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Abjection and Midwifery: Towards a Revision of Julia Kristeva's Theory of the Maternal

Patrick West

This paper will develop a specific reading of Julia Kristeva's analysis of the Mother in psychoanalytic contexts and artistic production. I want to suggest a particular connection between the Mother and a second figure closely associated with her: the Midwife. Such a move opens up the possibility for a new understanding of Kristeva's correlation of the Mother with the psychoanalytic concept of "abjection". I wish to identify the Midwife as the crucial intersection of a masculine and feminine subjectivity. I will undertake this project via a historical study of Midwifery, which will include an exploration of the Midwife's relationship to masculine ideologies of medical thought, as well as an account of the problematic rise of the "Man-Midwife". My strategy will be to extend the submerged historical and material content of Kristeva's own theories, with particular reference to *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. ⁱⁱ

The theoretical intention of Kristeva's analysis of the Mother is to identify and organize the conditions of language sufficient to produce a speaking position for Women in the Symbolic Order. This is the project she undertakes in her essay on the Virgin Mary entitled "Stabat Mater."ⁱⁱⁱ Kristeva argues that the figure of the Mother partakes of the un-representable space of femininity, and thus occupies the location conceded to Women outside the Symbolic; however, she makes the further claim that the Mother—tied to the biological and social function of Motherhood—can also

be understood as crystallizing the possibility of a representable and representing position for Women. (The shift from a *Woman* to the Mother thus enables Kristeva to propose a new subject position to be taken up by *Women* in cultural praxis.) This liminal or “halfway” position—constantly threatened by collapse—is named by Kristeva as abjection. In “Stabat Mater” she writes:

Let us call “maternal” the ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the un-nameable that one imagines as femininity, non-language or body (161-62).

The Midwife therefore represents a strategic intervention into the problematic of the relationship of the Mother to the figure of a *Woman*. In what follows, I want to extend this intervention in both a historical and a psychoanalytic sense. My paper is a re-reading of Kristeva’s work from a perspective incorporating a focus on her psychoanalytic assumptions and a historical and empirical study of the Mother and the Midwife.

I have no knowledge of any studies that attempt to read Kristeva’s work on Mothering via a sustained emphasis on the figure of the Midwife. However, such a project is attractive for a number of preliminary reasons: in the first place, the Midwife holds an important position in the apocryphal texts that deal with the infancy of Christ. She emerges as a figure tightly associated with the person of the Mother Mary: the proper name Mary functions at certain moments as a password for the figure of the Midwife. In addition, this very fact of her naming (in other places as Zelomi and Salome) indicates, if tentatively, a position of representation for the Midwife in the Symbolic. This web of representation is extended in a text entitled “The Midwife’s Account of the Birth in the Cave.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Secondly, and relatedly, the pictorial presentations of

the Mother located by Kristeva in the iconography of the Virgin Mary also introduce a stress precisely on the figure of the Midwife.

This close rhetorical association and confusion of the figure of the Mother with that of the Midwife provides both a basis and a durable structure for my work. A central strategy here is the attempt to replace Kristeva's tangential representations of the Mother—refracted through the idiosyncratic autobiographical histories of male artists (for example, Giovanni Bellini) and diffused through chromatic and patterned variation—with texts that stabilize a tradition of biographical and autobiographical accounts of the position and status of the Midwife.^[iv] I am looking at two texts in particular that seem to do this: Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* (1671)^[v] and the diary of the eighteenth-century Midwife Catharina Schrader.^[vi]

The question of representing the Midwife is, of course, more complicated than this model of authorship suggests. Nevertheless, I put it forward as an essential component of a study founded in psychoanalytic theories, yet one concerned to interrogate those theories from a historical and material point of view.

I now want to discuss a number of passages from Sharp's text that illustrate the "doubled" position occupied by the Midwife. They reveal her simultaneous location within the masculine organization of society *and* the space of the feminine. In particular, they appear to suggest a symbolic or masculine position for the Midwife. One open to her alone.

