



Deposited via The University of York.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/222149/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Killeen, Kevin John (2025) The Outrageous Inner Lives of Plants: Abortion Poetics in Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Duo* (Two Books of Plants). *The Seventeenth Century*. pp. 321-341. ISSN: 0268-117X

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2025.2457058>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

The Outrageous Inner Lives of Plants: Abortion Poetics in Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Duo* (Two Books of Plants)

Abstract:

Abraham Cowley's expansive Latin poem, *Plantarum Libri Duo* (1662) is one of the most elusive 'scientific poems' of an era that sought in such writing not to replicate what prose could say on the matter, and still less to serve any didactic or explanatory purpose. The poem, translated as 'Of Plants' (1689), includes in its lengthy second book, an animated debate on gynaecology, menstruation and abortion, all considered by and from the perspective of the plants involved: a collection of abortifacients and emmenagogues. It is at one and the same time, borderline absurd and wholly serious, even while, in tone, it is a long way from the burlesque so commonly encountered in the era's poetry. On the contrary, its account of the always fraught medical, social and emotional tensions around abortion make it the most frank and sympathetic discussions of the subject in early modernity. This essay looks at what, until recently, was a wholly neglected work and asks how Cowley understands the tasks and parameters of a poem that enmeshes its scientific subject matter within such rhetorical, dramatic and generic complexity.

Keywords: Abraham Cowley; *Plantarum*; early modern science; abortion; Herbals

Bio: Kevin Killeen is Professor of English Literature at the University of York. He is the author of *The Unknowable in Early Modern Thought: Natural Philosophy and the Poetics of the Ineffable* (Stanford, 2023); *The Political Bible in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2017), and *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Ashgate, 2009).

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Namratha Rao and Ted Tregear, organisers of a conference on 'Metaphysics and Materialism' at the University of York, that gave me the opportunity to try out a version of this essay, to Irina Tautschnig, for discussion and scrutiny of the Latin and to the hyper-knowledgeable participants in 'The Poetics of Science' conference in Bayreuth. This article emerges from the ARHC-DFG funded project: 'Scientific Poetry and Poetics in Britain and Germany, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment'

The Outrageous Inner Lives of Plants: Abortion Poetics in Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Duo* (Two Books of Plants)

That early modern poetry grappled with the rapidly shifting tides of scientific thought has long been recognised, but scientific poetry did not have a straightforward relationship to its constituent disciplines.¹ It did not aim merely to render its material, culled from prose, in verse form. On the contrary, its ability to plough its natural philosophy up, as one facet of the complex whole – theological, social and political – was key to the outsized ambition of such poetry, whether that was in its cosmological or atomic poetics, the creation-physics of hexameral writing, or somatic poetry that attended to the abyssal character of the body in all its medical-theological density. In Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Duo* (1662), when a range of erudite herbs, weeds and plants discuss menstruation and abortion in full-dress rhetorical orations, it is never quite clear *which* science, as well as which generic debt, is uppermost.² While the poem might fall within the *Lehrgedicht* tradition, as versified herbal, or while, to note Claire Preston's helpful characterisation of the poem, it might be seen as 'scientific georgic', neither can such categories encompass the strangeness by which bloodless plants argue over gynaecological theory and the management of abortion.³ What then should we be looking for in reading the scientific dynamics of such poetry, that touches on but differs from any prose equivalent? Liza Blake, writing on the atomism of Margaret Cavendish and Lucy Hutchinson's poems, argues that we miss the point if we try to ascertain too exactly which scientific position or school its authors most closely identified with, and we ought, rather, to understand their philosophical engagements as their way to 'carve out space for epistemologies beyond empiricisms', that not all forms of knowing are amenable to the experimental.⁴ Sciences themselves stand in sometimes uncertain relation to each other, always enmeshed in complex theological, metaphysical and social dynamics. Rarely is poetry that addresses the natural world some kind of downmarket popularisation of actual scientific discourse.

Cowley's *Plantarum* has in recent years been rediscovered in work by Victoria Moul and others (to which the essay will return, as it goes on) as variously an Ovidian, Georgic and political poem.⁵ But its scientific dynamics, evident though elusive, have not been discussed in any depth. This essay makes the case that its importance lies less in how it measures up to the Herbals or the Anatomies that it, in part, replicates, nor in how new its science might be considered. Rather, it lies in the epistemological cacophony of plants attempting to understand gynaecology, that it is a text revelling in its discordant intellectual frameworks, the tensions, poetic as much as scientific, that it constructs. If, however, it is newness that we seek, it is hard to think of any equivalent prose work, whether medical or literary, that not only discusses, but apparently accepts abortion as a fact of life and, broadly speaking, as a medical rather than a moral matter.

