

## The Medicalisation of Menopause in Early Modern English Medical and Popular Literature

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The medicalisation of menopause is a practice that regulates the natural processes of the female body and treats any deviation from the expected normative function as a deficiency to be cured. The medicalisation of menopause is usually spoken about in reference to the practice of treating menopause with hormone replacement therapy (HRT). While hormone replacement therapy has been widely prescribed for menopause since the 1940s, the medicalisation of menopause became a major concern for feminist critics in the eighties and nineties when it was discovered that HRT had numerous negative side effects, yet was still being prescribed for something natural.<sup>1</sup> While the medicalisation of menopause can therefore be seen as a relatively contemporary concern in feminist medical discourse, various scholars of the nineteenth century have engaged with how the evidence of our current modes of the medicalisation of menopause have developed through history.<sup>2</sup> These scholars contend that our current modes of medicalising menopause draw on the sexist rhetoric of the Victorian period which framed women's bodies as inherently dysfunctional. I argue that this narrative can be drawn back even further by considering how menopause was spoken about in the early modern period.

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<sup>1</sup> Madeleine Josephine Murtagh. *Intersections of Feminist and Medical Constructions of Menopause in Primary Medical Care and Mass Media: Risk, Choice and Agency*. (PhD Thesis, University of Adelaide: 2001), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Antonia Lyons and Christine Griffin, "Managing Menopause: A qualitative analysis of self-help literature for women at midlife," *Social Science and Medicine*, Volume 56.8 (2003), p. 1629.

Menstruation is a relatively small field in early modern studies,<sup>3</sup> and engagement with menopause is even rarer, with most scholars citing that menopause was not a major concern for those in the period. Within the scholarly dialogues on menopause in early modern England, there is practically no discussion on its process of medicalisation. Just as scholars of nineteenth century menopause have developed a narrative of medicalisation appropriate to their period, I seek to contextualise the medicalisation of menopause through the practices of early modern physicians, who framed the menopausal body as being dysfunctional in a way that is not unrecognisable to how it is treated by our modern physicians. Not only is the medicalisation of menopause a problem that aging women encounter in medical contexts, but it also is the root of a narrative that pervades all socioeconomic levels of early modern English culture. I refer specifically to English culture as it has been shown in scientific study that menopausal symptoms vary due to regional differences,<sup>4</sup> and therefore any argument concerning the lived experience of menopause must be region specific.

In this paper, I will provide an account of the specific ways early modern physicians medicalised the process of menopause and will hence chart how the images associated with the menopausal body represented in medical literature became disseminated through broader literary culture. The ideas purported in medical discourse are adapted and appropriated by early modern writers and artists to create a universal image of the aging woman as a stereotype that does not translate to the lived experience of menopausal women. The resulted othering of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Sara Read. *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), Patricia Crawford, "Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, Volume 91.1 (1981): 47-73, and Margaret Healy, 'Dangerous Blood: Menstruation, Medicine and Myth in Early Modern England', in *National Healths: Gender, Sexuality and Health in a Cross-Cultural Context* ed by Michael Worton and Wilson Tagoe (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> S Palacois, , V W Henderson, N Siseles, D Tan and P Villaseca, "Age of Menopause and Impact of Climacteric Symptoms by Geographical Region," *Climacteric*, Volume 13.5 (2010), pp. 419-428.

female body after menopause is not an innocent consequence of misguided medical beliefs, but one that is informed by, whether subconsciously or not, a desire to control the aging woman and the social independence she gains through menopause.<sup>5</sup> The study and circulation of medical texts in the early modern period engages with other popular literature at this time to create a relationship of give and take, wherein both forms work together to culminate in an image of the aging woman that serves to reinforce the motives of the patriarchy.

