

Birthing and Mining in John Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed"

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How to cite this paper: Frayne, A. (2017). Birthing and Mining in John Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed". *Advances in Literary Study*, 5, 57-83.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2017.54006>

Received: March 6, 2017

Accepted: October 8, 2017

Published: October 11, 2017

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Abstract

This paper uncovers an aspect of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" that has largely been ignored by critics of the poem, namely, the poem's interest in the interrelationship between power, geological exploration, and childbirth. Over the past twenty years, social historians and historians of medicine have explored early modern accounts of childbirth, making it possible for scholars to recover the historical context framing Donne's depictions of childbirth. Placing "To His Mistress" within this historical context forces us to rethink a number of critical assumptions about the poem: in particular that the poem concerns sex but not procreation. In this paper, I explore the implications that medical beliefs about reproduction and the medical politics of childbirth had for Donne as he set about trying to dramatize male desire and uncover the hidden interior of the female body. My historical analysis reveals how the poem fits within the early modern conversation about women's reproductive power and artificial birth. By illuminating interwoven references to childbirth with references to mining, I situate Donne's poem within the larger early modern conversation about women's reproductive power and artificial birth. This repositioning has important implications for Donne's sexual politics and the medical context informing his work.

Keywords

Medicine in Literature, John Donne, Caesarean Section, History of Obstetrics, Mining Metaphors, To His Mistress Going to Bed, Early Modern Childbirth

1. Introduction

Most critics of John Donne's famous elegy "To His Mistress Going to Bed"

(1669)¹ have concentrated on the poem's portrayal of women. Some critics have examined the explicit colonization of the mistress's body.² Others have investigated how Donne's poem opens the mistress's body to anatomical exploration.³ Few critics, however, have extended their analyses to suggest that anything more than a "discovery" is taking place in the poem, be it a geological, anatomical, or sexual discovery.⁴ Most scholarship rests upon the assumption that the speaker's aim is sex. For instance, Tom MacFaul quotes the poem as an example of "Donne's belief in sex as an end in itself" (MacFaul, 2010). MacFaul even goes so far as to reject the possibility of sex being procreative in the poem, insisting "procreation is brought up in order to be dismissed" (MacFaul, 2010). By concentrating on sex and ignoring procreation, scholars overlook what I consider to be the poem's interest in generating and harvesting minerals and humans. My view, contrary to what MacFaul has argued, is that the poem begins and ends with references to procreation because procreation is, in fact, the speaker's aim. To put it another way, references to procreation reveal that the speaker aims to extend his reproductive role by participating more fully in the birthing process. Yes, the speaker hopes to have sex with his mistress, but I will demonstrate that interwoven references to childbirth and mining in the poem disclose the speaker's underlying desire to participate in the delivery of his own child. This interpretation challenges the work of critics who disregard the speaker's desire to extend his reproductive role.⁵ By acknowledging this desire, I re-evaluate the interrelationship between power and childbirth. Additionally, my findings place Donne's poem within the larger early modern conversation about

¹Although an "obviously degenerate text" was printed in 1654 and another version of the poem published in 1669, manuscript evidence suggests that the poem may have been "written in the 1590s when Donne was studying at the Inns of Court or working for Sir Thomas Egerton" (Bell, 2010). Robin Robbins, the editor of the Longman annotated edition of Donne's poems, even suggests that the poem may have been inspired "by a public performance of *Romeo and Juliet*" (Robbins, 2010). Publication of the poem was delayed because the licenser of the 1633 *Poems* refused to print "To His Mistress" (Pebworth, 2006). Although the poem was not published until 1669, editors and critics generally agree that the poem circulated before 1669 in manuscripts. In this paper I rely mainly upon the text of "To His Mistress" found in the Westmoreland manuscript.

²In an ecofeminist reflection on the links between environmental and sexual exploitation, for instance, Bill Phillips observes that "Donne's poem makes the purpose of the colonies quite clear: they are to be exploited" (Phillips, 2004). Similarly, Achsah Guibbory notes that Donne's poem expresses "a desire to possess and thus master the colonized women" (Guibbory, 1990). Likewise, R.V. Young and M. Thomas Hester highlight the poem's colonial politics, arguing that the poem critiques England's colonial efforts by presenting the New World as a ravaged woman and the explorer's motives as lusts for power and wealth (Young, 1987; Hester, 1987).

³For example, Jonathan Sawday argues that Donne's poem evokes the image of Andreas Vesalius opening the dissected female body with his hand on the title-page of the *Fabrica* (Sawday, 1995). Likewise, Ilona Bell argues that "the woman's naked body [is] a genuine discovery" in Donne's poem because "anatomists were only just beginning to chart the woman's body when Donne was writing the poem" (Bell, 2010).

⁴As Raymond-Jean Frontain succinctly puts it, in the poem "sexual intercourse is the ultimate means by which one person can fully know and be known by another" (Frontain, 2011).

⁵Marian Dodsworth, for instance, dismisses William Frost's suggestion that Donne evokes a "daring transsexual metaphor attributing female birth pangs to a male speaker" (Frost, 1976) by saying that Donne's speaker is simply "showing himself capable of empathy with a woman's point of view" (Dodsworth, 2008).

women's reproductive power and artificial birth.

The theme of childbirth is introduced at the start of Donne's poem, when the speaker cries "until I labour, I in labour lie" (Donne, 2010).⁶ Donne returns to this theme at the close of the poem when the speaker begs his mistress to "show" herself to him "as liberally as to a midwife" (Donne, 2010). In these lines, the speaker transgresses the boundaries of gender and imagines himself playing both the mother and the midwife. He labours like a mother but uses his "hands" to explore his mistress's body like a midwife (Donne, 2010). Interestingly, when the speaker describes himself exploring his mistress's body, he uses the language of geology instead of the language of anatomy. The speaker pictures his mistress as a "mine of precious stones" and envisions himself uncovering "gems" (Donne, 2010). He uses a geological metaphor to describe himself entering into the "new-found-land" of his mistress's body (Donne, 2010). Recent studies in the history of alchemy and geology shed new light on the speaker's conflation of mining and childbirth, which previous scholarship on "To His Mistress" has not addressed.⁷ As I will outline, these studies offer insights into the relationship between alchemy, mining, medicine, and artificial generation and add weight to the argument that "To His Mistress" is concerned with artificial birth.⁸

Applying current research in the history of alchemy and geology to Donne's poem, I will argue that there is an image of the speaker performing a caesarean section on his mistress's pregnant body underlying the poem's more obvious sexual subtext. In the late sixteenth century, male surgeons began to enter the birthing room and perform caesarean sections on living patients. The operation was controversial, in part, because it deviated from the natural birthing process. Often, in early modern texts, caesarean birth serves as an example of artificial birth and is figured in relation to mining. By digging into the earth, geologists were thought to work in much the same way as surgeons.⁹ Just as the geologist

⁶The word "labour" had a variety of meanings in the early modern period, including "to suffer the pains of childbirth," "to work the land," and "to work a mine" (OED, 2013).

⁷Tara Nummedal establishes a close relationship between mining, medicine, and alchemy (Nummedal, 2007). William Newman relates alchemy to recent scientific advances in cloning and in-vitro fertilization (Newman, 2004). Newman reveals how "the followers of Paracelsus transferred the apex of human ingenuity from the fabrication of synthetic gold to the making of an artificial man" (Newman, 2004). Similarly, Ku-Ming Chang connects alchemy to current research in genomics and molecular biology and asserts that "theorists and practitioners of alchemy often investigated problems in mining and metallurgy, but many were equally interested in pharmacy and medicine" (Chang, 2011).

⁸The OED defines "artificial" as "a substitute for... something which is made or occurs naturally" and something that is "constructed by human skill" (OED, 2013). The caesarean section was performed as a substitute for a natural birth and demanded extraordinary surgical skills. Additionally, early modern medical practitioners figured the operation in opposition to natural birth. For example, seventeenth-century obstetrician François Mauriceau writes that a surgeon performs "the most dangerous of all surgical operations" when "the birth is contrary to nature" (qtd. in McTavish, 2005). Similarly, seventeenth-century midwife Louise Bourgeois associates the surgeon with "artificial intervention" (qtd. in McTavish, 2005). In using "artificial," I not only echo medical practitioners but also place the caesarean section within the early modern debate about nature versus art. William Newman explains that in the sixteenth century this debate extended to include the Paracelsian idea that "alchemists could create an artificial human being, a homunculus, within a flask" (Newman, 2004).

