‘Breeding’ a ‘little stranger’: managing uncertainty in pregnancy in later Georgian England[1] / by Joanne Begiato

Abstract

This chapter offer insights into the personal and familial experience of pregnancy in England in the long eighteenth century. It takes an emotions history approach because the language used by women, men, and their families during pregnancy frequently expressed feelings and moods as well as factual reports. Thus it focuses on the personal and inter-personal aspects of emotions, using Keith Oatley’s observation that ‘emotions are interpersonal; they set up particular kinds of relationships with other people’. The stages of pregnancy up to childbirth are investigated using parents’ and family members’ descriptions in correspondence and memoirs. What emerges is the richness of the language used to describe this bodily and emotional experience rather than more neutral, technical terms such as pregnancy. The chapter reveals the range of emotional meaning within the accounts, with people conceptualising pregnancy as a journey from a state of uncertainty into more certainty following delivery. Narratives of pregnancy display the state’s sheer uncertainty with a focus on anticipation and apprehension, and repeated combinations of words about the passage of time and change. This state of flux had several forms, from increase in size and knowledge, to bodily change through illness, the physical incapacities suffered by women, to considerable emotional disruption, partly owing to the invisibility of the unborn. The chapter goes on to argue that this shared emotional vocabulary had several functions. It helped women and their

[1] I would like to thank the following for their discussion and help: Katie Barclay, Ginny Engholm, Jennifer Evans, Kathleen Flynn, Michael James, Ciara Meehan, Sara Read, Shannon Withycombe.

families navigate the transition of pregnancy from one state to another. It also did some emotional 'work'. The emotional language helped tackle the permanent apprehension caused by uncertainty in pregnancy. It built bonds between spouses and between them and family members, bridging the astoundingly difficult transitions from one phase of life to another, and helped neutralise the fear of the arrival of an unseen stranger. These words were an emotional labour that helped convey a mother to the point of physical labour and its hoped for 'happy event' of a 'safe delivery'.

Introduction

Pregnancy was a routine, often regular experience for women across their child-bearing years in the long eighteenth century, since the majority of women wed in their mid-twenties and bore children until the menopause. Pregnancy was limited only by fertility, health, and sexual abstinence before the 'fertility transition'.[2] As such pregnancy from its earliest stages to birth was a topic consistently discussed in family correspondence and diaries among the literate social ranks. In some cases this was because husbands were away from home and wanted news. In the early 1820s Elizabeth Shaw replied to her husband John: 'I have not the shadow of a reason to suppose that I am in the way you think me. I wish I was as certain 3 months to come'.[3] Sometimes it was husbands worrying about their wives. In 1754 Robert Parker informed his wife Elizabeth: 'I must own absence [with] the certainty of yr Condition & Fretfulness, gives me particular and great uneasiness.'[4] Over sixty years later (9 April 1816) John Shaw told his wife: 'I am vexed beyond anything to

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[2] Rothery, Mark, 'The reproductive behaviour of the English landed gentry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' *The Journal of British Studies*, 48, 3, July 2009, 674-694.
[3] Cadbury Research Library [CRL]: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, The Shaw Letters, Shaw/77.
[4] Vickery, Amanda, *The Gentleman's Daughter: women's lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London, 1998)., 87

find you have let Sarah go without being provided with another girl do pray get someone in to the house and keep yourself as quiet as possible – I hope it will not be so bad as what you apprehend – do inform me any particulars in your next'.[5] Prospective mothers informed their families of their health. Elizabeth Leathes updated her father in 1775: 'We are not apprehensive of any bad consequences, ensuing from the fainting fits, as they are very common in pregnancy'.[6] On 11 March 1816 Elizabeth Shaw somewhat grumpily told her husband: 'I am looking forward to nothing but sickness in your absence – you will miss it all'.[7] And women recorded their thoughts in diaries. Elizabeth Fry wrote in her diary on 13 Sept, 1809 a week before her sixth child was born, 'Time runs on apace. I desire my imagination may not dwell on that which is before it. Every outward thing appears nearly, if not quite ready; and as for the inward preparation, I cannot prepare myself'.[8]

Although individual circumstances were often different, one common theme emerges across these relatively mundane commentaries on pregnancy, a pervasive sense of apprehension. Consider the words often used in the extracts above: uneasiness, fretfulness, apprehensive, bad consequences, vexed, sickness, certain. This chapter surveys the language used to describe pregnancy and the unborn child in order to learn more about this bodily and emotional experience in late Georgian England.

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[5] CRL Shaw/77

[6] Norfolk Record Office [NRO] BOL/2, The Bolingbroke Collection, the correspondence of Mrs Elizabeth Leathes (formerly Reading, subsequently Peach), BOL 2/24/24 Redeham Aug 5th 1775. I am indebted to Dr Michael James for giving me transcriptions of the Leathes' correspondence from 1775. For more about the Leathes see Michael James, 'The effect on family life during the late Georgian period of indisposition, medication, treatments and the resultant outcomes', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2010.

