

CHAPTER EIGHT



“Cushion Come Forth”

Materializing Pregnancy on the Stuart Stage

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Drawn from classical legend, Thomas Heywood's *The Golden Age*, first acted by the Queen's Men, premiered at the Red Bull Theatre around 1610.¹ The play depicts a society of chaste nymphs who—dedicated to the goddess Diana—have forsworn the company of men. Among these nymphs is Calisto, pursued by Jupiter; despite Calisto's oath, Jupiter successfully seduces and impregnates the nymph. Heywood's narrator, Homer, informs the audience of this pregnancy when he observes that “Eight moons are fill'd and waned, when [Calisto] grows great, / And young Jove's issue in her womb doth spring” (E3). Even if the audience is aware of her pregnancy, Calisto successfully hides this fact from her cohort until such time that she can no longer conceal it. At a crucial moment, the proof of her oath breaking becomes flagrantly visible, and Calisto is banished from Diana's company.

Desirous of a “solemn bathing,” Diana insists her nymphs join her; a dumb show proceeds wherein the audience witnesses Diana and the nymphs undress. The stage direction reads: “*They unlace themselves, and unloose their buskins; only CALISTO refuseth to make her ready. DIANA sends ATLANTA to her, who, perforce unlacing her, finds her great belly, and shows it to DIANA, who turns her out of her society, and leaves her*” (E4 s.d.). While no vocal reaction to Calisto's belly exists in the text, the stage direction suggests Diana, her nymphs, and the audience look on as Atlanta strips Calisto. In this under-discussed but provocative moment from *The Golden Age*, a boy actor playing a pregnant nymph is undressed on stage only to have his belly exposed to the goddess Diana and, perhaps, the audience. This moment raises a significant

question concerning early modern staging: in the context of an all-male performance tradition, what did audiences see when a boy actor played a pregnant woman? While it is difficult to know with complete certainty how femininity materialized on the male body, as Peter Stallybrass acknowledges in his discussion of prosthetic breasts, pregnancy was a highly conspicuous theatrical convention on the Stuart stage.² Playwrights and actors narrated, performed, and costumed pregnancy, making visible the great belly when appropriate to the play's dramatic action. With other provisions of gendered identity, such as wigs, cosmetics, and gowns, bellies add to the constellation of feminine theatrical prosthetics deployable by actors. Playwrights and players accomplished the illusion of pregnancy through verbal descriptions of physical appearances, as well as by using common soft goods, such as pillows and cushions, as prosthetic devices. Here I employ Will Fisher's definition of "prosthesis" as that which is simultaneously "integral to the subject's identity or self, and at the same time resolutely detachable or 'auxiliary.'"³ That is to say, in the plays discussed below, the prosthetic pregnancy belly is central to the character's identity, yet is ultimately detachable from the actor-character's body.

Before 1603, pregnant characters seldom appeared in English playhouses; because of mounting anxiety over Elizabeth's failure to produce an heir, representations of pregnant bodies were, perhaps wisely, rare. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1591) illustrates this gestational erasure.⁴ In act 4, Tamora gives birth to Aaron's unnamed illegitimate son. However, Shakespeare indicates in neither stage directions nor the spoken text that Tamora is pregnant; it is only when the nurse announces Tamora's off-stage delivery in act 4 that the audience discovers the queen's pregnancy. Similarly, in the 1599 Chamberlain's Men play, *A Warning for Fair Women*, Anne Sanders stands accused of conspiracy to murder but begs for mercy on account of her unborn child.⁵ Authorities dismiss Sanders's claim to pregnancy as a lie. Meanwhile, Anne Saunders, the character's real-life counterpart on whom the playwright based the drama, was indeed pregnant and allowed to deliver her child before her execution on May 6, 1573.⁶ Nevertheless, the playwright expunges any visual evidence of Anne's pregnant body from the Tudor drama. If Elizabethan playwrights go so far as to mention a pregnancy, they do not always clearly represent the gestational body in the playhouse. If a pregnant body does appear, as in George Chapman's *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* (1596) or George Peele's *Edward I* (1593), the pregnant character is not a major participant in the play's action, or the pregnancy itself is peripheral to the play's dramaturgical structure.⁷ In contrast, after James's succession,

dramatists displayed a growing interest in staging visibly pregnant characters who drive dramatic action.