⁹Several other scholars, including Jonathan Sawday and Elizabeth Harvey, have explored the connections between surgeons and geologists more fully, commenting on the similarities between the exploration of America and the human body and the inclination to apply eponyms to both geological and anatomical landmarks (Sawday, 1995; Harvey, 2002).

cuts apart the body of the earth to extract minerals, the surgeon performs a caesarean section to extract a child. Moreover, like the geologist who reduces Mother Earth to a mine, the surgeon reduces the human mother to an incubator. The caesarean section allows the surgeon to participate in a surgical birth, diminishing the role played by the mother. By imagining himself mining his mistress's body, the speaker in "To His Mistress" imagines a new birthing process in which the man labours to deliver the child. In this paper, I will examine the extension of the speaker's reproductive role. Specifically, I will consider how Donne describes this extension using geological and anatomical language. Collapsing the distinction between minerals and humans, mining illustrates how early modern scientists manipulated the maternal body. Within the context of the poem, references to childbirth are combined with references to mining to create a metaphor for the male struggle to control reproduction. Donne's use of the metaphor in "To His Mistress" suggests, within the context of the poem, that a man might be able to use artificial methods of birthing to extend his reproductive role.

Following my argument that the birthing-mining metaphor opens the possibility of the speaker extending his reproductive role, I will complicate the point by illustrating how the poem works to reveal the inadequacies that motivate this reproductive fantasy. The speaker envies his mistress's ability to give birth, so he imagines himself participating in a geological birthing process.¹⁰ His fantasy enables him to fulfill his desire to participate more fully in the reproductive process but ultimately stems from his fear of being excluded by and yet dependent on women.¹¹ His fear manifests itself in his attempts to control his mistress and replace the midwife. Janet Adelman, writing about the function of caesarean birth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, states that "the fantasy of caesarean self-birth is the answer to the mother's power over her feeding infant: if vulnerability comes of having a mother, the solution is to be self-born, not of woman born" (Adelman, 1992). Like *Macbeth*, Donne's poem stages a fantasy of male birth. However, Donne's poem also acknowledges the irony of such a fantasy: in trying to dominate his mistress, the speaker concedes that she is powerful; in trying to extend his reproductive role, the speaker admits that it is limited; and in trying to diminish the importance of the mother, the speaker imagines himself giving birth. These paradoxes relate to the irony of fatherhood in the early modern period—although society emphasized the importance of paternity, without the aid of genetic fingerprinting, it was an inherently unstable concept.¹² Fatherhood

¹⁰Here, I apply Mervyn Nicholson's suggestion that male envy "spins out fantasies of its own making that fulfill its wishes and fears" to Donne's poem (Nicholson, 1999).

¹¹Before the seventeenth century, women gave birth within a female space: they were surrounded by female friends and treated by midwives. Men, for the most part, were excluded. Although the caesarean section provided men with the opportunity to enter the birthing room and assist with difficult deliveries, they were still largely dependent on the mother, who had to give consent before the operation could be performed, and the midwife, who had to send for the surgeon in the event of obstructed labour (Wilson, 1995).

¹²MacFaul explains that fatherhood involved "a strange mixture of freedom and obligation, of uncertainty and fixity" (MacFaul, 2010). Katherine Park clarifies that "the precarious nature of fatherhood centered on the fact that men could never know for certain if their children were, in fact, their own" (Park, 2006). "The realities of conception, gestation, and childbirth, all of which fore grounded the mother's contribution to generation" undermined the importance of the father's contribution (Park, 2006).

was destabilized by the uterus, “the dark, inaccessible place where the child’s tie with its father was created, its sex determined, and its body shaped” (Park, 2006). As I will illuminate further, Donne’s speaker, who tries metaphorically to establish masculine authority over the uterus, cuts to the core of paternal anxieties—he reaffirms the importance of the uterus and, in so doing, re-establishes maternal power. Perhaps this is why, at the end of the poem, it is the speaker, rather than his mistress, who stands “naked first” (Donne, 2010).

The homological thinking that underlies Donne’s rhetoric of childbirth compares human life to mineral life. This particular comparison of human and mineral generation is not unique to Donne but rather has its origins in works on alchemy and geology, which describe minerals in human terms. Donne’s understanding of mining is likely drawn from these texts as well as from other literary texts that align mineral births with human births. Although William Newman and Lawrence Principe have identified links between alchemy and artificial generation and Bill Phillips and Carolyn Merchant have pointed out links between mining and rape, scholars have yet to comment on the connections between mining and caesarean sections. One of my challenges in what follows, then, is to establish how early moderns connected mining to caesarean sections and to account for the significance that this connection has for the way that Donne’s poem represents male efforts to control childbirth and gender relations more generally. What emerges from such an analysis is the recognition that the birthing-mining metaphor functions in this poem as a reflection of ambivalent social attitudes towards advances in obstetrics. The poem registers the historical moment when male surgeons began to practise midwifery and responds to social concerns about surgical births. To this extent, the caesarean section in “To His Mistress” does not solve the problem of paternal anxiety but rather explores the possibilities of artificial birth. My analysis of Donne’s poem will interest other scholars writing about Donne and the history of medicine. Beyond this audience, however, my analysis will speak to those who care about the larger issue of the medicalization of childbirth.¹³

2. Birthing, Mining and Metaphor

Other early modern poets employ the birthing-mining metaphor, but Donne’s use of the metaphor is distinct on several accounts. Donne presents mining as a type of artificial birth that depends upon the labour of the man rather than the woman. Other poets, however, use mining as a metaphor for man’s attempt to hasten the natural birthing process. For example, Margaret Cavendish “Earths Complaint” laments the brutal mining of the earth’s body (Cavendish, 1653); Aphra Behn in “The Golden Age” imagines an time when the Earth is allowed “[yield] of her own accord her plenteous birth, /Without the aids of men” (Behn,

¹³The medicalization of childbirth is still a current issue. In a recent article in the *British Journal of Medicine* Richard Johanson, a professor of obstetrics, Mary Newburn, the head of policy research, and Alison MacFarlane, a professor of perinatal health, report increasing rates of unnecessary obstetric interventions in normal births across the developed world (Johanson, Newburn, & Alison, 2002).

2000); and Andrew Marvell in “To His Coy Mistress” connects the womb-tomb dichotomy to the *carpe diem* motif (Marvell, 2003a). These examples center on the scientific manipulation of the timing and rate of birth. In contrast, the caesarean section receives more mythical treatment in Marvell’s “The Unfortunate Lover.” In this poem, the lover’s mother is shipwrecked at sea and “split against the stone, /In a Caesarean section” (Marvell, 2003b). This caesarean section is not described as a scientific procedure but rather as the mythical birth of a hero. The Roman emperor Gaius Julius Caesar and the god of medicine Asclepius were both born by caesarean section.¹⁴ Caesarean births were regarded as “highly auspicious” because they were thought to produce children “free of the weakness implied by being birthed by and therefore dependent on a woman” (Park, 2006). Donne’s use of the birthing-mining metaphor in “To His Mistress” differs from these examples in that the poem does not center on the hastening of the natural birthing process or the mythical roots of the caesarean section but rather focuses on gender dynamics in the birthing room.¹⁵ It registers the particular historical moment in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when male surgeons and new science first began to dominate the birthing room (Sheridan, 2010). When the speaker in Donne’s poem figures himself as a miner and surgeon, he imagines a birthing process that privileges the efforts of the man over the woman. Thus, the speaker figuratively usurps both the mother and the midwife.

At this stage, I would like to point out that my argument that Donne’s poem focuses on medical politics assumes that Donne was interested in medicine. Fortunately, my assumption has grounds, as other scholars of Donne, like Don Cameron Allen (1943), John Carey, Gary Kuchar, Jonathan Sawday, and Richard Sugg have written about Donne’s medical knowledge.¹⁶ Donne likely became fa-

¹⁴*The Imperial Book* gives an account of Caesar’s birth (Park, 2006).