In early modern England, the primary ways of understanding the body originated from the Hippocratic theory in *On the Nature of Man*<sup>6</sup> which stated that the body was ruled by four humours. An imbalance of any one of the humours, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile, blood, dictated the sickness a person would experience. These humours interacted with the complexion of a person, whether they had a cold, hot, wet, or dry constitution. Humoral theory was also invoked to explain the physical and behavioural changes that occurred in the aging process. People were born naturally warm and wet, and over the course of their life they lost their natural heat and moisture, so that in old age they were cold and dry.

The humoral specifications were drawn upon in the theory of aging schemes, which were systems used in early modern Europe that functioned as guides, dictating the proper behaviour at each stage of aging. These aging schemes framed aging in early modern England as a specifically gendered process. The seven ages of man was one of these aging schemes. It divided the stages of a man's life into seven ages, with each age being ruled by a planet. In William Vaughan's description, the first age called infancy is ruled by the moon and lasts for seven years. Infancy is

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Toulalan, "Elderly years cause a Total dispaire of Conception: Old Age, Sex and Infertility in Early Modern England," *Social History of Medicine*, Volume 29.2 (2016), p. 352.

<sup>6</sup> Hippocrates, *Volume IV. Nature of Man*, trans. by W.H.S Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

followed by childhood, ruled by Mercury and lasting for seven years more. The third age is ruled by Venus and called the strippling age which lasts from fourteen to twenty-two. The following stage is that of the young man lasting from twenty-two till forty-three and is ruled by the sun. The man's age is ruled by Mars and continues for sixteen years. The sixth age is improper old age which lasts from fifty till sixty-two and is ruled by Jupiter. The final stage, ruled by Saturn, continues for eighteen years till the end of man's life.<sup>7</sup> While Vaughan does not name this final stage, other early modern writers termed it the decrepit age, or old age proper.<sup>8</sup>

The distinction between the two stages of old age is what allows for the paradoxical early modern view of old age that views old men with respect in some instances, and mockery in others. Ruled by Jupiter, the man in improper old age lives in 'equity, temperance and religion', whereas the man in his final stage of life is 'drooping, decrepit, forward, cold and melancholick'.<sup>9</sup> With a few exceptions, these traditional schemes of age largely ignored women's aging processes. Excluded from aging schemes that dictated behavioural changes that characterised each stage of life, women's experience of aging was largely centred around when she started to look old. In a survey of parish records in early modern Suffolk, Lynn Botelho observes that the poor diets eaten by most English people accelerated the features of aging that were associated with menopause.<sup>10</sup> Features of aging including greying hair, wrinkles, facial hair and sagging breasts are emphasised in depictions of aging

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<sup>7</sup> William Vaughan *Approved directions for health*. (London: Roger Jackson, 1612), p.112-113 via Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership

<sup>8</sup> Tobias Whitaker *The Tree of Humane life*. (London: Henry Overton, 1666), p. 45 via Early English Books Online and John Taylor *Taylor's arithmetick*. (London, 1653), p. 9 via Early English Books Online.

<sup>9</sup> Vaughan, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause in Rural Women of Early Modern Suffolk', in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, ed. by Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 54. Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 78-79.

women because these features surfaced almost all at once at the point of menopause,<sup>11</sup> where similar markers of age in men appeared to be more staggered.

The comparatively expedient nature of female physical aging led to the notion that women aged more quickly than men. The prioritising of the physical appearance in aging women lacks the nuance with which male aging is considered in the period. The seemingly drastic move from youth to old age for women discounted them from the two-stage process of aging that led to increased respect in social circles for men in their old age. Functioning as the ignition to old age, menopause was seen as the accelerant that caused a woman's body to decay and intimately linked infertility and old age. Despite the apparent accelerated nature of female aging, most physicians generally agreed that menopause occurred between the ages of forty and sixty, with most agreeing upon the average age of forty-nine.<sup>12</sup>

The specific age of forty-nine is significantly tied to the belief of climacteric. A climacteric occurred every seven years and marked a period of crisis for the body. By framing menopause as a crisis to the body, the rhetoric surrounding menopause already contributes to its medicalisation and as such characterises post-menopausal women as having what Garland-Thomson says to be 'bodies that violate the normative standards and expectations of bodily form and function'.<sup>13</sup> The normative body of which we speak is the young fertile body, perceived as the anthesis to the post-menopausal one.