Between 1603 and 1642, there exist approximately twenty-two extant “pregnancy plays.” The defining characteristic of this dramatic subgenre is that the play portrays a pregnancy (whether visible or unknown to the audience) or a pregnant character who drives the action of a plot in some significant way. Over the span of thirty-nine years, pregnancy became conspicuous in its representation on Stuart stages, and this sudden increase in the visibility of gestating bodies—along with the material construction of pregnancy on boy bodies—is deserving of significant critical attention, though it has received little.⁸ Early modern theater practitioners implemented various strategies to stage pregnancy on seventeenth-century London stages. Three plays in particular trace the trajectory of visible pregnancy and its conventions. Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (1604) shows that pregnancy was indeed a visible theatrical convention on the Stuart stage. Thomas May’s *The Heir* (c. 1620), which “delivers” a cushion to an expectant father, dismantles the convention of performed pregnancy. This play, when read against other revelations of prosthetically constructed gender and identity, offers compelling evidence for common strategies of materializing pregnancy in performance. More specifically, May’s comedy reveals, parodies, and deconstructs the material conventions established in earlier pregnancy plays. Finally, Ben Jonson’s *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) highlights the ways in which playwrights—especially Jonson—further parody the pregnancy convention during the Caroline reign. Through these plays and others, the “great belly” becomes part of the ongoing conversation surrounding early modern prosthetics and stage materials.

Staging the Pregnant Body: Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (1604)

Many pregnancy plays depict characters whose bellies are visible, evinced by verbal descriptions detailing the size and shape of the conspicuously gravid body or the demands of the plot’s action. Early Stuart plays are the most explicit in this regard. In Samuel Rowley’s *When You See Me You Know Me* (1604), first performed by Prince Henry’s Men at the Fortune, Jane Seymour enters in the royal processional “big with child,” as indicated by the stage directions.⁹ King Henry VIII remarks that the queen will soon begin her labor as she “bears her burden very heavily. . . . Like good September vines, loaden with fruit” (A4–5). Similarly, Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1614, King’s Men) describes the titular character as

having grown “fat i’th’flank” with her pregnancy, while in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (c. 1611, King’s Men), Hermione’s handmaidens gesture to her body, which “rounds apace” and “spread[s] of late / Into a goodly bulk.”¹⁰ Mr. Allwit in Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* likewise describes his pregnant wife’s corpulent body as being that of a “tumbler” whose “nose and belly meets.”¹¹ This language, which explicitly gestures to the roundness of the gestating female body, points to pregnancy as a conspicuous condition integral to each play’s respective *mise en scène*. Early pregnancy plays, several of which are mid- and late-career dramas by Shakespeare—including *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Pericles*—are the most explicit in terms of detailing the size and shape of the pregnant body. These plays worked to establish the conventions disrupted and reinvented later in the seventeenth century. This is particularly true of *Measure for Measure*.

The dramatic action of Shakespeare’s 1604 King’s Men play begins in earnest when a young unmarried couple are publicly shamed for their sexual transgressions despite their possession of “a true [marriage] contract” (1.3.237).¹² The frigid Angelo, newly minted deputy to the absent Duke, discovers Claudio “got possession of Juliet’s bed” when the “stealth of [their] most mutual entertainment / With character too gross is writ on Juliet” (1.3.238–47). In other words, the visibility of Juliet’s gestational belly exposes their premarital sexual activity. As a result, Angelo sentences Claudio to death while he spares Juliet, presumably due to her pregnancy. As such, the scene necessitates the presence of a distended belly, as its imperceptibility would mean a lack of evidence for Claudio’s conviction and sentencing. It is only when the evidence of their copulation “too gross is writ on Juliet” that Claudio becomes subject to Angelo’s puritanical wrath. The visibility of Juliet’s pregnancy is damning evidence, indeed.

The descriptions of Juliet’s pregnant body throughout act 1 continue to corroborate the presence of a large belly for Juliet. Lucio, a local rake and friend to Claudio, reveals the situation to Isabella, Claudio’s sister, in an effort to secure her help. As Isabella is about to take her holy orders as a nun, Lucio hopes she might have some sway with the zealous Angelo. Lucio describes the physical evidence stacked against the young couple in explicit detail:

Your brother and his lover have embraced.
 As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
 That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
 To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
 Expresseth his full tilth and husbandry. (1.5.390–94)

Lucio fixates on the visual evidence of Claudio and Juliet’s relationship: her distended belly. He describes the roundness of Juliet’s body five times in as many lines, using words like “full,” “blossoming,” and “foison” to paint an explicit picture for the virginal Isabella. Moreover, the audience learns of the advanced state of Juliet’s pregnancy when, in act 2, scene 2, the Provost asks Angelo what to do with the “groaning Juliet? / She’s very near her hour” (2.2.753). Given these language choices, along with the fact Juliet is silent throughout her first appearance in act 1, scene 2—and nearly the entire play—the actor’s materially manifested belly must make a significant visual impression on the audience.

