

FALLING INTO THE RABBIT HOLE:  
MONSTROSITY, MODESTY,  
AND MARY TOFT

by

PIPER CRISP DAVIS

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ABSTRACT

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Piper Crisp Davis, M.A.

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Supervising Professor: Johanna M. Smith

The obstetrical hoax perpetrated by Mary Toft in eighteenth-century England is worth the further attention of English scholars, not only because numerous literary texts are inspired by or linked to the incident, but also because existing studies frequently simplify this contemporary cultural fascination by associating it with theories of monstrosity. In this paper, I demonstrate that attempts to examine the rabbit births through the lens of monstrosity are complicated by the imprecise nature of language and the multiple meanings of the term *monstrous*, while attempts at objective observation are frustrated and deconstructed by satirists, by other scientists, and even by the object of the experiment. Using Haraway's and Picciotto's theories to analyze primary scientific and satirical texts surrounding the Toft incident, my thesis introduces terms and research methods that may promote additional inquiry into an event which influenced eighteenth-century reproductive theories and challenged existing systems of epistemology.

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CHAPTER 1  
THE RABBIT WOMAN IN CRITICAL REVIEW

The monstrous and Mary Toft: this association is found so frequently in recent scholarship that it seems almost absurd to question their relevance. For scholars who analyze Toft's ostensible delivery of seventeen mutilated rabbits in accordance with the theory of maternal impressions (a theory which holds mothers responsible for fetal deformity by postulating that the unruly feminine mind has the power to warp the generative functions of the female body), this woman's case is disturbing because either the products of her body or the processes of her reproductive system are monstrous. However, close analysis of the way in which the term 'monstrous' is used in eighteenth-century texts reveals that eighteenth century authors and audiences were less eager than modern analysts to simplify the issue of monstrosity. Instead, the term is frequently applied by contemporary authors in surprising ways, which indicate that they are more concerned with issues such as epistemology, identity, integrity, and authority than they are with Mary Toft's 'monstrous' bodily functions. *St. Andre's Miscarriage, or a Full and True Account of the Rabbet-Woman*, for instance, plays upon the changeable nature of the term to characterize all parties involved with the case as 'monstrous' in some sense:

'Tis monstrous a Woman such a Cheat shou'd pretend;  
'Tis monstrous two Surgeons such a Cheat shou'd befriend;  
But the Monster of Monsters, beyond Comprehension,  
Is that they expected a monstrous Pension. (ll. 33-36)

It is significant that this text minimizes Toft's physical monstrosity in comparison with her own devious behavior, her surgeons' mental deficiencies, and the moral depravity of all parties

involved, because these meanings of the word 'monstrous' in eighteenth century England, which are rarely explored very well in modern critical reviews of the Toft hoax, are vital to understanding public fascination with the case.

In this chapter, Toft's cultural importance is established through a review of the scholarship that has determined her relationship to eighteenth century works of art and literature. Although an anonymously written and illustrated poem, *The Doctors in Labour*, represents Toft as a minor point of interest by dubbing her "a new whim wham from Guildford," scholarship demonstrates that a significant number of contemporary texts can be read as either influenced by or entwined with the rabbit woman phenomenon. However, in order to explain the cultural fascination with Toft that is evidenced by these literary and artistic connections, this chapter also explores the complex issue of the monstrous by examining, critiquing, and supplementing modern critical studies that view Toft through the lens of monstrosity.

### 1.1 From Whim Wham to Cultural Phenomenon

In 1726, twenty-three year old Mary Toft, the wife of a poor cloth worker, created a narrative of reproductive deception that captured the attention of the English nation. When she ostensibly began giving birth to rabbits, Toft generated a level of serious public discourse that seems excessive, considering the ridiculousness of her claim. Even so, the fact that Toft's rabbits were an issue of public concern is evidenced not only by the number of scientific texts that arise around issues related to her case, but also by the extent to which her activities inspired literary and artistic responses. Despite poverty and illiteracy, Toft managed to influence cultural discourse long beyond the few months of her notoriety. Her story is made more remarkable and deserving of attention from scholars of English studies by the fact that she produced fiction, not with a pen, but with her unmistakably female body.

When literary and cultural products of eighteenth century women are discussed, the name Mary Toft is rarely mentioned; nevertheless, a few scholars have recognized that Toft

was either directly or indirectly the subject of many literary, journalistic, and artistic compositions during the second quarter of the century. Since many other scholars have already demonstrated the possibility that Toft's case may have influenced the publication or interpretation of significant eighteenth century literary works, this study focuses on primary texts that deal directly with the Toft case; however, the significance of these texts is built upon the work of scholars who have established the role of Toft's rabbit births as a cultural phenomenon and literary influence.

Dennis Todd, Carol Barash and others have provided convincing evidence of intertextuality between accounts of Toft's case and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which was published in the year of the hoax. In her psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations of Swift's novel, Barash identifies the Toft incident as part of an important pattern of cultural changes, which include "the construction of middle-class gender identity, changing notions of women's roles in reproduction, and increasing regulation of male homosexuality" (443).<sup>1</sup> Primary texts support Barash's assertion that "Toft's and Gulliver's stories are part of a near cultural obsession with monstrous births, monstrous mothers, and the possibility that maternity itself was something dangerous, excessive and in need of public regulation" (446). Ideally, the role of the male physician was to provide such regulation. In order to do so, however, physicians must maintain the ability to report objectively on their patients; their failure to do so was equated with the collapse of a rational world. Once Toft's deception was revealed, several texts compared the scientific methods of her attending physicians and surgeons unfavorably with those of Swift's fictional protagonist:

It is well known that the Town has lately been amazed with idle relations by the Gullivers, St. André's and Howards of the age; and it is as certain that these Amazements have been carried out in their respective Capacities, of Surgeons, Captains, Dancing-Masters, Anatomists, Warreners, Coney-Catchers, &c. and they don't stick to tell us that there are Flying Islands and Rational Horses ...

and that Mary Toft of Godliman has been delivered of seventeen Rabbits.  
(Braithwaite 6)

The fact that a critique of Nathaniel St. André and John Howard, two of the nation's most respected anatomists and surgeons, was written under the pseudonym Lemuel Gulliver not only demonstrates the depth of public outrage surrounding Toft's claims but also illustrates the ways in which the case was intricately linked with Swift's fictional narrative. When Gulliver announces his refusal to "suffer any upstart Pretender of what Profession soever, to monopolize and vend his Absurdities within this [his] native Country, without such Animadversions as may serve to warn the publick against him" (32), he characterizes satirical prose like Swift's as necessary for the protection of the public good in a world filled with Toft-like deceptions.

Both Toft and Lemuel Gulliver are depicted in several prints of William Hogarth. Ronald Paulson notes that *Cunicularii, or the Wise Men of Godliman in Consultation*, the Hogarth print which most prominently features Toft, appeared only two days before *The Punishment of Lemuel Gulliver*.<sup>2</sup> However, the connections between these two drawings do not end with their dates of publication. Paulson's analysis reveals parallels between Hogarth's depictions of Toft and Gulliver, not the least of which are their positions within the frame, the angle at which they lie, the representations of the bodies, and the "intrusion of [their] nether parts." Paulson draws analogies between Gulliver's Lilliputians and Toft's rabbits, as well as between Gulliver's authorities and Toft's physicians, concluding that "[b]oth Gulliver and Toft are passive parties being exploited by their 'betters,' and both lend themselves to the exploitation." Using similarities in figure size and placement to visually reinforce these interpretations of Hogarth's drawings, Paulson concludes that Hogarth's *Cunicularii* not only represents Toft, but also reinforces cultural connections between her hoax and Swift's narratives.

If Toft's relationship to the works of Hogarth and Swift is not enough to establish the significance of her role in eighteenth century English literature and art, perhaps *The Discovery: Or, the Squire Turned Ferret*, a ballad written by Alexander Pope and William Pulteney (1727),



will convince readers of this thesis that the Toft incident made an important and lasting cultural impression. Like Hogarth's paintings of Lemuel Gulliver, which frequently associate Swift's fictional character with contemporary political figures, *The Discovery* clearly emphasizes the political undertones of the Toft hoax. The central target of Pope's and Pulteney's satire is not Toft but Samuel Molyneux, astronomer, natural philosopher, and secretary to the Prince of Wales. Primary texts by Toft's attending surgeons and anatomists make it clear that Molyneux was present and enthusiastic in the early stages of the rabbit-births, but his public claims of involvement in the deliveries vary widely from enthusiastic personal participation to detached neutral observation. Once doubts about the authenticity of the births began to surface, Molyneux's public position wavered depending upon his audience, despite his earlier assertion that he did "not perceive the least circumstance of fraud in the Conduct of this Affair" (qtd. in Whiston 115).

After establishing Molyneux's vacillation as a pattern of behavior that extends beyond his response to the Toft hoax and into his political beliefs, Dennis Todd reads *The Discovery* as significant not only because it represents feminine deception as frustrating Molyneux's attempts to gain scientific knowledge through observation but also because Molyneux's changeable behavior "comically echoed the way he had changed [political] parties, assumed poses, attempted to remain loyal to the prince, and yet excused himself to the king's party" (78). In this text, the rabbit woman's deception of major political and scientific minds becomes representative of several larger social issues: the corruption of the court and the futility of scientific observation. These themes are tied together by the implication that "at court, knowledge has become merely an instrument of position and status." When the unnamed subject of Pope's poem manages to bear rabbits, characters like Molyneux and Davenant (identified in the poem as M-I-n-x and D---nt) become embroiled in their competitive desire to discover the truth of the "secret" (l. 27). As the poem progresses, the focus shifts from Molyneux's inability to accurately observe the nature of the births to his shame at being publicly

revealed as incompetent. The fictionalized version of Molyneux wishes that the rabbit birthing incident had never occurred because of the resultant damage to his reputation.

However, the rabbit woman most certainly refused to fade easily from the public's attention. Although the flurry of publications directly related to Toft's rabbits dwindled with her conviction and incarceration in Bridewell prison, the incident "lay just on the threshold of consciousness, provoking a sense of wonder and disquiet and resurfacing in new, sometimes oblique, forms" (Todd 36). In his analysis of Pope's *The Dunciad*, Todd provides a convincing argument that Toft's cultural importance may extend beyond those texts which specifically represent her case. Although Pope began writing *The Dunciad* in 1725 (prior to Toft's scandal), Todd claims that understanding the rabbit-woman incident may be essential to thoroughly understanding the poem. He argues that the central image of *The Dunciad* is the goddess Dulness, a monster-breeding mother who, like Mary Toft, is "a vision of a mind so governed by the mechanisms of the body that the boundaries of self-identity give way to incoherence" (179). Todd claims that the driving force embodied in Dulness is the force of the imagination, and that interpretation of her is therefore bound to cultural understanding of the anxieties surrounding Toft and the question of the maternal mind's power to make physical impression upon the fetus.