[7] CRL Shaw/47

[8] *Life of Elizabeth fry. Compiled from her journal, as edited by her daughters, and from various other sources*. by Susanna Corder, Philadelphia, 1853. http://archive.org/stream/lifeofelizabethf00cordiala/lifeofelizabethf00cordiala_djvu.txt Accessed 21 March 2015

This is useful because for the most part there is far less published scholarship on the nine months of pregnancy as a specific state rather than the precursor to the main event of birth.[9] Recent illuminating scholarship on the science of reproduction, conception, and contraception, miscarriage, childbirth, midwifery, lying-in, infanticide and the associations of insanity with pregnancy, childbirth and uterine disorders makes it even more imperative to ask questions about pregnancy.[10] How did mothers experience it during a period identified with cultural, medical, and social change? How did pregnancy affect their husbands and families? How did new medical and reproductive technologies affect pregnancy as well as childbirth? What changed over time, place, and culture?

What has been done to historicise perceptions of pregnancy in their social, economic and cultural context suggests that during the long eighteenth century the vocabulary women and their husbands and families used about pregnancy and the unborn child was changing. Judith Lewis's study of British aristocratic women's childbearing between 1760 and 1860 found that around 1760 the common word for pregnancy, breeding (last used in her sources in 1817) was replaced by French euphemisms

[9] This is however now underway with exciting PhD research by Leah Astbury on early modern pregnancy and child birth, Shannon Withycombe on 19th century Americans and Whitney Wood on late 19th and early 20th century Canadians.
[10] For example Lisa Forman Cody, *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; J.Evans, & S. Read, '"Before Midnight she had Miscarried": Women, Men and Miscarriage in Early Modern England', *Journal of Family History*. 40, 1, p. 3-23 Jan 2015; J. Evans, '"They are called Imperfect men": Male infertility and sexual health in early modern England', *Social History of Medicine*, 2015; J. Evans, *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014; Valerie Fildes, *Wet nursing: a history from antiquity to the present*, (1988); Kim Phillips and Barry Reay, *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History*, London, Polity Press, 2011; Marland, Hilary. *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain* Basingstoke ; New York: 2004; Marland, H., and Anne Marie Rafferty (eds), *Midwives, Society, and Childbirth: Debates and Controversies in the Modern Period* (1997); Wilson, Adrian, *The Making of Man-midwifery: Childbirth in England, 1660-1770* (1995); Adrian Wilson, The ceremony of childbirth and its interpretation in Valerie Fildes, (ed.), *Women as mothers in pre-industrial England : essays in memory of Dorothy McLaren* (The Wellcome Institute series in the history of medicine) (1990).

such as enceinte, as a result of new medical practices and fashions for refined manners.[11] Susan Klepp's analysis of family limitation in America from 1760 to 1820 indicates that the language of pregnancy moved from mother-centred to child-centred over the period. Metaphors of plenty, sited in the maternal body, were overtaken by a language of restraint and rational child-rearing.[12] So breeding, teeming, or great with child, were replaced with phrases like 'awaiting a little stranger' or 'beloved object'.[13] Klepp proposes that this linguistic transformation was a manifestation of the demographic shift to restricted fertility in post-revolutionary era wherein women redefined their pregnancies as prudent, expected, and managed.[14]

Both these studies demonstrate that attitudes towards pregnancy are socially constructed. However, there is more to be said about the language of pregnancy outside of medical discourse with regard to its timing and context. Modification in cultural ideas is rarely as precise and dateable as the generational variation that Lewis and Klepp identify taking place in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Overall the terms for pregnancy did change amongst the middle and upper classes in the long eighteenth century, influenced by politeness and sensibility and changing notions of modesty. But one set of phrases did not simply supplant another. For instance the change from breeding to sentiment was probably not quite so clear cut. Elizabeth Shaw, an evangelical Methodist writing about her pregnancies from 1815 onwards still used the old fashioned term breeding. In one letter to her husband she commented: 'Your mother never knew what it was to be ill in breeding;' in another: 'If

[11] Judith Lewis, *In the Family Way: Childbearing in the British Aristocracy, 1760-1860*, 1986, p. 72.
[12] Susan Klepp. *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, & Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2009, p. 106.
[13] Klepp does not see this as the adoption of a language of refinement, although she does suggest that agricultural terms suggesting fecundity, such as breeding, was a term seen as overly animalistic.
[14] Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 103-113.

ever I live to breed again'. This was despite her more 'fashionable' use of evangelical vocabularies of the heart and sensibility and her bodily modesty which made her uncomfortable to discuss her condition.[15]

It is also difficult to pin down the context and causes of such cultural shifts. For example, Klepp suggests that in America the criticism of luxury and excess in the 1760s promoted the move away from metaphors of plenty and fruitfulness to one of constraint and self-control which permeated women's reproductive discourses (and practices) by the revolution.[16] Vocabularies of pregnancy were different in tone and form by the 1830s in England but it remains unclear how far this was due to a fertility transition in England. The concern with luxury does not correlate with the shift in metaphors for pregnancy in England since it had manifested in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, an era which did not fear population expansion and celebrated large families.[17] By the turn of the century there was alarm about untrammelled population growth, primarily aimed at the labouring ranks. There is also some evidence that debates about over-population encouraged distaste for prolific, fecund motherhood. Yet practice did not necessarily coincide. The size of upper-class families did diminish in the early nineteenth century, but evidence of deliberate family limitation is only apparent in the later nineteenth century. More sustained research is thus required to understand these issues of the timing and causes of changes in the personal and familial language and narratives of pregnancy in Georgian England.

[15] CRL, Shaw/42, 43A, 44A, 45A..
[16] Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, chapters 3 and 4.
[17] Jacqueline Hecht, 'From "Be Fruitful and Multiply" to Family Planning: The Enlightenment Transition', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Sites and Margins of the Public Sphere (Summer, 1999), pp. 536-551.

