Ann Wright, Rigton, Yorks., 20 Feb. 1681/2.
asked her master what to do, and he told her simply ‘it was best to flee away’, so she did.\textsuperscript{14}

Older spinsters and widows maintained firmer rights over their bodies and a greater freedom to refuse searches. Jane Brown, a York widow, refused to let the woman who shared a house with her see her breasts, saying ‘she would humour none so much’, and readily explained her big body: ‘she had been long troubled with a dropsy and could not get any cure for it, and said further that if she were with child it should trouble no body, but she was clear’. Suspicions in such cases tended to crystallize rather into informal rumours. Sara Whitfield, who gave birth alone because ‘no woman was then near her or in the house’, said that she ‘had heard there was a report she was with child but nobody did say anything to herself about it’.\textsuperscript{15} Such reports might take the length of the pregnancy to culminate in confrontations which could, for those women who managed to resist searches while they were pregnant, be turned away with ambiguous answers. In Rotherham in 1671, Gertrude Law responded to rumours around Milngate that ‘if she was with child, it would come to light’; when neighbouring women noticed she was ‘suddenly grown less in her body’ and a man challenged her, ‘thou was with child but thou art swampe [flat] now’, she replied ‘there were some that said so; but where is it now?’.\textsuperscript{16} Her answers, at least as reported, are confident retorts rather than evasions, although they might also be read as a challenge to find the lost child — a challenge which, in other cases, neighbouring women as well as authorities were ready to take up.

In Hull three years earlier the case of Susanna Vales, a widow who had lost a sucking child six years before, reveals a little more of the extent and limits of such local talk, and the ways that the subjects of rumour tried to confound it. Like the tale told by Sissily Linscale, Susanna’s story spread and lasted. After local talk culminated in official enquiries and a child’s body was found thrown into the harbour, Susanna Vales went to prison. She was still there eight months later when the teenage daughter of her next-door neighbour began — like Sissily Linscale — to talk.

\textsuperscript{14} PRO, ASSI 45 5/1/106, examination of Anne Smith, Aike, Yorks., 31 Jan. 1653/4.
\textsuperscript{15} PRO, ASSI 45 11/1/42, information of Margaret Glanes, York, 17 Apr. 1674; ASSI 45 11/2/255, examination of Sara Whitfield, Brighouse, Yorks., 13 Apr. 1675.
\textsuperscript{16} PRO, ASSI 45 10/1/59, information of Sarah Shaw, Rotherham, Yorks., 1 Aug. 1671.
Katherine Thompson, a servant aged around seventeen, one day took too much ale which ‘got into her head’ and was sent home to her mother, who lived next to Susanna Vales. Katherine’s mother threatened to have her sent to the house of correction for leaving her service, but Katherine responded, ‘if you will have me to the house of correction you must go to prison to that woman that is there’, meaning, she said, Susanna Vales. ‘She knoweth nothing of her own knowledge’, Katherine deposed later, because she was away in service when Susanna was accused, but she ‘hath heard Frances Earatt and other neighbours say that her mother Joan Thompson could not but know something concerning the child that Susanna Vales had borne’. It was a potent accusation from a daughter against her mother. ‘There is something pricks my conscience’, Katherine said to the neighbour who came in in the middle of their furious argument and reproved her for ‘so cursing her mother’. Like Sissily Linscale, Katherine was a servant on the margins of a local drama of secret birth, a young woman living mostly away from home and with potentially fraught relationships with her close kin. Both were apparently pricked by conscience into publicly voicing suspicions, rumours or dramatic stories. Such conscience was surely also an expression of their own angers and anxieties around families, absences and conflicts. There was more than one maternal relationship at issue.

The talk that brought Susanna into question started in church, in the street and at market. There, Susanna’s neighbours told each other to ‘look at Susanna Vales for she was very grown’, and exchanged telling and double-edged comments: ‘she thought that Susanna Vales was with child, if ever she . . . had had a child’; ‘she could not tell, but wished it were not so’; ‘she told it to a friend as a friend might tell her’; ‘I think she is with child, but durst not ascertain it’. Without any direct accusations, Susanna and the reputed father of the child heard of the rumours from ‘the people at the far end of the lane’ and, in different ways, refuted them. He told another woman ‘what if I did [father it], my back is broad enough’. Susanna’s denial was so much firmer that her interested neighbours ended up giving her flattering hints or expressions of neighbourly concern, instead of making direct allegations. At the time of the birth she told Sibell Walker that ‘she had taken something the night before to sweat on’ and was ‘up, but . . . not very well’; a week later she was telling Sibell ‘she had been a walking out of the gates’, and Sibell, noticing her
body was smaller, was telling her ‘she looked very handsome’. To Susanna’s mother, Sibell ‘took occasion to speak’ ‘about the sweat she took . . . and her mother said . . . that she had blamed her often for taking of things’. 17 When Grace Barrowcliffe, Mary Harrison, Frances Earatt and two midwives formally searched Susanna’s body and found that ‘her milk is sweet’, they concluded, presumably prompted by her, that the milk might have been occasioned by menstruation, and when one of them ‘put some questions’ to Susanna, she answered ‘she was always so’, although the searcher noted that ‘women do not always use to be so, but she knoweth not her constitution’. 18 How exactly women ‘always use to be’ was clearly to some degree negotiable. 19

Susanna’s insistence on interpreting the signs of her body in her own way constituted perhaps her sole defence against neighbourhood enquiry. Other women marshalled a series of explanations for the signs of pregnancy. Colic or wind was the most popular. In York Jane Browne told neighbours and the court that ‘the reason her belly was so great was that she had ill keeping and ill lodging and went wet of her feet which put up her belly’, and that ‘she wore a double blanket upon her body during the coldest parts and times of winter and that she put the same off not until about a week or ten days since’. Like some other women, she explained the stains on her bedclothes as those of menstruation — ‘the common course of nature with other women that have no children’ — and not of birth, but midwives found fresh milk in her breasts and said she appeared to be ‘a green [recently delivered] woman’. 20

The stories that women told to neighbours, family and employers were not simply ways of concealing pregnancy as long as possible. At one level, it made sense to see pregnancy as disease: this was how most current thinking conceptualized it. 21

17 Presumably abortifacients; Susanna’s mother said her daughter had admitted taking a pennyworth of powder, but would not tell her where she got it.