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<sup>11</sup> For examples of these such depictions see Lynn Botelho 'Images of Old Age in Early Modern Cheap Print: Women, Witches, and the Poison Female Body' in *Power and Poverty: Old Age in Pre-Industrial Society* ed. by Susannah Ottaway, Lynn Botelho and Katherine Kittredge. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2002) p. 225-246.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Read "When Menopause is not Climacteric," *Notes and Queries*, Volume. 59.2 (2012): 225. It is important to recognise here that climacteric was not used to refer to the event of menopause until the nineteenth century. Read explains that menopause was seen by early modern physicians as a consequence of the climacteric effect of old age on the body, and the terms should not be conflated.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies," *Signs*, Volume 30.2 Winter (2005), p. 1558.

Menopause is intrinsically linked to menstruation, and as such it is important to first contextualise early modern attitudes toward menstruation in order to inform discussion of menopause. Physicians of the period widely agreed that menstruation was an important process. Nicholas Culpeper explained menstruation as the process of 'blood which is voided every month is kept in when there is a Child. For if it be its nature it is not ill, but only superfluous, till they conceive; nor is it more an excrement than Seed and Milk'.<sup>14</sup> However, the general attitude toward menstruation was not so apathetic. Of the terms used to refer to menstruation one of the most commonly used is purgations. At the same point in time, purgations was used to mean; cleansing from defilement, and the removal of corruption, sin, guilt, or similar evil.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of menstrual blood being something dirty pervaded the majority of medical treatises. Nicolaas Fonteyn warns against the risks of women not menstruating in his *The Womans Doctor*; saying that 'the feculent and corrupt blood might be purified, which otherwise would turn to rank poison should it remaine in the body and putrify'.<sup>16</sup> Richard Bunworth echoes this sentiment in his *The Doctresse* warning that 'retention of the months procreate all manner of diseases'. While often the diseases related to retention or stoppage of the terms relates to unexpected stoppages in young women, the lack of specificity concerning whether it does or does not include menopausal women contributes to the ambiguous status of menopause. While Hippocratic theory stated bodies dried in old age, the theory of the dry body was not used to explain the absence of bleeding at the point of menopause for women.

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Culpeper. *Culpeper's Directory for midwives*. (London, 1641), p. 66 via Early English Books Online

<sup>15</sup> 'Purgation' in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online].

<sup>16</sup> Nicolaas Fonteyn. *The womans doctour*. (London: John Blague and Samuel Howes, 1652), p. 25-26 via Early English Books Online

The cause of female menstruation was explained by women lacking the natural heat to purge superfluities in the ways men did, which were primarily through sweat and facial hair.<sup>17</sup> When a person aged, their natural heat declined. As women began life with an already colder constitution than men, old age left her even more enfeebled. In Peter Chamberlains *Midwives Practice*, menopause is said to occur as a result of this loss of heat, because 'After the fiftieth year the courses cease, because the heat being now become more weak is not able to engender any portion of laudable blood, or if there be any such overplus is not able to evacuate or expel the same'.<sup>18</sup>

While excluding the tirade of warnings surrounding the poisonous post-menopausal body, even Jane Sharp's book of midwifery conforms to standards of disabling the aging female's body. Despite likely having gone through menopause already, being a 'practitioner in the art of midwifery above thirty years',<sup>19</sup> Sharp aligns menopause with a defective body. In speaking of the causes of menstruation not performing she says, 'if the body be ill disposed it sends not blood as it should do', continuing on in the same explanation to say 'old age will not make blood'.<sup>20</sup> The idea that menopause is caused through weakness contributes to the idea of the aging female body as being defective. Rather than being viewed as a natural process, menopause is seen to occur at the fault of the women when she ceases to have the strength to function in a normative standard.