This chapter instead explores the function of languages of pregnancy inspired by the 'emotional turn' in history.[18] This is an invaluable analytical framework because the language used by women, men, and their families during pregnancy frequently expressed feelings and moods as well as factual reports. The scholarship on emotions is extensive and its terms still being set and thus it is important to establish this chapter's approach. It uses Thomas Dixon's definition of emotions as 'felt' judgements and Keith Oatley's explanation that 'An emotion is a kind of judgement, an evaluation of an event in relation to a concern'.[19] Lemmings and Brook's definition is also helpful here too because it reminds us of emotions' physiological aspects: 'bodily sensations signalling that one's current personal situation is or is not in accordance with hopes, values, and well-being'.[20] In many respects these characterisations could describe pregnancy, itself an event or situation, which stirs emotions and moods that are expressed in words: often at the points at which there is deviation from hopes, values, and wellbeing. There are also several paradigms that the historian of emotions can adopt. This chapter does not assess the emotional 'rules' of pregnancy, which would necessitate investigating emotions at societal level.[21] Nor does it evaluate the emotions bound up with pregnancy from the perspective of 'emotional communities': groups in which people share values and interests, and privilege certain emotions and downgrade others.[22] Both families and

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[18] David Lemmings and Ann Brooks 'The Emotional Turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences', in idem., (eds), *Emotions and Social Change: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*, 2014.
[19] 'A Question of Emotion pt 2: Q&A with Prof Keith Oatley' http://scotinexile.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/question-of-emotion-pt2-q-with-prof.html Accessed 13 July 2014; 'A Question of Emotion pt3: Dr Thomas Dixon' http://scotinexile.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/question-of-emotion-pt3-dr-thomas-dixon.html Accessed 13 July 2014
[20] Lemmings and Brooks, 'The Emotional Turn', p. 33.
[21] Stearns, Peter N., and Carol Z Stearns. "Emotionology: clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards." *American Historical Review*, 90, 4 (October, 1985).
[22]Rosenwein, B.H. "Worrying about emotions in history." American Historical Review, 107, 3 (June, 2002). Also see http://scotinexile.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/q-with-professor-barbara-rosenwein.html Accessed 13 July 2014

religious organisations were emotional communities which helped manage the emotions experienced during pregnancy, but this study's source base is not large enough to do justice to this form of emotions history. Instead the chapter focuses on the personal and inter-personal aspects of emotions, using Keith Oatley's view that 'emotions are interpersonal; they set up particular kinds of relationships with other people'.[23]

Given that the study explores individual and familial emotions in the stages of pregnancy before birth, it excludes descriptions of the event of childbirth. It also prioritises parents' and families' descriptions and does not include midwives' or medical treatises in the consideration of accounts of experience. Aside from some memoirs the sources used are correspondence of five families drawn from the professional middle classes: the Leathes an Anglican clerical family based in Norfolk and Oxfordshire, writing in the mid 1770s; the Munbys, York lawyers, whose letters date from the turn of the eighteenth century; the Grays, two generations of Methodist lawyers in York, writing predominantly in the first decade of the nineteenth century; the Courtaulds, Unitarians, a silk manufacturing family in Essex, writing 1819-1823; and the Shaws, suppliers of hardware in Wolverhampton, who exchanged many letters from 1815 to the 1830s because John Shaw was a commercial traveller.[24]

NVivo was used to code descriptions of pregnancy and the range of nodes that developed were notable for relating to mental and physical feelings and sensations which form the discussion below. The survey of the accounts of pregnancy reveals

[23] 'A Question of Emotion pt 2: Q&A with Prof Keith Oatley' http://scotinexile.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/question-of-emotion-pt2-q-with-prof.html Accessed 13 July

[24] For brief biographies of the Munbys, Grays, Courtaulds, and Shaws see Appendix, Joanne Bailey, *Parenting in England: Emotions, Identity and Generations*, 2013, Oxford, pp. 253-4. For a biography of the Leathes, see James, 'The effect on family life', pp. 65-18.

the richness of the language used and the wide and varied vocabulary. By the second half of the eighteenth century the term 'pregnancy' was used. In 1775 Elizabeth Leathes told her parents: 'My Husband is highly Delighted with my Pregnancy & we are obliged to you for your Congratulations upon it'. In the same year her husband informed them 'I assure you she has had no symptoms during her pregnancy that those which are quite common and frequent'.[25] In 1811 Jonathan Gray rather awkwardly remarked to his wife, 'I am surprised at your miscalculations respecting the pregnancy of children'.[26] For the most part, however, numerous other terms were employed in preference to this neutral, technical term. This is surely because the alternatives selected to chronicle pregnancy possessed more powerful emotional meaning, evoking the moods and emotional states as well as physical feelings of pregnancy and its outcomes.

The chapter reveals the range of emotional meaning within the accounts, with people conceptualising pregnancy as a journey from a state of uncertainty into more certainty following delivery. It shows how narratives of pregnancy display the state's sheer uncertainty with a focus on anticipation and apprehension, and repeated combinations of words about the passage of time and change. The chapter first discusses the several forms this state of flux took, including increase in size and knowledge, bodily change through illness, physical incapacities suffered by women, and the considerable emotional disruption, partly owing to the invisibility of the unborn. The chapter then goes on to argue that this shared emotional vocabulary helped women and their families navigate the transition of pregnancy from one state to another. It performed emotional 'work' building bonds between spouses and

[25] NRO, BOL 2/24/24 Redeham Aug 5th 1775, BOL 2/24/25 Reedham August 15th 1775.
[26] 1811 May 20 Jonathan Gray from York to his wife Mary at Ockbrook, City of York Libraries [CYL], Archives and Local History, Gray Family Papers: Acc 5,6,24,235 J/37.

between them and family members, bridging the difficult transitions from one phase of life to another, and helping neutralise the fear of the arrival of an unseen stranger.