¹ One among various classic works in this respect is Nicolson, *Breaking of the Circle*.

² Cowley, *Plantarum Libri duo* (1662)

³ Preston, 'The Counsel of Herbs: Scientific Georgic', 196–240.

⁴ Blake, 'Non-Atomic Atomisms', 402.

⁵ Key writings include: Lecky 'Cowley and the Diversification of Textual Authority'; Moul, 'The Transformation of Ovid'; Moul, 'EEBO Introduction to *Plantarum*'; Monreal, *Flora Neolatina*; Spearing, 'Menstruation Debate'; Taylor and Wright, 'Patterns of Annotation'; Wright, *Restoration Transposed*, pp. 194–220

Cowley's scientific credentials were thoroughgoing, to the point that those credentials quite undermined his once stellar poetic reputation, in the view at least of twentieth century critics, who seem to have understood 'scientific poetry' as an oxymoron. At the Restoration, he invested considerable enthusiasm in the nascent Royal Society, with his 1661 Proposals for a 'Philosophical Colledge', which was soon followed by his long, Latin scientific poem, *Plantarum Libri Duo*. The poem ranges from the scrubbiest of weed to garden herbs – there is scurvy grass and dodder, spleenwort and sow-bread, maiden-hair and ducksmeat – alongside some that we might be more familiar with today: sage, mint, lettuce, rocket. Cowley retrained late in life as a physician, and the work is suffused with this knowledge, the whole constituting, we are told, 'a complete Body of Physic', with the plant-speakers reporting not only on their own pharmacological qualities as 'simples' – the constituent ingredients for medicines – but alongside this, a rich and additional sense of the fraught emotional lives of plants, their melancholy, their grievances, situated in the tangle of microcosm and macrocosm and burdened by ungrateful humans who pay them such scant attention.

Formally this is Prosopopoeia – the trope by which we 'make dumme and senceles things speake' as Abraham Fraunce puts it⁶ – and the speaking plants have a firm sense of tact, decorum, and a reckoning of one's place within the complex etiquettes and hierarchies of the green world. The herbs are encountered, however, not as Aesopian or allegorical representations of the human – or at least not in the two opening, scientific books – but rather as speaking puzzles, in which the plants' botanical selves, described via pharmaceutical qualities, vie with the fictions, scenarios, or legends that render them variously Ovidian or Dioscoridean, mythic or medical. They are rhetorically adept commentators on the foibles of humanity and the meagre out-of-the-way field where they are found positively brims with knowledge. The first book, with its plant monologues, each seemingly isolated, capable only of communicating their own elegant melancholy, resembles, at points, complaint poetry, in its recounting of their loneliness.

However, things change at the opening of Book 2. Men are told to leave the room, to stop reading altogether, because things are going to get graphic. 'Hence all you Males ... You jibing males'; 'Into the Female Secrets do not pry, / Or them at least pretend you don't descry' (this from the 1689 translation).⁷ Within its fictional framework – a council of plants in an Oxford herb-garden at midnight one spring evening – this is to be a book of gynaecology, menstruation, of sex and generation, midwifery, the precarious nature of women's lives in childbirth, of miscarriage and, most fully, of abortion. Indeed, Cowley as all-too-male author only knows about the substance of the debate because he is told later by one of the participants, Laurel. Nowhere in the book does the 'curse of Eve' serve as a shoulder-shrugging explanation for things, as is often the case when early modern writers attend to the pain of childbirth. But if the subject is 'teeming wombs' (160), as the orchestrator of the debate terms it, a theorising of how women's bodies work, neither is it

⁶ Fraunce, *Arcadian rhetorike*, G5r, ch. 31

⁷ Cowley, *Of Plants*, p. 33, l.2-6, *Plantarum*, p. 64, l.2-5, The unchopped Latin passage runs: 'Sacra bonæ celebranda deæ: Procul ite, profani, / Ite cachinnantes, non pia turba, Mares. / Fœminei secreta chori nescite libenter, / Nescite, aut saltem dissimulate, Viri. / Inspectare nefas generis Postscenia pulchri, / Ingens quæ pascit lumina scena patet.' On Laurel, line 45, Latin, l.43. The line numbers, English and Latin, are taken from the online edition, ed. Daniel Kinney (including notes) at: <https://cowley.lib.virginia.edu/works/Bk2.htm>, keyed to Dana Sutton's Latin text at: <https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/plants/2lat.html>. Longer quotes, for which the full Latin is not given refer to this. The 1662 edition can be found via Early European Books Online.