Beyond framing menopause as being a defect in itself, early modern physicians also cited it as the cause for a number of other conditions that plagued

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Bunworth. *The doctresse*. (London: Nicolas Bourne, 1656), p. 6 via Early English Books Online.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Chamberlain. *Dr. Chamberlain's midwives practice*. (London: Thomas Rooks, 1665), p. 69 via Early English Books Online

<sup>19</sup> Jane Sharp. *The midwives book*. (London: Simon Miller, 1671), sig. A1 via Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership

<sup>20</sup> Sharp, 290.

the body as a whole. Daniel Sennert's *Practical Physick* delineates a number of conditions, the cause of which he surmises to be old age and the cessation of terms. In discussion on the make-up of the womb, Sennert comments that it is naturally 'fleshy and soft and moistened by blood for Conception'.<sup>21</sup> He then frames the hardened womb as 'It is sometimes by birth, or old age, when they are past Childbearing' in opposition to the natural quality of the womb. As well as being hard, he also characterises 'The mouth of the womb is dry, and they are slender of a dry constitution, their lower lip is always chopt and blackish red'.<sup>22</sup> The condition of the womb on the inside is represented as being visible on the outside.

Unfortunately, Sennert goes on to say that 'This distemper is hard to be cured in any part, especially if it be old'.<sup>23</sup> Thomas Bartholin also comments on the physical changes to the womb after menopause in his *Bartholinus Anatomy*. In his description of the neck of the womb he explains how it is wrinkled, and these wrinkles 'serve for the greater Titillation caused by the rubbing of the nut of the yard against the said wrinkles'. However, these wrinkles are worn out in old age and become callouses, because it 'also become harder, so that it becomes at last gristley, as it were old women'.<sup>24</sup> Later writers cited this gristle as the reason for painful sex between men and women if the woman was past menopause as a means of dissuading against sex in old age.<sup>25</sup>

Sennart contests that it was caused by the 'stoppage of terms...gathering of crude and bad humours for when the way to the womb is stopt, the blood returns to the great Vessels and bowels and choaks their heat, and stops the vessels and

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Sennart. *Practical physick*. (London, 1664), p. 26 via Early English Books Online

<sup>22</sup> Mouth of the womb in this context refers to the vagina and labia rather than modern conceptions that refer to the cervix.

<sup>23</sup> Sennart, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Bartholin. *Bartholinus anatomy*. (London, 1668), p. 72 via Early English Books Online

<sup>25</sup> Toulalan, p. 352.



spoils the making of blood'. This problem is similarly used to explain liver problems in aging women, because

the womb hath many and great veins more than other parts. If then there be too much blood in them, it easily goes back to the hollow vein and choaks the heat of the Liver, and so the liver is distempered according to the humour. It breeds crude and phlegmatick blood which sent over the body causeth a cachexy: and what diseases come by the liver are by the consent of the womb as in stoppage of the terms and green sickness.<sup>26</sup>

According to Judy Norsigian, 'the term medicalization refers to treating a natural process as if it were a medical condition requiring intervention'.<sup>27</sup> While these physicians do not offer any potential cure to menopause, its inclusion in medical treatises and associations with diseases contribute to the process of menopause being viewed through a medical gaze. Despite the crisis that menopause is portrayed as in these medical accounts, there is little evidence that aging women of the period experienced it in this way. Michael Stolberg offers accounts of a number of European women in the eighteenth century seeking medical advice on the topic of their impending menopause, as well as popular medications used to treat menopause later in the century.<sup>28</sup> However, there is little evidence of these accounts in the specific case of England, particularly earlier in the period. While women in eighteenth century France sought medical relief for menopausal symptoms, this cannot be assumed to explain the situation in England.

While the medical discourses were dominated by male physicians for the most part, women's engagement with medicine was largely confined to recipe books and conduct manuals. These instances of female engagement with medicine contain a multitude of cures for various maladies, many of which directly concern the female body, her womb, and her menstrual cycle. However, none of these accounts include

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<sup>26</sup> Sennart, 127.