Because Toft's case is so thoroughly connected to the question of the maternal imagination, her literary and cultural influence did not end with the discovery of her deception. In fact, the theory of maternal impressions (simply stated: the idea that a pregnant woman could change the shape and appearance of her fetus with her imagination) was rarely questioned before Toft's claim was revealed to be fraudulent. The Toft scandal, however, sparked a flurry of scientific debate on the subject. Echoes of Toft's associations with maternal impressions continued to emerge in literary and cultural forums long after the theory had been officially abandoned by scientists. Bonnie Blackwell argues the significance of Toft's influence on Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, which was published more than thirty years after her hoax was discovered. Blackwell argues that "it is necessary to

understand how thoroughly [Tristram's mother Elizabeth's] characterization is imprinted by the legendary tale of the Rabbit Breeder of Godalming," and that without such understanding, it is impossible to "access Elizabeth Shandy as sympathetic heroine" (97). Blackwell illustrates the parallels between the labor of Elizabeth Shandy and that of Mary Toft first by pointing out that Shandy's ideal man-midwife, Mr. Manningham, is none other than Sir Richard Manningham, Fellow of the Royal Society, and author of *An Exact Diary of What was Observ'd During a Close Attendance upon Mary Toft* (1726). Blackwell reads *Tristram Shandy* as a critique of medicalization in childbirth, an approach intended to "valiantly end [a woman's] labor with surgical intervention in the briefest time possible" (101), despite the possibility of adverse effects to mother or child. This philosophy, in which laboring mothers are viewed as clockwork women, is frequently dangerous to mothers and babies. However, Blackwell points out that the concept of the "mechanical mother" is ideal for dealing with Toft's artificial labors, explaining that "one of the perfections of this patient is that she doesn't care what happens to the rabbit/baby." When Sterne chooses a baby damaged by both medical intervention and maternal imagination to narrate his tale, according to Blackwell, he is deliberately constructing a character who is shaped by forces that have been known to produce disastrous results in real-life situations. Although the associations might not be immediately apparent to modern readers, eighteenth century audiences would have found it difficult to ignore the multiple connections between Toft and Shandy.

The tone, content, and quantity of public discourse surrounding Mary Toft's public hoax demonstrate the fact that her case generated extensive interest in contemporary audiences. The fact that Toft's reproductive deception inspired lengthy scientific debates, poetry, art, and song has been established and discussed by scholars like Todd, Paulson, Bondeson and Blackwell. However, the question of why eighteenth century society found Toft's ruse so compelling is less easily answered.

## 1.2 Monstrous Beginnings

Modern literary critics have most frequently cited an eighteenth century fascination with monstrosity and medical curiosities to explain public fascination with the rabbit woman phenomenon. In fact, the term 'monster' frequently appears in conjunction with Mary Toft, particularly in modern texts. Even the titles of books and articles containing discussions of Toft reveal the truth of this observation: *Imagining Monsters*, by Dennis Todd, *Emblematic Monsters*, by A.W. Bates, and "Eighteenth Century 'Monsters' and Nineteenth Century 'Freaks'" by Phillip K. Wilson are examples. To modern readers, whatever Toft's motive may have been, a case in which a woman inserts dead rabbits into her own vagina fits well within the realm of the 'monstrous' because of the pathological nature of the conduct. From a Freudian perspective, it is easy to imagine a psychoanalytical reading of the rabbit-woman incident in which Toft is identified at least as sexually deviant, if not monstrous, as a result of her behavior. However, in order to truly understand the dynamics of the Toft case, it is necessary to interrogate modern assumptions about the definition of monstrosity along with those shared by Toft's contemporaries: when and how did eighteenth century authors use the word *monstrous* to describe the rabbit woman's antics?

In primary texts association of the Toft case with the term *monstrous* is frequently problematic because of the many ways in which the term can be defined. As Bates explains, the term 'monstrous' had developed a very specific meaning in eighteenth century scientific literature. While earlier texts suggest that "*monstrous* signified to the reader something more than just strangeness or deformity," by the early eighteenth century the word had become "a technical term within medicine signifying a child with severe congenital malformations" (13). Relying upon a primary text written in 1672 by the French physician François Bouchard, Bates distinguishes between the usage of the word *monster*, used for aberrations of nature that can still be explained by natural forces, and the word *prodigy*, used for occurrences that appear to be entirely against the laws of nature. By this definition, a deformed human birth would be

categorized as monstrous, but rabbit births went beyond the monstrous and into the realm of the prodigious.<sup>3</sup>

When referring to the products of Toft's labors, most accounts recognize the animals as rabbits rather than as monstrous or deformed human fetuses. Even at the height of Toft's performance, before it became fashionable to express doubts concerning the authenticity of her case, the animals might have been referred to as "Præter-natural Rabbets" as a way to distinguish them from ordinary rabbits and to express the wonder of the event, but they were very rarely called monsters.

This is not to say that Toft did not valiantly attempt to give birth to monsters. To the contrary, she had a vested interest in doing so, since parents of children with deformities were frequently able to profit by exhibiting their offspring in "raree shows," taverns, coffee houses, or, in the cases of the most provocative and intriguing defects, in lucrative private showings (Wilson 4). The fact that Toft had recently suffered a very real and painful miscarriage, in which she delivered "a substance which she said was like a large lump of flesh" (St. André 192), may have occasioned the rabbit woman's hoax. While every family hopes for healthy children, the exhibition of a deformed child could have helped to provide for the Tofts' other children. In the absence of the economic relief that such an exhibition could bring, the family may have conjectured that a manufactured monstrosity would be nearly as good.

Accordingly, Toft, who eventually became known as the Rabbit Woman of Godalming, began her journey into infamy with the ostensible birth, not of a rabbit, but of, by most definitions, a true 'monster': an unrecognizable hybrid creature formed from parts of a mutilated cat and what Dennis Todd describes as "the backbone of an eel [the Toft family] had eaten for dinner the previous Sunday" (6). Despite the family's best efforts, Todd reports that this first attempt failed to attract the attention of John Howard, a Guildford surgeon and man-midwife, who examined the creature but then failed to return for several weeks, apparently unimpressed and unconvinced. In any case, it is apparent that Howard "never knew or heard of the woman or

her friends until then and at first took [the claim] to be an imposition upon him” (St. André 193). Perhaps Howard secretly suspected that the claim was a hoax intended to generate income, or perhaps he simply preferred to avoid association with a family unlikely to be able to afford his bill.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever his initial objections may have been, Howard was irresistibly drawn to Toft’s claim and did eventually return to Guildford again and again; as an experimentalist, he was “interested in ‘rare’ objects; this meant he was interested in weird ones” (Picciotto 39). Howard was prepared to challenge assumptions, but he refused to believe what he had not seen or experienced for himself.<sup>5</sup> Todd claims that delivery of the ‘monster’s’ head was the defining moment of Howard’s faith, reporting that “the head and one foot had been mislaid,” but that “Howard would not believe it was a true monstrous birth until he had delivered the head” (7). Obliging, the Toft family (for it is logistically impossible that Toft could have perpetrated the entire hoax without their complicity) procured the first available animal head – a rabbit’s head – and allowed Howard to personally perform the delivery.

Todd labels this shift from ‘monstrous’ births to rabbit births as accidental, necessitated by the family’s inability to find and sufficiently mutilate all the body parts of the original ‘monster.’ He claims that the Tofts “had not planned for the hoax to involve rabbits,” but that “with the delivery of the head, they were committed” to the new singular identity of Mary Toft’s babies (7). However, examination of primary texts in which the products of Toft’s deliveries are subject to skeptical scientific scrutiny reveals a different reason for abandoning the original ‘monstrous’ construction.

Monstrosity, as defined by eighteenth century science, is the malformation of the human fetus. While disagreement on the causes of monstrosity still abounded, and range from the pregnant woman’s power to misshape the fetus with her imagination to divinely predestined malformation of the homunculus, few eighteenth century scientists would claim that the birth of

animals to human women fits the definition of monstrosity. The hybrid creature is defined as a “monster” not because it is a malformed human, but because it is a malformed rabbit:

The first animal did not appear to be a perfect Rabbet in all its parts, three of the feet being like the paws of a cat, the stomach and the intestines being like those of the same animal ... the bones of this creature being also different in substance and structure from those of common Rabbets, the head and one paw only excepted. (St. Andrè 182)

The ability of scientists to identify the presence of two distinct species in this hybrid ‘monster’ may have been unexpected by the Tofts, who made an obvious attempt to render the cat unrecognizable by removing the heart and lungs entirely from “their natural situation ... squeeze[ing them] out between the upper ribs and Vertebrae of the neck” (182). In any case, Toft and her assistants quickly recognized that their efforts to create monstrosity were less successful than they had hoped and changed tactics to meet the needs and expectations of their audience. All future births consisted only of recognizable rabbit parts. Once the rabbit form of the ‘monstrous births’ had been established, Mary Toft began to relate dramatic tales of her encounters with and urgent longing for rabbits during pregnancy. The addition of this story only served to make the hoax more convincing by associating it with the established scientific theory of maternal impressions.

Nevertheless, the hybridity of the first creature, combined with the ability of scientists to identify the techniques used to create the “pretended Monster” later becomes a point of vulnerability at which skeptics like Thomas Brathwaite attack the Toft case as fraudulent. After “returning the parts [of the monster] to their natural Situation” before the eyes of an assembled group of observers, Brathwaite declares, “some of the ingenious Persons that were at the bottom of the Cheat had cut a Cat to Pieces in like Manner with the Rabbets... to make the Delivery appear the more extraordinary” (21-23). Although this first birth resulted in a creature that suited contemporary scientific definitions of monstrosity, both the origin and the nature of

this monster were highly contested. Once this controversial evidence of ‘monstrosity’ was disregarded, the prodigious births of rabbit babies to a human mother were left as the best evidence to support Toft’s extraordinary claim.

However, the disqualification of Toft’s rabbit babies as monstrous does not mean that the term has no relevant application to her case. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the word ‘monstrous’ was used in multiple ways around 1726, including “a prodigy [or] a marvel” and “a person of repulsively unnatural character ... a monstrous example of evil.” These definitions not only extend the number of ways the term can be applied to Toft, but also reach beyond her physical manifestations of abnormality and into the realm of ethical standards as violated by nearly everyone involved with the case.