narrated from the mere-human point of view. On the contrary – this is a text that insists on the always slightly alienated character of its plant-speakers. Cowley will have us understand what it is like to *be* a plant who knows what it is to be a woman, to experience the *Weltanschauung* of scrubby and neglected weeds or rhetorically-proficient abortifacients, trapped in a fraught set of gendered and social wrangles, its metaphysically-inclined herbs voicing their unabashedly materialist concerns. That this is a medical-scientific poem is evident, but it relates only strangely to the discursive prose practices of its equivalent disciplines: natural history or midwifery, pharmacology or anatomy.

To note that this debate takes place in a herb-garden at a naughtily late hour in the learned surroundings of Oxford, or to note the rhetorically courteous turn-taking of the debate and its learned Ovidian resonances, might make it sound like a charming and well-bred *divertissement* and indeed, it has occasionally been understood as such. But there is more going on: this is a council of ‘Ecbolicks’ (*ecbolicae*) - ‘such Medicines as bring away dead Children or cause abortion’ (*Plantae quæ foetum imperfectum aut mortuum eiiciunt*), as Cowley’s marginal note, in both the Latin and English translation, has it.⁸ Each of the speakers in quite a spikey debate not only discuss, but actually *are* the remedies for unwanted or incomplete pregnancy, variously herbs to cleanse the womb of dead embryos, or to regulate menstruation which, in early modern medical usage, could mean, or was suspected to mean, ‘provoking’ miscarriage.

To a substantial extent, this is a poem not only *about* but which *defends* abortion, insofar as its speakers put up such resolute defences of their natural presence in the pharmacological world. One of the speakers, for example, Birthwort, is proud of her ability to relieve women’s pain in birth, but is, when it comes to it, practical: ‘As far as in me lies, I save the tree / And take the rotten away with me – getting rid of the foetus, to save the mother, like lopping a decayed branch.’⁹ If men being shooed out of the garden seemed to have something of the parlour game about it, the dead embryo, being scaped from the womb, is quite different. This is fierce stuff which men are just not up to:

Here to the womb again my aid I lend,
And hard as well as noisom work attend.
What I to cleanse the passage undergo
You wot not, but let no man, pray you, know.¹⁰

Pragmatism rules here in the poem’s domestic equivalent of realpolitik (realdomestik?), in a context where bilious condemnation of women’s sexuality was always close at hand: but what one said about abortion, publicly, and what, in the cold light of a pregnant day, one actually did, were not necessarily the same.

It reads to me as though Cowley supposes abortion a fact of life, a hard matter no doubt, but brute reality makes for difficult choices. It would be possible to dispute this – the plants of the dialogue give sometimes bitter, sometimes frank accounts of both their own

⁸ *Of Plants* p. 53, 960, *Plantarum*, p. 109, l.922.

⁹ *Of Plants* p. 48, l.723-4 *Plantarum*, p. 94, l. 693-4, ‘Qua licet auxilior, putridum salva arbore fructum / Stringo, concussus molliter ille cadit.’ This deviation from pentameter in the translation is unusual. Kinney’s edition clarifies the meaning and corrects the rhythm by adding ‘.., the rotten [Fruit] away ...’

¹⁰ *Of Plants* p. 48, 733-6, *Plantarum*, p. 94, l. 703-6, ‘Hic etiam miseræ succurro, Uterumque repurgo, / Nec facilis, purus nec nimis ille labor. / Quas ibi sustineam fortis detergere sordes / Scitis, sed nullus Vir (precor) ista sciat.’

and others' abortifacient qualities, but the poem is a dramatic debate, in which vehement opinions vie and are not resolved. Though speeches in any such staged debate can be mere 'monologues in disguise', as Virginia Cox puts it, they can also constitute 'genuine dialectic', which seems to be the case here.¹¹ Gillian Wright notes of Cowley's dialogic format (and the poem's emotional multiplicity) that it allows 'a degree of empathy one would scarcely have thought possible in the rather solipsistic author of the essays'.¹² Most importantly, *all* of the participants are associated closely with abortion, albeit there is a blur between emmenagogues (which as the early modern phrase goes, 'bring down the menses') and abortifacients. There are a good number of reasons why we might be wary of a male-authored poem wittily discussing menstruation, from a writer at least loosely associated with Cavalier culture, so able to make simpling ('gather ye rosebuds while ye may') into a coercive sexual pun, and so ready with casual misogyny.¹³ But *Plantarum's* depiction of a learned society of women has little sense of satiric bite or prurient purpose, in an era so wholly given to mockery. In its learned medical debate, it is less like the burlesque 'parliament of women' writings of the civil war era than a meeting of Cowley's 'Philosophical Colledge', serious and careful in its pursuit of knowledge.¹⁴