<sup>27</sup> Judy Norsigian. *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause* (New York: Touchstone, 2006), p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Stolberg. "A Woman's Hell? Medical Perceptions of Menopause in Preindustrial Europe," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Volume 73.3 Fall (1999).

any reference to the treatment of menopause nor its supposed associated symptoms.<sup>29</sup> This absence cannot be attributed to some sort of shyness or embarrassment as the accounts already deal with all manner of female bodily concerns. I contend that this exclusion in female literary spaces was because for women, the cessation of the terms was not an affliction to be cured, but a process of aging akin to greying hair or wrinkles. If not to address the complaints of the women calling for a cure, what caused the male medical preoccupation with menopause?

According to Scheper-Hughes, symptoms of illness are 'coded metaphors capable of speaking eloquently to troubling aspects of social life'.<sup>30</sup> The independence inherited by the post-menopausal woman is the troubling aspect of social life to which menopausal symptoms speak. The authority of the aging woman in the early modern period develops from what Amy Friode asserts to be a positive factor of menopause wherein the woman gained a degree of independence as they were no longer regarded as sexual prospects,<sup>31</sup> without the risk of punishing pregnancies that kept young women submissive. Judith Posner echoes this statement, saying that 'aging women are freed from the stigma of womanhood'.<sup>32</sup> Jonathon G. Harris has addressed the nature of poison and pathology in early modern discussion of the body politic.<sup>33</sup> Invoking the threat of poison within both the aging woman herself, and within her wider society, the woman's body becomes a

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<sup>29</sup> There is evidence of recipes to smooth rid of wrinkles ex. London, Wellcome Library, Western MS 7721/20 and to colour grey hair black ex. London, Wellcome Library, Western, MS 2840/23. While these recipes do demonstrate a resistance to the aesthetic effects of menopause, they don't suggest the same pathology as is demonstrated in medical treatises.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Madness of Hunger: sickness, delirium, and human needs," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Volume 12 (1988), p. 429.

<sup>31</sup> Amy Friode. *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 20-21.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Posner. "It's all in your head: Feminist and Medical Models of Menopause (strange bedfellows)," *Sex Roles*, Volume 5 (1979), p. 181.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathon G. Harris. *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

threat to be controlled as 'deviance is contained by being shown to contribute to the health of the 'social organism' or the maintenance of power'.<sup>34</sup>

By disabling the natural effect of the aging female body and reframing its existence as a deviation, the post-menopausal body became a body that needed to be inspected and regulated. The practice of disease being used as a foil for regulating deviant behaviour was a common in early modern England by this time. In speaking about how the image of the pox was appropriated by different groups to demonise their specific enemies, Keven Siena explains how 'medical authorities employed the frightening image of venereal disease to help create and enforce dangerous beliefs aimed at policing behaviour'.<sup>35</sup> This surveillance and regulation could then be applied to the woman in general, if for no other reason than to assuage the anxiety produced by the fact that she was no longer under patriarchal control.

Medicalising the female body in order to exert control over it was aided by the 'widespread contemporary fears of the unpredictability and mysteriousness of the female body which was regarded as frighteningly impervious to scientific and occult investigation or control'.<sup>36</sup> Jacqueline N. Zita frames the notion of reproductive control in her description of the menopausal woman who 'poses a serious threat to the authority and autonomy of a body politic which has always justified women's dependency and secondary social status as a function of female reproductivity, the quintessential cultural meaning of womanhood'.<sup>37</sup> This early modern idea of

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Siena, "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox: English Venereology and the Early Modern Medical Discourse on Social and Sexual Danger," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Volume 8.4 (1998), p. 555.