### 1.3 Money, Man-midwives, and Other Monstrous Problems

What may have begun as a desperate family’s attempt to generate income through the perpetuation of a hoax was transformed by Howard into a scientific discovery. Through his direct observation, Howard had become “qualified to discern the strange in the familiar and render it visible to others” (Picciotto 39). Once the rabbit head had been delivered, Howard began to contact other anatomists and surgeons about the phenomenal birth. Soon Toft was performing births almost daily before audiences of surgeons, physicians and man-midwives. While her artificially constructed monstrous offspring was rejected as authentic by many physicians and surgeons, the prodigious “Præter-natural Rabbet” births were widely accepted as possible, primarily because Toft reported “a constant and strong desire to eat Rabbets” (St. André 191). Contemporary scientific theories of maternal impressions, which held that women had the power to transform the shape of their fetuses with imaginations, fears, and longings, rendered it not only possible but unsurprising that “very poor and indigent” women who could not fulfill their intense cravings could produce offspring misshapen even beyond the bounds of humanity.<sup>6</sup>



Had she succeeded in her initial attempt to birth a 'monster,' Toft's story might have ended with a few profitable public showings. Instead, her failure resulted in a prodigy that satisfied those "desirous of a fact of which there was no instance in nature" (St. André 173). In his study of medical curiosities, Jan Bondeson focuses as much on this desire as on the oddities themselves. Despite the fact that his scholarly investigation of the Toft incident is located somewhere between a chapter exploring spontaneous human combustion and another chapter investigating the occurrence of tailed people, it soon becomes evident that the real medical curiosities of his study are the anatomists, surgeons, and physicians:

The Mary Toft scandal displays the London medical world of the early 1700s at its very worst. The doctors were shown up as ignorant, avaricious fools, toadying before the king and courtiers. Nearly all those involved in the scandal wrote pamphlets afterward to justify their own actions and blacken those of their adversaries. (140)

Bondeson's characterization of the medical men is supported by an examination of primary texts.

In the few months between Toft's first rabbit birth and the revelation of her deception, a number of publications proclaiming her authenticity appeared, but it is "difficult to find anyone who was willing to deny the story before the hoax was exposed" (Todd 39). The best scientific minds of England either were convinced of her authenticity or were restrained from speaking objections by their respect for the opinions of colleagues who argued that:

[I]t cannot be doubted but all such persons as are not governed by prejudice, or some worse motive, will suspend their judgment till these facts come to their knowledge by a more certain way, than by flying reports and conjectures. (St. André 170)

Ironically, the very same spirit of experimental philosophy that drove Toft's physicians onward in hopes of discovering the secrets of the natural world also served to silence dissenting voices

from other members of the scientific community, who might otherwise have revealed secret physical deceptions and scientific incompetence at work in the investigation of Toft. In this cultural climate, which characterizes the only voices that dare to poke fun at Toft, her doctors, and her rabbit births as “flying reports and conjectures,” it is hardly surprising that Toft was able to perpetrate her hoax. However, satirical representations of Howard, St. André, Molyneaux, and other man-midwives identify the problematic aspects of their overt enthusiasm: the determination of those who “Resolv’d this *Secret* to explore, / And search it to the *Bottom*” left little room for dissenting voices to question the authenticity of Toft or the competence of her supporters (Pope *The Discovery* Ll. 23-24). Few cases in history provide such rich textual examples of scientific curiosity gone so monstrously awry.

While some analyses categorize the surgeons as monstrously curious, others label Toft and her accomplices as monstrously greedy. These criticisms are difficult to dismiss, considering the amount of publicity and the number of publications sold by the medical men who attended the Rabbit Births. Although there is no evidence that Toft was paid large sums for her performances, several texts document the wealthy men’s concern for her comfort and compensation. For example, Toft was escorted in comfort from Godalming to Guildford and eventually was installed in a London bath house, Lacy’s Bagnio, so that she could be carefully and publicly observed. Cyriacus Ahlers, a representative of King George I, is reputed to have promised Toft a royal pension, but this story may have been circulated in order to discredit the skeptical Ahlers.<sup>7</sup> Even if her own economic acquisition was negligible, Toft’s physicians stood to gain a great deal in terms of the establishment of their authority in the burgeoning field of man-midwifery, and the development of political power as they competed for positions of royal favor.

The representation of man-midwives as monstrous is neither new nor limited to a single text. In *Bodies Politic*, Roy Porter examines visual representations of disease, death, and doctors in the long eighteenth century, concluding that Hogarth’s *Cunicularii*, which is subtitled

*The Wise Men of Godlimen*, “cast[s] the doctors who promoted [Toft] as Charlatans freakier than the freak” (53). Porter examines Hogarth’s representation of Sir Richard Manningham, whose “meteoric rise from apothecary to physician and finally to knight” is illustrated and critiqued through a series of visual contrasts in clothing, hairstyle, and position within the frame (53). Similarly, Porter observes that the figure of St. André, who began his illustrious career not as a man-midwife or surgeon, but as a dancing-master, holds a fiddle tucked beneath his arm and stands with one leg aloft, as though ready to resume that “incurably frivolous profession.” The physicians and surgeons in Hogarth’s print seem particularly feminized, especially when contrasted to the robust figures of Toft in labor, her female attendant, and even the male “Rabbit getter” who stands on the left side of the frame (Hogarth qtd. in Porter 54). Even this feminization of the male is a manifestation of abnormality or monstrosity that deserves to be explored in relation to the Toft affair.

The fact that Hogarth creates visual ambiguity between the sexes is unsurprising in the context of eighteenth century debates over the character of the man-midwife. Londa Schiebinger discusses the confusion that ensued from man-midwives’ “incursion into a female domain” (106), explaining the eighteenth century theory of sexual complementarity. Proponents of this theory argue that “there are certain employments and vocations more proper for one sex than another: a woman who sets up an academy for fencing and riding aims at something above her sex, but a man sinks beneath his sex when he interferes in the female province” (109). While Toft’s monstrous offspring blur the line between human and animal, eighteenth century texts are equally concerned with the nature of individuals who blur the line between male and female. Because man-midwives imposed upon the most private of women’s private spheres, and because they laid claim to expertise in areas that seemed innately feminine, questions of gender ambiguity seemed inevitable. On page 107 of *The Mind has no Sex?*, Schiebinger provides a copy of a rarely seen drawing: Frontispiece to [S.W. Fores], *Man-Midwifery Dissected* (London, 1793). The illustration, which claims to depict “a newly discovered

animal,” is of a midwife, dissected with a vertical line through the center of the body. The left side of the figure is male and stands in a laboratory full of bottles, potions and disturbingly large instruments. The right side of the figure is female; she stands in a flowery kitchen before an inviting fire, on which a pot warms. Her hand, which holds a cloth and gestures invitingly toward the stove, provides a striking contrast to the hand of the man-midwife, which holds a menacing pair of forceps militantly at his side. Perhaps the most telling feature of this illustration, however, is the feminization of the man-midwife, which is effected not only through his literal physical connection with the female but also through the presence of items like “Love Water” and “Cream of Violets” on a shelf that is clearly labeled “for my own use.” Despite this harsh visual treatment of the man-midwife, the artist provides no visual indications that the female midwife is being satirized as masculine.

Schiebinger notes that the term *man-midwife* became the cause of gender-related linguistic confusion:

... a surgeon and man-midwife practicing in London in the 1730's, queried, “how can a man be a wife without being a hermaphrodite?” To whom does the “wife” in the term *midwife* refer? Is it the wife about to be delivered of child and pain, or is it the woman assisting the birth? ... [T]he woman might not be a wife at all, but a maid, or indeed, a widow. In view of these uncertainties, [this surgeon] suggested calling a man assisting a birth a “mid-man” and the woman in attendance a “mid-woman.” (Schiebinger 107)

The surgeon about whom Schiebinger is writing is John Douglas, although he is mistakenly identified as Edmund Chapman in her text.<sup>8</sup>

Like the Forbes Frontispiece, which declares the man-midwife to be a newly discovered animal, Douglas's diatribe questions the humanity of the “midman” in multiple ways. Monstrosity is implied by the suggestion of hermaphroditism, but also by the association of the male physician with cruel and unnatural practices of mechanical intervention during childbirth.

Douglas levels accusations of inhuman treatment against male practitioners by analyzing case after case in which man-midwives “took Hooks or Knives and carved the Children to pieces and often also destroyed the Mother” (1). Unfortunately, the monstrosity that Douglas discusses is no hoax. Toft’s rabbit babies, which also were delivered in mangled pieces, seem eerily imitative of reality when viewed through the lens of the graphic descriptions Douglas published within a decade of the Toft incident.

Clearly, the question that should be addressed by this study is not whether the Toft case fits in with studies of monstrosity; the problem is rather that too many of those involved with the case can be labeled as *monstrous*, in too many different ways. Regardless of whether the term *monstrous* is applied to Toft or to her attendants, its use is clearly complicated by cultural interpretations. In discussing the rabbit-woman hoax, monstrosity can refer to physical deformities: those created by maternal impressions or those imagined by the misogynistic tendency to view female bodies as dangerous and unpredictable during reproduction. Alternatively, monstrosity can be defined in terms of the ethical deviance represented by greed and deception. Monstrosity can also be interpreted in terms of moral depravity, which results from single-minded pursuit of knowledge, without regard to human life or dissenting opinion. Although many critical analyses do not fully explore all the possible applications of the monstrous to Toft’s situation, analysis of primary texts reveals eighteenth century awareness of the issues raised by Toft to be complex, multifaceted, and deeply rooted in questions of knowledge, gender, and agency.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MONSTROUS WITNESS

Although many scholars have explored the influence of Mary Toft on canonical literary texts, little attention has been paid to the numerous scientific reports and satirical flyers that arise directly from the incident. These texts, which are written by surgeons, anatomists, man-midwives, journalists, and anonymous satirists, range in tone from objective to derisive, and vary in form from the scientific report to the ribald ballad. It is difficult to systematically examine such a wide range of diverse texts. However, as the texts represent modes of public response, such examination is necessary to any cultural analysis of the Toft scandal.

Individuals reviewing and responding to Toft's claim tended to have one of three reactions: belief, skepticism, or scorn.<sup>9</sup> The division of primary texts into these three categories presents several challenges, not the least of which is difficulty in determining the author's true response. For example, skilled satirists whose primary rhetorical purpose is derision of physicians may pretend to defend Toft's actions or authenticity. Those convinced of the rabbit births might feign skepticism in order to appear unbiased, while hardened skeptics who intend to expose the fraud frequently imitate the language of neutrality in order to gain access to information. Additionally, some authors combine more than one type of response in a single text. For this reason, the texts discussed in this study are not categorized into sets of texts that "support," "discredit," or "disparage" Toft and her associates. However, readers should keep in mind that this analysis is based at least in part upon identification of the ways in which authors express one or more of these three responses, particularly since such analysis of authorial response is of utmost importance in defining the ways in which texts reflect or respond to cultural values.