A first best guess about the purpose and form of *Plantarum* might be that this serves to make its subject matter – whether simpling in a far-flung meadow or abortion in dire straits – a little *gentle*. In Book 1, certainly, it is possible to suppose that the well-bred, if slightly melancholic herb-soliloquies serve to raise the levels of decorum, to elevate the low-level drudgery of plant-gathering, when actual rooting around in real-world hedges for Wormwood, Dodder or Lustwort was not really a suitable pursuit for the implicit milieu of aristocratic and educated women. Or perhaps, in Book 2, we could plausibly imagine that its formal rhetorical setting, together with its rich Ovidian play, might serve as cover for the general embarrassment that Cowley wishes to head off. While this may be the case, however, it would also be hard to say that Cowley's anthropomorphising the natural world makes things *easier* on the aristocratic ear. What may seem, initially, a coy and prudish format, turns out to be unabashed and graphic and it is a text that revels in its dissonance, in staging its unresolved ethical debate, the real-world business not of rooting around in hedges but of unwanted pregnancy.

The herb garden symposium, in both its introductory framework and its formal orchestration by the council President, Artemesia (Mugwort), is set up initially as an exemplum of social civility and collaborative intellectual endeavour, but it is not too long before a degree of discord creeps in, in play with well-tempered medical-philosophical dispute.¹⁵ The poem's staged scientific disagreement produces a picture of the complex entanglement of natural philosophy within the social, where every anatomical analogy is always fraught, and never coy. The first half of the debate turns on the character of and

¹¹ Cox, *Renaissance Dialogue*, 2; See too Cox, 'Female Voice'.

¹² Wright, *The Restoration Transposed*, 202.

¹³ Thanks to Jessie Hock, for the connection to Robert Herrick's 'Gather ye rosebuds', etc. Cowley as Cavalier is most evident in his early collection, *The Mistress* (1647).

¹⁴ On the 'parliament of women' trope, see Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, 129-311, noting various pamphlets, bawdy and misogynist, associated with Henry Neville, but used in turn by all sides; Purkiss, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 64-70; Spearing, *Fruits of Retirement*, 187.

¹⁵ As to why Artemesia is the council president, perhaps the figure in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, leader of the council of women who decide to withhold sex from men, may be a candidate. Thanks to Irina Tautschnig for this suggestion. On the wider resonances of the plant in popular and dramatic culture, see Sprang *Londons Fountaine of Arts and Sciences*, 358-370.

anatomical purpose of menstrual blood, whether it was a toxic or benign product, a poison or the sources of life-giving breast-milk. The speakers rehearse variously post-Galenic, post-Hippocratic theories of menstruation and women's health, trying out a set of metaphors in which to imagine the kinds of fluid exchange, or mechanics of menstruation. As the speeches continue, turns more specifically to abortion, which becomes, in turn, the main subject in the second half of the book. Tempers flare; accusation and counter-accusation are hurled in what threatens to turn into intra-plant civil war, although things are more or less kept in check by the council President.

The most evidently vituperative speaker is the Mastick-tree (*Lentiscus*), who lambasts Savin (*Sabina*), as an infanticide - the latter being the most commonly-known and effective abortifacient: 'Savin knows a better way / Than thy Medea Children to destroy'.¹⁶ I hold off on the full range of the thunderous attack, till later in the essay – the speech is long and its misogyny is forthright. But Mastick, with her attack on abortion, is in turn roundly condemned, as a prim, bilious and medically ineffective plant, and the response to her demand that Savin be banished is vehement: 'thou wretched shrub' chides Savin, in retort, frankly asserting that she is nature's gift, and refusing to shy away from her chief quality:

But I the truth of what I am disclose.
Children, I own, I from the belly wrest.
... I own it, nor will I ungrateful be
To bounteous Nature, lest I anger thee.¹⁷

If the debate does not resolve, neither does it stint to list the numerous other ways in which abortion can be procured – indeed, the poem is something of an encyclopaedia, in this respect - with the president of the council, Mugwort, returning to arbitrate and bring the debate to some kind of close, coming down firmly on Savin's side: 'If the green Nation, Sister, banish thee / I'll go along and bear thee company'.¹⁸ If the debate does not quite resolve, the monologue of Savin, the chief abortifacient, nevertheless receives the most fulsome applause and general, though, not unanimous support – itself a really quite shocking conclusion.