The action of the play leaves little room for ambiguity as to the progress of Juliet’s pregnancy, or the gravity of her situation. Shakespeare’s dramatic structure (along with his language) necessitates a visibly distended belly for Juliet. After hearing Lucio’s appeal, and the explicit description of Juliet’s fecund body, Isabella agrees to beg Angelo for her brother’s life. The moment that Isabella agrees to speak for Claudio is the inciting incident of Shakespeare’s play—it ignites the dramatic momentum necessary to carry the story through to its conclusion. As a result, the conspicuity of Juliet’s pregnancy is so crucial to the structure of *Measure for Measure* that, without it, the play’s central conflict lacks instigation. The explicit vocabulary used in the characters’ language to describe Juliet’s body and comportment, along with the dramaturgical necessity of Juliet’s pregnancy, suggest the presence of a cushion—or possibly a specially made prosthetic device of some kind—placed under the performer’s skirts to make the boy actor appear pregnant. Therefore, the question remains: how did actors manifest the “great belly” on their male bodies?

The “Great Belly” and Prosthetic Convention: Thomas May’s *The Heir* (c. 1620)

Thomas May’s *The Heir* is a comedy that illuminates strategies of materializing pregnancy on boy actors’ bodies by exposing a fake pregnancy in full view of the audience. In the process of recovering material strategies used to stage pregnant bodies, counterfeit pregnancies are the most illuminating. Like moments of identity revelation, the on-stage removal of a prosthetic device metatheatrically reveals methods whereby performers conventionally constructed gender. As noted above, here I incorporate Fisher’s definition of “prosthesis.”¹³ For example, in Ben Jonson’s 1609 *Epicoene*, a wig is “auxiliary” to the titular character, yet becomes “integral to the subject’s identity.” First played at Whitefriars by the Children of the Revels, *Epicoene*’s titular

character reveals he is a young boy, rather than a blushing bride, by merely removing his wig at the end of act 5. As one of the key prosthetics of gender construction on the early modern stage, a wig's removal dismantles the illusion of femininity, exposing the boy beneath. The interactions among such theatrical prosthetics possess the power to make and unmake the subject's gender simultaneously.

Early modern theater practitioners materialized pregnancy through the implementation of prosthetic pregnancy bellies beneath players' skirts. This relationship between the belly and the costume is evident in a number of pregnancy plays, including *The Duchess of Malfi*. In Webster's tragedy, Bosola suspects Duchess is hiding a pregnancy and points to her changing style of dress as evidence. He notes that, "contrary to [the] Italian fashion," the Duchess "wears a loose-bodied gown" (D2). This line necessitates a costume change from the Duchess's act 1 appearance wherein the actor likely wore a contemporary noblewoman's gown complete with the stiff stomacher that clung to the torso. However, in act 2, the actor playing the Duchess requires a "loose-bodied gown" that can possibly accommodate a distended belly. While art historian Karen Hearn notes, "surviving accounts are devoid of references to alterations being made to formal gowns in relation to maternity [and] specific rich maternity wear is not known to survive," it stands to reason that pregnant noblewomen, and the boy actors who imitated their style of dress on stage, possessed methods to accommodate their expanding bodies.¹⁴ Therefore, the belly—or, at the very least, the suggestion of it—exists within the network of signs and prosthetics that construct femininity on Stuart stages.

Similar to Epicoene's wig, the "great belly" becomes a major subject of dramatic action in Thomas May's *The Heir*, a comedy that illuminates strategies of manifesting pregnancy on boy actors' bodies. *The Heir* premiered at the Red Bull around 1620.¹⁵ In this understudied comedy, Luce and her lowborn lover, Francisco, reveal she has become pregnant in hopes that Luce's father, Franklin, will allow them to marry. Unfortunately, the lovers' plan backfires. Concerned with public opinion and the denigration of his dynastic legacy, Franklin resolves to marry his daughter to Shallow, a dim-witted gentleman to whom Luce is already betrothed. While Luce's father is furious with her, he simultaneously appears amazed at her ingenuity; he demands to know how she managed to hide the pregnancy from him. Luce merely responds: "Fearing your anger sir, I strove to hide it," suggesting the pregnancy appears difficult to conceal at this revelatory moment; Franklin instructs Luce to continue to "hide it one more day" until he develops a plan (B4). Luce's father proceeds to convince Shallow that he drunkenly

consummated his relationship with Luce, thereby getting her with child. Having no memory of this event, Shallow takes one look at Luce, dimly affirms that her belly “swells,” and resolves that Franklin’s version of events is the only logical conclusion (C).