19 Some believed it possible for women who had never been pregnant to have milk in their breasts; in Susanna’s case it might also have followed previous miscarriages.

20 PRO, ASSI 45/11/1/42–6, informations of Margaret and Edward Glanes, 17 Apr. 1674; Mary Bouill, 18 Apr. 1674; examination of Jane Browne, 18 Apr. 1674; information of Jane Topham, 18 Apr. 1674.

For others, the specific disorders they identified may have represented the only way in which the changes in their body made sense to them: wind, colic or dropsy; never pregnancy. Reinterpretations and concealments of pregnancy, though, could also work at a much subtler level, and it is this level which we most need to understand in order to make sense of the bodily and mental worlds of concealed pregnancy. Women who kept their pregnancies secret had little or no access to the shared knowledge and accumulated experience of local mothers. Single women like Sissily Linscale did not normally witness births; it was not just the secrecy of the event, but her position as an unmarried woman that made the women 'look strangely' upon her when she intruded. Their exclusion from the world of female knowledge made it hard for single women to speak of the experience of pregnancy in the ways that married women and widows did. Anna Beardall, a Sowerby widow who had already had two illegitimate children, was able to judge that 'she thought it [the child] was dead on Friday before, she was so sore and so heavy'. She claimed that it was stillborn because Abraham Ryley had refused to let her have a bit of a beef collop a week before the birth; and that she 'was not so in the bearing of this as she was in the bearing of her former children'.

Single women had neither this kind of personal expertise, nor, it seems, access to the knowledge and lore shared among other women who had borne children. They did, however, share the particular perceptions of conception and pregnancy of this period, and these must have lent themselves to some interpretations of especial use to them: the belief that the child in the womb did not quicken until the fourth month could extend to a refusal to acknowledge pregnancy or the prospect of bearing a live child right through the pregnancy. For women who did not want to be pregnant, the first four or five months of pregnancy, sometimes more, could be interpreted in terms of missing menstrual periods which might be resumed, or a swollen body that might fall flat again, and abortifacients from herbs or steel filings, or letting blood from the foot were spoken of simply as ways of restoring

22 PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/14, examination of Anna Beardall, Sowerby, Yorks., 6 Mar. 1681/2.

menstruation. Gertrude Law told the JPs examining her that she was 'much swelled in her body by reason that for the space of eighteen weeks before that time she had not had the benefit of nature after the custom of women', but denied that she had borne a child. Isabel Barton confessed that 'about midsummer last as she was coming from Scarborough market' a man pulled her off her horse and ravished her, 'after which her body did grow big': but she was never 'with quick child', and the miscarriage she had six months later had no shape. There were many ways of explaining pregnancy, without using the phrase 'with child'. Anne Peace of Billingley, searched by midwives who found fresh milk in her breasts, cried and told them that a month before, as she was going to Barnsley market, 'she coured [crouched] down to make water And then and there did pass from her body a thing like a gristle'. It 'put her to very much pain', but what it was 'she could not tell'. However, she was to confess under examination that it was 'a man child dead and stillborn, being then about the half birth', and that she had 'never felt the said child alive or stir in her said body'. Women's perception of conception and pregnancy could be complicated, contradictory and open to reinterpretations, both conscious and sub-conscious, to suit their circumstances.

II
SECRET LABOURS
After a hidden pregnancy, the moment of illegitimate birth was a point of confirmation or revelation both for neighbours, family and employers, and for pregnant women themselves. The legal position made this even more so: infanticide was treated as murder only if the live child was fully out of the body when it died. The length of time during which pregnancy could be presumed to be uncertain, and the legal as well as social weight placed on the moment of birth, shaped women's perceptions and self-representations of the time of labour in some unexpected ways. Women recounting secret births were compelled to erase the experience of labour and to retell it in other ways.

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24 PRO, ASSI 45 7/1/10A, examination of Isabel Barton, Hutton Bushel, Yorks., 9 Mar. 1663/4.
25 PRO, ASSI 45 5/7/74–5, examination of Anne Peace, Billingley, Yorks., 7 Mar. 1659/60.
For legitimate mothers labour was a period to be planned for and managed in the semi-public female world of neighbourly support. For illegitimate mothers it was exactly the opposite: a time to hide and afterwards deny. Although preparing for birth could constitute weighty evidence in favour of the mother's innocence, only two women in the sample group claimed to have prepared clothes or linen for their infants. None of these women lay in. One or two spent a noticeable amount of time in their rooms or in bed, but most gave birth in secret and, at least in their subsequent accounts, quickly. Labour, it seems, was so identified with the rituals of legitimate childbirth that it had to be erased from the story of illegitimate birth. This was obvious in the legal context: a story of a short, painless or unexpected labour was the safest one for a woman accused of killing her child, as it could explain why she had not called for help. It was also established knowledge that poor women, and in particular the mothers of bastards, bore their children quickly and more easily than those fully prepared for a lying-in: stories of illegitimate births and the murder of new-borns created a culture in which such labours were meant to be shamefully easy. But it also seems to have been true at a neighbourhood level, in the talk exchanged between suspected women and their neighbours or households. Even when they had admitted giving birth, women whose infants had been found dead did not talk about the labour. The labour that ended a concealed pregnancy was as unspeakable as the pregnancy itself.