No doubt, to make sense of the poem, we need at least some attention to contemporary debates about midwifery, abortion and women's health, such as we find it, in the mostly, but not entirely male-authored medical and sometimes legal literature. Such context, though important, will get us only so far. The written record is, when not wholly censorious about abortion, full of elisions and circumventions. Despite this, there is a quite rich legal-historical critical literature on early modern abortion, none of which, as far as I can find, discusses Cowley's abortion debate. If the subject is surprising, it may then speak to the strange capacities of scientific poetry to go where prose simply does not.

¹⁶ *Of Plants* p. 49, l. 778-9, *Plantarum*, p. 98, l. 747-8, 'Medeam Grudite pueros Medea Sabina / Doctius et citius dilacerare suos.'

¹⁷ *Of Plants*, pp. 50-51, l. 844-5, 866-8, 871-4; *Plantarum*, pp. 101-2, l. 813-14, 833-4. 'Non ego sed quae sim dissimulare volo. / Confiteor nondum natos me avellere foetus ... Confiteor, neque ero naturae ingrata benignae, Ne tibi displiceam quae mihi nulla places.' The final phrase has the sense (not clear in the 1689 translation), 'so that I may not displease you, who in no way please me'

¹⁸ *Of Plants*, p. 53, l. 956-7, *Plantarum*, p. 107, l. 919-20, 'Cum te, chara soror, viridis Respublica pellet, / Ire relegatae non dubitabo comes.'

It is hard to know if the poem's languishing, barely read, and barely commented upon for so long, is down to its forbidding Latin, or to its subject matter, that Latinists of the twentieth century, at least, tended to shy away from the topic of menstruation. Before the recent spate of attention to the poem, the only substantial piece of writing on it was a chapter in a 1960 monograph by Robert Hinman, in which account, we barely glimpse either the subject matter or the rancour of the debate; his account of the poem's plants pictures them as an embodiment of harmony, part of a universe in 'balanced, perpetual process', tending in all its complexity towards order.¹⁹ The tacit charge to which his take on Cowley responds was that in writing scientific poetry, he was not really writing poetry at all. The spectre of Charles Lamb's quip lambasting Fulke Greville as 'rigid with intellect' hangs over Cowley too, in H.J.C. Grierson's comment that his 'bright dry intellect' was fascinated by a science whose 'spirit was alien' to poetry. Hinman's riposte is to protest that Cowley was never 'coldly clever'; he was a philosophical poet, but did not write 'versified philosophy'.²⁰ The turf wars of the poetic and the scientific implicit in this – in which science is only ever a cold, clinical blade, narrowly rational in its outlook – are very much those of the twentieth century, with its often stiff Two-Cultures debate. But Cowley's fortunes in general waned.

This has changed in recent years, with a return of interest in Cowley as a royalist poet, and with some impressive readings of *Plantarum's* generic and political investments. Ruth Monreal's 2010 work paired Cowley's poem with René Rapin's more evidently georgic *Die Hortorum libri IV* as twinned instances of Latin didactic herbal poems, and indeed this pairing was made in a number of contemporary responses, and Rapin and Cowley were subsequently published together.²¹ Victoria Moul, whose essays on the poem have done most to bring it out of its relative obscurity, is particularly enlightening in her reading of the poem via Cowley's Ovidianism, and what she argues is its 'parallel between the typical female experience in the *Metamorphoses* (of the threat of sexual violence, pursuit and transformation) and what is going on *inside* women once they have conceived', playing on the idea of birth itself as metamorphosis.²² How this thoroughgoing Ovidian set of references works itself into the poem's epistemological framework – where a world beset by flux vies with the effort to pin down an elusive medical-scientific explanation – will be worth returning to.

Moul's readings, including a useful EEBO introduction, also emphasise the poem's fate in a wider, near-lost Latin canon. At least some of the difficulty in assessing the poem is a product of its different published forms: *Plantarum Libri Duo* (1662), as a two-book poem engages with its 'scientific' subject-matter throughout, and has its own internal coherence – and at c. 2700 lines, it is a substantial poem. But after Cowley's death, a volume, *Poemata Latina* (1668), was published, overseen by Thomas Sprat, and this included a six-book version, *Sex libri plantarum, viz. duo herbarum, florum, sylvarum*.²³ The whole work then

¹⁹ Hinman, *Cowley's World of Order*, 267-296 (273)

²⁰ Hinman, *Cowley's World of Order*, vii, 2, citing Grierson and Smith, *Critical*, 156-7; Similarly Martin (ed.) *Cowley: Poetry and Prose*, ix-xi; Bradner, *Musae Anglicanae*, 118-122 gives a similarly damning account of the poem's failure. More recently Hillyer, *Four Augustan science poets*, 1-26, attending to Cowley's interest in science, but with only brief comment on *Plantarum*.