The meaning of descriptions of increase in pregnancy

Perhaps unsurprisingly individual and familial accounts of pregnancy often used of addition and increase both descriptively and metaphorically. Thus the pregnancy was discussed through the expanding girth of the mother, a feature of life writings that does not show much variation across the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. Linda Pollock's work cites numerous early seventeenth-century examples which relate to size. Unton Dering was described as 'so bigge', Anne Meautys wrote 'I groe very bige'.[27] Examples from the colonial period in America are similar: '"big with child," "gone with child," "great with child," "big-bellied," or just plain "big"'.[28] When these terms are placed in their broader context, it is evident they are not always simply reports of bodily adaptation to a growing foetus. They also were metaphors for uncertain timing, physical and emotional oppression, and risk. For instance, during her pregnancy in 1775 Elizabeth Leathes often defined her state through growth. In one letter she reported, 'I am very much increased in size within this last Fortnight. I thank God I am as well as can be expected in my [cur]rent Condition & I take all possible care of myself'.[29] In another letter Elizabeth thanked her parents for a set of more comfortable stays, and observed:

> I suppose you will be surpris'd to find that I am so much increased in size since my return from Town, as to be obliged to leave them open three inches behind notwithstanding I let them out as much as they will allow on each side.

[27] Linda Pollock, 'Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early Modern Society', in Valerie Fildes, *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, 1990, pp. 44, 46, 51.
[28] Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, p. 106.
[29] NRO, BOL 2/24/13/1 April 9th 1775.

> This makes me apprehensive that I shall be confined sooner than I first expected.[30]

For the Leathes, therefore, the really important feature of Betsey's size was its indication of the timing of her pregnancy and whether she had estimated childbirth correctly. Her husband Edward shared these concerns and wrote to his wife's parents:

> I now think Betsey's prodigious size is the strangest phenomena that ever was. Had it been her lot to have been born a male, she would have been an excellent Dutch Tailor as they are generally reputed the worst because they are more frequently out in their reckoning than any others, however, to be serious, we are not without our forebodings that the little Master or Miss which ever it may be will not tarry much longer.[31]

Bigger size signified that the pregnancy was more advanced than expected and the parents less prepared than required. In other words, measuring and charting bodily increase was an attempt to impose some degree of certainty on the pregnant condition.

For mothers, the discussion of size could be an acceptable way to express and share the anxiety of pregnancy. Bessy Ramsden referred to both size and timing in the 1770s 'I am at a loss to say when to expect the fatal moment …I am such a monster in size; and indeed I am under great apprehensions I shall drop to pieces before I am ready for the little stranger'.[32] Thus the metaphor of weight conveyed physical and emotional oppression. Mary Dudley was a wealthy married Quaker who felt called to preach and recorded the process of feeling thus moved by God in her

[30] NRO, BOL 2/24/14 Redeham Monday evening Apr 24 1775.
[31] NRO, BOL 2/24/25 Reedham August 15th 1775.
[32] Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 100.

memoir where she also displayed her concerns about leaving her numerous children in order to preach. In the fall of 1787 she reported 'an alarming illness' from which she suspected she would not recover. Nevertheless she did, and while convalescing, she came to feel that she was being raised up for a purpose: to visit and preach in distant parts. From that point, she reports, 'the weight grew almost insupportable, so that sleep, appetite, and strength, nearly departed from me, and my dear husband queried (after watching unperceived by me) what can this be?' Her conviction held and in February 1788 she left home to travel with a group of Quaker Friends to preach for six months in Holland, Germany, France. Her daughter, who compiled the memoir commented here that their mother left at home seven children, the youngest of whom was 10 weeks old.[33] Mary must have given birth around Christmas 1787 when she was recording these oppressive weights upon her body and soul. What is at first glance a discussion of spiritual weight and growth was thus surely shaped by the final stages of childbirth and feeling a deep uncertainty about her future.

These correspondents also used 'size' to discuss the expansion in numbers of family. This could be by describing pregnancy and an addition to the family. Thus the Leathes talked of an 'increase in our family' and a generation later John and Elizabeth Shaw frequently utilised the term 'increase' about Elizabeth's pregnancies. On 28 November 1819 John Shaw asked his wife: 'I suppose I may be allowed to tell the folks at Rochdale and Colne that we are promised an increase in the family ere it be long'.[34] For many of these families, the potential increase was imagined as a shared venture that anticipated the collective nature of childcare when children were

[33] *The Life of Mary Dudley, including an account of her religious engagements and extracts from her letters with an appendix containing some account of the illness and death of her daughter Hannah Dudley*. London, 1825, pp. 44-5.
[34] CRL, Shaw/16

older and grandparents and aunts aided parents.[35] Perhaps this imparted further poignancy to Kate Taylor's letter to her sister Sophia about her and her sister-in-laws' pregnancies, in July 1823.