What might such a labour story have been? What little survives of early modern women's own accounts of childbirth contains few detailed descriptions of the actual time of labour. Some traces of an oral culture of women’s talk about labour remain.

26 Wilson, ‘Ceremony of Childbirth’.
27 The best prepared was Anna Beardall, who was also unusual in being more open about her pregnancy. She had ‘an old shirt which was her former child’s a little pair of biggins a little coife or two that were too little for her former child and a few headbands and for a lapping she intended to pull her old coat in pieces for’. PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/16, information of Anne Oates, Sowerby, Yorks., 6 Mar. 1682/3. By the eighteenth century, the preparation of clothes was a standard defence: Malcolmson, ‘Infanticide in the Eighteenth Century’.
28 Eccles, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, 86; Tess Cosslett, Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses of Motherhood (Manchester, 1994), ch. 1, discusses the prevalence of images of ‘natural women’ in childbirth literature.
29 Alice Thornton’s accounts of her labours are an exception: The Autobiography of Mrs Alice Thornton of East Newton, Co. York, ed. Charles Jackson (Surtees Soc., lxii, Durham, 1875), 141.
For single women whose pregnancy was known, labour was the time at which they were questioned for the father's name: midwives deposed that they had purposefully made use of the time of greatest pain to force out the truth from labouring women. The reported words of women in labour in this situation record a vivid and frightening common language of childbirth: prayers 'that the child and she might never part if he were not the father of it', or that 'she might never be delivered thereof' conjured up a vision of labour that could end only with death. For legitimately pregnant women, though, labour was not just about pain but about work. An early seventeenth-century London midwife, defending herself against charges of professional misconduct, complained that her client had been 'so dull and slow in her pains and so unapt or unwilling to help herself and to set forward the production of her child that her child was born very weak and feeble'. The honest, hard labour expected here is echoed in the testimony of Elizabeth Armytage in Liversedge in 1682. Examined several days after the birth, she deposed:

on Thursday last at night about midnight when she awaked of her first sleep she was so taken that she could not stir off the bed if it had been on fire under her and that she called out as loud as she could but nobody came to her and says she bore her child within half an hour after but it was dead and did neither cry breathe or move and at morn the first that came to her was young Lydia Blezard and she crept on her hands and her knees to open her a little door and desired her to go to Ellen Leach to desire her to come to her and speak with her and when she came she told her she had had a night would have killed a horse.

This labour followed an acknowledged, though illegitimate, pregnancy: Elizabeth had told two other women of her pregnancy and prepared clothes for the child, and she said she only gave birth alone because the child came early. Her relative freedom from the suspicion attendant on more carefully concealed births seems to have allowed her, both at the time of childbirth and later when she was examined, to tell a story of labour that echoed something of the hard pain other women understood.

30 See, for example, Guildhall Library, London, MS 9057/1, fo. 111', deposition of Mary Holland, 12 May 1636; Greater London Record Office, DL/C/230, fo. 93', deposition of Bennett Cradell, 22 June 1626.
31 Greater London Record Office, DL/C/194, fo. 83', personal answers of Elizabeth Besy, 10 May 1631.
32 PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/4, examination of Elizabeth Armytage, Liversedge, Yorks., 13 May 1683. One witness, though, suggested that her servants would have heard Elizabeth's calls if they had been awake.
Such stories seem to have been inaccessible for most women who had concealed their pregnancies. Even those who admitted giving birth rarely mentioned labour pains. Mary Dotchin, who was too weak to carry her child home after giving birth, nevertheless said simply that 'she was delivered of a woman child in the common field'. The day after she gave birth, Dorothy Steele said that 'yesterday night about seven of the clock she bore the infant now lying dead in the brewhouse of her master Robert Beck and that she carried the said infant to the quayside and laid her betwixt two clogs'. Mary Browne gave birth in her own bed without, she asserted, the knowledge of the child who was sharing it.33 The ultimate denial, though, was a refusal to admit that a child had been born: in effect, a literal interpretation of the illegitimate mother’s prayer ‘that the child and I might never part’. A week after she seems to have given birth in May 1666, Isabel Nicholson deposed ‘that she had borne no child as yet, but that she is with child by a young man unmarried... and being demanded where the child was, which the midwife and the ten women did say she had borne her answer was, that she never did bear any, but that she will be delivered of one, before Lammas next either alive or dead’. She told a concerned neighbour the same. She was later to admit both to the neighbour and the JP that she had borne a child, saying that, afraid to shame the father, she had sworn never to confess his name, ‘for she was sure to die and enough to suffer’.34

At the same time these women, examined by JPs or talking to their neighbours, often managed to tell some kind of story of the time and pain of labour, turning it into something else but retaining its narrative shape — as they had done for the signs of pregnancy. Mary Coates of Beverley answered the enquiries of neighbours who knew she was ‘sickly and weak’ with reassurances that she was ‘pretty lightsome’, although the rain had made her legs painful; though one of the women had heard her ‘bemoan herself sore’, Mary said that ‘she herself had had a pretty good night but that the said Frances her mother had had a woeful night’. They disbelieved her and, eventually, when they con-