¹⁵Donne’s poem may have been written in the late sixteenth century, when the caesarean section was still considered “a feasible operation on the living women” (Eccles, 1982). By the mid-to-late-seventeenth century, however, practitioners and patients alike had started to lose faith in the operation—probably because, in practice, very few mothers survived. Adrian Wilson explains that in the sixteenth century it was unlikely that a mother would survive the caesarean section because the operation was carried out “without knowledge of aseptic precautions” (Wilson, 1995). Along the same lines, Louis Schwartz reports that during the seventeenth century—especially from the 1630s to late 1660s—maternal mortality rates increased rapidly because practitioners had no concept of medical hygiene (Schwartz, 2009). He writes that in London, these rates were “the highest ... experienced in the period” (Schwartz, 2009). These rates coupled with alarming reports of mothers dying during caesarean births overshadowed much of the excitement that had initially surrounded the medicalization of obstetrics in the sixteenth century. Indeed, Wilson asserts that midwives and mothers in the seventeenth century delayed calling for the surgeon because he was associated with fear and death (Wilson, 1995). This historical context explains, in part, why Donne’s poem differs from the other poems mentioned, which were written in the seventeenth century. In contrast to Donne’s poem, these poems do not present caesarean birth as a practical alternative to natural birth but rather figure caesarean birth as a brutal procedure, which prevents the mother from giving birth naturally.

¹⁶Consider Carey’s argument that “allusions in [Donne’s] works show that he was widely read, for a layman, in medical literature and tried to keep himself abreast of current research” (Carey, 1981). Furthermore, take into account Kuchar’s observation that “few texts exemplify the changes that early modern discourses of anatomy had on the conceptions of the body more dramatically than John Donne’s *Devotions*” (Kuchar, 2001).

miliar with medicine during childhood, since his stepfather, John Syminges, was a physician and the president of the Royal College of Physicians (Sugg, 2005).¹⁷ In addition, Donne's literary works reveal a fascination with anatomy and disease. For example, in "The Comparison" Donne refers to surgery when the speaker states that "in searching wounds the surgeon is/As we when we embrace or touch or kiss" (Donne, 2010). Similarly, Donne traces the circulatory system in "The Second Anniversary: Of the Progress of the Soul" (1612) when the speaker asks "know'st thou how blood which to the heart doth flow/Doth from one ventricle to th'othergoe?" (Donne, 2010). In short, given Donne's knowledge of medicine, disease, and the body, it is reasonable to conclude that he would also have been aware of the politics of medicine.

3. Medical and Historical Context

Having just established Donne's interest in medical practice, I want now to discuss the political changes being made to the medical system in the early modern period. In the early sixteenth century, medicine emerged as a profession and physicians, who were trained in universities, became members of the Royal College of Physicians and acquired status in the community (Brodsky, 2008).¹⁸ The College was established, in part, to distinguish properly educated practitioners from uneducated practitioners, like midwives and surgeons (Ostovich & Sauer, 2004). However, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, midwives and surgeons fought to understand medical theory in order to challenge the notion that they were "uneducated" practitioners.¹⁹ Bridgette Sheridan observes that, in Paris, "the struggle between surgeons and physicians for status in the medical hierarchy played an important role in men's entrance into the birthing room" (Sheridan, 2010). Midwives and surgeons began to compete for patients, especially pregnant patients who required care during pregnancy and childbirth (Sheridan, 2010). Gender dynamics ensured that women were eventually excluded from the medical hierarchy: they were not instructed in new medical practices (Sheridan, 2010; Phillips, 2007).²⁰ Midwives were disparaged by male practitioners for their lack of knowledge and labelled as "cunning women" who

¹⁷When Donne turned eleven, his family moved into a house adjoining St. Bartholomew's Hospital (Carey, 1981). Sugg notes that "the founding papers for the Lumleian were in fact signed in the family home in 1582" (Sugg, 2007). Carey concludes that, given where Donne grew up, he "would have had the chance to imbibe medical chat from an early age" and "the routines of medication and surgery [would have impinged] still more on [his] consciousness" (Carey, 1981).

¹⁸In 1518, Thomas Linacre established the College of Physicians in London (Brodsky, 2008; Ostovich & Sauer, 2004).

¹⁹Before the seventeenth century, surgeons and midwives had focused primarily on practise rather than on medical theory (Sheridan, 2010).

²⁰They were "excluded from the Schools of Anatomy," which forced them to be more reliant on male practitioners for assistance with obstructed births (Phillips, 2007). Additionally, they were forbidden from practicing surgery. For instance, in 1540, a Guild of Surgeons was founded in London, which specified in its statutes that "no carpenter, smith, weaver, or woman [should] practice surgery" (qtd. in Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 1990). The early modern hierarchy of medical knowledge also allowed male practitioners to devalue midwives' experiential knowledge of childbirth, arguing that they were ignorant and unfit to practice obstetrics (Phillips, 2007).

tried “to excel men” (Guillemeau, 1612). They were also associated with sexual licence: “Mother Midnight” was a term used interchangeably in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for a midwife or a bawd (Phillips, 2007).²¹ Eventually, male practitioners displaced midwives. As Lianne McTavish reveals, this shift happened all across Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but occurred “most quickly and completely in England” (McTavish, 2005).²² Tensions over control of the birthing process are strikingly evident in Donne’s poem, suggesting that Donne was aware of the gender politics surrounding the medicalization of childbirth. Donne’s speaker struggles with female control over childbirth and attempts to reassert male dominance by excavating his mistress’s body.

In the early modern period, the caesarean section was a topic of some controversy in the debate over which procedures midwives should be allowed to perform. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski reveals that midwives actually performed caesarean sections in the twelfth century,²³ but once the operation was performed post-mortem it interested surgeons and medical writers as a form of dissection (Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 1990). Then, in the fifteenth century, surgeons began to describe themselves performing the operation on living women (Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 1990). Along these lines, sixteenth-century physician François Rousset insists that the caesarean section can be performed “without risk to the life of either mother or child” (Rousset, 2013).²⁴ In 1586, translator Caspar Bauhin added an appendix to Rousset’s treatise, which included a description of the caesarean section performed in 1500 in Switzerland (Worth-Stylianou, 2013; Todman, 2007). This account is the first recorded case of a mother and baby surviving a caesarean section (Todman, 2007). Jacob Nufer, a pig gelder, allegedly performed the operation on his wife, Elizabeth, after her prolonged and ineffectual labour (Todman, 2007; Reiss, 2003). Elizabeth went on to give birth to five other children by vaginal deliveries (Todman, 2007).²⁵ Sixteenth-century physician Jacques Duval also maintains that the caesarean section can be successfully performed on living women (Duval, 1612).²⁶ Duval claims to have witnessed surgeons operating on livingwomen

²¹Midwives were often accused of providing women with contraceptives and abortifacients (Phillips, 2007).

²²Lianne McTavish adds that in England “childbirth became a part of medicine between 1720 and 1770” (McTavish, 2005).

²³This occurred “after the clergy, who provided medical care in the early Middle Ages, were forbidden in the twelfth century by the church to perform procedures that involved shedding blood” (Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 1990).

²⁴A Latin translation of Rousset’s treatise, *New Treatise on Hysterotomotoky or Childbirth by Caesarean*, was published in 1586 in *Gynaeciorumlibri*, a compendium of works on obstetrics and gynaecology (Worth-Stylianou, 2013). An English translation of the third section of Rousset’s text was published in 1723 with William Cheselden’s *A Treatise on the High Operation of the Stone* (Worth-Stylianou, 2013).

²⁵Herbert Reiss questions the authenticity of this account because “even if [the] woman had escaped death from haemorrhage or infection ... it is inconceivable that she could have had so many subsequent vaginal deliveries without uterine rupture” (Reiss, 2003).

²⁶Duval’s text, *On Hermaphrodites, Deliveries of Women and the Treatment which is Required After Childbirth* (1612), is thought to have circulated fairly widely as copies of the text exist in public libraries across Europe (Worth-Stylianou, 2013).

(Worth-Stylianou, 2013). However, it is important to note that not all of Rousset's and Duval's colleagues shared their enthusiasm for the caesarean section.