The Midwife—at least until the rise of the Man-Midwife in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—was always a woman. Jane Sharp was writing as a contributor to the debate that accompanied the emergence of the Man-Midwife. Her text is therefore a valuable commentary on the unique status of the female Midwife. She observes that:

the holy Scriptures hath recorded Midwives to the perpetual honour of the female Sex. There being not so much as one word concerning *Men-midwives* mentioned there that we can find, it being the natural propriety of women to be much seeing into that Art: and though nature be not alone sufficient to the perfection of it, yet farther knowledge may be gained by a long and diligent practice, and be communicated to others of our own sex (3).

The specific emphasis in this passage on the fact of “recording” and the “word” introduces a certain mode of representation allied to the occupation of the Midwife. Sharp reserves the cultural field of Midwifery to Women at the same time as she draws upon an ideology of *naming* and *recording* founded in the Symbolic precepts of masculine thought. She raises the possibility of sustaining a particular type of representation for that which culture understands as the un-representable field of the feminine. Another quotation from *The Midwives Book* will serve to exaggerate this operation:

It is commendable for men to imploy their spare time in some things of deeper Speculation than is required of the female sex; but the Art of *Midwifry* chiefly concern us, *which, even the best Learned men will grant, yielding something of their own to us, when they are forced to borrow from us the very name they practise by, and to call themselves Men-midwives* (4).

This passage—in its interplay of “naming” and “borrowing”—marks the complexity of the line Sharp draws across the edge of the Symbolic Order as a sign, I am arguing, of the crucial subjectivity of the Midwife.

The status of the *Man-Midwife* in this scene is a complicated one. The Midwife derives her particular subject position less from a pattern organized of equal parts of a representative male and female subjectivity, than from a necessarily difficult appropriation by the Midwife of symbolic characteristics no longer resident in the Symbolic Order. In other words, the female Midwife—as represented here by Sharp—appears to construct a position of authority that does not *mimic* the authority of the Man-Midwife so much as use the *threat* presented by him to develop a unique mode of symbolic, para-masculine “authority”.

This material reveals therefore a *complex inter-meshing* of this space and time of the Midwife with the *primary* Symbolic edicts of the social. Furthermore, it does this while upholding the integrity of Midwifery as a field occupied by Women.

Sharp also draws on the Book of Exodus to refine her primary thesis in regard to the distinctive symbolic position of the Midwife. In this passage, I want to draw attention to the particular formation of the Symbolic Order that is produced here in the *tension* between two discrete symbolic icons (God and King):

Her fidelity shall find not only a reward here from man, but God hath given a special example of it, *Exod. 1.* in the Midwives of *Israel*, who were so faithful to their trust, that the command of a King could not make them depart from it, viz. *But the Midwives feared God, and did not as the King of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive. Therefore God dealt well with the Midwives; and because they feared God, he made them Houses* (1-2).

The basic feature of this passage, I want to suggest, is the contrast it sets in place involving the competing authorities of King and God. I am reading this contrast as evidence for the particular

symbolic position of the Midwife: held suspended between two representatives of masculine authority.

The Midwives Book provides detailed medical information of value to the Midwife in her daily activities. However, in the passages I have discussed from Sharp's text, I have concentrated on her general comments on the status of the Midwife in respect of the threat to her discipline in the form of the Man-Midwife.

The diary of the Midwife Catharina Schrader, on the other hand, is primarily a day-to-day record of her activities. However, it also seems to introduce an emphasis on the characteristics I am identifying as peculiar to the special position of the Midwife as the intersection of a feminine and masculine subjectivity.

In the diary of Catharina Schrader we frequently come across accounts of difficult or unusual births in which Schrader expresses her desire to call a (certainly male) surgeon:

It seemed an uncomplicated birth. And I wanted to deliver her by art, but because I still had little experience, I wished to have a surgeon with me to avoid all scandal (50).