> About Christmas my dear F & Mo in law will reckon an addition of *three* to their grandchildren. My Anna, Ellen & Self will be confined much about the same time - - probably myself rather first, & Ellen our sweet little Ellen last; oh what would I not give to see the soft wee things so dear to them, but I shall never, never see either of them in this world – where all is trial & separation.'[36]

Kate's report of her and her sister-in-laws' additions to the family is partly a vocabulary of fear and uncertainty. The separation she referred to was very real since Kate and her husband had emigrated to America with her father George Courtauld and some of her siblings a couple of years earlier. She left behind her mother and parents-in-law and her young son who had been born in England and remained with his paternal grandparents or aunt until he could make the passage. Clearly the uncertainties of her own pregnancy made her feel more bleak about the chances of meeting her nieces or nephews and, even, being reunited with her son.

The language of familial increase also had economic overtones. In June 1798 Francis Gregg wrote to John Firth about his new son: 'Lord Carlisle will stand Godfather to your boy – I sincerely congratulate you & Mrs Forth in your acquisition to your family'. This term 'acquisition' conveys the impression of an addition to property.[37] The economic facets of the metaphor 'increase' were also related to the

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[35] Bailey, *Parenting in England*, chapter 8.

[36] Courtauld, S. A. (ed.), *Courtauld family letters, 1782–1900*, 7 vols. (privately printed, 1916), vol. 3, 1043.

[37] [CYL] Papers of the Munby family of York [includes papers of the Forth, Woodhouse, Pearson and other related families], Letters to Rev. John Forth (1788–1806), Acc 54:168–175.

father's central role as a provider for his dependents. The increase in numbers of children would require a commensurate increase in income to support them. This was the first stage of a common rhetoric of fatherhood in which men referred to children as economic burdens, conceptualising the prospect of fatherhood as at once a joy and a fear due to its financial repercussions.[38] Interestingly, the Shaws who made their living from warehousing and retailing used this economic imagery most explicitly. On 6 June 1813, relatively soon after their marriage Elizabeth told her husband that she was not pregnant:

> I suppose you wish to know also if you are not likely to have to work hard for a larger family than you already have – I think I may venture to say you have nothing to fear on this account yet which I suppose you will not be sorry for.

She used a similar terminology when she was pregnant: 'you will find many things wanting I am afraid by the newcomer which has never enter'd into your head but will certainly find a road into your pocket but don't be alarm'd you are not the first that has experienced these extra expenses'.[39]

Bodily and mental apprehension in pregnancy

There is considerable evidence that people feared childbirth. After all, maternal mortality across a woman's child-bearing years was high and infant mortality even more so.[40] This fear is omnipresent in some of the correspondence studied here, with frequent recourse to words like 'awful', 'dangerous', 'anxious', 'death' and 'hope'. Thus Elizabeth Leathes wrote to her mother about 'the approaching awful period', worrying that her father might not accompany her mother to stay during the confinement, 'for fear anything should happen … for Life is very uncertain &

[38] Bailey, *Parenting in England*, pp. 63-6, 148, 162.
[39] CRL, Shaw/40A, Shaw/42.
[40] Woods, R., *Children remembered. Responses to untimely death in the past* (2007)

particularly at such Dangerous times'.[41] Edward Leathes told his father-in-law that he dreaded having to 'endure the bitter pangs of another Night so Fraught with Anxious Doubts & Dead-like thoughts as this hath been'.[42] The pangs of labour are usually associated with mothers, but here the father used them for his emotional distress. However, the words of apprehension were more widespread throughout the letters than discussions of the labour itself. It is helpful to differentiate between fear (an emotion) and apprehension (a mood). Here it is important to differentiate between an emotion and mood. For example, fear is a basic innate emotion which is a single episode lasting only a few seconds. Anxiety is a mood, or generalised background state, which lasts longer and raises or lowers susceptibility to emotional stimuli.[43]

During her pregnancy in 1819 Kate Courtauld wrote to her sister: 'Dearest Soph, it may be I shall see you no more here – none of you any more. I cannot with complacency fix plans for a distant period – when I may perhaps have no concern with all that is done under the sun.'[44] The association between the passage of time and uncertainty in Kate's letter was present in others where long distances were not separating family members. This seems to indicate that apprehension was an oppressive yet normal state during pregnancy. It is possible to test this using word frequency on the correspondence, which resulted in a high frequency of words associated with the passage of time, including: 'time', 'longer', 'next', 'soon', 'sooner', 'past', 'last', ''morning', 'months', 'night', 'reckoning' and 'begin'. This is meaningful when considered alongside other words that have a high frequency and were used in

[41] NRO, BOL 2/24/13/1 April 9th 1775, also see BOL 2/24/22 Reedham July 18th 1775.
[42] NRO, BOL 2/24/26 Reedham 28th August 1775.
[43] Dylan Evans, *Emotion: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2001), p. 47.
[44] *Courtauld family letters*, vol 2, p. 534

conjunction, such as ‘think’, ‘hope’, ‘may’, ‘expectation’, ‘uneasy’, and ‘know’. Collectively they convey the anticipation central to the narratives of pregnancy.