It is not until act 5 that the lovers reveal Luce’s virginity. Having discovered that Francisco is, in fact, highborn, he and Luce no longer require the pregnancy ruse to make a suitable match. They secretly marry despite Luce’s betrothal to Shallow. When Luce’s father discovers their plot, he unleashes his fury upon Luce: “I am undone, strumpet thou hast betrayed thy self to beggary, to shame besides . . . hang, beg, and starve, I’ll never pit thee” (H2). Francisco, hoping to smooth things over with his new father-in-law while ridding them of the senseless Shallow, delivers the truth beneath Luce’s “shame”:

But for the fault that she must answer for, or shame she should endure in Court, behold her yet an untouch’d Virgin, Cushion, come forth, here signior Shallow, take your child unto you, make much of it, it may prove as wise as the father.

He flings the cushion at him. (H2)

This telling stage direction, which appears in the play’s earliest printing (1622), suggests Francisco reaches up Luce’s dress to remove the cushion stuffed under her skirts, further evincing the need for a “loose-bodied gown” that makes room for the great belly.

When Francisco exposes the material method of Luce’s fabricated pregnancy, this moment from *The Heir* transforms into a metatheatrical revelation akin to Jonson’s boy bride trick in *Epicoene*. Just as the removal of *Epicoene*’s wig exposes a prosthetic technique integral to the fabrication of femininity, so too does the cushion illuminate pregnancy’s material manifestation. Like *Epicoene*, the dramatist asks the audience to turn their attention to the myriad ways in which players construct femininity on stage. Delivering the cushion for Shallow’s paternal inspection, Francisco midwives the material truth of Luce’s ingenuity and this theatrical pregnancy prosthesis. This moment of parturition not only unmakes the illusion of pregnancy as a theatrical convention, but also threatens to undo the fiction of gender altogether by tacitly gesturing to the boy beneath the belly.

Similar invocations of the “cushion” appear elsewhere in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century print. For example, in a series of combative letters between John Jewel, Bishop of Sarum, and Henry Cole (published in 1560), Jewel mentions to Cole that “hauing nothing to say, ye would seme to haue somewhat. As women y^e woulde seme to be with child, sometimes rear vp

their bellies with a cushion.”¹⁶ The *OED* defines cushion within this context as well. A cushion is not merely a “case of cloth . . . used to give support or ease to the body in sitting, reclining, or kneeling” but also a “swelling simulating pregnancy: sometimes called *Queen Mary’s cushion*, after Mary Tudor.”¹⁷ This follows from one of the quotations in the *OED* entry, which comes from Milton’s 1649 *Eukonoklastes*: “And thus his pregnant motives are at last prov’d nothing but a Tympany, or a Queen Maries Cushion.”¹⁸ Thomas Davies and John Halliwell-Phillips’s *A Supplemental English Glossary* notes “Queen Mary was often mistakenly believed by herself and others to be pregnant; hence Queen Mary’s cushion-protuberance that produces nothing.”¹⁹ Readers are perhaps familiar with Queen Mary Tudor’s false pregnancies, though the actual causes and methods of these fabrications are less clear. Nevertheless, Luce’s false pregnancy and Francisco’s invocation of the prosthetic perhaps recalled rumors of Mary Tudor’s own “cushion” for the audience.

A scene from Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV* (c. 1597) likewise anticipates this abortive moment from *The Heir* when an officer arrests Doll Tearsheet for accessory to murder.²⁰ Doll claims pregnancy in order to avoid legal censure; she threatens to miscarry the child currently inhabiting her womb if the officer drags her to jail. The officer asserts if Doll does miscarry, Mistress Quickly “shall have a dozen of cushions again,” suggesting that the twelfth cushion is currently stuffed up Doll’s skirt to fake pregnancy and avoid prosecution.²¹ The text is unclear as to the specific action that occurs at this moment; nevertheless, it remains possible that, in a precursory move to Francisco in *The Heir*, the officer reaches up Doll’s skirt to remove a cushion. The convention of falsifying or theatricalizing pregnancy with the use of a simple cushion was a popular method of materializing the “great belly” on stage, unambiguously deconstructed in May’s comedy.