The "fault" or "shift" in what thus far emerges as a "proper" unfolding of the Symbolic Order—the resort to an authority sanctioned by the masculine regulations of medical, institutional training and the use of instruments forbidden the Midwife—can be located in the historical evidence that surrounds this extract from Schrader's diary. It is evident that while Midwives often called for the presence of a (male) doctor or surgeon at difficult births, they—the male practitioners—were required "not necessarily to supervise or intervene, but to act as a witness to her actions in the case" (82; n. 11) [Hilary Marland, notes to Schrader's memoirs].

I want to insist on the strange constitution we encounter here of two formulations of the Symbolic Order thrown into relief at the site of the Mother. The Midwife emerges as a figure who, while maintaining her investment in the semiotic or the “othered” space of Woman, nevertheless forms an idiosyncratic equation of the Symbolic Order.

In the passages I have presented so far I have read the propositions developed by Jane Sharp and Catharina Schrader in terms of Julia Kristeva’s thesis of abjection as the failure of the subject to complete the separation from its primary and fundamental object: the Mother. Abjection, for Kristeva, is a position in the development of the Oedipus complex, in the course of which it emerges at a time prior to both the mirror stage and the “anxiety” of castration. It therefore constitutes the most archaic and weakest desire on the part of the “subject-to-be.” Abjection is closely associated with a psychotic foreclosure or expulsion of the paternal signifier. The presence of abjection in the patient consequently indicates a subject whose domain is outside the realm of meaning and society. In linguistic terms, abjection acts as a threat to the speaking capacity of the subject, which depends on the absolute symbolic distinction of subject from object.

A complication in this arena occurs in the distinction between the paternal signifier in its mature Oedipal mode and its supplementary existence as an immature pseudo-object labelled by Freud the “father of individual prehistory.” Kristeva holds the position that what the ‘subject’ of abjection properly forecloses is this secondary, fragile edifice: the “father of individual prehistory.” The Symbolic Order is consequently doubled, and the site of this doubling is a scar that constitutes an excess on its own surface. This excess or fault in the Symbolic provides the material for the unique valency of the Father that I am understanding in this paper, pace Kristeva, as the basis for the position of the Midwife.

However, Schrader's diary presents a specific feature of the Midwife's daily practice that cannot be explained in terms of my reading of this central definition of abjection found in Kristeva's work.

Here is how Hilary Marland describes the Midwife Schrader at work:

In the cases Schrader describes she apparently viewed herself as the prime mover and active party in the delivery scene. . . . Schrader was a busy manipulator, dilating the cervix, stretching the passages, referring often to the fact that she "had to make all the openings," employing a variety of birth positions, pulling the child out with "great force", and frequently practising podalic version, her instinct and experience leading her to prefer to deliver the child feet first. She was also extremely anxious to quickly relieve the parturient woman of the afterbirth (45).

The key principle of Schrader's operations as they are presented in this analysis is an emphasis on the Midwife as one whose activity consists of creating and maintaining borders and separations. Schrader appears to have understood her role as one marked by the concepts of distinction, propriety and cleanliness.

This leads me to the second of Kristeva's two definitions of abjection. Kristeva holds that *any* "halfway" or indeterminate process or state can be regarded as a representation of the abject. The link between these two formulations is located in Kristeva's logical reading of the Jewish dietary edicts as found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. She argues that the central and pervasive intent of these regulations is to maintain lines of separation and distinction.

To take one example: Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy each represent the following regulation: “You shall not boil a kid in its Mother’s milk.” Kristeva isolates the intention of this law as a concern to maintain proper boundaries of separation. In her reading it is *the integrity of the border itself* that *separates* the Jewish race from the outside. To this extent, the nauseating “half-boundary” between two versions of the ‘same’ in the above example (milk/that nurtured by milk) marks a trespass of the law for the Jew.