Another difficulty in categorizing texts, or even in attempting to discuss them individually, is that all of the surviving pamphlets, fliers, articles, or booklets related to Toft and her rabbit births exist in conversation with one another. While the general order of the conversation is from belief to skepticism and finally to derision, notable exceptions to this pattern exist. The fact that a few authors begin to make jests at Toft's expense even before her deception is revealed, along with the fact that at least one or two authors continue to insist upon her authenticity long after it makes sense to do so, means that chronological categorization of response is difficult. In discussing each text, this study will disregard chronological order, but will still attempt to situate texts within contemporary public discourse.

Despite the fact that individual responses to the scheme provide exceptions to any attempt to categorize or organize these accounts chronologically, a rudimentary progression can be identified in many instances, from the earliest accounts, which cast doctors in the role of objective scientific observers, to later satirical texts, which emphasize the downfall of the objective scientist and his knowledge. This chapter will demonstrate that the agent of the change from scientific objectivity to satirical disorder is feminine deception, enacted not as physical production of monstrosity but as performance of monstrosity, which wreaks havoc in the medical theatre by undermining attempts at objective scientific observation.

### 2.1 Monsters in the Garden: Sexuality and Scientific Inquiry

The association of feminine deception with monstrosity is hardly a new one, even in eighteenth century England. In fact, its story is almost as old as the biblical story of creation. The idea that male acquisition of knowledge could be undermined by feminine deception began in the Garden of Eden. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, it is only the feminine Eve who communicates directly with the monstrous serpent, but her act begins a chain of events that not only sentences women to suffer pain in childbirth but also frustrates masculine intellectual pursuits by condemning men to physical labor. For eighteenth century experimentalists,

connections between spiritual knowledge and scientific inquiry are traced back to their origins in Edenic mythology. Joanna Picciotto explains this association best:

Experimentalism challenged traditional forms of literacy and divinity by extending the Protestant call of *sola scriptura* to the first book God wrote: nature ... [this] fantasy of a primitive religion based on natural investigation took at its point of departure Francis Bacon's celebrated account of Eden as a place of knowledge and discovery. (36)

As early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, experimental scientists began to conceive the spiritual innocence of man as an epistemological state in which knowledge and insight about the workings of the natural world, far from representing a state of sin, "characterized a regimen of self-exertion whose aim was to *reverse* the fall" (37).

Tracing the experimentalist philosophies of Bacon, Boyle, and Newton, Picciotto's analysis examines ways in which these men of science shaped eighteenth century epistemology with their earlier quests to gain "carnal knowledge without submitting to carnal temptation" (41). Picciotto demonstrates that the metaphors used by Newton and Boyle as they describe their attempts to peel away nature's deceptive veneer of beauty and sensual attraction to examine the inner workings and deeper truths of the natural world are heavily laden with Edenic references that "manage to transform even the eating of the apple into a form of innocent inquiry." However innocent the inquiry may appear, this world view implicates the female body in eighteenth century experimentalists' sense of isolation from the natural world: if collusion with the feminine resulted in the loss of paradise and all of its associated wisdom, then objective and detached observation of the feminine might be the means of regaining Adam's birthright in the form of knowledge.

Rather than imagining the intellectual state of pre-lapsarian man as void of knowledge, Picciotto argues that experimental scientists viewed paradise as a state of complete knowledge. In Eden, Adam was able to identify and name each animal and plant by simple observation of its natural characteristics, but this knowledge was lost with the fall and expulsion from the



garden. For experimental philosophers, who believed that loss of knowledge was the primary consequence of the fall of man, diligent attempts to regain that knowledge through study, experimentation, and observation were more than intellectual pursuits: they were the means of regaining man's original, pre-lapsarian perfection.

Given the connections that Picciotto establishes between experimental philosophy and Edenic mythology, it is unsurprising that Toft's deception might be associated with that of Eve in satirical texts, or that male scientists might be ridiculed as weak and stupid for their susceptibility to Toft's feminine wiles. The concept that male knowledge might be overturned by feminine seduction or deception is a pervasive one throughout Western history, and the theme is repeated frequently in texts related to the Toft scandal. Some of the most obvious eighteenth century challenges to the authoritative status of scientific observers are found in an extensive collection of satirical texts, many of which, like the first lines of Pope's "The Discovery: or, the Squire Turned Ferret" do represent Toft as the seductive feminine foil to male scientists' bumbling intellectual inquiries:

Most true it is, I dare to say,  
E'er since the Days of Eve,  
The weakest Woman sometimes may  
The wisest Man deceive. (Ll. 1-4)

As the poem progresses, the efforts of Molyneux and St. André to discover the truth of Toft's condition are visually and manually obstructed by the nature of the female body, which lends itself to secrecy. Pope satirizes scientists' best attempts to gain objective knowledge through technologies that aid observation, since "all about was so opaque" that even the most advanced telescopic lens cannot improve visibility within the recesses of the female body (l. 43). "The Discovery" also emphasizes the difficulty of directly conducting experiments or observations involving the sense of touch when attempting to uncover the secrets of feminine reproductive systems, since Pope's farcical Molyneux struggles "on tiptoe" to reach "as high as e'er he could" to detect a rabbit in Toft's vagina (Ll. 45; 47).

Representations of Toft's physicians, surgeons, and anatomists as comedic figures is one way in which eighteenth century satirists attempt to ridicule the way in which Toft, an illiterate, working-class woman, was able to create a crisis of epistemology extending far beyond the facts of her particular case. When the anonymous illustrator of "The Doctors in Labour; or a New Whim Wham from Guildford" represents St. André as a clownish jester-like character, the visual implication of his ignorance and foolishness is clear. The first lines of the poem only increase this condemnation of St. André and other doctors:

Poor Mary Toft in Ignorance was bred,  
And ne'er betrayed a deep designing Head.  
Never seemed cut out for plots: Yet ne'er did wife  
Like her impose so grossly on Man Midwife. (LI. 1-4)

While Pope's depiction of Toft as analogous to Eve emphasizes feminine deception and seduction, this representation minimizes Toft's intellectual and seductive power to emphasize the weakness and idiocy of masculine victims.

Throughout "The Doctors in Labour," there is an implication that St. André perpetuates the hoax through his clownish, attention-seeking performance. Each illustrated frame is reminiscent of a stage; some frames are flanked by the curtains of windows or beds, while the angled wooden and/or parquet floors of other frames combine with the sparseness of furniture "props" and barren walls to create the illusion of stagecraft. The angle of characters' bodies and the stilted nature of their gestures add to the impression that the entire Toft affair is nothing more than an entertaining performance, with St. André, whose ridiculous clown costume sets him apart from the other figures, as the principal performer. By promising to represent not only the "Fraud by which a Godliman woman carried on her pretended rabbit breeding" but also "the simplicity of [eighteenth century English] doctors, by which they assisted to carry on that imposture, discovered their own skill, and contributed to the Mirth of His Majesties Liege Subjects," the tagline following the poem's title confirms the visual impression presented by its illustrations.

“The Doctors in Labour” clearly represents St. André as instrumental in Toft’s deception: in it, his jester-like persona cavorts around Toft’s body, demonstrating her physical symptoms with great aplomb for public approval. Despite his agency in advertising her claim, however, he is just saved from being implicated as an accomplice in her deceit. The final frame, which finds “Poor Andrew sit[ting] upon Repenting stool / Cursing his fate in being made a Fool,” indicates the author’s belief that St. André is not an intentional accomplice in the hoax. In fact, this poem’s even-handed application of satire is unlike many of the more pointedly argumentative or critical Toft texts because it spreads responsibility for the event so evenly, without managing to either completely vilify or entirely forgive any one party, including Toft.

While Toft’s character is defended in the first frame, which cites her lowly birth and lack of education as excuses for her behavior, this defense is later negated by descriptions that represent her as highly prone to sexual fantasies, as she exclaims:

The Rabbit all day long ran in my Head,  
At Night I dreamt I had him in my Bed;  
Methought he there a Burrough try’d to make  
His Head I patted and I stroaked his Back.  
My Husband waked me and cry’d Moll for shame  
Let go – What ‘twas he meant I need not Name. (LI. 13-18)

The implication that Toft makes her rabbit claim in order to fulfill a sexual need that is not being met in her marriage is one that appears in several satirical representations. Accounts that deal with Toft’s use of rabbits to replace the proper place and function of male genitals abound.

*Much ado about Nothing, or a Plain Refutation of All that has been Written or Said Concerning the Rabbit Woman of Godalming* is an anonymous satirical text containing implications about Toft’s use of rabbits for sexual gratification that she cannot or does not receive from men. This text, written in dramatically improper grammar and spelling, under the pseudonym “Merry Tuft,” purports to be Toft’s first-person statement.<sup>10</sup> In it, the association of

rabbits (here spelled “rawbits”) with penises is extended to implicate both Toft and her physicians in sexual impropriety.

While the story of the pregnant Toft’s craving for rabbit meat had been offered as a possible explanation for her production of rabbit babies, this text turns her desire for “rawbits” into an insatiable sexual need. The author presenting him/herself as Merry Tuft describes her response as an erotic awakening occasioned by an encounter with a neighbor. Tuft declares that, although her “huzbund had giffen [her] mani and mani a Rawbit before,” there was “no comparrezon” between the two sexual experiences (13). Afterward, she declares that she valued her husband’s advances “no more then nutthink at all, but always honed and honed for my nabur’s Rawbit.” The unnamed neighbor’s flattery, as he assures Tuft that she is “a Wuman as had grate natural parts, and a large Capassiti, and kapible of beng kunserned in depe Kuntrivansis” (12), is reminiscent of the temptation of Eve as represented in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in that both seducers appeal to the vanity of their targets. While the appeal to Eve is based upon praise of her intellectual capability, the appeal to Toft is imagined in this text as praise of her ability to keep secrets from men because of her anatomical construction.

Tuft/Toft does not name her alleged seducer, but manages to cast him in a serpentine role by reducing his physical description to a single phrase about his “rawbit,” or phallus, which is “not byld nor rostid nor fricumceed but tost up skin and aul with its eres prickt up” (13). In *Much Ado*, the rabbit woman’s powerful sexual deception impedes medical and scientific investigation in much the same way that Eve’s temptation of Adam obstructs access to the epistemological paradise imagined by experimental scientists. Accordingly, she seduces each “surjohn,” although she declares that none of these men compares favorably with her initial seducer:

But he groing wary of suplyng me, fobd me off, and sade as how I had too much Affucktation for him: so he brot me one Surjohn and another Surjohn, but nun of these Rawbitts went down like his... and as for takin them at the mouth,

I cood not; for evar sense I had tastid his Rawbitt, I tuk them all tuther way, and  
I humbli cunseve it is the best way, espechally if thay are not flabby. (13-14)

In this passage, “Merry Tuft” (or the satirist writing as Toft) blames the sexual inadequacy of her “surjohns” for turning her act of feminine seduction into an act of medical deception. While the first “rawbitt” encounter was an oral experience analogous to the tasting of forbidden fruit, leaving Tuft to exclaim that she had “nevur tastid a dellikittur morsel in [her] lyf” (13), subsequent experiences with physicians are sorely lacking. Toft complains that she has never seen “such a mortul site of ugly fellurs in [her] born days, peeping and gropin, and sputtering out haf English and haf Lattin” (17), and insists that these gentlemen must be responsible for depositing rabbits inside her body, an experience she finds none too pleasant in comparison with her ideal sensual encounter.