When Francisco exposes the cushion, he further reveals the fact that Luce’s pregnancy was not merely narrated, but visible and material. The dialogue reveals that Luce’s belly is visible to Franklin and Shallow while the stage directions indicate she is “gravida” upon her entrance (B4). Furthermore, the audience, like Franklin and Shallow, find themselves in the dark regarding Luce’s false pregnancy. Luce never confesses her scheme to the audience, nor is the audience privy to any revelatory conversations between the conspirator-lovers. While Luce hoodwinks her father and fiancé by displaying a swelling belly, so too is the audience unaware her pregnancy is counterfeit until Francisco removes the prosthetic device. If the cushion were undetectable beneath Luce’s dress, producing it from beneath her gown proves nothing (other than perhaps a strange proclivity toward household

soft goods). That Francisco finds it necessary to remove the cushion and fling it at Shallow, communicates Luce not only verbalized her pregnancy, but also manifested a visual cue signaling her fertility. The action of the play as well as the audience’s ignorance makes it clear that Luce’s pregnancy had to be visible to both characters and spectators.

May’s play explicitly foregrounds the material strategies of staging pregnancy by giving the audience a glimpse into the making (and unmaking) of theatrical gestation. Like Epicoene’s wig in Jonson’s comedy, the cushion’s delivery and the commonplace of “Queen Mary’s cushion” communicate that staging conspicuous pregnancy may have been as simple as collecting a suitable pillow from the tiring house and securing it beneath the player’s gown. Moreover, the revelation of Luce’s virginity—the cushion’s “delivery”—suggests the conventionality of the prosthetic belly, just as the removal of Epicoene’s wig tells us of the prosthetic’s orthodoxy in constructing femininity on stage. The playful ways May signals pregnancy—and nonpregnancy—in *The Heir* call attention to the ways his contemporaries similarly gestured to pregnancy through dialogue, asides, and soliloquys. The revelation of Luce’s cushion in *The Heir* came from a tradition of staging conspicuous pregnancy on Stuart stages.

While *Measure for Measure* and *The Heir* necessarily display the pregnant belly for the audience’s visual consumption, some pregnancy plays nevertheless require that the character’s gestational status remain hidden from other characters on stage. In Ben Jonson’s *The Magnetic Lady*, the playwright challenges conventions of staging great bellies on boy bodies and throws into relief plays such as *Measure for Measure* wherein the “great belly” is an integral component of the play’s *mise en scène*. However, rather than serving as a counter to the conspicuity of the pregnant belly in plays like *Measure for Measure*, *The Heir*, or *The Golden Age*, Jonson’s experimentation with hidden pregnancy suggests visible bellies were the status quo in most pregnancy plays.

Resisting the Belly: *The Magnetic Lady*, Ben Jonson (1632)

First performed by the King’s Men, Jonson’s *The Magnetic Lady* simultaneously upsets and reaffirms established audience expectations of staged gestation, similar to the playwright’s disruption of fictional gender in *Epicoene*.²² Earlier pregnancy plays rely upon the visibility of the belly as part of the play’s *mise en scène* whereas, in this comedy, Jonson relies upon verbal cues and character observation to expose Placentia’s pregnancy. Jonson simultaneously withholds the belly and metatheatrically berates the audience for

failing to notice his cues regarding the heiress's pregnancy. Despite Jonson's best efforts to satirize the material practices of earlier pregnancy plays and avoid participating in the prosthetic construction of the gestational belly, he nevertheless firmly entrenches the play within the pregnancy play subgenre.

Early pregnancy plays, such as *Measure for Measure*, or even *The Winter's Tale*, deal in relatively straightforward depictions of the gestating body while focusing on the patriarchal anxieties created by the "great belly" within the world of the play. Midperiod pregnancy plays—many of which are comedies—begin to challenge newly established conventions of staging pregnancy. The result is pregnancy farce, as in May's *The Heir* or Middleton's *Chaste Maid*. However, by the mid-1630s, Jonson satirized earlier pregnancy plays with a more critical eye toward conventionalized prosthetic practices. Throughout the first half of *The Magnetic Lady*, almost nobody in the play is aware that Placentia, the play's fourteen-year-old unmarried heiress, is with child. Placentia's inept physician, Rut, misdiagnoses Placentia's symptoms, which include strange cravings for lime, hair, and soap ashes; as Peter Happé points out, Placentia's appetite may "accompany pregnancy, as Rut ought to know."²³ Nevertheless, Placentia's cravings and behavior go unrecognized as symptoms of gestation. Polish, Placentia's lady-in-waiting (and birth mother, as the play later reveals), easily recognizes Placentia's predicament. Concerned for Placentia's health, Polish attempts to communicate to Rut the real issue at hand:

POLISH. THE GENTLEWOMAN, I DO FEAR, IS LEAVENED.

RUT. LEAVENED? WHAT'S THAT?

POLISH. PUFFED, BLOWN, AND'T PLEASE YOUR WORSHIP.