<sup>36</sup> Katherine Armstrong, "Possets, Pills and Poisons: Physicking the Female Body in Early Seventeenth-Century Drama," *Cahiers Elisabethains: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies*, Volume 61.1 (2002), p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline N Zita, 'Heresy in the Female Body: The Rhetorics of Menopause', in *Menopause: A Midlife Passage*, ed. by Joan C. Callahan (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 74.

menopause marking a deviation from the standard female biology align with current biogender essentialist views of menopause which consider the process to be a 'deviance from the gendered norm of true femininity, a loss of womanhood produced by a biological change'.<sup>38</sup> The de-gendering and unsexing of the aging woman contributes to an ageist and sexist othering which is 'a deliberate, discursive process of physical and mental standardisation of the human form and its behaviour'.<sup>39</sup> In reducing the female state to being dependent on her fertility and subservience, the menopausal woman is stripped of her gender identity and is now viewed as grotesque parody of womanhood.

Zita considers menopause as being 'influenced, though not exclusively, by the cultural meanings given to gender, sexuality, female specific aging, and other social differences'.<sup>40</sup> I purport that these cultural meanings placed onto menopause are involved in a cyclical relationship. Culture informs ideas concerning the intersection between gender and age, and these preconceived notions create the image of menopause depicted in medical discourses. However, the ideas perpetuated in these medical dialogues become disseminated back through culture, reaffirming the prejudices against aging women through all modes of cultural capital. The image of the unsexed aging woman with a poisonous body therefore pervades early modern literature. Spenser's description of Duessa in Book One of *The Faerie Queene* embodies the images perpetuated in medical discourses.

A loathy, wrinkled hag, ill favoured, old,  
Whose scret filth good manners biddeth not be told.  
Her crafty head was altogether bald,  
As in hate of honourable eld,  
Was overgrown with scurfe and filthy scald;

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<sup>38</sup> Zita, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Allison Hobwood and David Houston Wood, 'Early Modern Literature and Disability Studies', *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. by Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Zita, 69.

Her Teeth out of her rotten Gums were fell'd,  
 And her sowre breath abhominably smeld;  
 Her dries dugs, lyke bladders lacking wind,  
 Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;  
 Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind.<sup>41</sup>

Duessa's hard and wrinkled skin, toothless gums, and sagging breasts were all features of menopause in the Renaissance, which immediately links her to the image of the aging woman at this time. The description of her breasts is the most significant feature in this depiction. 'Filthy matter from them weld', the idea of Duessa's breasts leaking poison invokes the contentious medical idea of menstrual blood which was not purged would putrify inside the old woman and travelling through her body, corrupting wherever it goes. This also functions on a metaphorical level. Leaking breasts is an image associated with childbirth and breastfeeding, and as such also comes to represent fertility and youth. Duessa's perversion of the leaking breasts implies that her existence as an infertile woman intrudes upon the natural order. The concept of the cessation of menstruation marking a moral change in a woman was further explored in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with Lady Macbeth's famous plea:

come unsex me here,  
 And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
 Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,  
 Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,  
 That no compunctious visitings of nature  
 Shake my purpose, nor keep peace between  
 Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,  
 And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers.<sup>42</sup>

As had been often explained, thick blood referred to the melancholy Lady Macbeth needed to perform wicked deeds. However, thick blood was a lesser-known allusion to the inability to purge menstrual blood, which is reinforced by the reference

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<sup>41</sup> Edmund Spenser. *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A.C. Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 111.

<sup>42</sup> William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, ed. by Roberth Minola (New York: Norton and Company 2013), p. 16.

to the stopping of 'visitings of nature', a known metaphor for menstruation. While the stoppage of menstruation in this case does not suggest menopause or old age, the language used appropriates the language of the cessation of terms in order to evoke the systems of thought surrounding menopausal women. The imagery of Lady Macbeth's breasts further aligns itself with Duessa's depiction. Like the 'filthy matter' leaking from Duessa's breasts, Lady Macbeth asks for her milk to be replaced with gall, meaning the yellow bile of which an excess causes the body to become ruthless and insolent.<sup>43</sup>