That the author of *Much Ado* uses invented spellings to create sexual innuendo is clear in his/her use of terms like “affectation” and “rawbit.” In this text, these spellings are attributed to the sex and class of Toft as the ostensible “authur.” However, the spellings *rabbet* and *rabbit* are both commonly used in texts by educated, upper-class men. The semantic questions raised by alternative spellings of the word *rabbit* do not go unnoticed by eighteenth century satirists, who play with the fact that even the “most eminent Physicians, Surgeons, Anatomists, and Men-Midwives” indiscriminately use variant spellings that have very different linguistic connotations; one satirist even charges that “some of these Great Wits have such short Memories that they spell it both Ways in one and the same Page” (Carey 14). Although the difference between the spellings *rabbit* and *rabbet* may seem insignificant, investigation of eighteenth century meanings of these words in the Oxford English Dictionary reveals another picture.

While the word *rabbit* is identified chiefly, as one might expect, with the small furry mammal, it is also sometimes identified in eighteenth and early nineteenth century texts as “a meaningless word used as an imprecation,” according to the OED.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the word *rabbet* is defined as a carpentry term, and is used as both a noun meaning “a channel, groove, or slot ... intended to receive the edge of another piece or pieces” and a verb describing

the act of joining or “rabbeting” pieces together in an interlocking, “tongue-in-groove” construction. Given the multiple meanings of the term(s) involved, it seems likely that “Merry Tuft’s” confession is equally laden with double-entendre when she declares:

I had always Rabbett um at my tungs end: so that I had got such a habit of using myself to this wikid wurd, that I was named Rawbittin Merry long enuff afore this Misfortin hapned. (19)

At least one other Toft-related text makes use of *rabbet* as an invective; in “St. Andre’s Miscarriage,” the poulterers cry out “God Rabbet the Woman, St. Andre and all” in their frustration at the loss of business caused by Toft’s stunt.<sup>12</sup> Although it is possible, as the OED indicates, that these uses draw upon the word as a “meaningless imprecation,” it is equally likely, given the context, that the imprecation is given a very specific meaning, at least in texts related to Toft. In these instances, authors are playing with the dual meanings of the language. Drawing upon the associations that are frequently made with rabbits as animals (i.e., they reproduce rapidly, they hide in holes, etc.) and the meaning of the word *rabbet* as a carpentry term, satirists refer obliquely to sexual intercourse with a word that might otherwise have been “meaningless.”

Obviously, *Much Ado about Nothing* is filled with ribald sexual humor, but it is also laden with serious social commentary. By representing Toft/Tuft, as “an ignirunt littirat Wuman, as can nether rite nor rede” but who is nonetheless able to “rite trooth and plane Inglish” better than many other “people as set up for authurs” (22), the anonymous satirist comments on sexual politics and the privileges associated with gender, education, and wealth. In many ways, this text is at least as harsh in its representation of Toft as it is in its representation of any other individuals; however, the fictional Merry Tuft does take care to emphasize that she has been “mad a sad Cretur of by a parsel of surjohns, hoo, as all the world noes, are nun of the onnistists men” (11-12). Her stated purpose for writing, “to clere [her]self and shaim them all” is consistent with the “publisher’s” request to audiences:

It is therefore to be hoped, they will suspend their Judgments, till they have heard what she has to say for herself ... by letting their Resentments fall on *the true Impostors, or Quacks*, and not on a poor innocent Woman, whose Misfortunes they have made the Cat's Paw of their Roguery. (9)

Representations like this one, which cast physicians as even more intentionally deceptive than Toft, require further investigation. Satirical representations that lambast surgeons along with Toft may be explained by an analysis like this one, which examines the scientific failure in the context of its relationship with lost paradisiacal knowledge. However, comparing Toft with Eve does not provide an explanation of satirical responses that vilify the failure of physicians as far worse than the deception of Toft.

## 2.2 Pursuit of the Monstrous Objective

Examination of satirical representations of the Toft affair reveals the truth of Dennis Todd's assertion that "with few exceptions, the satires that came out after the affair was exposed as a hoax insisted that Mary Toft was either blameless or the least guilty of the perpetrators" (69). Todd reads these satirical responses as more significant in their exoneration of Toft than in their vilification of the man-midwives, anatomists, and surgeons who are given the blame in her stead, explaining that "guilt would imply that she had enough intelligence and industry to have carried out the hoax, and [satirists] would grant her neither" (70). His analysis suggests that eighteenth century audiences feared Toft enough that they needed to actively deny her power, even if it meant placing the blame upon male scientists.

Since, however, satirists could (and did) effectively minimize the strength of Toft's individual power by associating her act of deception with Eve's act of seduction, another explanation seems necessary to justify the time and energy spent on satirizing the Toft hoax. Ridicule and vilification of physicians may have been predicated upon the existence of the many texts in which these men obstinately argue with, accuse and threaten one another in the name of scientific inquiry. Medical professionals participate in extensive debates about Toft, some

expressing a “violent suspicion” that their colleagues have participated in the ruse (Ahlers 13), and others responding with accusations that colleagues’ unprofessional, biased conduct taints their ability to objectively “confirm [or deny] the Truth of the extraordinary Delivery” (Brathwaite 15). The situation is only worsened when Thomas Howard, a porter at Lacy’s Bagnio, is caught sneaking a rabbit to Mary Toft. In the face of this definitive evidence, which is quickly supported by depositions taken from the porter, from various rabbit sellers in Guildford and Godalming, from the midwives who attended the “births,” and from Toft herself, the same physicians who had once argued adamantly for Toft’s authenticity reverse themselves dramatically in a number of publications intended to qualify or justify their previously statements of belief.

Since these reversals take place not only in personal narratives but also in “scientific” accounts of the rabbit births, many satirical texts base their denigration of physicians on the ways in which ostensibly objective reports, by conflicting with one another and with themselves, appear unprofessional and even comical. The assumption that scientific examinations should yield similar and consistent results is responsible for the humor inherent in accounts like *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Wonderful Coney-Warren*. The anonymous author of this account pretends to argue for Toft’s authenticity, but does so by producing ridiculous supporting arguments. Satirical accounts like this one mock the processes of reasoning used by medical professionals who attempt to make the evidence in Toft’s case fit their preconceived notion of her authenticity:

We all know that the story of the Trojan Horse was at first looked on as a Fable; in this indeed the Allusion differs, that live Men were the Production of the lifeless Horse, and dead Rabbits of the live Woman, which, I hope, will be a full Confutation of those Philosophers, who hold that there is no equivocal Generation. (2)

The author’s use of this clearly satirical argument in a text that otherwise purports to carefully examine various reasonable explanations for the rabbit births implies that ‘real’ scientific reports contain similar examples of irrational argument.



Later, the same author provides a typical example of the illogical reasoning employed by scientific observers of Toft. He accomplishes this by discussing the fact that “there was Grass found in the paunch of one of the Rabbets.” The presence of grass in the stomach of one of the rabbits was a significant point of debate among real anatomists and surgeons, some of whom argued that it provided evidence of fraud, since fetal rabbits would obviously not have eaten grass, and others of whom countered that it only provided further evidence of the extraordinary nature of these particular rabbits, which could be born with grass already instilled in their stomachs from the womb. Playing upon the kinds of arguments being made in actual scientific reports, the author of *A Philosophical Enquiry* uses his observation about the grass “to confute those who held they were not Rabbits” but also to claim that the presence of grass means little about whether or not the animals had lived outside the womb, “since all Flesh is Grass.” This text comically simplifies the debate actually occurring in scientific examinations of Toft’s rabbit babies.

Examination of texts like this one might lead to the conclusion that satirists who condemn Toft’s physicians more than her actions do so because they hold the medical men to a higher standard of professionalism and objectivity, a point which means that Toft is blameless due to her own ignorance, rather than guilty because of her deceptive powers. But do these texts condemn scientists for stupidity or for complicity in feminine deception? It is frequently difficult to tell, because it seems as if, for satirists, these two faults are interchangeable when applied to Toft’s physicians. While Toft’s ability to deceive the public would provide evidence of her superior intellect, her male companions’ willingness to comply with the plan would mean their lack of intellectual capacity. Conversely, if these scientists are not intentionally deceptive, their stupidity is represented as an evil trait because it fails to protect them from the temptations of Eve, in the guise of Mary Toft.

Satirists who write about Toft and her physicians frequently address the question of whose failings are most monstrous in nature, but the term “monster” is almost always used by satirists in relation to the ethical and/or moral deficiencies of Toft and her associates; when

Douglas becomes suspicious of fraud after being refused admittance to Toft's chamber, he plays with the linguistic flexibility of the term by announcing his fear that "some *new Monster* was breeding" (15). If biological qualities of the Toft's 'fetuses' are discussed, the animals are usually called "sham-Monsters" by skeptics and "praeter-natural Rabbits" by believers (Brathwaite 21; St. André 188). However, one text differs significantly from this pattern: in his memoirs, even after apprehension of the rabbit-smuggling porter and her subsequent confession convinces almost everyone else that the affair was a fraud, William Whiston uses the term monster to refer specifically to the products of Toft's conception.

While most accounts that assert the authenticity of Toft's rabbit births appear before the revelation of her trickery (in December, 1726), Whiston's memoirs include transcriptions of a lecture, given on March 8, 1727, "The Day of the Second Earthquake at London," in which he characterizes Toft's case as one of a list of "completions" of the prophecies of Esdras, demonstrating "the fulfilling of those Signals whose Times are already past" (46). The fact that Whiston supports the authenticity of Toft's "monstrous" births, even after her confession and incarceration, is surprising, to say the least. Many scholars dismiss this account as the questionable ravings of a religious zealot.<sup>13</sup> Whiston published numerous religious prophecies, which have, as Richard H. Popkin points out in a forward to *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian*, "been treated as a bad joke" by contemporary audiences and largely ignored as irrelevant by modern scholars (xii). However, since Whiston articulates a unique perspective on both the biological monstrosity exhibited by Toft and the ethical monstrosity exercised by observers, his text is important to any cultural study that attempts to situate the Toft incident within contemporary concepts of the monstrous.