RUT. WHAT! DARK, BY DARKER? WHAT IS BLOWN? PUFFED? SPEAK ENGLISH—

POLISH. TAINTED, AND'T PLEASE YOU, SOME DO CALL IT.

She swells and swells so with it—²⁴

Rut, too thick to comprehend Polish's cues, merely instructs that Polish give Placentia "vent / If she do swell" and "get her a husband" to cure her illness (2.3.22). However oblivious the other characters are, Jonson clearly intended the audience to notice Placentia's concealed pregnancy. Her emblematic name is, of course, a play on "placenta." Even without the use of a visible belly, a 1632 Blackfriars audience with experience with nearly thirty years of pregnancy plays likely recognized not only Placentia's name and symptoms, but also Polish's carefully chosen language. Jonson himself anticipated as much.

Placentia’s belly was likely inconspicuous beneath the boy actor’s gown, evinced by the metatheatrical choral interludes of which Jonson makes use to comment on the action and, appropriately, the playwright’s artistic merit. One of the characters is a fan of Jonson’s work and the other one is not. During one of these interludes, the play’s harshest critic—aptly named Damplay—asserts it was a “pitiful poor shift of [the] Poet to make his prime woman with child and fall in labour, just to compose a quarrel” (3.42). Here Damplay complains that Placentia’s being “with child”—a surprise to him—is a contrived convention, which suggests the pregnancy was illegible to the audience. Jonson’s defender, Boy, counters this unfounded critique, insisting that Placentia’s pregnancy and sudden labor pains ought not to have been a surprise to audience members who paid close attention. In fact, her pregnancy proves to be at the heart of the play’s conflict, as the Boy demonstrates:

The stream of the argument threatened her being with child from the very beginning, for it presented her in first of the second Act with some apparent note of infirmity or defect: from knowledge of which the auditory were rightly to be suspended by the author, till the quarrel . . . hastened on the discovery of it . . . wherein the poet expressed his prime artifice, rather than any error. (3.42)

Jonson’s embedded counter criticism communicates the playwright expected the rapt aural attention of the audience in order to identify the conventionalized pregnancy coding expressed by Polish and enacted by Placentia throughout the play, without the customarily conspicuous material belly. Jonson preemptively chides the theatergoers, claiming they should have noticed the poet’s “prime artifice” when Placentia’s “note of infirmity or defect” became apparent to the play’s most attentive hearers. Through the Boy’s metatheatrical intervention, Jonson pokes fun at the inept observers surprised by Placentia’s pregnancy, and perhaps, his fellow playwrights who rely too much upon spectacle and prosthetics. Simultaneously, Jonson makes fun of what he no doubt considered a hackneyed convention by this point: the undiagnosed pregnancy, seen in a number of popular pregnancy plays prior to 1632 including Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, Middleton’s *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (c. 1619), and Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (c. 1630). Nevertheless, it remains possible that the boy actor playing Placentia could have sported a visible cushion or pregnancy prosthetic beneath his gown. In this scenario, Jonson highlights the stupidity of the male characters who fail to notice Placentia’s ever-increasing girth as well as the audience members who may side with Damplay’s analysis. Alternatively, if Placentia does not display any

kind of visible physical evidence to suggest that she is pregnant, this reveals Jonson's attempts to undermine the convention of prosthetic bellies on boy actors by making it a convention bolstered by the power of language and—by extension—preserved in print.

Jonson, well known for his biting social commentaries, is equally renowned for his satires of theatrical conventions—particularly theatricality sustained by prosthetics and cosmetics, as Farah Karim-Cooper illuminates.²⁵ In this way, Jonson's intervention in conventionalized theatrical pregnancy suggests the "great belly" was in fact a widely used performance prosthetic visible to the audience. In an effort to perhaps parody (and ridicule) the convention of prosthetic bellies on boy actors, Jonson in fact reinforces the tradition of the customarily observable and materially manifested belly. Even when Placentia hides her pregnancy, Polish uses words that describe the visual evidence revealed by Placentia's body: she is "leavened," "puffed," and "blown." Regardless of whether Placentia's "great belly" was visible or not, Polish's language communicates that pregnancy remains a visible condition in the imagination of the audience, even lacking the conspicuity of a prosthetic belly.²⁶ Although Jonson seems to insist on the inconspicuousness of Placentia's pregnancy, he merely reinforces the belly's conventional materialization in pregnancy plays. Put another way, Jonson's efforts to draw the audience's attention to the belly despite its probable concealment communicate the very convention of visibility demonstrated by *The Heir*, *The Golden Age*, and *Measure for Measure*.

