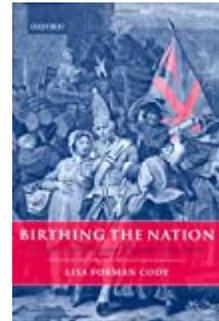




Lisa Forman Cody. *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 376 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-926864-1.



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New Labor(s)?

Birthing the Nation is an ambitious book that engages with debates about the development of nationalism and the formation of modern ideas about gender and identity. Lisa Forman Cody argues that during the long eighteenth century male science altered the meanings of sex and birth in ways that helped Britons to imagine specific aspects of their individual and social identities both at home and abroad. Middling sort maternity became valorized for holding families and nations together, while reproductive signs and stories enabled Britons to connect their corporeal, domestic, and local experiences to larger, abstract concepts of community and alienation, such as gender, religion, and nationality. Enlightened commentators came to perceive reproduction as a social category that highlighted distinctions and interrelationships between women and men, mothers and children. Reproductive knowledge and metaphors helped men midwives, naturalists, and other late eighteenth-century intellectuals find natural proof for social hierarchies, including the construction of biological racial difference. Reproductive beliefs enabled Enlightenment doctors, ethnographers, and journalists to mark out the boundaries of rationality versus imagination, enlightenment versus credulity,

masculine reason versus female passion, and civilized Englishness versus more atavistic social identities. By the nineteenth century issues of reproduction had become matters of public concern, and men of science had established cultural authority over matters of reproduction.

Issues of reproduction were at the center of political upheavals over the course of the long eighteenth century. Stories about the warming pan scandal that surrounded the birth of the son of James II in 1688 are evidence for a late seventeenth-century crisis in paternity and patriarchy, reflecting fears that the Glorious Revolution and Hanoverian Settlement were tenuous, and that political models based on kinship and patriarchy could override constitutional monarchy.[1] The emergence of female monarchs in Austria, Hungary, and Russia from the 1740s led to similar patriarchal anxiety about a world turned upside down, while both the Anglo-Scottish union of 1707 and the British occupation of the American colonies were described by their opponents in language that suggested illicit trysts and seductions. George III was depicted as passionate, jealous, and weak, a bad mother to his American children, but after the loss of the colonies

he became a loving husband and father of the nation. By contrast the French Revolution was compared to a monstrous caesarean birth.

Cody's book is not merely an analysis of the gendered language of politics, and at the center of her narrative is a social history of the emergence of men, rather than midwives, as pre-eminent authorities over sex and birth. For much of the early modern period knowledge about reproduction was primarily the preserve of women and midwives. Early modern Britons believed that women were fundamentally different from men, and that their experiences could be inaccessible to male authorities. In the later seventeenth century, however, stories about abortions, witchcraft, and Catholicism suggested that men might be more rational and less dangerous persons to oversee reproduction and birth. Female midwives were accused of facilitating abortions, tolerating female sexual lust, and forging links with other women rather than with men to protect women's reputations and desires. Scandals about midwives fed contemporary fascination with women's secret activities in the delivery room, fueling popular suspicions that midwives had the potential to undermine society and the state through their feminine prerogatives. Homosocial bonds of womanhood promoted by women such as Jane Sharp began to be denigrated by midwives' opponents, and were reconceptualized as homosexual affections that stood in opposition to the ideal Georgian reproductive household.

Men-midwives helped shape a new gender system that suggested that the sexes were akin in fundamental emotional and human ways. The male midwife was an educated, rational professional, capable of stepping back from the female reproductive body and determining a delivery strategy objectively. But he was also a man of feeling and sympathy, a close and comforting household intimate who empathized with the fears and pain of mothers. Many male midwives were Scottish, and thus victims of xenophobic satire, but midwifery offered Scots a means of displaying their commitment to the Union through a disdain for superstition and popery, allowing them to fashion cosmopolitan British identities as charitable men aiding marginalized single mothers. A male midwife was deemed a superior birth room attendant since he combined positive masculine and feminine traits, an eighteenth-century metro-sexual seeking to import the latest obstetrical methods to the backward provinces. Anxieties remained about male midwives having such intimate access to married women, however, and their actions were often perceived as either erotic or violent.