33 PRO, ASSI 45 9/2/31, examination of Mary Dotchin, 15 July 1669; ASSI 8/1/114, examination of Dorothy Steele, Newcastle upon Tyne, 30 Jan. 1666/7; ASSI 9/3/17, examination of Mary Browne, Beverley, Yorks., 6 Mar. 1669/70.
34 PRO, ASSI 45 8/1/79, examination of Isabel Nicholson, Dalston, Cumb., 9 May 1666.
fronted her again, Frances fell on her knees and confessed that her daughter had given birth to a dead child.\textsuperscript{35} Susanna Vales’s tale of having the colic and vomiting was shaped exactly to fit the process of labour and birth that her neighbours believed she was hiding: the colic ‘took her and held her’ from around three in the afternoon to nine or ten at night, at which point she vomited ‘and then was better and so she fell to rest’. This, if Susanna had really been in labour, neatly recasts one familiar bodily experience to cover another.\textsuperscript{36} Still, none of these tales reflect the idea of birth as work that was expected of legitimate mothers; rather, they retell concealed labour as something else.

The actual events of single women’s labours were entirely different from the well-prepared rituals established for married women and their communities. Most described giving birth entirely alone, often leaving shared rooms or houses to give birth in secret. Jane Mewers, who had stopped at Howick on her way from service to her sister’s house, ‘thinking she had not been so near her time’, went to bed with her two bedfellows and in the same room as a man but got up without disturbing them during the night; being in ‘such a distraction she knew not what she did’ she gave birth among the coals. Her bedfellows knew nothing until the next afternoon.\textsuperscript{37} Susan Smith testified that she lay with her sister Mary the night that she bore her child and all the week after: ‘Mary made the bed always herself and did her work all that time as she used to do’ and she suspected nothing. Mary had given birth while Susan was out of the room, kept the stillborn child in the bed all night and buried it in the garden in the morning.\textsuperscript{38} Occasionally, women gave birth in the same room or the same bed as others, allegedly without their knowledge. Isabel Nicholson eventually admitted to bearing her child in the same room as her master and mistress; she got up and buried it after her master had risen, a little before daybreak.\textsuperscript{39}

Only rarely did the women who lodged with the accused record

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\item \textsuperscript{35} PRO, ASSI 45 11/2/58–9, information of Margaret Breerwood and examination of Mary Coates, Beverley, Yorks., 7 May 1675.
\item \textsuperscript{36} PRO, ASSI 45 9/1/122, examination of Susanna Vales, Kingston-upon-Hull, 1 July 1668.
\item \textsuperscript{37} PRO, ASSI 45 8/1/70, examinations of Jane Richardson and Jane Mewers, Howick, Northumb., 6 Dec. 1666.
\item \textsuperscript{38} PRO, ASSI 45 10/1/118, 120, information of Susan Smith and examination of Mary Smith, Hipperholme, Yorks., 22 Feb. 1670/1.
\item \textsuperscript{39} PRO, ASSI 45 8/1/79.
\end{itemize}
any suspicions: it was safer to have known nothing. Barbary Howland found herself suspicious of her fellow servant, but said she did not know why. Although she shared a bed with Mary Green, she ‘did not know the said Mary Green to be with child: for she did work and spin without trouble and eat her meat and victuals and complained not of pain or distempers’. After ‘pretending her head ached’ one evening, Mary gave birth while her two bedfellows were sleeping and decided to leave the house, their mistress being away. Barbary refused to let her go, ‘finding a fear and jealousy upon herself but the cause thereof she knew not’, and when their mistress returned they found that Mary had the dead child wrapped in a petticoat. Barbary’s suspicions did not have to mean a concealed birth; she might also have been thinking of theft, the other obvious explanation for a servant wishing to leave suddenly with a strange bundle. But she, and the other bedfellows who testified, might also have been collaborating, at some level, in a collaborative project of denial. If they had any suspicion that their bedfellows were pregnant, they might hope, as the pregnant women must themselves have done, that the birth would never happen.

In more public births, the role that witnesses played marked the stark difference between legitimate and illegitimate labour. For single women in labour, other women featured not as support, but as threats. Midwives were there not just to give help but to examine the truth and to withhold, if necessary, their help until the mother confessed the father’s name. Some women or their families or households were unwilling to fetch help, hoping for an uncomplicated and secret birth. Susanna Watkin may have been in this position. A neighbour heard her calling for a midwife ‘or else knock me on the head’, and her master, the child’s father, was reported to have refused to send for ‘another woman or two’ after the child was stillborn: ‘he would not for he had a mind to conceal it in this world and in the next let him and her shift it’. Even if others were there, they did not necessarily help.

40 PRO, ASSI 45 11/1/83, information of Barbary Howland, Newcastle upon Tyne, 26 Aug. 1674.
41 PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/100, information of Elizabeth Lawman, Thorne, Yorks., 7 July 1681. Although Susanna said no one was present, other reports record her master and a female neighbour as having been at the birth, and she may have been shielding them; other births might also have been less secret than they appear here.
Steele said that her mistress was at her labour, ‘but did not at all help her in her travail, and did leave her to bring forth her birth’.42