In contrast to Rousset and Duval, seventeenth-century midwife Jane Sharp expresses doubts about the caesarean section. According to Sharp, although male “physicians and [surgeons] say that [the caesarean section] may be safely done without killing the mother,” it should never be performed “whilst the Mother is alive” (Sharp, 1671). Along the same lines as Sharp, sixteenth-century surgeon Jacques Guillemeau writes that despite “[beliefs] that such a cesarean section can, and should, be practiced while the woman is still alive,” he “cannot advise” it because “of the five women on whom [he witnessed] this operation [being] performed, none survived” (Guillemeau, 1609).²⁷ In the same way, Bishop Godfrey Goodman warns against the caesarean section:

You shall see sometimes the bellies [of mothers] opened, the flesh rent, the tunicles [*sic*] cut in sunder, to finde out a new passage for the poore infant, who must come into this world through the bowels of his dead mother, and upon his first approach, may be justly accused, and arraigned for a murderer. (Goodman, 1616)

Goodman, like Sharp and Guillemeau, expresses doubts about the possibility of a mother surviving the caesarean section. Indeed, given the alarming mortality rates and the gruesome descriptions of the operation, it is no wonder that the caesarean section was usually performed in the early modern period post-mortem, so that a surgeon could extract a living fetus from the body of a woman who had died in childbirth (Park, 2006). The church strongly supported this practice called fetal excision, as it allowed the fetus to be baptized (Park, 2008). Male practitioners were taught surgical techniques and the new science of anatomy, which enabled them to perform fetal excisions and caesarean sections (Sheridan, 2010; Phillips, 2007). As demand for these procedures increased, midwives experienced difficulties maintaining their clientele (Sheridan, 2010; Phillips, 2007). Thus, the caesarean section played a pivotal role in ensuring that midwives were marginalized from medicine.

4. Literary Links between Medicine and Geology

The comparison of the caesarean section to mining hinges on the fact that both practices dissect a maternal body in order to extract something valuable. Mining involves the location of a mineral deposit, the “excavation of open pits” in the ground, and the extraction of the ore body (OED, 2013). In order to access a mineral deposit, a miner must first remove the overburden or the soil and rock that sit above the deposit. This exposes the ore body and allows for extraction and processing. Once the ore body has been processed it becomes valuable. Mining becomes a form of dissection when it is imagined in human terms. Early

²⁷*On the Safe Delivery of Women* (1609) was first published in French but an English translation was published in London in 1612, entitled *Childbirth or the Happy Deliverie of Women* (Worth-Stylianou, 2013).

modern people envisioned the earth as a nurturing mother. As the sixteenth-century alchemist Basil Valentine articulates, the earth “is itself fed by the stars and is thereby rendered capable of imparting nutriment to all things that grow and of nursing them as a mother does her child while it is yet in the womb” (qtd. in Merchant, 1980). Thus, mining the earth is like dissecting a mother. The miner, much like a surgeon, cuts apart the body of Mother Earth in order to extract her children before they can be naturally born. Early modern people believed that metals grew from seeds in the womb of the earth (Merchant, 1980). These seeds, maturing under the earth’s crust, were eventually born to the earth’s surface (Merchant 1980). Metals extracted through mining were therefore like human children, wherein mining was like the caesarean section.

John Taylor’s poem “The Travels of Twelve Pence” describes minerals in human terms and connects mining to the caesarean section. In Taylor’s poem the speaker imagines a twelve pence “relating how he first was born and bred” (Taylor, 1630). The twelve pence recounts:

There from my Heathen *Dam*, or *mother Earth*
 With Paines and travaile, I at first had birth.
 A hundred strong men-midwives, digg’d their way
 Into her bowels, to find where I lay
 With Engines, Spades, Crowes, Mattocks, & such matters,
 They ripp’d & tore her harmlessewombe to tatters,
 And but they did within the mid-way catch me,
 They would have dig’d to Hell it selfe to fetch me. (Taylor, 1630)

The twelve pence describes his extraction in terms of a human birth: he endows the earth with a “wombe” and “bowels,” and he imagines “strong men-midwives” extracting him (Taylor, 1630). The twelve pence specifies that the men “digg’d their way” into the earth to extract him and that they “tore her harmless wombe” in the process (Taylor, 1630). This description implies that the twelve pence was not born naturally but rather by caesarean section. In the early modern period, male practitioners usually performed the caesarean section. “Men- midwives” Goodman explains, use “the strength of their limbes” and “the hardness of the hearts” to perform the operation (Goodman, 1616). The brutality of the operation and the lack of empathy demonstrated by surgeons who performed it posed questions about the ethics of caesarean sections and mining.

As the mining industry expanded in England and across the New World, the ethics of mining came into question. For some, the metaphor of the earth as a mother posed an ethical constraint. Margaret Cavendish, for example, in “Earth’s Complaint” meditates on the cruelty of mining:

O *Nature*, *Nature*, hearken to my *Cry*,
 Each *Minute* wounded am, but cannot dye.
 My *Children* which *I* from my *Womb* did beare,
 Do dig my *Sides*, and all my *Bowels* tear:
 Do plow deep *Furroughs* in my very *Face*,
 From *Torment*, *I* have neither time, nor place.

No other *Element* is so abus'd,
Or by *Man-kind* so cruelly is us'd. (Cavendish, 1653)

Similarly, in the widely popular *Natural History*, Pliny emphasizes “the indignation felt by our sacred parent” when we “penetrate her entrails, and seek for treasures” (qtd. in Merchant, 1980). In the *Fairie Queen*, Edmund Spenser writes that it is a “sacrilege to dig” in “the quiet wombe” of the earth (qtd. in Merchant, 1980). These authors believed that mining was an unethical violation of a living organism. Behn envisions this violation as sexual, and she laments a past time when men “made no rude rapes upon the virgin Earth” (Behn, 2000).²⁸ Early modern scientists, Merchant notes, believed that “nature’s womb harboured secrets that through technology could be wrestled from her grasp” (Merchant, 1980). This belief spurred the exploitation of the colonies and the “looting” of the New World’s mineral wealth (Phillips, 2004). In a sense, geologists were thought to be capable of dominating both the earth and the female body.

Geologists, and others interested in learning about the earth and its minerals, often looked to alchemical texts for information.²⁹ However, they were faced with “a bewildering variety of text” because some texts “explained the generation of metals and minerals in the earth,” while others outlined “the basic components of all metals, mercury and sulfur” (Nummedal, 2007). In addition, alchemical texts occasionally used metaphors that “[drew] on vegetable and human generation and growth” to describe chemical processes (Roberts, 1994). Take, as an illustration, Michael Maiher’s alchemical treatise *Symbola aureaemensae*, which uses a metaphor of human generation to express the formation of the Philosopher’s Stone:

The stone, just like a man, is conceived from a mixture of two seeds, masculine and feminine, is transformed into an embryo through impregnation, is born into the light of day, is nourished with milk, grows, [and] reaches maturity. (qtd. in Roberts, 1994)

In contrast to Maiher, who uses human generation as a metaphor for chemical processes, sixteenth-century physician and alchemist Paracelsus uses chemical processes as “the fundamental model for explaining natural processes in the physical universe as well as within the human body” (Principe, 2013).³⁰ “Paracelsian chemistry,” Newman elaborates, “advocated a considerable expansion in the domain of alchemy” and “a similar widening took place in Paracelsus’s view of

²⁸Phillips explains that the imagined rape of the earth was a reflection of man’s struggle to assert ownership over the land and the female body (Phillips, 2004). “The woman’s body,” Phillips asserts, “[became] a commodity” like the New World, which needed to be “explored, measured and divided up” (Phillips, 2004).

²⁹Warren Dym observes that mining officials frequently turned to alchemical theory when trying to understand the origins of metals (Dym, 2008). Likewise, Nummedal states that the authors of alchemical texts often “aimed in part to educate potential investors in the methods and processes of . . . mines and metallurgy” (Nummedal, 2007).

³⁰Principe explains that Paracelsus generated a “chymical worldview” that connected “the formation of minerals underground, the growth of plants, the generation of life forms, as well as the bodily functions of digestion, nutrition, respiration, and excretion” (Principe, 2013).

the power of alchemy to replicate natural products, leading him and his followers to the position that human creative power was practically unlimited” (Newman, 2004).³¹ *De naturarum*, a work supposedly written by Paracelsus in 1537, recounts “the generation of homunculi,” which are artificial humans (Newman, 2004), insisting that “there was not a little doubt and question among the old philosophers whether it even be possible to nature and art that a man can be born outside the female body and [without] a natural mother” (qtd. in Newman, 2004). Feminist critics have made much of the alchemical birth of the homunculus, which takes place in an alembic vessel rather than the womb of the earth.