Other than the fear of childbirth itself, there are obvious factors that caused anxiety, especially when considered in the light of time passing which surely exacerbated unease. For new mothers ignorance about what to expect and not having a husband’s or relative’s support was the cause. Catherine Ettrick, who sued her husband for cruelty in the 1760s accused him of neglecting her needs during her pregnancy despite her ‘being Totally Ignorant how to Manage herself when she was with Child’ and not allowing her sister to visit for the month before the birth, letting her ask a friend who lived nearby, or calling her mother or midwife in time.[45] Another reason for apprehension in pregnancy is that it could make the mother very unwell. Indeed, physical illness is perhaps the other most frequent language in which pregnancy was cast. Women were often ill in the first trimester of pregnancy, troubled by sickness and general tiredness and ill-health. Women also found the end stages of pregnancy particularly debilitating and thus tried to plan accordingly, no doubt a difficult aim given the state’s uncertainty. In May 1785, Jane Munby wrote to her mother Jane Pontey:

I should like the children very much to have come to you during the Holidays as I expect to be confined about that time, but am afraid I shall not be able to manage it, shall make the attempt some of these days[,] at present I am not very well and have been only poorly the last two or three weeks.[46]

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[45] Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, Trans.CP 1765/4 Ettrick v. Ettrick, Libel, article 4.
[46] CYL, Papers of the Munby family of York, 1815 May 25 Jane Munby to her Mother Jane Pontey Acc 54: 207.

Significantly there is little difference between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries in this regard, as several extracts from Linda Pollock's study of the early seventeenth century illustrate. Aletha Talbot's mother pleaded for her daughter, 'I besech our Lord send hir much comfort of hir children for she breeds them very painfully'. Charles Lyttelton commented that his wife was 'so continually sick with (I think) breeding, that she can do nothing but puke'. Ralph Montague wrote that his wife 'has bin indisposed and sick these two moneths just as she used to be when breeding'. Reporting on expecting her first child Alice Thornton rememberd: 'I was exceeding sickly in breeding, till I was with quicke child'.[47] Perhaps the only substantial difference in reporting in the nineteenth century was that it used rather less graphic descriptions.

Elizabeth Shaw's letters to her husband John from 1815 onwards, for example, are a record of her illness throughout her pregnancies which range from minor to serious. She was subject to various digestive and bowel problems, persistent vomiting, lost her appetite and weight, had aches, looked awful, and felt worse. Examples include Elizabeth to John, 1815: [pregnancy] 'has gone with my spirit, my strength my appetite – as to colour I never had any since you knew me but it has altered even that Mrs Scales tells me I look as if I was sinking into the earth.' In another letter: 'I scarcely ever am 5 minutes without being sick and that does make me very low sometimes … Then I have a constant headache and backache besides pain in my legs'.[48]

[47] Pollock, 'Embarking on a rough passage', p. 46.
[48] CRL, Shaw 41, 44A.

Seeing and naming the unseen unborn child

It could be argued that pregnancy has always been a state of uncertainty and apprehension. Yet this needs to be historicised. As Barbara Duden comments ‘over time, woman and body do not remain the same’; we cannot feel the same as our distant counterparts because our bodies have no ‘empirical equivalent’ to theirs.[49] One major reason for different perceptions is the changing visibility of the unborn child. Indeed Rachel Bowlby observes that technologies of conception shape perceptions of the foetus, and, therefore, pregnancy.[50] In modern pregnancy far more is visible – both in terms of seeing the foetus and the knowledge associated with that. Today a foetus is visible as a moving, real-time, image on a screen and a still photograph produced from the same scan as a physical object and memento. Though we are used to seeing the embryo within the womb and can visualise it, this is a very recent phenomenon. It was the 1880s when physicians first began to use the recently invented stethoscope to listen to the baby’s heart in the womb, the end of the nineteenth century when X-rays were used to see a six-month old embryo in the womb.[51] It was not until the late 1970s in Britain that ultrasound was first used to produce an image of the baby before birth.[52] Seeing the foetus in a scan rapidly became normal practice and has significant implications for the timing of knowledge; the most obvious example is that the baby’s sex can be known in advance.[53]

In contrast, therefore, the foetus in the past was invisible until birth. An excellent example of the consequences of the unseeable child is a poem by Anna Lætitia Barbauld (1743–1825), published 1825, probably written at the end of the eighteenth

[49] Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, 1993, p. 90.
[50] Rachel Bowlby, *A Child of One’s Own: Parental Stories*, Oxford 2013, chapter 1.
[51] Duden, *Disembodying Women*, p. 33.
[52] Developed in the 1950s, ultrasound technology came to public attention with the first IVF baby in England, in 1978. Rachel Bowlby, *A Child of One’s Own*, p.20.
[53] Bowlby, *A Child of One’s Own*, pp. 20-21.

century: *To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible*. In it she reflects on the long passage of time as the 'Germ of new life' makes its way from its sensory and physical prison to birth. Lack of knowledge is beautifully captures in Barbauld's description of the foetus to mother: 'Part of herself, yet to herself unknown' The anticipation evoked in the several occurrences of 'anxiety' and is intensified by the invisibility of the child as 'eager matrons count the lingering day' mindful of the pain to come until the burden is transferred from womb to loving arms. This longing for the time to pass quickly until the baby is visible is emphasised in the final verse:

> If charmed verse or muttered prayers had power,
> With favouring spells to speed thee on thy way,
> Anxious I'd bid my beads each passing hour,
> Till thy wished smile thy mother's pangs o'erpay.[54]

Thus visibility has a profound impact on a mother's conceptualisation of her foetus. In Bowlby's astute words, ultrasound has changed 'the view of pregnancy; it makes the foetus more of a recognizable soon-to-be baby, and less of a hidden, interior being perceptible only through its creeping movements'.[55] These 'creeping movements' were the sensations first felt at the quickening and continued through pregnancy to be joined by weightier movements and painful jolts as the foetus moved and kicked. Indeed Duden argues that the senses were the only means by which women in the past could report on their experiences of the unseen, or the 'sensorium' of what went on inside them.[56] Movements or, more sinisterly, lack of movements were the primary indication of foetal well-being, thus they also

[54] I am indebted to Sara Read for alerting me to this poem
[55] Bowlby, *A Child of One's Own*, p 22.
[56] Duden, *Disembodying Women*, p. 8.

occasioned maternal emotions.[57] This makes the vocabulary of pregnancy all the more important to closely scrutinise in terms of an emotional discourse.

