

James Burnes
HSCI 5990
September 12, 2012

A Mother's Part

The third chapter in Katherine Park's *Secrets of Women* revolves around the role of motherhood in regards to anatomies. The chapter title refers to both the mother's physical part the womb or the uterus, but also the role of the mother in the process of generation and even the decision for the private dissections that she discusses. In comparison with chapter II's discussion of natural philosophies of dissection Park attempts to fill chapter III with the *actual* practices.

Park begins with an example of Florentine motherhood, Fiamatta di Donato Adimri. Fiamatta wed at the age of sixteen and began having children soon after. She gave birth to a total of seven children, and following the last fell ill. She was treated by a physician and seemed to be doing well until three weeks after the birth she felt "a pain around her heart." She died the same night. Her husband had her "opened up" to determine the cause of death. The surgeon discovered her uterus was filled with "putrefied blood" which lead to her death. However upon inspecting the other organs the surgeon also revealed that she showed signs of consumption and would have died eventually anyway.

The idea of "opening up" individuals was nothing new in the late fifteenth century. By the time of Fiamatta's death it was quite common for private dissections to occur after death in the home among a small group of individuals. As often as not the instance provided a means of teaching female anatomy to training physicians. Parks shows this evidence in a painting. Since most human cadavers

obtained for dissection were convicted criminals most were male. However, Park uses a famous plate earlier in the book that shows Vesalius dissecting a female cadaver publically. Given the high number of women dying in childbirth, it seems like a reasonable place to go in order to understand female anatomy. In addition it seems criminal dissections were public spectacles and the deceased bodies of the upper class were small, privately held affairs.

Most cases of these dissections were at the behest of the surviving widower, but this was not always the case. On occasion women themselves asked to be opened up after death, as in the case of Bartalomea Dietisalvi. Dietisalvi was concerned that her death would have been due to consumption and wanted to verify the cause in order that her daughters could be treated. Women, usually the patient's mother, if she was still alive, seemed to have the final say in whether or not the body in question would be opened.

Park shifts focus from dissection to birth as well as pre and postnatal care. All of her sources reveal that the midwife was only there for the service of the birth and they were not consulted either before the birth or with any problems following the birth. These issues were usually under the care of a male physician. Parks research reveals that the practice of women's medicine by male specialist, if they can be called that, became more prominent as the fifteenth century progressed. One supporting piece of evidence is that there were nearly always surgeons present at a birth. This allowed them to focus on any problems that arose during the birth that might result in a caesarean section (of which few children survived), as well as facilitated a quick "opening up" if the mother died.

Park writes on the subject of generation as viewed in the fifteenth century, mainly that women were generally seen as incubators for a lineage. The idea that women could mark or shape their children en utero was very popular. Park shows a birthing tray to illustrate that point. Also, the idea that women's bodies could passively resist male seed was also prevalent. The results from such encounters were, in order of success: daughters who look like their mother, daughters who look like their father, sons who look like their mother, and finally sons who looked like their fathers. The latter occurring when every secretive female prowess had failed.

Park ends the chapter with the "myths of the maternal body" framed neatly between Julius Caesar and Nero. The idea of a successful caesarian birth in antiquity is remote, however the auspices of a successful male child "not born of woman" were very good. Successful, virile, and all male, they were destined for greatness. Julius' mother had lived only long enough to bring her son to full term and therefore was the epitome of the perfect mother. Nero, on the other hand, had his mother killed for the specific purpose of seeing where he was before he was born. He doubted his wife could give him a "legitimate son" and ordered his philosophers to make him pregnant so that he might give birth to a likeness of himself. They gave him an elixir containing a frog that expanded within his body until he called for them to get it out. He vomited up the frog and was disgusted by just how hideous the vile creature was, and wondered if he had appeared the same.

What is important to Park is that throughout the growing practice of dissection among the patrician class, the influence of male physicians in women's medicine also grew. By the end of the fifteenth century male physicians were

treating infertility, trying to ward off miscarriage, and generally exhibiting increased attention to women's reproductive health. This helped to educate the laypeople with their own reproductive health and habits but also "highlighted tensions and discrepancies" that revolved around the mother's part.

Parks work is filled with numerous images which help to illustrate her points as well as reveal differences between times, and cases. She writes in an easy to follow manner while still maintaining a scholar's professionalism. Her footnotes are copious and address issues at length. Many sources are primary journal-like *ricordanzas*. Since *Secrets of Women* was written after her initial histories in general period dissection, she can focus more on the nuances of gender based dissections than spend her time researching dissection in general. Her basal view of a broader dissection history has greatly strengthened her ability to address the issues of gender, generation, and the origins of human dissection.