²¹ Monreal, *Flora Neolatina*. The two works appear together in a 1795 edition of both poems.

²² Moul, 'The Transformation of Ovid', 229. See too Moul, 'Horatian Odes'.

²³ Cowley, *Abrahami Couleij Angli, Poemata Latina* (London: T. Roycroft and Jo. Martyn, 1668)

appeared in translation as *Six Books of Plants*, viz. *The First and Second of Herbs, The Third and Fourth of Flowers, The Fifth and Sixth of Trees, Now made English by several hands* (1689), overseen and partly translated by the Irish poet, Nahum Tate (books 4 and 5) together with C. Cleve (book 3) and Aphra Behn (book 6), while the first two books were translated by J.O., probably (but not definitively) John Oldham.²⁴ The translation, here and there, can be opaque, even muddled, but what Victoria Moul characterises as the qualities of the Latin – ‘always good, often funny and sometimes beautiful’ – are not absent in the English, and while a new translation, currently under way, will be welcome, Restoration translations, with their occasional liberties, have a particular wayward energy to them that is hard to replicate.²⁵

The posthumous six-book poem has a quite different centre of gravity to the 1662 two-book version, with a much-reduced level of interest in the botanical character of its plants and none of the earlier work’s complex anatomical concerns, even while the longer version retains its plant-speakers and colloquy structure and, in book 5, has a heated exchange between Old World and New World plants, which touches on the idea of a new medical cornucopia. The expanded poem reflects a changed set of priorities for the Cowley of the 1660s, eager but not quite able to find his way back into royalist circles. Wright suggests, however, that we should be cautious about retro-fitting the whole of *Plantarum* as a royalist poem. Even while the final book features some fulsome, perhaps even over-eager monarchical trees, the corresponding polity of flowers in books 3 and 4 is a *Respublica Floram*, a ‘Common-wealth of Flow’rs’, who reject the idea of a flower-monarch as a tyrannical imposition.²⁶ Caroline Spearing, by contrast, makes an interesting case for reading the menstruation debate as political, after a fashion. Wondering why a male poet ‘address[es] a topic so rigorously excluded from general public discourse’ she reads it as Cowley’s way into the still less straightforwardly addressable subject of Henrietta Maria and the various polemical attacks on the feminised state under Charles. In this reading, that notes the poem’s genesis prior to the Restoration (‘For all these things were written just before the most fortunate return of the king’), the poem’s primary object is those political opponents who routinely wielded tropes of toxicity and emasculation within the Royal entourage, and the venom of those anti-Royalists, chided by Cowley, is figured obliquely in the book’s account of menstruation.²⁷

The poem cannot, then, be seen as neglected, but it is the case that its relationship to science, and indeed poetry’s capacity as a medium for natural philosophy, remains at the edges of such studies. Not the least problem, in reassessing the poem within any such framework, is the messy character of ‘science’ itself. If early modern natural philosophy sometimes sees harmony everywhere – in the choral character of physico-theology and the well-oiled machine of creation – Cowley’s poem gives a sense of more intractable puzzles and incongruities of natural philosophy, the world’s parts in always skewed relation to each other. In Katarzyna Lecky’s reading of the poem, Cowley embraces a methodologic chaos, ‘a

²⁴ The full title is, *The Third Part of the Works of Mr Abraham Cowley, Being His Six Books of Plants, viz. The First and Second of Herbs, The Third and Fourth of Flowers, The Fifth and Sixth of Trees, Now made English by several hands* (1689). Taylor and Wright. ‘J. O. Conundrum’, with reference to Perkin, *Cowley: a Bibliography*.

²⁵ Moul, ‘EEBO Introduction to *Plantarum*’.

²⁶ Wright, *The Restoration Transposed*, 202.