The issue of theatricalizing the pregnant body is one that loomed large for these playwrights. Nevertheless, the question remains: What did Atlanta show to Diana in *The Golden Age*? What does the audience see when Atlanta strips the pregnant acolyte nymph? What did it look like to see a boy actor, costumed and painted as a woman, display a "great belly"? In Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* or Jonson's *The Magnetic Lady*, the plays' characters learn of a hidden pregnancy because the secret must eventually come out: the child must emerge from the mother's womb. Even in *The Heir*, wherein Luce falsifies her own pregnancy, Francisco must deliver the material truth of Luce's swelling to prove her chastity. The very act of removing what creates the "great belly" (i.e., the fetus/cushion) attests to the belly's very presence. However, in the case of Heywood's *The Golden Age*, it is not birth that reveals Calisto's hidden pregnancy, but the revelation of the belly hidden beneath Calisto's layers of clothing.

We know from Homer's narration it has been eight months since Calisto first encountered Jupiter; presently she "grows great" with "Jove's issue" (E3). The text directs the audience to pay particular attention to the visible proof

of Calisto’s secret pregnancy. Homer, setting the scene for the audience, asks us to “note how she would hide / That which time found, and great Diana spied,” but what did the audience “spy” when Diana’s nymph “perforce unlace[es]” Calisto’s bodice and “finds her great belly” (E4)? Heywood’s dumb show suggests Atlanta exposes Calisto’s secret through a dramatic, sartorial reveal wherein the audience and Diana witness the physical evidence of Calisto’s transgression together. When Atlanta unlaces Calisto’s gown, she discovers the nymph’s distended belly and “shows it to Diana” (E4). The word “show” suggests Atlanta forcibly displays her discovery to Diana. Rather than reporting Calisto’s pregnancy to Diana, Atlanta “shows” it to her; this language underscores the material necessity of the belly’s visibility on stage. While it is possible that the performers could stage this moment so that Calisto faces upstage while Atlanta disrobes her in order to forgo the prosthetic belly all together, it seems unlikely given the structure of the Red Bull’s stage in relation to the audience seating. If the “great belly” was only narrated, rather than visible to the audience, this staging tactic may have proved difficult considering the Red Bull’s square floor plan.²⁷ Audience members sitting far enough upstage of the action would notice if the belly were absent, disrupting the illusion of pregnancy and feminine gender maintained by Homer’s narration and Diana’s reaction.

Alternatively, a visible belly on the boy actor’s body may have buttressed the fiction of Calisto’s feminine gender, while bolstering the already present tension between the male body and the pregnant character. Unlike *The Heir*, the action of *The Golden Age* never indicates if the cushion-as-belly ever transforms into the cushion-as-cushion. As such, the fiction of Calisto’s gender and gestation remain intact—perhaps even reinforced—when the pregnancy is revealed. Nevertheless, while Calisto’s distended belly indicates the character’s fertility, it also signifies an impossible reality: the pregnant boy. In what may appear to be a straightforward revelation scene, this moment from *The Golden Age* demonstrates the complexity of materializing great bellies on boy actors for the all-male English stage.

Stuart London’s theatrical marketplace was one in which the maternal body became a major source of dramatic interest on public, private, and court stages. Each performance of pregnancy, informed and influenced by those that came before it, further established the belly’s conventionality within the visual vocabulary of the seventeenth-century playhouse. Boy actors, animating these pregnancy plots, materialized their “great bellies” using easily collected soft goods, such as pillows and cushions—and perhaps even moved toward specially created prosthetics to stage the gestational body in the wide array of pregnancy plays that emerged between 1603 and 1642. As such,

this prosthetic exists and interacts within the network of feminine signifiers including gowns, wigs, and cosmetic paints. Considering the relative canonicity of many of these pregnant characters (and the objective canonicity of the playwrights who wrote them), it is odd that such a resolute gap exists in the study of early modern pregnancy prosthetics. Shedding light on this critical blind spot, we can begin to paint a more complex picture of male femininity and reevaluate the nuances of staged gender on Stuart stages.

Notes

1. Thomas Heywood, *The Golden Age* (London, 1611), frontispiece. As the play's first publication in 1611 notes, *The Golden Age* had been "sundry times acted at the Red Bull, by the Queen's Maiesties Servants." I therefore date the play's first performance around 1610. Throughout this essay, after the initial citation of a primary source playtext, all additional citations are given parenthetically using act, line, and through-line numbers or quarto page numbers.