By locating this bile in the previously fertile breasts, Lady Macbeth represents a three-fold association. Firstly, infertility is not compatible with femininity, secondly insolence is not compatible with femininity, and therefore thirdly, infertility gives rise to an insolence in the body that detaches a woman from her womanhood, as Daphna Oren-Magidor explains 'Quotidian infertility might be seen as a sign of immorality, but there was a more powerful articulation of the connection between sin, reproductive failure and the transgression of gendered boundaries'.<sup>44</sup> As breasts that nurture new life are corrupted, post-menopausal women are seen to corrupt young people morally. This embodied corruption, combined with the anxiety created by the ambiguity of the aging woman's body and sexual history culminate in popular culture with parodic images of uncontrollable female sexuality in the in aged women. The post-menopausal woman was viewed as an 'expert of all things sexual' who 'procured, arranging trysts, organising affairs, and contributing to the downfall of innocent maids'.<sup>45</sup> In *The Insinuating Bawd And the Repenting Harlot*, a young

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<sup>43</sup> Janet Alderman. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 135.

<sup>44</sup> Daphna Oren-Magidor, *Infertility in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017), p. 91.

<sup>45</sup> Lynn Botelho, "Old women and sex: fear, fantasy, and a defining life course in Early Modern Europe," *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, Volume 42 Age and Sex, (2015), p. 196.

woman laments her involvement with prostitution, saying how “my own Base Sex seduc’d me first to Sin. One who by long Experience knew the way”.<sup>46</sup> Despite the young woman entering into prostitution through her own free will, the traditional representation of the aging woman as being predatory dissolved the guilt of the young woman, and as a result the sins of youth can be absolved by displacing them onto the old.

The process of the aging woman acting as a figure onto whom zealous sexuality can be transposed is evident in the contemporary characterisations of the legend of Danae. Danae was imprisoned by her father, Acrisius the King of Argos, having heard a prophesy that said her son would kill him. Angered by this, Zeus sent down a golden shower that impregnated Danae. In the depictions of Danae up until the sixteenth century she is represented either on her own or with a cherub. In these early portrayals of Danae, she ‘did not function merely as a symbol of chastity, but as an image of chastity violated’.<sup>47</sup> From the sixteenth century onwards, images of Danae include an old woman at her side collecting the rain of coins in a clear relation to the old bawd collecting money from the young prostitutes.<sup>48</sup> Hendrick Goltzius’ *Danae*, Jacob Matham’s *Danae*, and Titian’s *Danae* for Philip II of Spain all display the aged woman as the active figure in the portraits. Where Danae lays transfixed, the old woman is either laughing, collecting golden coins, or reaching for Danae’s body herself. In order to maintain the ideation of Danae as a saint, the negative connotations surrounding her story must be transposed to the old maid. In doing this, Danae can be absolved of her alluded prostitution and the old maid collecting the money is critiqued for her greed. These representations reinforce the suspicion

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<sup>46</sup> Edward Ward. *The insinuating bawd and the repenting harlot*. (London, 1699), sig. B1v via Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership.

<sup>47</sup> Eric Jan Sluijter. “Emulating Sensual Beauty: Representations of Danae from Gossaert to Rembrandt,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Volume 27.1 (1999), p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Sluijter, 28.

toward the post-menopausal woman which enables her to be used as a scapegoat for the immoral behaviour in early modern society.

The aging woman's sexuality apparently perverts even the most natural relationships. In Sidney's *The Old Arcadia* (1593), the middle aged Gynecia sees her daughter as the cause of aging body, 'the growing of my daughter seems the decay of herself. The blessings of a mother turned to the curses of a competitor'.<sup>49</sup> The mother whose children are adults loses her role as a mother and in old age becomes 'depraved like that of a girl / 'Tis the green-sickness of a second childhood, and, like the faint offer of a latter spring, serves but to usher in the fall, and withers in an affected bossom'.<sup>50</sup> The invocation of a second childhood creates an image of the aging woman as being incompetent which is a stark contrast to the way she is portrayed threatening towards young people. The poisoning of the menopausal body in threatening characters reinforces the notion that the independent aging woman is dangerous. The subsequent demeaning of the aging woman in comedy functions as a means to negate this threat by controlling her.