Cody's work is most suggestive when exploring changing notions of masculinity. She argues that new gender models such as John Dryden's pregnant Lord Nonsuch in *The Wild Gallant* (1696) presented patriarchs as paternal nurturers who acknowledged women's pains and desires, and she suggests that Georgian culture invested fatherhood as a new ideal. Yet Cody also argues that depictions of pregnant men inverted perceived ideas about the natural order of sexual reproduction, and became linked to same-sex male relationships and effeminate masculine sexuality that subverted the supremacy of traditional, idealized, patriarchal heterosexual fathers. Similarly scientific curiosity distorted gender attributes, allowing women to use "masculine" tools such as telescopes and bug-nets and transforming men into "excited, finicky, effeminate collectors" (p. 113). Connections between sodomy, politics, and fruitless philosophy continued into the eighteenth century, and were mobilized to articulate national characteristics.

One of the strengths of *Birthing the Nation* is that it draws on a wide range of legal, medical, and personal sources, as well as an impressive selection of periodicals and visual images. Cody notes that medicine and politics often intermingled in cartoons and that the Georgians, like their French counterparts, turned to symbolism, satire, jokes, and innuendo to explore questions about royal authority, national policy, and international affairs [2]. Additionally this popular fascination with wondrous and weird tales of sex and birth was exploited to help demarcate difference, inferiority, exclusion, and unreason. It is when she engages with this world of print that Cody's arguments are at their most forceful, although her failure to engage with issues of consumption and circulation weakens her argument somewhat—who actually read these books or saw these images?

Many historians want to argue that the periods they study are eras of major upheaval. Certainly eighteenth-century Britain witnessed a great deal of change: Anglo-Scottish union, population growth, the emergence of a class-based society, a rapidly developing economy, the loss of one empire and the creation of another. Gender relations and identities might also have undergone significant alteration, but not necessarily in the manner that Cody suggests.[3] I have three reservations. First, her argument that male midwives such as William Smellie redefined the birth room as a complex and conflict-ridden space of scientific enquiry full of women and men is problematic when read alongside recent descriptions of seventeenth-century birth chambers.[4] Secondly, this reviewer was skeptical about the claim that the unborn

became endowed with a sense of personhood not seen in previous centuries, and that the eighteenth century was a period when the child became valued above the mother.[5] Thirdly, her argument that medieval and early modern couples rarely spent much time together and had little in common, whilst “heterosociality” (p. 15) flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also set alarm bells ringing. Perhaps this was true to some degree of representations of married life, but surely it did not reflect everyday experiences.[6]

Yet even if Cody is sometimes controversial, or even wrong, it is precisely such bold theories and statements that make this a book that historians must and will engage with. Anyone interested in the history of early modern and modern gender (especially masculinity), medicine (especially gynecology and obstetrics) and politics (especially the development of national and imperial identities) will find this an intriguing and thought-provoking monograph.

Notes

[1]. Mary Fissell makes a similar case in *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 7.

[2]. For some important works on eighteenth-century humor and satire see V. A. C. Gattrel, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London*

(London: Atlantic Books, 2006); R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London: Allen Lane, 1984).

[3]. See A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and R. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London: Longman, 1998) for the nature of such changes.

[4]. For example, D. Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter 7; L. Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), chapter 5. Melissa Hollander’s forthcoming University of York Ph.D. thesis also offers important insights into such issues from a British perspective.

[5]. See Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions*, chapter 1; Gowing, *Common Bodies*, chapter 4; C. McClive, “The Hidden Truths of the Belly: The Uncertainties of Pregnancy in Early Modern Europe,” *Social History of Medicine* 15:2 (2002): 209-227 for suggestions that throw doubts on Cody’s arguments.

[6]. See B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapters 3 and 8 for the nature of early modern marriages.

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