The entirely invisible and sensory nature of pregnancy therefore helped shape the vocabulary used to describe the unseen unborn child. The term babe was used for the child once born and child was used in combination form to describe pregnancy: 'with child'. There were also a number of euphemisms adopted by people in life writings which were particularly in use from the later eighteenth century. Klepp's study of America compiled such euphemistic phrases from the 1760s as: 'expecting every day the birth of another little dependent'; 'little urchin'; 'the beloved object'; 'two precious Objects'; 'expectation of a new happiness'; and 'the Pledge.'[58] Most of these were used in England in the same period. In a letter from Elizabeth Shaw, for instance, the baby was referred to as the 'newcomer'.[59] Occasionally the noun used for the child would be personalised, for example, master or miss, or took the form of a term that indicated the meaning of the child to the mother or family. For instance, Kate Taylor replied to her sister's letter in April 1819 with a whimsical reprimand that her younger sibling had not asked about her pregnancy:

> 'You say nothing about my expected darling: will you not love it, altho' it may be some time in this world before you see it? I am sure it has caused me trouble enough already, little miscreant; for I often think seriously of the possible, perhaps probable, issue of the next few months'.

So here the child was both a 'darling' and a 'miscreant'. It conveyed future happiness, but also future risk since it may well have been her darling, but it could

[57] Duden, *Disembodying Women*, p. 92.
[58] Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, chapter 3.
[59] CRL, Shaw/42 21 March 1815

also be her end as she suggests in the final sentence.[60]

Perhaps the most common description was ‘stranger’ or ‘little stranger’. This was not only used by parents but also by friends and family. In 1806, for instance, the Reverend J. W. Bowman wrote to his friend Reverend J. Forth:

> I congratulate you most sincerely on the arrival of the young stranger at Garthorpe, of whom as well as Mrs Forth we rejoice to hear so favourable an account, & it will afford my Wife and me very great pleasure if in your future arrangements we can either of us be of any use to you.[61]

This was such an established term that it decorated textiles associated with maternity, such as the gifts for new mothers of pin cushions with pins spelling out welcome to the ‘little stranger’.[62] Presumably this term ‘stranger’ related to the lack of knowledge and invisibility of the unborn child whose sex, appearance, size, health, and personality were all unknowable. As Klepp points out, all the euphemistic terms objectify and depersonalise the foetus. This was hardly a new formulation since ‘stranger’ was only as depersonalising as ‘with child’.[63] The term stranger also evokes the unknown, a verbal representation of the ambiguity of the future. If we think about societal responses to strangers in the form of foreigners or immigrants, then the impression is not entirely benign. The American Elizabeth Seton even talked of her child as ‘the Shadow’.[64] Did depersonalising the unborn as a ‘stranger’ indicate its invisible, unknown qualities and reify some of the ambivalences felt about pregnancy and childbirth? It helps here to distinguish between fear and anxiety. Fear

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[60] *Courtauld family letters*, vol 2, p. 535.
[61] CYL, Papers of the Munby family of York, 1806 Sept 3 Rev J W Bowman to Rev J Forth Acc 54: 175.
[62] For more on this topic see Sally Holloway, ‘Materialising Maternal Emotions’, unpublished paper, 2015.
[63] Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, p. 120.
[64] Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, p. 109.

is an emotion, anxiety is a mood. As Keith Oatley observes, ‘emotion is a change in readiness, a mood draws on the same processes and is a maintained state’.[65] Yet, Joanna Bourke points out, anxiety and fear can be difficult to differentiate between. She argues that the distinction between the states lies in social hierarchies. Fear can be managed if you can flee it or neutralise it, but if you lack the power to do so, then the result is anxiety. Bourke points out that ‘[t]he uncertainty of anxiety can be whisked away by the processes of naming an enemy … converting anxiety into fear’ because the group can then take action or – at least - have the perception that they can take action, which neutralises the fear.[66] Perhaps distancing and neutralising of the child served a similar emotional utility. Did acknowledging the unborn’s strangeness help neutralise fear in some way and thus ameliorate anxiety and prepare for the inevitable change wrought by its arrival?

The emotional management of pregnancy

This section proposes that the emotional language of pregnancy served a function, which was to manage uncertainty. There are two frameworks in which to assess the narratives of pregnancy in this way. Firstly, the language that I’ve been outlining can be categorised as ‘emotion words’. David Lemmings and Ann Brooks define ‘emotion words’ (which circulate in ‘emotion economies’) as feelings that ‘are named and renamed by words in different social contexts but in relation to particular figures they generate affective value by constituting shared “objects of feeling’’.[67] Taking this model the emotion words outlined here have two functions. The first is that they generate affective value through a shared feeling of apprehension between the

[65] Keith Oatley http://scotinexile.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/question-of-emotion-pt2-q-with-prof.html Accessed 13 July 2014.
[66] Joanna Bourke, ‘Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History’, *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 55, issue 1, 2003, 126-7.
[67] Lemmings and Brooks, ‘The Emotional Turn’, p. 4.

woman, her husband, and her family members. In this argument a language of anxiety and apprehension therefore acted as a bond, reinforcing spousal and familial relationships, within what was a state of trepidation. The second related function is that these ‘emotional words’ helped the prospective parents navigate the transitional nature or pregnancy from uncertainty to something closer to certainty (or at least the end point of that phase).