The way the aging woman is degraded in comedy and ballads play on the idea that in old age the woman is driven purely by her sexuality, with no ambitions beyond seeking sexual favours from younger men. This image of the lusty older woman is particularly pervasive in the ballads of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. While the medical texts of the period transcribe the views of an educated class, Alice Tobriner contends that ballads 'contain entire systems of thought made meaningful for the uneducated'.<sup>51</sup> The narrative of the oversexed old woman is disseminated to the illiterate where it becomes prevalent in ballads like *The Old*

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<sup>49</sup> Sir Philip Sidney. *The Old Arcadia*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> William Congreve. *The Way of the World*, ed. by Brian Gibbons (New York: New Mermaids, 2002), II.i.

<sup>51</sup> Alice Tobriner, "Old Age in Tudor-Stuart Broadside Ballads," *Folklore*, Volume 102.2 (1991), p. 149.



*Womans Commendations of Her young Husband* and *The Olde Bride*. The humour in these ballads derive from the juxtaposition of the aging woman's sexual hunger with her revolting appearance, with each instance of sexual desire being paired with a grotesque depiction of her aging features. In the case of *The Old Woman's Commendations* the humour is specifically drawn from the old woman's delusions of her fertility. Despite being 'Full fourscore Years and Seven' she still thinks she 'may be with Child'.<sup>52</sup> Where the female body is dangerous in medical literature this danger is alleviated in popular literature through the combined efforts of disabling the female body and concomitantly demeaning her through claims of rampant sexual appetite. The degrading of the aging woman results in disempowering whatever independence she gained through menopause.

The appropriation of medical discourse surrounding old women fed into a dialogue where writers attempted to cure an illness without a cure, not the process of menopause, but the threat it posed for their patriarchal society because 'political writers, playwrights and pamphleteers attempted to explain not only the nature of the corpus politicus' ills: styling themselves as the nation's physicians'.<sup>53</sup> By appropriating the rhetoric of medical discourse, writers could provide a cure to the body politic which saw itself at risk from the women they could not control.

The independence a woman gains through aging is attacked by specifically targeting her body and framing it as dysfunctional and dangerous. Whether this be the poisonous blood purported in medical discourse, or the uncontrollable sexual urges depicted in comedy and ballads, both mediums affirm and reaffirm the dialogue that the aging female body is dysfunctional. Literary scholars of the early modern period often comment on the fact that popular representations of aging

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<sup>52</sup> Anon. *Age renewed by wedlock; / OR, / The Old Womans Commendations of Her young Husband*. (London: English Broadside Ballad Archive, 1693).

<sup>53</sup> Harris, 3.

women are almost unrecognisable from what we know about the lived experiences of women in the period.<sup>54</sup> While old women were not all lambasted as witches and bawds, the images of female old age these characters reflect speak directly to the sexism imbued in medical literature that pervades all level of literary and artistic culture.

The medicalisation of menopause promotes a theorisation of the aging female body as being less than, as being dysfunctional, as being something inherently dangerous. It is no coincidence that this is a response to the first time in an early modern woman's life where she inherits some form of liberty dependent of men. The medicalisation of menopause seeks to disable the female body in order to control it. The thirst for control over the aging woman's body permeates early modern culture through every level of socioeconomic engagement, and the contemporary forms of popular media sought to enforce this control by appropriating the messages conveyed through medical discourse. The medicalisation of menopause does not exist in a medical vacuum, the damaging messages it purports became lodged in the specific cultural conscious of early modern England, and this is what creates a narrative of the aging woman as simultaneously a dangerous threat, and a sexualised punchline.

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<sup>54</sup> Jeanne Addison Roberts, "The Crone in English Renaissance Drama," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, Volume 15 (2003), p. 118. Botelho, "Images of Old Age in Early Modern Cheap Print". p. 226.

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