Ambivalent and equivocal figures, mistresses were as likely to threaten as to help pregnant servants. Masters, even when they were the fathers, appear to have had far less power over the bodies of their servants and the talk of the neighbourhood: it was mistresses who examined women’s breasts, confronted them, mediated between them and concerned neighbours or parents, and chose to reveal or conceal what they knew. Isabel Sowden, a Yorkshire servant, refused to admit her pregnancy to her mistress and, when she went into labour, escaped her mistress’s care, went to the back of the house, climbed up some scaffolds out of her reach and gave birth there.43 Jane Cowper, who confessed giving birth to twins in Stanley, Yorkshire, in 1682, said that her mistress, Margaret Mason, was alone with her in her labour, refusing to let anyone else near. She claimed that Margaret was responsible for the infants’ deaths, and that afterwards she forced her to sit up for the next two days and go to the door to show herself to the neighbours and stop any questions. Hers is the most detailed account of any labour:

on Sunday morning last about seven of the clock she did bear and bring forth two female infants being a bastard and begotten by one William Simson of Woodhall . . . when she lived with him as a servant and saith nobody was with her when she bore them but Margaret Mason who helped her in her labour; and although she cried out at the bearing of the first, the said Margaret would let none come at her, but said if she cried out she would stab her and when the first was born she the said Margaret took it and gripped it by the throat with her right hand and when she was bearing the second, she put her some water into her and the said Margaret laid her left hand on her the said Jane’s mouth to hinder her for crying out, and bid her put down her pain and she says she knows not how she bore her second child, but soon after it was born Margaret bid her go to the door and shew herself, but it was so cold she could not stay and the said Margaret made her sit up all day on Sunday and all day on Monday and said they should not know at the next house, and if her sister Allen came in she would stick her.

Margaret Mason’s refusal to allow her servant a more public, assisted birth — something more like the births of other illegitimate mothers — runs right through labour to birth and its after-

42 PRO, ASSI 45 8/1/110, examination of Dorothy Steele, Newcastle upon Tyne, 4 May 1666. This may, of course, also have been a way of protecting her mistress from allegations of complicity.
43 PRO, ASSI 45 9/2/112, information of Jane Wilson, Monk Frystone, Yorks., 4 May 1669.
math. At every stage, Jane's parturition is kept secret, and it is this secrecy which endangers the infants' lives.

Jane Cowper's exceptionally detailed account is also the only one to attribute the alleged murder to someone else. Her story makes of her mistress an extraordinary villainess, almost akin to those of the popular literature of murdering mothers. The child's father, she said, 'did not wish her to make away her bairn when he got it but said he would keep it' — although all women asked this question answered that the father had not encouraged them to kill the infant, very few said he had guaranteed to keep it — and she added, 'the said Margaret Mason had been in Ireland and said she had put children on spear points there'. She had wanted to make her pregnancy known the week before the birth, she said, but Margaret would not let her, saying 'that Mr Bunneyman got the maid with child and gave her mercury and oil to make her vomit, but she the said Margaret had a better medicine for her for she had steel filings in a bottle that she would give her'. To the other witnesses who eventually found the bodies of the children, Margaret appeared almost as threatening, cursing them and Jane and denying, as she did in her examination, that she knew anything about the birth. However true it was, what this story with its stress on her own passivity and innocence did for Jane was enable her to tell, as few other women did, of a birth that ended in death.  

Most women's examinations stick to a narrative model that suppresses details of the birth and death in the same way as it does those of pregnancy, thus allowing women to say that they did not expect the birth, did not look at the child, did not see if it was alive and assumed it was stillborn. Rarely did mothers accused of neonatal infanticide confess to actively harming their children. We might read this as a typical example of the kind of passive language of violence used by women. Natalie Zemon Davis's analysis of sixteenth-century Frenchwomen's pardon tales for murder has stressed the shortage of words and narrative models that women had for homicidal violence and justifiable rage.  

There were, though, models for infanticide. Seventeenth-century broadsides and dramas depicted 'unnatural mothers' and

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44 PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/32, examination of Jane Cowper, Stanley, Yorks., 9 Feb. 1681/2.

‘bloody mothers’ with abandon; but these mothers killed, with graphic violence, winsome toddlers and young children, not newborns. Sensationalized murders involved engagement, at some level, between victim and murderer; they depicted a conflict with two clear subjects, even if one was dependent upon the other. But neonatal infanticide involved a quite different understanding of individuality, subjectivity and dependence. It involved a problematic, blurred boundary between mother and dependent infant, and it was understood to be a crime not of violent activity but of passivity or neglect. The language that some defendants used reflected this. Grace Ward, a Yorkshire servant, confessed that ‘she did not apprehend herself in labour, till the child fell from her as she was standing by her bedside, and . . . she said she knew not whether it had life in it or not, but that so soon as she was delivered she laid it upon some straw and threw a coverlet over it, and did not look after it till the morning her master called her down to her work, and then the child was dead’. This is a child who is born accidentally and unacknowledged, whose death is the result simply of ‘not looking after it’.

In a few cases, the story of passive neglect was not possible. Infants’ bodies were discovered with their mouths bound, their heads covered, and sometimes with wounds on their throats or chests; one had its tongue cut. Defendants often described wrapping up or covering a new-born child; they do not say whether the wrapping was meant to warm, shroud or stifle it. Some refused to know. Frances Webster, a servant who got up late one night from the room where two children and their nurse were sleeping to give birth in the kitchen, said ‘whether the child was living or dead she knoweth not but confesseth she did put a piece of cloth in the child’s mouth and wrapped it up in a piece of woollen cloth’. Behind her insistence on not looking for the signs of life is an admission of preventing life in the commonest way. The

46 For example, N. Partridge and J. Sharp, Blood for Blood: or, Justice Executed for Innocent Blood-Shed (London, 1670, STC P630); Murther Will Out: or, A True and Faithful Relation of a Horrible Murther Committed Thirty Three Years Ago, by an Unnatural Mother, upon the Body of her Own Child about a Year Old (London, 1675, STC M3093).


49 PRO, ASSI 45 10/2/125, examination of Frances Webster, Kingston-upon-Hull, 21 Dec. 1672.
distinctions between miscarriage, stillbirth, neglect, and active violence were open to varying interpretations, both for the law and for the mother. The women who hid their pregnancies and their births to the end were pushing the early modern model of foetal development to its furthest limits: they refused to allow the foetus any 'quickening'.