²⁷ Spearing, ‘Expelling the Purple Tyrant’ 369–380. Cowley (1662) ‘Nam haec omnia scripta sunt Paulo ante foelicissimum regis reditum’, *Plantarum*, A7v. See too Spearing’s fuller argument, in *A Cavalier Poet and the Classical Canon*.

poetic mode that disrupts all systemic understanding with its delight in a botanical world characterized by entanglements and growth'.²⁸ Such a description captures usefully some of the baffling generic commitments of the poem. Cowley's science does not aim merely to catalogue his herbs, so much as trouble the very categories that structure his era's medical thought. These plants, confidently explaining menstruation, do not know their place in scientific as much as social hierarchies, and that well-bred, elegantly articulate ecobolics discuss the ethics and procedures of cleansing the womb after an abortion is not an accidental impropriety, but the very character of the inquiry.

The suspicion also lingers that just as poetry might be an unsuitable medium for science, which demanded an exactitude and a precision of language, so too natural philosophy might be a dull and deadening subject for poetry – and if, I suggested earlier, this was very much a twentieth-century vision of things, neither is it wholly absent in early modernity. The prefatory material to the poem shows its editors slightly at a loss in figuring why so renowned a poet should choose such seemingly trivial subject matter. Indeed, Thomas Sprat suggests that Cowley's scientific training began, more or less, as a ruse. In this account, when Cowley returned to England, he needed some cover, to mask the royalist purpose of his return, to which end, 'he was advised to dissemble the main intention of his coming over, under the disguise of applying himself to some settled Profession. And that of Physick was thought most proper.' Cowley in this account finds himself becoming expert in the minutiae of fieldwork, almost accidentally:

To this purpose, after many Anatomical Dissections, he proceeded to the consideration of Simples; and having furnish'd himself with Books of that Nature, he retir'd into a fruitful part of *Kent*, where every Field and Wood might shew him the real Figures of those Plants, of which he read.²⁹

This is, almost certainly, disingenuous, prompted by the embarrassing suggestion of Cowley's too early and too easy rapprochement with the political reality of Cromwell in the preface to his 1656 poems.³⁰

The discordant generic character of the Plant poems – witty, a little metaphysical, scientifically detailed while wholly dependent for their effect upon the rhetorical-social restraint of the laments – is registered nowhere so clearly as in the slightly baffled prefatory address 'to the Reader' by the editor-translator, Nahum Tate, who is wholly uneasy about the subject matter, and whether it is suitable for a poet of Cowley's skill. The world of plants, Tate explains, is 'but a barren Province to cultivate, where the Soil was to be enrich'd by the Improvements of Art and Fancy'. The concern is not quite that urbane Cowley has gone rustic, but rather that his mean subject fails in grandeur. 'He must so frequently descend to such minute Descriptions of Herbs and Flowers, which administer so feeble occasions for Thought, and unfurnished of Variety'. This is no small charge, in an early modern reckoning of rhetorical-poetic performance – a failure at the level of *inventio*, the choice of subject.

²⁸ Lecky 'Cowley's *Six Books of Plants*', 172.

²⁹ Sprat, 'An Account of the Life' in Martin (ed), *Abraham Cowley*, xxviii, cited by Nahum Tate, in his prefatory 'To the Reader', *Six Books of Plants*, A2r.

³⁰ See on this aspect of his biography, and the political mess he made for himself, Taaffe, *Cowley*, 95-120; and the ODNB entry on Cowley by Alexander Lindsay. Sprat in fact mis-dates Cowley's 1654 return to England, claiming wrongly that he remained abroad till 1656, whether accidentally or perhaps to inflect his relationship to the Cromwellian regime differently.

The mitigations – that the author’s wit, classical ingenuity, and thoroughgoing panache overcome this, never quite shake the sense that the subject, in its ‘own naked Nature, and simply consider’d, could afford but slender Matter’.³¹ Given this problematically low topic, Tate can barely make sense of how it is that the poems work so well: ‘since the enumerations are no where tedious, but every thing made beautiful and entertaining, it must be wholly ascribed to the Faculty of the Artist, with a *Materiem superavit Opus*’ - the Work surpasses the material - as Ovid has it.³² In part, the poem can be explained by the elevation of the ostensibly insignificant, just as Virgil’s *Georgics* produces its sublimity in the rough raw material of mere farming and bee-keeping: ‘This wonderful Performance put me on a consideration, by what Artifices of Ingenuity he could possibly effect it: I was sensible that the smallest Subjects were capable of some Ornament in the hands of a good Poet’. In part too, it is that Cowley is restrained, ‘being never carried too remote by the heat of the imagination’, sober such that his conceits ‘appear the result of a genuine Thought’, whatever that might mean. Tate’s embarrassment is quite enjoyable to watch, but it also prompts a key question: how, for Cowley or for early modernity, does the scientific belong in, and how is it transformed in a poem?