2. Peter Stallybrass, "Transvestitism and the 'Body Beneath': Speculating on the Boy Actor," in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 64–83. Stallybrass acknowledges it is impossible for us to know with any real certainty if boy actors wore prosthetic breasts, and, hence, what exactly Renaissance spectators saw when a boy actor undressed on stage. However, he nevertheless argues that the early modern theater was a "site where the prosthetic production was dramatically staged and speculated upon, as the boy actor undressed, as the fixations of spectators were drawn back and forth between the clothes which embodied and determined a particular sexual identity and contradictory fantasies of the 'body beneath.'" Stallybrass, "Transvestitism," 76.

3. Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 26.

4. For information on the play's date, see Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 297.

5. Anonymous, *A Warning for Fair Women* (London: 1599). Joseph Quincy Adams Jr. convincingly argues that Thomas Heywood is the rightful author of the play. Joseph Quincy Adams Jr., "The Authorship of *A Warning for Fair Women*," *PMLA* 28.4 (1913): 594–620.

6. J. H. Marshburn, "'A Cruell Murder Donne in Kent' and Its Literary Manifestations," *Studies in Philology* 46 (1949): 131–40, at 133.

7. In George Chapman's *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, two minor characters, Samathis and Martia, enter "with childe" within seventy lines of one another. Additionally, George Peele's *Edward I* features Queen Elinor entering "in her litter borne by foure Negro Mores." Upon her arrival Elinor complains that her king, "[k]nowing his Queene to be so great with childe," beckons her to come with haste to Wales without an explanation. George Chapman, *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* (London: 1598), F2–F3; George Peele, *Edward I* (London: 1599), D3–D5.

8. For example, Kathryn Moncrief and Kathryn McPherson argue that maternity “—both public and private, physically embodied and enacted—must be considered performative.” While Moncrief and McPherson suggest that pregnancy is an “obviously visible condition” on the stage, and their text has become a touchstone for scholars interested in studying motherhood in early modern drama, their influential volume lacks any rigorous analysis of pregnancy as a performance convention, material sign, or prosthetic prop on the English stage. Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson, eds., *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

9. Samuel Rowley, *When You See Me You Know Me* (London: 1605), frontispiece; A4.

10. John Webster, *The Tragedy of the Duchess of Malfy* (London: 1623), D2; William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale* in *The First Folio of Shakespeare: Based on the Folio in the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection*, 2nd ed. Prepared by Charlton Hinman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 2.1.607–11. All references to plays in Shakespeare’s First Folio cited throughout this essay use the First Folio’s act, line, and through-line numbers.

11. Thomas Middleton, *A Chast Mayd in Cheape-side* (London: 1630), C.

12. Here Claudio refers to the fact that, though he and Juliet have pledged themselves to one another, and consider themselves husband and wife, they lack the legal marriage proceedings performed by a church official.

13. Fisher, *Materializing Gender*, 26.

14. Karen Hearn, *Marcus Gheeraerts II: Elizabethan Artist* (London: In Focus, 2003), 46.

15. Thomas May, *The Heire* (London: 1622), frontispiece. As the frontispiece for *The Heir* notes the play was “lately Acted by the Company of the Revels” prior to its publication, I date the play around 1620. For more information on the play’s first performance location, see Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 291.

16. John Jewel and Henry Cole, *The true copies of the letters between the reuerend father in God Iohn Bisshop of Sarum and D. Cole vpon occasion of a sermon that the said Bishop preached before the Quene Maiestie, and hir most honorable Counsel* (London: 1560), 58.

17. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “cushion,” September 15, 2016, www.oed.com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/view/Entry/46257?rskey=AmIKAD&result=1.

18. OED, “cushion.”

19. Thomas Lewis Owen Davies and James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps, *A Supplemental English Glossary* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1881), 167.

20. Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 291.

21. William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of Henry IV* (London: 1600), K3.

22. *The Magnetic Lady* was first licensed by Henry Herbert on October 12, 1632. See Henry Herbert, *The Dramatic Records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, 1623–1673*, ed. Joseph Quincy Adams (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1917), 34.

23. Ben Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady*, ed. Peter Happé (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 84 n17.

24. Ben Jonson, *The Magnetick Lady, or Humors Reconiled* in *The works of Benjamin Jonson. Containing these playes: Bartholomew Fayre, The Staple of the News, the Divell is an Asse, vol. 3* (London: 1641), 2.3, page 22. Remaining citations for Jonson's *The Magnetic Lady* are given from the 1641 printing and cited parenthetically by act, scene, and page numbers. In the case that no scene number is provided, such as during the play's choral interludes between Boy and Damplay, the act and page numbers are provided.

25. Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2006), 111–31.

26. Moncrief and McPherson, *Performing Maternity*, 1.

27. See John Orrell, *The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).