According to Sally Allen and Joanna Hubs, the alembic vessel allowed male alchemists to seize “the embryo from the womb of the earth” and imagine a birth in a man-made vessel (qtd. in Long, 2010). In their reading of Maier’s *Atalanta*, Allen and Hubs claim to observe “an obsession with reversing, or perhaps even arresting, the feminine hegemony over the process of biological creation” (qtd. in Long, 2010). Maier’s image of male Wind carrying a child in his belly, Allen and Hubs assert, attests to this obsession (Long, 2010). What Allen and Hubs imply is that the facet of alchemy focused on the creation of the homunculus aimed to diminish the woman’s role in reproduction.³² However, this is not to say that alchemy was entirely motivated by male anxieties about women’s reproductive power but rather that these anxieties figured in some alchemical texts. It is important to realize that although the followers of Paracelsus “are responsible for transforming the homunculus from a topic of some rarity to one” that is eventually “taken up mainly by literary authors,” the topic was rejected by most alchemical authors in the seventeenth century (Newman, 2004). What is crucial to this paper, however, is whether or not Donne takes up the topic of the homunculus and registers anxieties about women’s reproductive power in his depictions of alchemy.

References to alchemy in two of Donne’s poems—“Love’s Alchemy” (1633) and “The Comparison” (1633)—suggest that Donne was familiar with the topic of the homunculus and interested in the links between alchemy and human reproduction. Editors and critics of Donne frequently note that he mentions alchemy in his writings. For example, Parisa Shams and Alireza Anushiravani, in a recent study of mystical alchemy in Donne’s poetry, write that “when Donne [seeks] to depict and symbolize the process of purification, he [calls] on alchemy” (Shams & Anushiravani, 2014). References to alchemy in “Love’s Alchemy” and “The Comparison” connect it to pregnancy and mining and are particularly relevant to my discussion of the birthing-mining metaphor in “To His Mistress.” The speaker in “Love’s Alchemy” begins by stating “some [men] have deeper digged Love’s mine than [he]” (Donne, 2010). Here, the speaker draws an implicit parallel between alchemy and mining by connecting both sub-

³¹Newman goes on to state, “the homunculus, as artificial human, was the crowning piece of man’s creative power” (Newman, 2004).

³²Newman identifies similar motivations “in a pseudonymous work ascribed to Thomas Aquinas, called *De essentisessentarium*,” which cites the creation of the homunculus as “evidence against the theory that there is a female seed contributing to human generation” (Newman, 2004).

jects to love. Then, at lines 7 and 8, the speaker imagines a “chymic” who “glorifies his pregnant pot” (Donne, 2010). In these lines, the speaker connects alchemy to human generation and alludes to the creation of the homunculus. In “The Comparison,” the speaker describes the creation of gold out of “the earth’s worthless dirt” using “the chymic’s masculine equal fire” and “the limbeck’s warm womb” (Donne, 2010). Notably, here, the speaker uses the language of human reproduction to describe an alchemical process. In the early modern period, medical authorities upheld Galen’s theory that the man’s body was dry and hot, while the woman’s body and womb were moist and cold (Maus, 2005). Importantly, these qualities were thought to make men and women fertile; sixteenth-century physician Juan de Dois Huarte Navarro writes that woman “was by God created cold and moist, which temperature, is necessary to make a woman fruitful and apt for childbirth” (qtd. in Maus, 2005). Thus, in figuring the alchemist’s fire as “masculine” and the alembic vessel as a “warm womb,” the speaker alludes to medical theories about gender difference and fertility (Donne, 2010). Moreover, the speaker suggests that the alembic vessel might serve as a kind of male womb.

The imaginary alchemists in “Love’s Alchemy” and “The Comparison” seem to possess their own wombs, in which they experiment with minerals. Within these poems alembic vessels serve as surrogate wombs and allow alchemists to experiment independent of Mother Earth. Mining, on the other hand, does not afford geologists such independence. Geologists could not replace Mother Earth because they were utterly dependent on her ability to generate metals. The only way for a geologist to escape from such dependence was for him to replace the metaphor of “Mother Earth.” Merchant observes, “the metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother [began] to gradually vanish as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and rationalize the world view” (Merchant, 1980). The Scientific Revolution undermined the importance of the female earth by replacing the “organically oriented mentality” with a “mechanically oriented mentality” (Merchant, 1980). This mechanical mentality inspired a new, male-centered metaphor: “the earth as a machine” (Merchant, 1980). Thus, although the geologist could not actually escape from the earth, this mechanical mentality allowed him to imagine himself escaping from the maternal figure. The geological obsession with escaping from the earthly mother mirrors the anatomical obsession with subverting the human mother. This anatomical obsession is not only evident in medical practices like the caesarean section but also in dissection practices. Anatomists were fascinated by the female reproductive organs. These organs had “an emblematic status as exemplary objects of dissection” because they represented “the body’s hidden interior” (Park, 2006). “The task of the scientist,” Sawday asserts, “was to voyage within the body in order to force it to reveal its secrets” (Sawday, 1995). The scientist used his new “mechanically oriented mentality” to discover and exploit the secrets of the female body (Merchant, 1980). In so doing, the scientist transformed the female body into “a machinelike body,” which could be harnessed and controlled (Merchant, 1980).

Donne brings different threads from geological, alchemical, and anatomical discourses together in his birthing-mining metaphor. Donne describes surgical birth through a mining metaphor because the connection between the earth and the mother is already made through the metaphor of Mother Earth. Moreover, to describe a surgical birth in terms of mining presents the opportunity to subvert the metaphor of Mother Earth, diminish the importance of the human mother, and reinvent the birthing process so that it privileges the efforts of the man over the woman. Mining represents a different method of birthing and conveys the possibility that the mother's role in birthing might be reduced. By deploying a set of innovative, geological associations, Donne's mining metaphor allows readers to see the potential for an artificial, male-dominated birthing process.

5. The Birthing-Mining Metaphor in "To His Mistress"

"To His Mistress" was written in the 1590s when childbirth was shifting from a domain of female control to a division of male medical practice. Taking this historical context into account, tensions over control of childbirth become apparent in Donne's representation of the speaker's relationship with his mistress. For the speaker there are tensions inherent in submission to the authority of women in what was otherwise a patriarchal culture. The speaker's fantasy of control over childbirth stems from his desire to dominate women and reassert masculine authority in the birthing room. Through a series of comparisons, the speaker systematically constructs his fantasy: he compares male labour in sex and surgery to female labour in childbirth, men's hands to women's vaginas, medical examinations to sexual encounters, surgeons to fathers, mines to wombs, children to gems, paternal bonds to maternal bonds, and gynaecological books to women's bodies. However, the female rituals of childbirth and the physics of gestation and birth spill over into the speaker's fantasy, making the links between childbirth and female power impossible to ignore. Thus, despite the best efforts of the speaker, women in the poem do not become submissive and unnecessary but rather remain powerful and essential. Donne uses dramatic irony at the end of the poem to undermine the speaker's attempts to subvert the mother and the midwife and reveal the insecurities motivating the speaker's fantasy of artificial birth.