The first consequence Kristeva draws from this equation of abjection is to identify the figure of the Jew as the paradigmatic expression of “normal”, completed Oedipal development (that is, a subject marked “cleanly and properly” beneath the rubric of an absolute separation from the Mother). The Jew, therefore, as the Oedipal subject.

The second is to characterize the historical figure opposed to the Jew—the anti-Semite—as the subject of abjection. The anti-Semite, therefore, as the failure of Oedipus.

I am reading Schrader’s description and understanding of her own activity as linked to the concept of our defence against the abject: the so-called “Jewish” edicts of a vigorous and separating Oedipalism. Precisely where Kristeva locates the Mother as a process of abjection, I have tried to show the Midwife—Schrader—existing as the index of a certain powerful, clean, separating Oedipalism.

My central contention is that Kristevan “abjection” lacks sufficient Symbolic motility to avoid the danger on its “far” side from psychosis. At the site of abjection—reified by Kristeva as the site of the Mother and childbirth—I am identifying both a novel figure (the Midwife) *and* equivalently a theoretical construction within which abjection or para-abjection enjoys a more determined

Symbolic status. An agent of separation, the Midwife maintains a certain foundation in the feminine.

Midway between the Jew—the model of a vigorous “proper” Oedipal cleanliness—and the anti-Semite—who fosters an anti-Oedipal emphasis on the disruptive threat to discourse highlighted by the semiotic—the Midwife maintains a strange authority: a complex structure of difference and representation.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva introduces the figure of the Hungarian doctor Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis (1818-1865) (159-60). Semmelweis was the discoverer of the etiology of puerperal, or childbed fever: he argued that it had its beginnings in the passage of bodily material from an infected source—often a recently dissected corpse—to the genitals of the child-bearing Woman ^[vii] Collapsing the borders of death and life, puerperal fever is, for Kristeva, a disease marked by the “distracting moment when opposites . . . join” (159). A sign, to this extent, of abjection. Semmelweis’ importance for Kristeva’s project lies in this fact. His importance for my project lies in the fact that—silent in Kristeva’s text—Semmelweis founded his discovery in the “clean and proper” practices of the Midwifery students in his school. The Midwifery students in Semmelweis’ institution did not handle corpses and were therefore not responsible for the transmission of puerperal fever. They maintained borders. This, one might be tempted to say, is the site in *Powers of Horror* where its own native opposites come together in a “crisis of distraction.”

Semmelweis therefore provides a point of coincidence between my work and Kristeva’s text. Despised by the medical authorities of the mid-nineteenth century, he identified, before Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister, the principles of germ infection. In response to an attack on his doctrine, he once wrote: “there are at present 823 of my pupil midwives carrying on Midwifery practice in Hungary . . . who are more enlightened than the members of the Berlin Obstetrical Society” (174) [Quoted in Gortvay].

In conclusion, I want to set in place an opposition between Kristeva's analysis of the Mother in the art of Bellini, and a nativity scene by the painter Robert Campin that posits a stress on the Midwife. [\[viii\]](#)

There are two primary facets of Kristeva's reading of Bellini's work: firstly, the relationship and figuration of Mother and Child in his work indicate a process of the "abject" founded in the earliest instance on chromatic and tonal variation, and secondly, this reading coincides with the biographical details of Bellini's life in such a way as to develop a structure (on Bellini's part) based not on representation as much as on fetishization.

The case of Campin is strikingly different. Besides his life span (1378-1444) we know nothing of his biography except that he is probably to be identified with the Flemish artist the Master of Flémalle. Is this "anti-biography" perhaps the necessary and seductive basis for the interpretation of a figure as subtle and complex as the Midwife?

I want to develop a reading of Campin's work in contrast with a painting that, while not by Bellini, develops what is on a certain level a similar understanding to his of the "abject" Mother/Child relationship.