Hiding and denying pregnancy and birth can be partly explained by the medical model of a 'dissociative reaction', when the mother is mentally unable to acknowledge either pregnancy or birth. The women who gave birth in privies and left the new-borns there, like waste, and the women who spoke of giving birth to a 'gristle' or unrecognizable matter even when their pregnancies had been carried to, or close to, full term, seem to have been unable to acknowledge pregnancy at any level. There were clear material reasons for this. Infants who died at their mothers’ hands or through a lack of help at the birth did so because there was no economic place for their survival: it was materially and socially impossible for many pregnant single women to imagine themselves as mothers. Such scenarios might also seem to intensify the ways that birth and pregnancy complicate established ideas of personhood and subjectivity. Childbirth involves the production of another subject; childbirth in these circumstances and with these results might mean the denial of that possibility, and the translation of the infant subject into what Kristeva has termed the ‘abject’, all that the body rejects.

In the specific context of early modern medical and popular models of the body, acknowledgement of pregnancy could be a fairly flexible business. Most of these pregnancies were concealed, but not necessarily unknown; few of these women actually said they were unaware of their pregnancy. To a degree which is now hard to imagine, suspicions of pregnancy might not be tested or firmly established. ‘Denial’ is too simplistic: it may be, rather, that these women did not have to deny pregnancy, because they

50 Hoffer and Hull, Murdering Mothers, 147; for the use of this model in a modern legal defence, see Julie Wheelwright, 'A Moment as Mother', Guardian, 13 May 1995, 12, on the Caroline Beale case.
51 For an analysis of such understandings of birth, see Schulte, Village in Court, 104–5; similar stories are discussed in Malcolmson, 'Infanticide in the Eighteenth Century', and the same pattern is documented in cases in the Old Bailey Sessions Papers (e.g. the case of Ann Traherne, 6–8 April 1687).
52 Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in The Kristeva Reader, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford, 1986); Cosslett, Women Writing Childbirth, ch. 4.
did not have to acknowledge it. Nevertheless, not knowing was not simple. Pregnant and recently delivered women’s denials of their condition involved not so much a dissociation from the child, or a refusal to allow the infants a separate life, but a battle between acknowledgement and suppression of the facts of pregnancy and birth. What happened after a secret birth and death makes that struggle clearer.

III
FINDING THE BODY

After a secret birth, some women attempted to continue the shaping and rewriting of events that had been possible in pregnancy, refusing to admit that a child had been born. Unborn children were still part of the mother; they were not, yet, separate legal subjects who could be injured, and they could still be represented as children waiting to be born, or symptoms of gout or wind. The refusal to admit that a child had already been born and had died was shaped by the complicated and negotiable association between mother and child.

Women who kept their pregnancies and births secret, whose refusal to know their condition seems to deny their foetuses any subjectivity of their own before or after birth, were none the less often unable to simply abandon or conceal the bodies of their new-born infants. The life that had been denied or lost still made a persistent, pressing demand, perhaps more of one than a newly delivered woman had expected. Disposing of the child’s body posed a cultural and emotional problem as well as a practical one.

Whether their deaths were suspicious or not, the bodies of dead infants were not in general treated like those of adults or older children. Customary burial practice treated stillborn children, because they had died without baptism, differently from adults. Midwives were sworn simply to dispose of infants’ bodies in suitable ‘secret places’, keeping them from animals and out of public lanes.54 For women who had stillbirths secretly, as well as, probably, both married and unmarried women who miscarried, burial in a garden, yard or field was the obvious option, but it could be practically difficult and psychologically problematic.

Their endeavours to deal with the bodies suggest some of the frustrations posed by established custom.

Rarely did women admit abandoning their new-borns. Even births that were referred to as miscarriages or ‘mentions’ might be ended with some ceremony and help. Sarah Peele, twenty-two weeks pregnant, ‘had a miscarriage of a mention of a child not formed as it could be discerned whether it was a male or female child. And saith that it so ill happened that nobody but herself was in the house when she had this miscarriage, so she lapped the said mention of a child in a handkerchief and carried it the day after she was delivered . . . to . . . William Tennant’. He was the father of the child and ‘took it from her lapped as aforesaid in her handkerchief and laid it in his own close’. Even a birth that she claimed had been an unformed ‘mention’ still had to be ‘lapped’ and buried with care.

It was at this point in the narratives of secret births that the child’s father, usually absent or unnamed, might reappear. Jane Kendall, like Sarah Peele, took her stillborn child to its father to bury, five hours after its birth. Not all men were ready to play the part that women wanted in acknowledging and dealing with a miscarriage or stillbirth. Anne Jackson, whose child had been born and died in her husband’s absence, waited for his return and help: she ‘kept the child by her until he came home’ two days later, ‘acquainting him with it desiring him to see it’; but, he would not look, and answered ‘that I might do what I pleased with it’. She asked him ‘what she might do with it if she might call in neighbours, and where she might bury it, and he gave her no answer at all, so that she being destitute of help after buried it in a garden’. Those fathers who were also masters had created conflicting roles and responsibilities which, almost inevitably, failed the pregnant servant. Andrew Waterlow, a Yorkshire yeoman, was ready to admit his paternity and Susannah Watkinson remained in service with him until the birth and after it. He was the central figure in her narrative of labour, and she expected help and eventually marriage from him. At her instruction, the woman with her wrapped the new-born child up and put it in