Ovid's *Amores* 1.5—an early elegy that Donne reworks in "To His Mistress"—describes Corinna, a courtesan or adulterous woman, being undressed and caressed by her lover (Hadfield, 2006). Corinna enters her lover's room "draped in a loose tunic," which her lover tears off during a brief struggle (Ovid, 2011). Following this struggle, Corinna and her lover engage in sex: they "[weary themselves] and [lie] exhausted together" (Ovid, 2011).³³ Donne leaves out some

³³Andrew Hadfield discusses the similarities and differences between Ovid's text and Donne's poem in more detail, insisting that Donne's poem is "replete with Ovidian sexual energy and tension" and explaining how Donne's poem "[makes] use of the tried and tested comparison between the arts of love and the arts of war, implicit in Ovid's erotic writing" (Hadfield, 2006). Likewise, Jonathan Post explores similarities between "the Ovidian erotic poem" and Donne's poem, arguing that Donne uses Ovid's "potentially pornographic matter" but makes it more "aggressively [sexual]" and "politically edgy" (Booseqtd. in Post, 2006).

details of Ovid's text from his poem—the speaker does not, for instance, have sex with his mistress at the end of the poem—but he also makes some additions, the most notable of which is the conceptual metaphor mining is caesarean childbirth. From the start of the poem, the speaker talks about himself in reproductive terms; at line 2, the speaker figures himself as a mother in “labour” (Donne, 2010). When the speaker compares himself to “a midwife” at the end of the poem, he again makes reference to the concept of childbirth (Donne, 2010). However, in the middle of the poem, the speaker describes his mistress in geological terms: he compares her to a “new-found-land” and to a “mine of precious stones” (Donne, 2010). By interweaving references to childbirth with references to mining, Donne creates the overarching conceptual metaphor mining is childbirth or, more specifically, mining is surgical childbirth. This conceptual metaphor complicates the gender dynamics at work in Donne's poem, as it brings to mind early modern debates about reproduction and the medical politics of childbirth. In allowing the reader to comprehend the speaker in relation to a mother and a midwife, the birthing-mining metaphor brings into focus the speaker's desire to extend his reproductive role. The speaker conceptualizes his relationship with his mistress in terms of a struggle for reproductive power, alluding to the battle between midwives and surgeons for control over the pregnant female body. Moreover, when the speaker compares his mistress to a “mine” (Donne, 2010), he uses mining to conceptualize *how* he might extend his reproductive role. As mining was partially understood and talked about in terms of a caesarean section in the early modern period, mining provides the speaker with a metaphorical way to participate in the birthing process. Ultimately, the birthing-mining metaphor suggests that what is at stake in Donne's poem is reproductive power: the speaker envies the mother's ability to give birth and the midwife's ability to participate in the birthing process. His childbirth fantasy opens the possibility of men replacing women in the birthing room and gaining control over the reproductive process.

Donne calls attention to human reproduction at the start of his poem. The speaker, in the second line, contrasts the male-female roles during sex with a pun on the word “labour” (Donne, 2010). He begs his mistress to let him “labour” or work sexually, evoking the age-old metaphor of “coitus as ploughing” (Greene, 1989). This metaphor reinforces the traditional male-female roles in reproduction by defining the woman as the passive land that is ploughed by the active man. Aristotle's biological theory held that it was the active male principle that created an embryo, while the passive female principle provided nutriment (Merchant, 1980). However, the speaker's pun also evokes the biblical sense of the word “labour.” Labour, in Genesis 3.19, is a penalty for sin. Because Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, God declares that man must labour in the ground (by “the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread”) and woman must labour in childbirth (“in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children”) (*The Holy Bible*, 1932). The speaker, who echoes God when he says: “Until I labour, I in labour

lie” (Donne, 2010), underlines the gender divide set forth in Genesis. However, the speaker also transcends this divide. “In labour lie” he states, imagining himself to be “[bringing] forth children” (*The Holy Bible*, 1932). Here, the speaker figuratively takes on a transsexual role, picturing himself to be labouring both in sex and birth. Additionally, he draws attention to the uncertain nature of fatherhood. Uncertainty, the speaker implies, springs from the fact that he cannot be sure that his labour during sex is connected to his mistress’s labour during childbirth. If he were able to beget *and* birth his child, then he would be able to be certain of this connection. “Until I labour” the speaker asserts, “I in labour lie,” subtly suggesting that until he is able to beget and birth his own children, he will have to suffer the pains of uncertainty (Donne, 2010). Unfortunately, the speaker’s anatomy prevents him from giving birth to his own children naturally.

While it is physically impossible for the speaker to give birth, the caesarean section provides him with a way to “labour” in childbirth. The surgeon who performs the caesarean section “labours” in surgery in order to extract a child from the body of the mother.³⁴ The mother’s role in reproduction is reduced because she does not give birth to her child vaginally. Thus, although the speaker cannot give birth to a child naturally because he lacks a vagina, with his “roving hands” he can perform a surgical birth (Donne, 2010).³⁵ The surgeon, who uses his hands to deliver a child, is akin to the midwife. However, whereas the midwife inserts her hands “up into the womb” in order to determine the presentation of the child or “draw forth” the child (Sharp, 1671), the surgeon uses his hands to make an incision into the mother’s womb and “fetch” the child through the mother’s abdomen (Mauriceau qtd. in Eccles, 1982).³⁶ The difference here lies in the way that the surgeon renders the mother’s vagina unnecessary. Indeed, insofar as the surgeon extracts the child through the mother’s abdomen, he replaces the vagina with a man-made opening. The caesarean section provides the speaker with a metaphor for birthing that deemphasizes the importance of the vagina. The surgeon who performs the caesarean section, in a sense, overcomes the physical impossibility of a man giving birth.

The poem not only figures the speaker in relation to a surgeon but also to a father. Given that references to reproduction structure the reader’s understanding of the function of sex in the poem, the speaker, who tries to seduce his mis-

³⁴Surgeons were often described as performing “manual labour” (McTavish, 2005).

³⁵In the early modern period, men’s hands were already associated with childbirth because writing was often compared to birthing. For instance, Sir Philip Sidney uses childbirth as a metaphor for poetic creativity in the first sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella*, when the speaker, who is attempting to find “fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,” exclaims: “Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes, / Biting my trewand pen, beating myself for spite, / ‘Fool,’ says my Muse to me, ‘look in thy heart and write’” (Sidney, 2006). Here, Sidney draws a comparison between a writer and labouring mother. In addition to Sidney, many other poets compare writing to birthing. For an overview of this poetic tradition see Maus, 2005 and Sacks, 1980. For a discussion of how Donne fits into this tradition see H.L. Meakin, 1998.

³⁶The surgeon’s hands might also be thought of as replacing the midwife’s hands in that the surgeon takes over when the actions of the midwife have been unsuccessful. Obstetrician Grantley Dick-Read articulates this idea, stating that the surgeon should intervene “when hands are not sufficient” (qtd. in Eccles, 1982).

tress into bed, might be thought of as a prospective father. The simultaneity of literal seduction and figurative birthing scenes alludes to the potential connection between the surgeon and the father. “As liberally as to a midwife show/Thyself,” says the speaker (Donne, 2010), conflating a seductive striptease with a medical examination. The speaker uses the adverb “liberally” to describe how he wishes his mistress to behave (Donne, 2010). “Liberally” means “freely” or “licentious” and may imply that the speaker wants his mistress to behave “lewdly” (OED, 2013). The potential connection between the surgeon and the father was a cause of great concern in the early modern period. Male practitioners or “men-midwives” that specialized in gynaecology and obstetrics were often accused of being “sexually rapacious” and “promoting fertility” with their “own seed” (King, 2007).³⁷ The tale of Agnodice, retold by Guillemeau and Catherine de Roches, touches on the potential connection between the surgeon and the father (Read, 2010). Agnodice, an Athenian girl disguised as a man so that she can practise medicine, is berated as “a seducer and corruptor of women” because she examines female patients (Read, 2010). Donne’s speaker, who intends to examine *and* seduce his mistress, calls attention to the potentially erotic nature of the medical examination. In addition, he gestures towards the infidelity of his mistress. Although the poem connects the speaker to a surgeon and a father, it does not figure him as a husband.