However strange it appears to be in its use of religious prophecy to critique "objective" scientific reports, Whiston's analysis of the Toft affair is not completely out of place in its cultural context, as examination of A.W. Bates' extensive study of monstrous and prodigious births demonstrates. According to this study, early modern Europeans performed the acts of recording, observing, and displaying deformed individuals as "outside the course of nature" in a

quest for deeper meaning (14). Bates identifies one of the earliest and “plainest example[s] of [this] quest for meaning [as] the belief that monstrous births were messages from God, or moral warnings, to those who were able to ‘read’ them” (11). Most of the studies reviewed by Bates reflect a shift away from superstitious or religious interpretations of monstrosity, toward a “more enlightened attitude based on exact and careful study” (25). Many scholars disagree upon exactly when this shift takes place; whether the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are characterized as belonging to the superstitious age or the scientific era, however, by most accounts these decades fall somewhere in between. Whiston’s text is a good example of this vague separation, since it combines elements of scientific observation with elements of superstitious belief. Examination of the way in which Whiston seeks to justify his belief in Toft reveals an important aspect of eighteenth century experimental science.

In his sixty-first prediction, Whiston warns that “there should be *Signs in the Women*, or more particularly, that *menstruous Women should bring forth Monsters*” (108-09). As fulfillment of this prediction, Whiston lists several instances of deformed and/or hermaphroditic children “now publickly advertised to be seen in London” (109), but pays special attention to “the poor woman who had seventeen or eighteen portions of rabbits taken out of her body,” despite the fact that the rabbit woman’s claims had been disparaged by the date of his address (110). Whiston upholds Toft’s account as authentic based upon the fact that her testimony was “generally believed by sober persons in the neighborhood,” reminding readers that the basis for this general belief was not gullibility but close examination of the evidence by rational thinkers:

Nay, Mr. *Molyneux*, the Prince’s Secretary, a very inquisitive Person, and my very worthy Friend, assured me he had at first so great a Diffidence in the Truth of the Fact and was so little biased by other Believers, even by the King himself, that he would not be satisfied until he was permitted both to see and feel the Rabbit in that very Passage whence we all come into the World out of our Mother’s Womb. (Whiston 111)

This kind of experimental scientific scrutiny, according to Whiston, results in a degree of certainty that should be trusted implicitly.

Whiston reminds readers that scientists did initially trust their observations of Toft's case. He does so by relating Molyneux's reaction to observation of Toft in this confusing statement: "Accordingly, [Molyneux] told me that he had more Evidence for it than he had that I had a nose." As strange as this analogy seems, the subsequent explanation reveals that these two men share an understanding of knowledge as based upon experience of the senses: although Molyneux could verify the existence of the other man's nose only through the sense of sight, his belief in Toft's authenticity was based upon two senses: seeing and feeling. By Whiston's assessment, Molyneux and other experimental scientists can trust their own sensory observations, even when the things they see defy popular belief or common sense.

Ironically, Whiston does not base his belief in the rabbit births upon his personal observation of Mary Toft. Instead, his argument for her authenticity is based primarily on the fact that her claim was initially believed by a large number of respectable individuals, including those of "very great Honesty, Skill, and Reputation" (110). He chooses to ignore or reject the fact that most of the individuals he lists as supporters of Toft later revise their views. Even this rejection, however, is couched in terms of observation, since Whiston lists his own observations of his colleagues' behavior as proof that their ostensible skepticism holds little weight. He claims that the medical professionals only began to "pretend to any Grounds of Suspicion" in order to protect their own reputations, and that "anyone may see [evidence of coercion] in all their Retractions" (117). In this sense, Whiston's narrative is intriguing because it both depends upon and questions the authority of objective observation.

If Whiston chooses to accept some forms of observation as valid proof of objective truth but simultaneously rejects other observations, upon what does he make this distinction? The answer to this question is found in careful analysis of statements like this one, which emphasize time and location as the primary determining factors of truth:

Neither did Mr. *Ahlers*, the King's Surgeon, nor Sir Richard *Manningham*, oppose Mr. *Howard's* and Mr. St. *André's* evidence, till the Thing was impudently laughed out of countenance, not in *Surry*, where the scene lay, but at *London*, 30 miles off. (115-16)

According to this experimental philosopher's view, it is almost ridiculous to believe that observations separated in time or place from the event being observed could possibly be trusted; however, it is just as ridiculous to believe a claim without support from observation. For example, Whiston refuses to believe Toft's confession, not only because it was not made "until she herself was threatened with a painful Operation," but also because observation of the rabbit babies revealed them to be "not true or natural Rabbits, but of præternatural Production, which it was impossible for her to procure" (116), a fact which could only be verified by very close observation and experimentation by individuals with the scientific knowledge and objectivity to make such judgments.

The fact that ostensibly qualified, objective observers later retracted their statements of belief is, for Whiston, of no consequence, because these retractions, like Toft's confession, occurred under duress. Instead of threats of physical torture like those used to induce Toft's confession, these doctors were threatened with the loss of their reputations and their practices; under these circumstances, Whiston argues, any statements they make cannot be accepted as true or objective. He makes no distinction between threats of torture endured by Toft and pressure placed upon medical professionals by satirists, claiming that "ridiculous and abusive Pictures" combine with "the grossest Banter and Ridicule" of "merry and profane scribblers" to maliciously alter facts with the intent to keep the public uninformed (120-21). The problem with scientists, then, according to Whiston, is not monstrosity in the form of stupidity or deception but cowardice in the face of monstrous intimidation: rather than exhibiting an innate inability to objectively observe and report, these physicians demonstrate a tendency to change their opinions in the face of satirical coercion.

Whiston's perspective on monstrosity is significant because, in addition to recognizing the monstrous capacity of the feminine body, he introduces the satirist as a possible perpetrator of monstrosity by drawing comparisons between the coercive power of public ridicule and the force of physical torture. However, careful examination of Whiston's point demonstrates that his concern over the destructive power of "vain Amusement" is directed not at the satirical texts, or even at their authors, but at the power of the satirist's acerbic wit to alter objective perception of reality by influencing the words and actions of individuals whose social positions qualify them as arbiters of truth (121). Ironically, in *Imagining Monsters*, which is arguably the most thorough analysis of the Toft affair, Dennis Todd characterizes the satirists against whom Whiston sets himself so firmly as holding a similar view, citing their obsession with the "complex mental phenomenon of confusion and, more particularly, [with] how this confusion is caused by a vivid sensory experience which creates a 'reality' that is, in fact, not real" (81). Clearly, this concern over the possibility of discovering reality through objective observation is one of the most important aspects of the Toft case, since it motivates both the creation and the critique of satire.

### 2.3 De-authorizing the Modest Witness

The humor of many satirical responses to Toft's scandal is based, not upon the ridiculousness of her claim, but upon the "spectacle of [a physician] trying to steady his public identity as if it were some rickety scaffolding – and making it totter and fall by his very act of trying to steady it" (Todd 81). But why should this spectacle provoke such intense public interest, amusement and outrage? Todd offers one answer to this question as he examines the ways in which texts like "St. André's Miscarriage" and "The Man-Midwife Finely Brought to Bed" feminize representations of their male subjects by collapsing them into representations of the female patient:

[M]en are transformed into laboring women, into versions of Mary Toft herself, into monsters ... many people responded with an edgy apprehension that Mary Toft represented an overwhelming power that, by sundering what was true from

what was experienced as true by the senses, could precipitate people into confusion so profound that their identities were destroyed and they were transformed into monstrous and shapeless things. (88)

While Todd's theory aptly describes the cultural concerns that keep the Toft affair so prominently in the minds of readers, it does not go far enough in explaining the process by which Toft's physicians lose their authoritative claim to declare themselves objective witnesses and reporters of truth.

For a better understanding of this process, it is necessary to understand Donna Haraway's description of the "modest witness" as a model of scientific authority arising in the late seventeenth century with the experimental work of scientists like Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle. Because the "specifically modern, European, masculine, scientific form of the virtue of modesty" involves an unmarked, "self-invisible" status that does not, theoretically, affect the scientists' observation of the natural world, narratives written by individuals whose authority is based upon this kind of objectivity should "lose all trace of their history as stories, as products of partisan projects, as contestable representations, or as constructed documents" and instead take on a "potent capacity to define the facts" (224). Haraway, as a feminist theorist, is of course not arguing for the desirability of this model; she is merely suggesting that this model is pervasive throughout the history of Western scientific investigations, particularly those based on the tradition of Boyle's experimental philosophy. Haraway articulates the theory of the modest witness in hopes that, by recognizing the mechanism by which this model works to develop "the technologies for establishing what may count as the case about the world," modern audiences may challenge and deconstruct the authoritative model as ineffective for the "second millennium" (240). The Toft hoax is scientifically and culturally significant in relation to Haraway's theory because it provides an example of an incident during which the modest witness model of authority has been successfully challenged in the past, and therefore encourages us to believe that such challenges will continue to occur in the future.

In any analysis of primary texts related to the Toft scandal, it is necessary to thoroughly understand the theoretical concepts presented in Haraway's model of the modest witness in order to describe the authoritative claims made (and lost) by Toft's physicians. Referring to studies done by Stephen Shapin and Simon Schaffer, Haraway identifies "three constitutive technologies" upon which the modest witness bases his observation of the natural world: a material technology, which consists of the scientific instruments and techniques developed in order to make observations; a literary technology, which consists of the texts that communicate knowledge to outsiders; and a social technology, which consists of the conventions used to communicate with other modest witnesses (224). While all three of these elements are extremely important in examination of primary scientific texts related to the Toft case, these technologies collapse upon themselves throughout the rabbit woman texts, perhaps because the introduction of Toft's agency as performer changes the dynamic between objective (modest) witness and passive (female) subject. In examining the material, literary, and social technologies established by these eighteenth century would-be modest witnesses, it becomes clear that the element of deception introduced by Toft's performance is an unplanned for and unwelcome addition to the epistemological world view of the experimental scientist.

Some material technologies related to scientific observation of the Toft case include the tools and techniques involved in direct experimentation with the rabbit subjects. Experiments involving dissection and microscopic observation are concerned primarily with determination of the nature and origin of the animals. While texts that support Toft report the same basic information as do texts that denounce her as a fraud, the presentation and interpretation of these facts vary greatly from one author to the next. Some witnesses view the evidence as fact, while others view it as performance. The idea that objective reporting can be tainted by a witness's predisposition now seems so obvious that it is hardly worth repeating, but the fact that these witnesses appear to be aware of their own prejudices even as they struggle to maintain the appearance of objectivity is both revealing and disturbing because it reflects a degree of deliberate intent to deceive audiences with biased opinions disguised as objective observations.



Like Haraway's modest witness, St. André attempts to rationalize evidence that the supposedly stillborn rabbits have actually been alive and breathing prior to their "birth" from Toft's vagina. Although the lungs of the rabbits floated in water, which they could only have done if they had been filled with oxygen (an impossibility if their only existence had been inside Toft's womb), St. André claims that the lung he tested was "just specifically lighter than water" and that it only rose "very slowly" when submerged (175). Faced with test results that inconveniently contradict his idea that the rabbits are præternatural creations of Toft's mind and body, St. André could have reported the results without comment, a choice which would (theoretically) have identified him as unbiased. Alternatively, he could have ignored the evidence altogether, a decision which would have confirmed his complicity in Toft's deception. Instead, however, he chooses to discuss and reinterpret them by adding subtle modifiers that make these results seem less significant than they might otherwise have appeared. This decision confirms his attempt to inhabit the objective stance of the modest witness, while demonstrating the futility of attempts to claim such a position.