55 PRO, ASSI 45 10/2/114, examination of Sarah Peele, Northowram, Yorks., 10 Oct. 1672.
56 PRO, ASSI 45 6/1/92, examination of Margaret Fletcher and Elizabeth Crackinthorpe, Little Strickland, Westmoreland., 18 Mar. 1660/1.
57 PRO, ASSI 45 10/2/89, examination of Anne Jackson, Yokefleet, Yorks., 8 Mar. 1671/2.
her master’s bed ‘which was warm he being newly risen out of the same’. In her story, he was committed to her and to the child:

she told him that she had been delivered of a child, which was dead and that it was put into his bed to try if they could get it any life, who made no answer but wept over her . . . after she was known to be with child her master was willing to marry her and she verily believes they had been married, but that there happened several great floods which so much troubled and distracted her master in taking care for his corn and cattle that he could not attend it.58

Most women, though, faced the problem of what to do after the birth alone. Mary Falkiner’s attempt to bury her child came as the culmination of a personal narrative in which her endeavours to manage pregnancy and parturition had been frustrated at every point:

She being great with child did go to several houses in Darrington aforesaid and desired harbour but was denied, and on Friday after in the evening of that day did fall into travail in Mary Webster’s lathe . . . and was shortly delivered of a man child the same evening no person being there with her present . . . And on the Saturday following this examinant saith that she left the said child in her dame’s lathe and went into her dame’s house where she remained all that day and in the evening thereof intended to take a hack and the child (which this examinant saith was still born) and to have carried the same to the outside of the east part of the churchyard of Darrington aforesaid and intended to have digged a hole where she this examinant saith she should have buried her said child. But she this examinant failing in the performance of her intentions she this examinant brought back her said child to the place where it was born where she this examinant left the same until Wednesday the next following And then laid her said child in the bush where it was found.59

The endeavour to bury the child just outside the churchyard suggests some of the cultural expectations surrounding the treatment of stillbirths: clearly, many women, and not just legitimately pregnant ones, expected more than the simple disposal of the body that was prescribed in instructions to midwives. But burial could also be problematic. The behaviour of other women suggests that more than practical factors could cause them to fail in their intention to bury dead infants.

Many mothers, instead of burying their child’s body, kept it by them, even when they were up and working again. Jane Lockwood confessed that she bore a stillborn child alone and that

58 PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/96, 97, 100, examinations of Elizabeth Lawman and Andrew Waterlow, Thorne, Yorks., 3, 7 July 1682. Waterlow’s land was on the reclaimed peat moss of Hatfield Chase.  
59 PRO, ASSI 45 7/1/73–4, examination of Mary Falkiner, Darrington, Yorks., 1 Oct. 1664.
she left it on her bed, intending to bury it, but that her father's dogs pulled it off: 'she was much to blame', she admitted, 'she did not acquaint her mother and neighbours therewith', and she put it back in the bed intending to bury it. Servants put their infants in their chests or boxes, one of the few personal places they had in shared rooms with open doors. Jane Hardy, a widow, confessed that she had given birth to twins, both dead, and 'kept them by her, about a week's space' before she laid them in the earth of her floor. For these women, the aftermath of secret births meant an agonizing and irreconcilable tension between denying or confessing their maternity.

The burial or disposal of a dead child's body usually took place secretly; the search that might follow was very often a collective drama. In a way that the actual birth could never be, it was a public event, uniting neighbours in a fraught and frightening enterprise. Secret pregnancies, when they were discovered, ended in a drama that was the precise opposite of, and the substitute for, the public, acknowledged births of legitimate mothers. In cases like these, midwives and women worked not to help to separate mother and child through labour, but to reunite them after the child's death.

The project of reuniting mother and child, officially and eventually the law's responsibility, was also a neighbourhood enterprise. In Pontefract in 1649, Richard Townend, aged nine, and Raphe Colborne, aged seventeen, went to tell someone about the dead child that Richard had been frightened by finding in a bush. They found Martha Popple, aged forty-four, who deposed later that the boys had come to her and 'asked her how many children she had To whom she answered she had none, but wished she had one whereupon he replied he could help her to one, for he had fo[und a] child dead'. This extraordinary exchange, with a tone that could be either brutal adolescent humour or simple puzzled anxiety, sounds almost like a set question-and-answer. It probably was not, but it does suggest that even quite young boys in a village community may have had established and familiar responses to the discovery of a disowned child: first, they sought

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60 PRO, ASSI 45 9/3/45, examination of Jane Lockwood, Cumberworth, Yorks., 6 Feb. 1670/1.
61 PRO, ASSI 45 7/1/102, examination of Jane Hardy, Layerthorpe, Yorks., 13 Feb. 1663/4.
62 PRO, ASSI 45 3/2/184, information of Martha Popple, Pontefract, Yorks., 14 Jan. 1649/50; it is not clear which boy is speaking here.
to find a mother for it. What this boy wants is also confused. He needs to find a mother who wants this dead child — 'I can help you to one', he says to the woman past childbearing age who wishes she had had a child — and also to solve the crime caused by a mother who did not want it.

In similar ways, in many of these stories patterned, formulaic, but weighted, verbal confrontations provide the climax to the search. Grace Child reported her encounter with Jane Lockwood:

she is certain that the said Jane was very lately with child both by her seeing her and by handling her and saith that on Friday last she seeing her smaller than she was the day before said these words to her (viz.) Jane, thou was with child yesterday but art not today what hast thou done with it?63

Jane 'denied it with cursing' and threats, and the search proceeded to find a child in the chaff in her bed. Jane Cowper, who blamed the death of her child so clearly on her mistress, responded in the same way when a neighbour told her that she had heard she had had a child: 'then Jane began to curse and swear and said they were all lying whores and thieves that said so'. The midwife declared that she had not dared to come in until other women were there, fearing for her life, but once there, she took centre stage in the search: 'Look about you dear women for there hath a child been lately born here'.64 When Mary Butler's child was found in her bed straw, Elizabeth Thornton took it 'and laid it by its mother on a table and said Mary this is your child'.65

Prosaic but dramatic, the verbal confrontation was the only way of conveying the shock of the search.