The second framework in which to consider the narratives of pregnancy is based on the definition of language as a technology of mood; in Dylan Evan’s phrase a ‘linguistic medicine’.[68] In this model, the emotional words of pregnancy worked in two ways. Firstly, they provided consolation to those experiencing the apprehension and at times fear intrinsic to pregnancy. This visible in written from in correspondence but presumably this was just a small proportion of its verbal counterpart. In short, the sympathy and advice generated by the language of uncertainty helped assuage anxiety. A second way in which language acts as medicine for mood is through the use of humour. Spouses used humour to ease the anxiety of pregnancy. This is present in several letters, but is perhaps most striking in examples of couples dealing with miscarriage.

We know that miscarriage was in itself ambiguous due to the lack of certainty in the timing and progress of pregnancy. Moreover, sometimes, women experienced the uncertainty as to whether their pregnancy would terminate in miscarriage or delivery. In 1816 Elizabeth Shaw informed John Shaw: ‘I am confin’d to my bed & scarcely dare turn me as still I have such great loss of Blood I am taking medicine to prevent

[68] Evans, *Emotion: a very short introduction*, pp. 52-3.

it as much as possible & I write this laying in bed – I dare not sit up'.[69] In the early nineteenth-century examples from this study, a miscarriage was nonetheless often understood and acknowledged as such, although women did evaluate the loss according to the stage of pregnancy. In February 1823, Kate Taylor reported to her sister Sophia that she was almost too unwell to write because 'I have had another accident tho' so early as not be called a *miscarriage*, but it makes me feel ill & was I fancy brought on by *dancing*, as we have established a dance once a week'.[70] As Kate's letter shows, miscarriage was often represented as an accident. Although there is no explicit sorrow expressed, this kind of report does not indicate a lack of emotional response to the loss. It might show some degree of distancing from a distressing situation; indeed we know that some women were relieved at miscarriage, depending on the number of children they already had and their age, state of health, and situation. Nonetheless, in the context of the apprehension experienced within pregnancy some spouses attempted to lighten the mood in their exchanges.[71]

Perhaps the best example is Jonathan Gray's attempt to console his wife Mary, in 1811, for a similar 'misadventure'.

> My Dear Mary
>
> Tho' I was not much surprised at what has happened to you, after the fall over the stile which you mentioned in a former letter, yet I am concerned to think that you should have had so serious an illness; & be reduced so weak. Upon

[69] CRL, Shaw/50.
[70] *Courtauld Family Letters*, vol 2, p. 987.
[71] Other forms of humour included gentle mocking over identifying the sex of the foetus, CRL, Shaw/41, 1815 march 13 Elizabeth Shaw to her husband John Shaw.

> former occasions of the same kind, I think you were scarcely at all confined to your bed; & were wholly recovered in the course of a week. I do not however know that by not going to Ockbrook this misadventure would have been avoided; because unless you had been more circumspect & careful then you generally are in not taking long walks &c, it might have come on. We will hope, however, that the lost embryo is some silly woman, who would have been next to useless in society, & not a Pitt a Wellington or a Horseley. We must really have you treated in future in Mrs Russell's manner, or your constitution will be feebled by these repeated affairs & you will become a Mrs Russell in strength.[72]

Jonathan's shared sympathy with his wife is overshadowed by our discomfort at his somewhat misogynistic and heartless aside that if the lost embryo was a female it would be less a loss than if it were the makings of a prime-minister or a general. Yet to take this aside at face-value utterly misrepresents Jonathan who was born in a wealthy professional family, studied, travelled, worked hard as a lawyer, cared deeply for his family, both in terms of affection and materially, was pious, and involved in the philanthropic affairs of his city. Jonathan was probably just trying to cheer up his wife. He was comforting his wife through humour – making a blatantly sexist comment that he knew was ridiculous – but that he hoped would lighten his wife's sadness – and his own. Indeed banter shaped his other letters at happier times where he talked with delight of his two 'brats'.[73]

Conclusion

Narratives of pregnancy display the state's sheer uncertainty through the

[72] CYL, Gray Family Papers: 1811 June Jonathan Gray from York to his wife Mary at Ockbrook Acc 5,6,24,235 J/39
[73] Thanks to Katie Barclay for discussion about this.

combination of words about the passage of time and change, the insufficiency of knowledge and information, the physical incapacities suffered by women, and the invisibility of the unborn. But these words did not simply recount feelings. They also did some work. The emotional language, I suggest, helped tackle the pervasive apprehension caused by this uncertainty. If one definition of emotions is that they are both personal and interpersonal ‘felt judgements’ then shared ‘felt judgments’ built bonds between spouses and between them and family members, bridging astoundingly difficult transitions from one phase of life to another, and helping to neutralise the fear of the arrival of an unseen stranger. These words were an emotional labour that helped convey a mother to the point of physical labour and its hoped for ‘happy event’ of a ‘safe delivery’.[74]

7777 words

[74] Phrases taken from the Leathes correspondence.