Other examples of St. André's failed attempts at objectivity are found in this text, some of which are less easy to identify. While dissecting the rabbit subjects, St. André mentions that the lungs are "remarkably small and of a much darker color" than those of normal rabbits; however, these observations are offered without comment or interpretation until more than ten pages later, when he finally offers his conclusion that the animals are not, in fact, "bred in a natural way" (187). This example demonstrates a conscious attempt to demonstrate objectivity by delaying interpretation until after the material experiment is complete.

However, the principles of modest witnessing are complicated in the Toft case by the fact that they are used to both verify and denounce her claims; ostensibly 'objective' observation provides dramatically different interpretations of the same set of events, creating a crisis of epistemology that helps explain Toft's cultural significance.<sup>14</sup> The implication of St. André's "objective" report is that, if the rabbits are not real rabbits, they were truly bred by Toft and are, therefore, not part of a hoax. On the other hand, given information from the same experiment,

Thomas Brathwaite observes that “if ever an Animal has breath’d, tho’ never so small an Instant, their Lungs as constantly swim” (14), and that the floating lungs provide clear evidence not only that the rabbits are not stillborn fetuses but also that St. André exhibits evidence of “a Design to gloss over this Matter” when he claims otherwise.

Attempting once again to claim the authoritative stance of the modest witness, St. André admits to finding “five or six pellets, much of the same colour and consistence of the common dung of a rabbit” (178). This admission, like his report of the buoyant lungs, provides evidence that is contrary to his conclusion and therefore serves to identify him as an unbiased observer. However, a few lines later St. André begins to refer to these rabbit pellets in very different terms: as “mucous matter... of the nature of which is constantly found in the bowels of all foetus animals” (178). This revised terminology contradicts his earlier attempts to remain objective by characterizing the same pellets in a manner that supports his assumption of Toft’s authenticity. Brathwaite attacks St. André on this sudden switch, sarcastically noting “what a Pity it is [that] our *Narrative* Writer should have so little Skill in Anatomy, or so bad a Memory” (18). Cyriacus Ahlers finds even more to complain of in St. André’s text, since his examination of the rabbit pellets revealed “small Bits of Hay, Straw and Corn,” clear evidence that the rabbits had lived and eaten outside of Mary Toft’s womb (27). Although they may seem like petty squabbles over insignificant details, for eighteenth century readers who depend upon the conventions of modest witnessing as a method of reporting objective truth, these disagreements over material technologies in the form of experimentation represent dissolution of boundaries between truth and falsehood.

The material conditions under which observations and experiments occur are also of great concern to Toft’s witnesses. As Haraway explains, the conventions of witnessing are intricately connected with issues of public and private space. Although witnessing should be “public and collective,” it must not take place in uncontrolled public space. Instead, the space in which modest witnesses produce knowledge through observation must be “rigorously defined,” by which Haraway means that “not everyone [can] come in, and not everyone [can] testify

credibly” (225). For the physicians who presume to modestly witness and pronounce judgment on the truth of Toft’s claims, the spaces in which her performance takes place provide an ideal balance between access and restriction.

One of John Howard’s first decisions as Toft’s physician was to move her out of the privacy her home in Godalming; Howard reports in a letter to Henry Davenant, a member of the court of George I, that he has “brought [Toft] to Guildford for better convenience” (qtd. in St. Andre 173). The fact that he urges “any curious person who is pleased to come” to Guildford reinforces the idea that the move is convenient because it provides more public access to a greater number of observers. However, the space in which Toft is kept in Guildford is not entirely public, and the invitation is not truly extended to all observers. Howard’s last words to Davenant, added in a post script almost as an afterthought, are quite telling: “If you send a person, let him bring a letter from you.” This comment makes it clear that only certain individuals will be accepted into the public space of observation.

Cyriacus Ahlers describes the limitations placed upon Toft’s Guildford quarters, as he describes his trip “to the Woman’s Lodging, which was over-against Mr. Howard’s House,” and explains that Howard “would not suffer [Mr. Brand, a relative of the King’s apothecary,] to come into the room where the Patient was” (3). On more than one occasion, certain individuals (at times even those whose normative identities qualified them as modest witnesses) were denied access to Toft, in a manner that was later interpreted as an effort to conceal her hoax from prying and suspicious observers. Once the audience of qualified witnesses was exhausted at Guildford, Toft was moved to Lacy’s Bagnio in London. This space, too, provided public access; however, this access was very carefully limited and controlled. Dr. James Douglas reported that his request to visit Toft at the Bagnio was denied because neither St. André nor Howard was available at the time of his arrival. When Douglas “told several Gentlemen ... that [he] was afraid some *new Monster* was breeding” (15), he was concerned with the characters of men like Howard and St. André, who suspiciously guarded information and limited access to Toft.

Despite the fact that they were not authorized to give eyewitness accounts, other individuals were present during the rabbit woman's labors, individuals whose visible identities disqualify them as modest witnesses, but who, ironically, all but disappear from the official reports. The presence of numerous female midwives and servants of both sexes throughout Toft's labors is confirmed by the inclusion of their depositions in her trial.<sup>15</sup> However, the true significance of their presence becomes evident when readers carefully examine primary texts. Just as Haraway identifies the presence of "crucial artisans who built and tended [Boyle's] air pump" and whose labor makes Boyle's scientific observations possible (226), Toft's modest witnesses are enabled through the labor of individuals who patiently serve and observe the rabbit woman around the clock. The importance of these invisible laborers is emphasized by instances like this one in St. André's narrative:

We sent to Mr. Howard, who came to us immediately, and told us that the woman was actually in labor of the fifteenth rabbit. We had not been at his house long, before the nurse who attends the woman came to call Mr. Howard to her, she being then in one of her labor pains. (174)

Later, St. André admits that while he and Howard were away on a social call when "the nurse who attended her had delivered her, before [their] return, of the lower part of a male rabbit" (177). In his report, Ahlers complains that "several Women went in and out as they pleased" even after Mr. Brand had been banished (4). By relieving the authorized male witnesses from the tedious responsibility of tending the subject of their observation, these silent workers separate the observer from the experiment. In doing so, they alter the witnesses' ability to credibly testify; however, the literary record rarely exhibits awareness of this problem. At several points in their narratives, male scientific observers (unknowingly) demonstrate the ironic breakdown of literary technologies, since they, the "authorized" witnesses, leave Toft in the throes of her "labor pains" to the care of midwives and servants who are not authorized to provide reports. As a result of the time they spend socializing away from their subject, the literary records provided by these witnesses are compromised.

While authors like Ahlers and St. André may not be aware that their observations of Toft are compromised by their reliance on servants and midwives, they are highly aware of threats that other modest witnesses pose to their status as objective observers. Haraway explains that the ideal modest witness must be “self-invisible, transparent, so that [his] reports would not be polluted by the body” (232); while the conventions of social technology between scientific witnesses require objective communication from both parties, scientists who disagree about the Toft case actively seek to remove the transparent status of their opponents’ bodies while reinforcing the invisibility of their own. One method of accusing the opposition of bias is through the testimony of a third objective witness, frequently one who, because he is not a physician or surgeon, has no stake in the argument itself, but who is nonetheless qualified to become a transparent observer because of his normative race, class, and gender. Since Ahlers’ companion Mr. Brand is just such a witness, his exclusion from Toft’s bedchamber is a particular point of contention.

While Ahlers admits that his account differs significantly in several points from that offered by both Howard and St. Andre, he makes a particular point of arguing that Howard’s refusal to allow Mr. Brand into the patient’s room “deprived [him] of a proper witness, to attest what past on both sides.” For Ahlers, this refusal to admit Brand is “beyond all doubt done with some sinister View” because it violates the conventions of social technologies between modest witnesses.

Despite Ahlers’ claim to authority based upon objective observation, his text reveals many places at which the illusion of objectivity gives way to blatant skepticism; however, Ahlers seems to be aware that literary and social conventions of witnessing require him to exhibit a degree of objectivity whatever his actual doubts may be. Ahlers’ fluctuation between skepticism and objectivity is evidenced in his discussion of Toft, who he describes as walking around with her knees pressed “close together, as if she was afraid something might drop down, which she did not care to lose” (6). During one of Toft’s labors, Ahlers expresses surprise that Toft continues to keep her knees pressed together instead of “choosing rather to keep them asunder

to make way for the Birth” (7). Immediately after this comment, however, Ahlers seems to recognize the need for an objective observation and concedes that Toft “doubtless knew best what posture was the most advantageous for her singular Delivery.” Since Ahlers soon notes that the “Patient laughed very heartily” at a joke, which he believes is “so extraordinary for a Woman in her Condition that he could not forbear looking to Mr. Howard” for an explanation, it is clear that his concession to the conventions of objective witnessing is short-lived.

Even more pronounced than Ahlers’ attacks on Mary Toft are his attempts to discredit Howard by implicating him in her deception. In his *Observations*, Ahlers implies that Howard is not only aware of but is also instrumental in perpetrating the fraud. Passages like this one are particularly damaging to Howard’s status as modest witness because they strongly emphasize his physical presence, making it impossible for him to maintain the posture of invisibility:

She was now ordered by Mr. Howard to sit down ... and [he] sat himself opposite to her in a Posture which appeared to me very uncommon, and indeed not a little Suspicious: He made her put her Legs between his, and with his Knees he press’d her close together. There was a small Charcoal-fire lighted in the Room, and they were both sitting... after such a manner that it was impossible for me to observe distinctly what they were doing and in particular to mind the Motions of Mr. Howard’s right Hand. (8-9)

Not only does this passage imply that Howard deliberately obstructs the ability of Ahlers to objectively witness his actions, but the emphasis on his physical interaction with Toft removes his own authority as a chaste, incorruptible observer of events. The sexual innuendo created by descriptions of dim lighting and physical proximity are heightened a few lines later, when “the woman begin[s] anew to cry out very strangely” (9). While she cries out, “Mr. Howard continue[s] all the while to keep her Knees close together, and holding his Head against hers, he [takes] her Hands into his,” according to Ahlers’ account. Despite his promise to avoid public character assassination, Ahlers manages within a few paragraphs to make implications of

improprieties that resonate throughout a variety of satirical texts, sparing none of the witnesses (himself included).