The contrast between *The Nativity* by Robert Campin and Piero della Francesca's painting of the same name is a striking one. [\[ix\]](#)

In Piero's work a number of features are significant: the infant Christ lies heavily on his back and yet his arms are outstretched, as if he is poised to spring towards the figure of the Mother. This effect—lodged in the processes of "abjection"—is highlighted by his position on the Mother's cloak, which itself suggests a half-falling away from the Mother. The abject identification of the two is simultaneously fleeting and absolute. In addition, it is

noteworthy that the other figures in the scene are “withdrawn,” notably absent from this drama of abjection.

In Campin’s text, on the other hand, the scene is utterly different. The young Christ does not lie on his Mother’s clothing—the symbolism of which is taken to an extreme because, certainly in comparison with the other work, the Virgin Mary is literally dwarfed by her enormous cloak that spreads in large folds over and around her. In fact, the impression I gain is that the painter has arranged the edges of the cloak so as to deliberately and artificially exclude the infant from such a connection to the Mother. Additionally, Christ is not extending his arms out towards his Mother, but seems quite clearly to be pushing backwards and away from her. The other figures seem also to be playing an active part in the drama of this scene (in contrast to the ‘sterile’ characters of Piero’s work). Saint Joseph and, in particular, the Woman (perhaps to be identified with the biblical Midwife Zelomi) at the extreme bottom-right corner of the work, seem almost to be clearing a path for the young Christ. The direction of the infant’s travel, an *intention* heightened by the course of the road that extends in a northerly attitude, is towards the recognizable figure of the *Midwife*, Salome.

Salome’s right hand is extended as if to cradle the young Christ, and her left hand emphasizes the action of the right. If this is the moment of birth, as at least one commentator suggests it is, and as the hands of the Virgin Mary, in stark contrast with Piero’s painting, intimate by *coming together* in prayer as if *after some other act*, or as if the Virgin herself is momentarily engaged in handling the process of birth (like the Midwife?) it is also obvious that Salome’s hand (or hands) could be understood as “*delivering*” the child.^[x]

In contrast with the works of Bellini and Piero, Campin’s text indicates a specific activity of the Midwife in a way that coincides with my theory of abjection as a particular order of masculine and

feminine processes. To this extent, a certain tradition in Western pictorial representation coincides with other historical material as presented in this paper with the effect of encouraging a revision of Julia Kristeva's work on abjection and maternal identity.

^[i] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. European Perspectives. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Trans. of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Paris: Seuil, 1980).

^[ii] Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" (*The Kristeva Reader*. By Kristeva. Ed. and comp. Toril Moi. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) pp. 160-86.

^[iii] "The Midwife's Account of the Birth in the Cave" (*New Testament Apocrypha*. Ed. W. Schneemelcher. Trans. R. McL. Wilson. Vol. 1. London: Lutterworth, 1963) pp. 413-14.

^[iv] Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" (*Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. By Kristeva. Ed. Léon S. Roudiez. Trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas A. Gora and Léon S. Roudiez. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) pp. 237-70.

^[v] Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book. Or, The Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered. Directing Childbearing Women How to Behave Themselves in their Conception, Breeding, Bearing, and Nursing of Children* (Marriage, Sex, and the Family in England: 1660-1800 25. London: Miller, 1671. New York: Garland, 1985. A facsimile made from a copy in the British Library.)

^[vi] Catharina Schrader, "Mother and Child Were Saved": *The Memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian Midwife Catharina Schrader*

(Trans. and annot. Hilary Marland. *Nieuwe Nederlandse Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis der Geneeskunde en der Natuurwetenschappen* 22. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987.)

[\[vii\]](#) Gy. Gortvay and I. Zoltan, *Semmelweis: His Life and Work* (Trans. Éva Róna and R. Bonnerjea. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1966.)

[\[viii\]](#) Robert Campin, *The Nativity*, c. 1425, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon.

[\[ix\]](#) Piero della Francesca, *The Nativity*, National Gallery, London.

[\[x\]](#) Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Picador ed. London: Pan, 1985) chapters 2 and 3.