At this point, some readers may want to challenge my interpretation of the poem by pointing out that a verbal variant of line 46 may, in fact, imply that the speaker and his mistress are married. In about one-third of the early manuscript versions of “To His Mistress” line 46 reads: “There is no penance, much less innocence” (Pebworth, 2006). This version of the line, Ted-Larry Pebworth explains, “supports the idea that [the speaker’s mistress] is either a bawd or a married woman being urged to commit adultery” (Pebworth, 2006). This version essentially suggests that sex between the speaker and his mistress would be neither penitent nor innocent (Pebworth, 2006). However, in two-thirds of the manuscript versions line 46 reads: “There is no penance due to innocence” (qtd. in Pebworth, 2006). This version of the line “supports the idea that the speaker is coaxing his new bride into the nuptial bed” (Pebworth, 2006). If the speaker and his mistress are married, then their sex is innocent and therefore requires no penance (Pebworth, 2006). As the text of “To His Mistress” that was printed in 1669 reads “due to” rather than “much less” at line 46, most modern editors of Donne’s poem print this variant (Pebworth, 2006). However, Pebworth notes that some editors “[accept] the ‘much less’ version of the line as Donne’s original wording and have seen the ‘due to’ version as an attempt—either by choice or through necessity—to make the poem more acceptable by suggesting that the couple are married” (Pebworth, 2006). Jonathan Post explains why Donne may

³⁷Phillips reports that men who practiced gynaecology ran the risk of being accused of adultery because people suspected that they were actually seducing and pleasuring women during medical examinations (Phillips, 2007). Recommended treatments for “uterine melancholy and distemper” included sexual intercourse and masturbation (Eccles, 1982). However, when prescribed or administered by male practitioners, these treatments were sometimes condemned as fornication.

have felt the need to alter his poem, writing that the “aggressive sexualized form of distinctly English literature” that emerged from experimentations with Ovidian elegies in the sixteenth century was “perceived by the authorities as politically disruptive” and, as a consequence, many works were banned and burned (Post, 2006). In addition, in the Westmoreland Manuscript line 46 reads “much less” (Pebworth, 2006). The Westmoreland Manuscript is considered to be one of the most authoritative texts of Donne’s work. Palaeographer P.J. Croft suggests that Donne’s friend Rowland Woodward probably copied this manuscript from one of Donne’s holographs (Robbins, 2010). Pebworth’s suggestion that line 46 may have been changed to make the poem less scandalous and Post’s reasons as to why Donne may have changed the line, convince me that in the earlier versions of the poem the speaker and his mistress were probably not described as being married. Taken in conjunction with the fact that poem was initially considered “so scandalous by the licenser of the 1633 *Poems*” that he refused to publish it in that volume (Pebworth, 2006), line 46, to my mind, suggests that the speaker and his mistress are about to engage in adulterous sex. If this is the case, then Donne destabilizes male power in the poem by suggesting that the mistress is about to defy the authority of her husband by having sex with the speaker.

While encouraging his mistress to be unfaithful to her husband, the speaker worries that she will also be unfaithful to him. The speaker voices concerns about women’s sexual freedom and the threat this freedom poses to patriarchal society. His concerns echo attitudes toward female sexuality that were being expressed by medical writers in the early modern period. For example, Helkiah Crooke insists that women are “more wanton and petulant than males,” which makes it near impossible for men to trust them (Crooke qtd. in Hobby, 2001). He warns that women, “mad for lust,” might “invite men” to their beds (qtd. in Hobby, 2001). Along the same lines, physician John Sadler cautions men that

the imaginative power [of women] at the time of conception... is of such force that it stamps the character of the thing imagined upon the child: so that the children of an adultresse may be like unto her own husband as though begotten by another man; which is caused through the force of the imagination which the woman hath of her own husband in the act of coition. (Sadler, 1636)

Both Crooke and Sadler outline the problematics of female power: women are difficult to control, yet their sexual freedom threatens patriarchal ideas about family and kinship, which rest on “descent through the male line” (Park, 2006). Likewise, Donne’s speaker struggles to come to terms with his mistress’s sexual freedom. On the one hand, he tries to convince his mistress to exercise her freedom and commit adultery. On the other hand, he recognizes the importance of fidelity—an early modern man could only be certain of his child’s paternity by restricting his wife’s sexual freedom. The speaker underscores the importance of fidelity when he cries “my kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned”

(Donne, 2010). Infidelity, the speaker implies, threatens a man's family or "kingdom." The speaker betrays his apprehensions about his mistress's infidelity when he says that her "white robes" are like those worn by "heaven's angels" and "ill spirits" (Donne, 2010). Although he claims that he will "easily know/... these angels from an evil sprite," his explanation—a joke about penile erections and piloerection—suggests that he is actually unable to tell the difference between a faithful "angel" and an unfaithful "sprite" (Donne, 2010).³⁸ Moreover, the implication is that he is also unable to tell the difference between a child of his and the child of another. Essentially, the speaker highlights physics of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth, all of which emphasize the mother's reproductive contribution and power. The speaker, unsettled by his mistress's power and jealous of her reproductive abilities, says: "Gems which you women use/Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views" (Donne, 2010). He inverts the myth of Atlanta and Hippomenes, suggesting that he feels emasculated by his mistress. Troubled by her procreative power, the speaker imagines himself dominating his mistress by excavating her body.

When the speaker imagines himself delving into his mistress's body, he uses the language of geology, rather than the language of anatomy, to describe his actions. Thomas Greene argues that the speaker's actions are "provocative" because he does not reveal the anatomical objects that he discovers (Greene, 1989). Instead, the speaker describes his discoveries in geological terms:

O my America! My new-found-land!
 My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned!
 My mine of precious stones! My empery!
 How blessed am I in this discovering thee! (Donne, 2010)

Envisioning his mistress as a geological entity, the speaker imagines himself colonizing her. He aligns his anatomical exploration with exciting discoveries taking place in the New World.³⁹ Discovering her body's interior, the speaker suggests, is like a voyage into the "new-found-land" that will uncover "precious stones" (Donne, 2010). These metaphors of "dominion and wealth" inspire in the speaker a desire for the "experience of absolute possession" (Greene, 1989). The speaker divulges this desire by repeating the possessive adjective "my." While the speaker's "earthy soul may covet" his mistress's buried jewels (or chil-

³⁸The speaker insists that an "angel" will set "his flesh upright," while a "sprite" will set his "hairs" upright (Donne, 2010). Here, he relies on two responses (a response to sexual arousal and a response to strong emotions or cold temperatures). While the speaker assumes that he will experience these two responses under different circumstances, in reality it is possible that he will experience these responses together. Scientific data suggests that heightened emotions, like fear or anxiety, can result in both penile erections and piloerection (Roze, Oubary, & Chédru, 2000; Barlow, Sakheim, & Beck, 1983). Taking this data into account, the reader might conclude that the speaker's method for telling the difference between angels and sprites is flawed.

³⁹These lines are typically read in relation to Donne's interest in the New World. Hadfield, for example, notes that Donne had "direct experience of English maritime power," as he "[sailed] on the Cadiz voyage under Essex and Raleigh (June-August 1596) and the 'Islands' voyage to the Azores (July-October 1597)" (Hadfield, 2006). Hadfield identifies "an explicitly political sub-text" in these lines, which "reminds the readers of the imperial importance of London" and the dynamic of an "imperial ruler" and "his conquered territory" (Hadfield, 2006).

dren), the placement of “my” reveals that his rational soul “covets” his mistress’s body (Donne, 2010). He covets her body in a sexual sense, yes, but the speaker also longs to dominate his mistress’s womb, which would allow him to control the birthing process. Dominating the womb will enable the speaker to overcome “the precarious nature of fatherhood,” which stems from the mother’s physical connection to her child (Park, 2006).

Like the surgeon who severs the umbilical cord, the speaker imagines himself disturbing the connection between his mistress and her child. “To enter into these bonds is to be free,” exclaims the speaker (Donne, 2010), underlining the freedom that comes from interrupting the bond between mother and child. In interrupting this bond, the speaker is able to sever figuratively the mother’s connection to her child and establish his own connection. The speaker replaces feminine bonds with masculine, implicitly replacing maternal bonds with paternal. He says: “There where my hand is set, my seal shall be,” inviting a comparison between the caesarean section, which begins where his “hand is set,” and a “seal” of paternity (Donne, 2010). Other scholars have noted that “seal” refers both to an imprint that is used to authenticate a document or ensure ownership and to a penis (“Seal”; Greene, 1989). However, “seal” might also refer to a surgical seal: Paul, in Romans 4:11, defines the circumcision of Abraham as “a seal of righteousness” (*The Holy Bible*, 1932). In this sense, the metaphorical caesarean section might allow the speaker to figuratively imprint a seal of paternity upon his child. The child born by caesarean section has been removed from his maternal origin and introduced into a masculine realm (Adelman, 1992). In this realm, the woman’s reproductive contribution and role in childbirth is deemphasized. As Park notes, the child born by the caesarean section is marked by “maleness” and “prowess” because he has been birthed by a man (Park, 2006). Donne’s speaker imagines himself participating in the birthing process and extracting a child of distinctly male origin, whereby he evokes the fantasy of male birth.