But the real dynamic at work between St. André, Howard, and Ahlers is the struggle to obtain and maintain the authoritative status of objective observer, arbiter of truth, or modest witness. This status is in question when several “objective” witnesses interpret the same events in different ways; but more importantly, the entire concept of objective truth as determined through observation is placed on trial in these texts. While the breakdown of objective scientific authority evidenced in the rabbit woman texts may not actually be caused by Toft and her deception, the introduction of performance and deception into the scientific theatre certainly alters the dynamic involved between witness and the object of his vision. It is true that the object of vision is normally subject to the agency of the viewer (Haraway 233), but when the viewer is being manipulated by a performance, the tables are turned: agency is awarded to the object of the gaze. This role reversal feminizes the masculine witnesses, who become not only victims of deception but perpetrators of monstrosity through their failure to maintain epistemological authority.

## CHAPTER 3

### A MONSTROUS LEGACY: CONCLUSION

Throughout this examination of the Mary Toft hoax and its associated texts, it has become increasingly apparent that the ideas of eighteenth century authors cannot be simplified or reduced, even when they are writing about an episode as brief and seemingly trivial as this one. Attempts to examine this incident through the lens of monstrosity are complicated by the imprecise nature of language and the multiple meanings of the term *monstrous*, while attempts at objective observation are frustrated and deconstructed by satirists, by other scientists, and even by the object of the experiment.

Although the level of cultural fascination with Toft and her rabbit babies at first appears to require an explanation, any confusion is put to rest by consideration of the ways in which the incident and the textual conversations surrounding it explore major social issues and questions – many of which remain unanswered in twenty-first century society. When debates arise about the authority of scientists to deliver objective, factual accounts of issues like global warming, stem cell research, evolution, or other highly charged controversial topics, frequently the charge is related to the fallibility of human observation and the limits of human knowledge, issues which are at the forefront of debates and satirical accounts of Mary Toft's hoax. Indictment of satire, as expressed by William Whiston, is no less of an issue in the twenty-first century than it was at the time of his writing. Concerns like his are repeated almost daily as the media is accused (perhaps accurately) of altering public perception of reality.

This is not to minimize or ignore other modern applications of the Toft incident, which are more closely related to perceptions of the female body, up to and including questions of a woman's relationship to, rights regarding, and responsibility for the products of conception.



These questions deserve to be examined in a study that more extensively explores the issue of maternal impressions and eighteenth century theories of conception.<sup>16</sup> Understanding the ways in which these questions function in the Toft texts, however, is contingent upon the ability to sort through sources that contradict one another. While some of these contradictions are quite subtle, others are direct and confrontational, but all require and deserve careful examination. This study provides an initial examination of terms and research methods that may be helpful in further investigation of the Toft incident. However, the theories examined throughout this paper should assist future attempts to sort through the mass of Toft-related texts in which the deterioration of the modest witness's authority leads to an entirely different kind of monstrosity.

APPENDIX A

NOTES

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Of these three cultural shifts, Toft's case has most obvious application to women's roles in reproduction; however, debates about midwifery in general are also closely connected to issues of class, gender, and sexuality.

<sup>2</sup>Toft is represented in a second Hogarth print, entitled *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism*, dated March 15, 1762. Lemuel Gulliver, or at least some part of his anatomy, appears in a series of prints both before and after *The Punishment*, although he often appears in the form of political satire, and represents real-life political figures rather than Swift's fictional character. Paulson further explains this representative relationship in his discussion of Hogarth's *The Festival of the Golden Rump* and *Idol Worship*.

<sup>3</sup>Bouchard's text specifically lists "a woman [who] gives birth to a beast, whether four-footed, aquatic, flying, reptilian, or of some other kind" among his examples of prodigies (qtd. in Bates 13).

<sup>4</sup>While surgeons were frequently called during difficult deliveries, it was not until "after the 1720s [that] they began increasingly to move into the field of normal deliveries" (Marland 39). The fees for man-midwives were prohibitive for many women, and it would have been unusual for a family of the Tofts social and economic class to call a physician of Dr. Howard's stature in anything less than the most life-threatening situation. Londa Schiebinger explains that, as male participation in the profession grew, procedures of medical intervention "were practiced by men, not women; midwifery, in contrast, remained a traditional art practiced by women, primarily for the benefit of the poor" (105).

<sup>5</sup>Here, I have assumed, along with Dennis Todd, that "Howard did not connive with the Tofts" (272), although many people did accuse him at least of complicity, if not of conceiving of the entire plot on his own. As support for his assumption, Todd cites the number of conflicting sources, some of which convict Howard and others of which clear him of blame. Most evidence

against Howard comes from one source, written by Cyriacus Ahlers in angry response to the way his own behavior is described in Howard's affidavit.

<sup>6</sup>After the hoax is discovered, Toft's "babies" are revealed to be nothing more than common, naturally occurring rabbits, while the anatomists and surgeons who pronounced them "præter-natural" are widely reviled. At the same time, the concept of maternal impressions begins to be questioned by physicians and surgeons, most famously in the Turner-Blondel texts.

<sup>7</sup>St. André's account differs from Ahlers' account on several points, one of which is the nature of his promises to Mary Toft regarding a royal pension; however, Ahlers does report that he "gave the Woman something" (apparently a guinea, if St. André is to be believed) as he returned from Guildford to London with his report for the king (21).

<sup>8</sup>Schiebinger identifies Edmund Chapman as the man-midwife responsible for questioning the use of the term "man-midwife," but her research is faulty, as closer attention to detail in the primary sources reveals. In Chapman's text, *A Reply to Mr. Douglas's Short Account of the State of Midwifery in London* (1737), he frequently quotes his opponent, Mr. John Douglas, but he does so in the context of discrediting Douglas's attempt to cast a "Cloud of Reproach over the Characters of those that practice this noble and necessary branch of physick" (3). The questions Schiebinger quotes are originated by Douglas in *A Short Account of the State of Midwifery in London* (1736), written the year before publication of Chapman's reply. While Schiebinger attributes these quotes to Chapman, it is actually Douglas who asks "How can a Man be a Wife except he be a Hermaphrodite? May they not as properly say a Man-monkey, Man-goose or Man-ass?" It is Douglas who refuses to use the "common, tho' barbarous term Man-midwife, except in quotations, because it carries Nonsense in the very Front of it," choosing the term "Midman" instead, and Douglas who suggests the use of the term "Midwomen, which includes Maids, Wives, and Widows." Although Schiebinger claims otherwise, Chapman not only rejects these suggestions as "too low and trifling to deserve a

serious Answer” (4-5), but also argues that “the Term *Man-midwife* may be defended both from *Custom* and *Propriety* and will doubtless be in use long after Mr. *Douglas* himself shall be forgotten” (6). These harsh words arise in response to the accusations of gender ambiguity that are implied by suggestions that the word *wife* in the term *man-midwife* refers to the male practitioner and not to the woman being delivered.

<sup>9</sup> This claim is, of course, a slight over-simplification. It is important to acknowledge a fourth group of texts, which are not directly related to Toft, but do mention her and are most definitely inspired by her deception. These texts are lengthy debates on the viability of the theory of maternal impressions. The most famous and heated debates were between Daniel Turner and James Blondel; these began in 1727, soon after Mary Toft was exposed as a fraud.

<sup>10</sup> While I have not found this information mentioned by other scholars, it is worth noting that Bondeson claims (without providing the source for his information) that “some have attributed [*Much ado about Nothing*] to Jonathan Swift. However, he argues that “this vulgar and unladylike tirade, meant to be in Mary’s own words (and spelling!) seems beneath the dignity of this great writer” (134). In my opinion, the biting social satire and clever use of language might, in fact, have read readers familiar with Swift’s work to speculate about the possibility that he had a hand in this text. More importantly, since scholarship on Swift successfully demonstrates that he “substitutes language for sexuality, performing verbal feats so skillfully” that contemporary readers “entirely accepted [Swift’s use of] the word coffee [for example] as a code name for sexual intercourse” (Flynn 118), it is not difficult to believe that he could have been responsible for the bawdy word play in *Much Ado about Nothing*.

<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps significant that the earliest use of the word *rabbit*, *v.2* in the OED is a 1742 text by Henry Fielding; however, the word *rabbet* is clearly used as a curse word by authors satirizing the Toft incident. The possibility that Toft’s hoax contributed to a unique usage of the word *rabbit*, which endured at least until the year 1889, deserves further investigation.

<sup>12</sup> Bondeson reports, and complaints in primary texts confirm, that the business of warreners and poulterers “reached an all-time low after the Guildford miracle became public knowledge” (130). Laws established during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, which “forbade the eating of anything that might be borne by a woman,” combined with the unappetizing discussion, dissection and display of dead rabbits contributed to this decline.

<sup>13</sup> Todd argues that Whiston’s text is singular because it provides the only “explicit or literal connection between the [Toft] incident and religious fanaticism” (94).

<sup>14</sup> Dennis Todd takes my claim one step further, extending this epistemological crisis to one of personal identity, claiming that for many people “Mary Toft represented an overwhelming power that, by sundering what was true from what was experienced as true by the senses, could precipitate people into confusion so profound that their identities were destroyed” (88).

<sup>15</sup> This is not to say, however, that “unauthorized” or “immodest” witnesses were called upon to discuss the authenticity or scientific viability of Toft’s rabbit births. The depositions given by Edward Cofteen, Richard Stedman, John Sweetapple, and Mary Peytoe are limited in that they merely affirm the sale of rabbits to Joshua Toft, Mary’s husband. The deposition of Mrs. Elizabeth Mason includes testimony that Mary Toft did not eat the rabbits procured by her husband. Only one deposition, taken from Mary Cofteen, includes more extensive information, but even this is primarily focused upon Cofteen’s observation of Joshua Toft’s behavior and interaction with his wife.

<sup>16</sup> Several extensive studies of the theory of maternal impressions already exist, most of which at least give the Toft incident credit for its instrumental role in inspiring the Turner-Blondel debates. For more information on the theory of maternal impressions, I especially recommend *The Less Noble Sex*, by Nancy Tuana, and *Maternal Impressions*, by Cristina Mazzoni. These texts, while they do not provide analysis of the Toft incident, would be particularly useful in an analysis of the case from the perspective of maternal impressions.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Piper Crisp Davis holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from the University of Texas at Arlington and has many years of experience in all aspects of education, from administration of childhood programs to academic advising of college students. This passion for education, which has always driven her professional goals, ultimately led her back to the classroom: a place where she feels most confident and comfortable as instructor, student, researcher, and writer. After earning her Master of Arts Degree in English from the University of Texas at Arlington, Piper will pursue doctoral studies at Texas Christian University. Her research interests include the interdisciplinary intersections of science and literature, with a particular emphasis on examining these issues through feminist theory. Piper's interest in the literature of the long eighteenth century is based upon the fact that it provides a rich historical field for these investigations. Piper lives in Arlington with her husband, Ron, and their children: Hannah, Ronni, Cassi, Colin and Chad.