Beneath these stark exchanges runs a current of emotional anticipation: sometimes, of a reaction from the searchers (one swoons; another gives a cry); more significantly, of the reaction of the mother. The searchers, in their stories, both confronted and comforted the suspected mother, looking for evidence of feeling that could be used for or against her. Their approach reveals the ambivalence and the anxieties that drove those — sometimes the same — women who searched for signs of pregnancy. Like the authors of the popular literature of infanticide,

64 PRO, ASSI 45 13/2/28, information of Anne Walker, Wakefield, Yorks., 9 Feb. 1682/3.
but in quite different circumstances, they were concerned with the question of guilt and the portrayal of pathos. Some witnesses spoke of an unnatural stoicism: when neighbours found Mary Appleby’s dead child in a water-hole, its mouth tied and its head covered, Mary ‘never concerned herself but acknowledged it to be her child’. Other witnesses found in the words of the guilty mothers an emotionally satisfying accompaniment to the search. As retold by the searchers, the mother’s words dwell on the child, not as dead body or abandoned waste matter, but as lost infant. They echo grief, trauma and the power of the mother–child bond. The narratives of loss and reunion that the searchers told were one way of coming to terms with the events, of finding a way to talk about infanticide. Their language may record both the conventional, often formulaic, terms in which mothers expressed their distress, and the words with which searchers forced a confrontation and tried to make sense of infanticide through the mother’s mourning. Ann Porter told of the discovery of the infanticide of Isabel Nicholson in 1666. Challenged by Ann and her mistress, Isabel had denied bearing a child, saying she ‘was with child and had ten weeks to go’. Confronted by the ‘marks and tokens’ Ann had found in her bed, ‘at last the maid did confess it, and said that she would bring forth the child, provided she might be cared for, which this informant [Ann] did promise should be performed’. The search that follows was described in detail:

Isabel Nicholson went out of the house and this informer and Mabel Munckhouse accompanied her down the field to a little bog and there she sought it, Mabel Munckhouse putting down her finger in the bog cried out that she felt a frog but Isabel replied that it was her bonny babby and she took it by the arm washed [it] lapped it in a cloth, carried it to her mistress’s house, and laid it on the table. And being desired by them to declare who was the father, she replied that she had sworn never to confess it, for she was sure to die and enough to suffer.

This is not a narrative of criminal impassivity, but of traumatic maternity. It allows Isabel to reclaim the maternity she has denied through recognition and nurture. It is not a three-day-old corpse that the women recover from the bog, but ‘her bonny babby’; the washing and lapping enables a further recuperation of the infant as baby, not corpse, or even frog. The story rewrites

66 PRO, ASSI 45 11/2/3, information of Henry Jackson, Newcastle upon Tyne, 3 Sept. 1675.
67 PRO, ASSI 45 8/1/81, information of Ann Porter, Hawkesdale, Cumb., 13 May 1666.
infanticide as a tale with an ending that is meant, at some level, to resolve: mother and child are reunited.

The sensational literature of the seventeenth literature presented mothers who committed infanticide as murdering monsters, 'unnatural mothers', 'nature's cruel step-dames'.68 Lacking the virtuous maternal instinct, they murder their infants in bloody fashion and with gruesome detail; there is no doubt of their guilt. But those who told of real infanticides refused the most dramatic model of guilt and criminality, as indeed did the courts. Either because they were predisposed to be lenient towards women in this particular crime with its problems of evidence or because they were unhappy with the structure of the 1624 statute which inferred guilt from the concealment of a child's death, by the late seventeenth century judges were increasingly unlikely to hang women for the murder of their new-borns.69 The focus of witnesses and neighbours, however, was not on questions of evidence and guilt, but on the bond between mother and child, which was manifestly problematic in any case where infanticide was suspected. Witnesses and neighbours attempted, in both linguistic and practical ways, to reunite child with mother; at the same time, they were often directly concerned to erase any image of the mother as murderess. They presented her instead as confused and anxious, heartbroken and manipulated by her fear of naming the father.

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In a culture where the recognition of pregnancy was, to some degree, negotiable, the desire or readiness to be pregnant could be what made the difference between publicly recognized pregnancies and secret ones, between a pregnancy supported by female reproductive rituals or characterized by fear, concealment and confrontation. Yet these two mental and social experiences may not have been so far apart. The bodies of single women were open to public investigation and challenge in a way that married women did not expect; but were their mental worlds always so

68 Typical titles include A Pitilesse Mother: That Most Unnaturally at One Time, Murthered Two of her Owne Children at Acton (London, 1616, STC 24757), and Natures Cruell Step-Dames: or, Matchlesse Monsters of the Female Sex (London, 1637, STC 12012).

69 Walker, 'Gender, Crime and Social Order', 141.
absolutely different? Fear, unreadiness to know, and a troubled understanding of the relationship between mother and infant might have been part of many legitimate mothers' experience of pregnancy as well. It is in this light that the drama of infanticide makes most sense. The discovery of the murder of a new-born child was a collective trauma which communities, and particularly women in communities, had to work to deal with: this involved telling stories, giving warnings, and imagining the emotions of maternal commitment and remorse. In these ways, the world of secret pregnancy might illuminate the less readily acknowledged stories of all mothers.

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