While referencing this fantasy, the speaker compares his mistress to a “mystic book,” alluding to gynaecological texts (Donne, 2010). Although critics and editors of “To His Mistress” typically interpret “mystic books” as religious texts, if the word “mystic” is taken more generally to mean “mysterious,” “secret,” or “concealed,” then “mystic books” may be interpreted as books of secrets (OED, 2013; Donne, 2010). In lines 39 - 43 the speaker establishes a connection between books and women—specifically, he implies that opening a book is like seeing a woman naked. This implication links “mystic books” to gynaecological texts, which contained information about women’s “secrets” and diagrams of naked women. Monica Green outlines how in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries gynaecological texts entitled “the secrets of women” emerged “out of the general interest in sexuality and generation” and “gradually [grew] into a specialized literature that fused natural philosophical concerns to understand generation with medical concerns to control it” (Green, 2008). These texts were read

by “different classes of Latin and vernacular readers,” including “physicians, religious men, natural philosophers, and elite laymen,” all of whom “participated in a shared discourse on women” (Green, 2008). Essentially, these texts provided men with a way to learn and talk about “the hidden processes of generation” (Green, 2008). In Donne’s poem, when the speaker compares women to “mystic books,” he alludes to texts that demystify the inner workings of the female body (Donne, 2010). Playing on the comparison between books and women, the speaker says that while “lay men” may only see the “coverings” of these books, he “must see” these books “revealed” (Donne, 2010). He asks his mistress to “show” her body to him, so that “[he] may know” her as intimately as a “midwife” (Donne, 2010).⁴⁰ Gynaecological texts enabled men to adopt the perspective of the midwife: women were often depicted naked, with their genitals or wombs exposed. Green reminds us that “men had no means of control” over the female reproductive system “except by attempting to know and understand” it (Green, 2008).⁴¹ Thus, in Donne’s poem, the metaphorical comparison of books to women underlines the speaker’s desire to understand and control his mistress’s body.

In a final twist, Donne’s poem ends by making it obvious that the speaker has failed in his rhetorical attempts to master his mistress. He may have ordered her to take “off,” “unpin,” “unlace” and “cast” off her clothes, but these commands have proven useless (Donne, 2010). For all the speaker’s orders and claims of superiority,⁴² she has defied his authority and refused to undress. In a last effort to regain control over the situation, the speaker resorts to removing his own clothing: “To teach thee, I am naked first” (Donne, 2010). However, by adopting a strategy of teaching by example, the speaker inadvertently disempowers himself. By stripping naked, the speaker effectively takes the place of his mistress, whom the reader expected to be standing naked at the end of the poem. Ironically, the speaker is “naked first,” while his mistress is wearing “more covering than a man” (Donne, 2010). The “secrecy” of the mistress’s body subverts the speaker’s attempt to establish masculine authority. As the speaker puts it, women, with “their imputed grace,” must “dignify” men (Donne, 2010). The representation of women as virtuous or powerful beings, who must confer honours upon men, conveys a sense of the power of the hidden female body. The

⁴⁰For an analysis of these lines in relation to apocryphal Marian traditions see M. Thomas Hester, 1987.

⁴¹Gynaecological texts taught male practitioners about the female reproductive system, enabling them to compete with midwives, who possessed “experimental knowledge of medical and obstetric practice” (Park, 2006). However, these texts were also a source of knowledge for the public. Within these texts and other midwifery manuals, men could read about what went on in the birthing room (from which they were usually excluded) and view women’s genitalia (which was a privilege usually reserved for the husband and the midwife). Moreover, these texts afforded men control over women’s bodies. For instance, men could learn about the female orgasm and the clitoris, which Columbus Fallopius “discovered” in the sixteenth century (Harvey, 2002). Eccles explains that in the early modern period there was a prevalent belief that a woman had to orgasm in order for her to emit seed and become pregnant, so knowledge of the clitoris would, in theory, allow a husband greater control over his wife’s ability to conceive (Eccles, 1982).

⁴²For example, when he claims that he is her sovereign and discoverer.

female body, in being more “covered” than that male body, resists men’s attempts to scrutinize and understand it. It can only be “revealed” by a woman who *chooses* to “dignify” a man with knowledge of her body (Donne, 2010). The female body in the early modern period was often anatomically reduced to the uterus, which became a symbol for the body’s interior.⁴³ However, the uterus was an organ that could only be revealed through surgery (or caesarean section),⁴⁴ which required the woman’s permission. Thus, subtly undercutting the power dynamic so far established within the poem, Donne ends by re-establishing women’s control over their bodies.

Donne’s strategy to first present the speaker’s fantasy of masculine dominance and then undermine the speaker and reassert female power speaks to the complexity of the gender constructs operating within “To His Mistress.” After he has exposed himself to his mistress, the speaker becomes aware of the inverted power dynamic. He asks her: “Why than [*sic*], /What need’st thou have more cov’ring than a man?” (Donne, 2010). However, rather than asserting male power with his question, the speaker unwittingly undermines all of his previous commands by giving his mistress the opportunity to speak and the power to disagree with him. He reveals that his authority over her depends on her. Inverting the conventions of the blazon, which Nancy Vickers explains descriptively dismember and silence women, Donne ends his poem with the speaker waiting for his mistress to speak (Vickers, 1981). When one returns to the speaker’s earlier fantasy of reproductive control, this ending stresses that just as the power of the speaker depends on the willingness of his mistress, so the power of the surgeon depends upon the mother.⁴⁵ Ultimately, through this final twist, Donne exposes the irony undercutting the struggle for power between men and women occurring both within the poem and, more broadly, the medical community.

6. Conclusion

In its metaphorical exploration of childbirth, “To His Mistress” depicts the progressive possibilities of artificial birth, while simultaneously exposing male anxieties about women’s reproductive power. The poem is a product of, and a reaction to, the transient historical moment when medical authority over women’s bodies and childbirth was shifting to male practitioners. The speaker’s desire to transcend his reproductive limits, his various challenges of women’s

⁴³Sawday, discussing dissected figures from Berengarius’ *Isogoge Breves* (1522), states that the woman’s “identity ... is entirely determined by the uterus, to an extent that ... the uterus, in effect, *is* the woman” (Sawday, 1995). Similarly, Park clarifies that “women’s anatomy was reduced functionally to their organs of generation” (Park, 2006).

⁴⁴Sawday explains that female cadavers were “an altogether rarer commodity” than male cadavers, making it difficult for men to learn about female anatomy except through surgery (1995). “The womb or uterus,” he maintains, “was an object sought after with an almost ferocious intensity in Renaissance anatomy theatres” (Sawday, 1995). It is not surprising that Donne chooses to make the uterus the implicit focus of his blazon, which is, after all, a kind of rhetorical dissection.

⁴⁵Unless the surgeon is summoned by the mother or the midwife and given permission by the mother, he cannot perform the caesarean section.

control over reproduction, and his repeated attempts to assert masculine dominance over the female body reflects both the problematics of a female-centered birthing process and the fear that men may actually play a relatively minor role in reproduction. Participating in the debate about women's reproductive contributions, Donne's elegy embodies a central tension: although early modern society emphasized the importance of the father, the physics of pregnancy and childbirth emphasized the importance of the mother. Thus, the poem shows patriarchy to be a fundamentally unstable concept.

Donne's poem suggests that early modern patriarchal society was disturbed by new reproductive models, which threatened male superiority by suggesting that men and women might be more biologically similar than previously thought. The speaker uses the birthing-mining metaphor to envision a stable concept of family and kinship that does not depend upon a woman. The speaker metaphorically reinvents the birthing process so that he supersedes his mistress and gains additional control over the reproductive process. However, at the time, medical practitioners had begun to refute the Aristotelian notion of men being the more "perfect" sex by arguing "that men and women [were] equally perfect in their sex" (Maclean, 1980). Similarly, medical practitioners began to suggest that men and women contributed equally to generation—for example, Sharp writes that "there must be a conjunction of Male and Female for the begetting of children" and "there must be a perfect mixture of Seed issueing [*sic*] from them both, which virtually contain the Infant that must be formed from them" (Sharp, 1671). Donne's poem suggests that anxieties about the blurring of sex distinctions may have fuelled men's enthusiasm for artificial birth. Donne's poem is striking evidence that men may have perceived the natural birthing process, which emphasized the importance of women, as a threat to their masculinity.

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