“GREAT WITH CHILD TO SPEAKE”:
MALE CHILDBIRTH AND
THE ELIZABETHAN SONNET
SEQUENCE

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THE ELIZABETHAN POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS was acutely concerned with procreation and power: problems regarding succession complicated the reign of Elizabeth I as they had that of Henry VIII before her. Reflecting this concern, the literature of the era consciously or unconsciously turned to the metaphor of the book as child (Curtius 132–34).1 Spenser, for example, refers to The Shepheardes Calendar (1579), his “little booke,” as his “child” (12); Sidney, too, casts himself as “father” to the Arcadia (1590), his “child” (57). These metaphors of literary creation as the issue of male childbirth were a commonplace of dedicatory prose (Sacks 5–8), but the male childbirth metaphor also appeared in the literature “proper” following those dedications, most notably in the inaugural sonnets of the Elizabethan sonnet sequences. In the opening sonnet of Astrophil and Stella, for example, Sidney compares his poetic efforts to a painful maternal labor: “Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes” (1.11). Similar metaphors of male childbirth occur early in the sonnet sequences of Samuel Daniel (Delia 2), Spenser (Amoretti 2), and Henry Constable (Diana Sonnet 1, First Decade).2

The literary and cultural significance of the male childbirth metaphor is historically complex: it indicates the Elizabethan ambivalence toward the homologous functioning of poetic creation and procreation. On the one hand, the metaphor accorded the sonneteer a godlike form of autonomous, creative power, wherein tropes of parthenogenesis functioned to subsume and negate the female function in procreation. On the other hand, the metaphor could never entirely marginalize the female function, which inevitably returned to challenge the sonneteer’s desired autonomy over the processes of pro/creation. The deployment of the male childbirth metaphor, therefore, while founded upon a hierarchy of masculine privilege, inadvertently produced a “feminized, subordinated” poet (Prendergast 26).3 This threat to
masculine creative autonomy produced an ideological rupture, seemingly insoluble. However, to examine Renaissance medical discourses on childbirth alongside the evolution of the sonnet sequence from Sidney to Shakespeare is to note an ideological shift that reasserts masculine privilege in both literary creation and biological procreation.

In this essay, I will argue that the Elizabethan sonnet sequence traces the historical ideology of reproduction from a Galenic model, in which the female was accorded a significant—though markedly inferior—role in procreation, to the beginnings of an Early Modern medical theory that, returning to Aristotle, would seek to diminish the female role in procreation. The first section of the essay will locate the male childbirth metaphor within the prevailing medical discourses of the Galenic and Aristotelian traditions. Part II will show more specifically how the Galenic tradition allows for gender switches within the sonnet sequence: how the female patron can metaphorically impregnate the male sonneteer and how the female thereby governs procreation. Part III will examine the various types of male childbirth metaphor and the various strategies deployed by the sonneteer to reappropriate procreation as an exclusively male prerogative. The final section will demonstrate how countervailing theories of generation, specifically a historically reemergent Aristotelian tradition that insisted upon sexual opposition rather than similitude, afforded the male sonneteer, in this instance Shakespeare, a medico-ideological basis for ultimately reasserting the male role in procreation.

I. THE MALE CHILDBIRTH METAPHOR: THE GALENIC AND ARISTOTELIAN TRADITIONS

The trope of male childbirth was not entirely new nor particular to Renaissance England. E. R. Curtius traces the trope back to classical authors such as Plato and Ovid as well as to other writers of the Latin Middle Ages. However, he argues that the metaphor of the literary work as a child of the mind is "a favorite in the Renaissance and Baroque periods" (133). Accordingly, the metaphor of male childbirth can be seen as historically significant beyond its status as a literary commonplace. Childbirth is never a culturally neutral, transhistorical event. In Early Modern culture, much as it is today, childbirth was inextricably bound to ideologies of medicine, psychology, aesthetics, theology, and politics. For, as Adrienne Rich declares, "Motherhood . . . has a history, it has an