Cowley himself is relatively restrained, if slightly contradictory, in his explanation for why he has included scientific annotations to the Latin poems, claiming on the one hand that nobody needs much help to find out about the plants’ qualities – ‘for what is more easie than to turn over one or two herbalists?’ – and on the other hand that physicians, ‘whom I pretend not to instruct, but to divert’, might just be a little too busy for such menial pharmacopeia: ‘there are few so well vers’d in the history of plants as to be acquainted with the names of them all.’ It will be both a utile and accurate account of herbs - its notes there ‘not for ostentation of learning’ - and something arcane, ‘a part of philosophy that lies out of the common road of learning’.³³ Poetry according to Cowley, is particularly good at managing the perhaps vast gulf between the bare fact and the metaphysics that underlie the quotidian – it has a particularly transformative quality. He aims, in writing about plants ‘not to press out their Liquor crude in a simple enumeration, but as it were in a Lymbeck, by the gentle Heat of Poetry [*lento poetiarum ambagum igne lenique tormento*] to digest and extract their Spirits’. Indeed, the proximity of alien things is his very purpose: ‘Nor have I chosen to put them together which had Affinity in Nature I rather connected those of the most different Qualities [*quam maxime discrepantia connectere malui*], that their contrary Colours, being mixt, might the better set off each other’.³⁴ While this might conceivably relate to the incongruous assemblage of herbs, Cowley’s aim of ‘maximum discrepancy’ (to follow the Latin, rather than the tamer English rendering) is quite a precise description of his scientific subjects – natural history on the one hand, gynaecology on the other – pressed together, in so discordant a fashion.

The generally plausible case has been made that the Latin version of Cowley’s *Plantarum* is, to a greater extent, a scientific text, compared to the more-sparsely annotated English text. Kathleen Taylor and Gillian Wright, in their study of the annotations wonder if they are thinned out (in the case of first two books) because the ‘translators may not have seen much benefit in including many often literally gory details of female reproduction in

³¹ Tate, ‘To the Reader’, a2v

³² Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.5, describing Mulciber’s Palace of the sun.

³³ Cowley, *Six Books*, b1r. Latin preface to *Plantarum* (1662), A4r-v, ‘extra publicas plateas aut itinera usitata’ at: <https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/plants/1lat.html>

³⁴ Cowley, *Plantarum*, A4r.

what was, after all, a commercial collaboration'. They note that the mythological-religious notes are not trimmed to the same extent, as the scientific categories – botanical, medical and so on.³⁵ This intuition that the less fully annotated *Of Plants* is aimed at a less learned audience has been noted by various readers of the poem, that the English 'emphasises the poetic features of the work (the variety of lyric, narrative and epic register) and its political content at the expense of its medicinal and scientific seriousness'.³⁶ Still, even aside from the fact that the annotations centre on the pleasantly haphazard Pliny and the hardly cutting-edge figure of Jean Fernel (1497-1558), we should be cautious about what the 'scientific' means or entails: sometimes, it may dutifully render fact upon fact as a well-catalogued empirical Herbal might be expected to. But sometimes, natural philosophy can be found in metaphysical flight (the 'part of philosophy that lies out of the common road of learning'), seeking the elusive relations between things. Cowley's annotations might tell us, for example, that Rocket is 'hot and dry in the third degree', Galenically speaking, but when Savin is angered by Mastick's speech against abortion, we find the annotations playing with its humoral terms: 'Those three degrees of heat which she before / From nature had, her anger now made four'.³⁷ The reduction of the scientific apparatus is, in many cases, a reduction of a quite *outdated* epistemological framework, and there are, in any case, other dynamics at play in the heated arguments over menstruation and abortion. We might even suppose that the shifts in annotation practice from *Plantarum Libri Duo* to *Of Plants* makes the poem seem less antiquarian. While a certain shimmer of scientific due diligence may be lost in the reduction of the notes, it might not seem a great scientific loss to plants who proudly boast of their Harveian framework for understanding the circulation of the blood, to dispense with Fernel. Though it was the editors' - Tate or Oldham's - decision to excise the notes, the reduced annotations may have been seen as *more* in keeping with the scientific character of late Restoration natural philosophy, keen to dissociate itself from an over-reliance on drab authority. More importantly, though, the notes were never really where the poem's scientific-metaphysical interest lies, less in mere fact, than in the epistemological quandary of how one science – natural history - 'knows' another – anatomy or midwifery, encompassing the not yet delineated sciences of gynaecology and obstetrics. In any case, too insistent a pursuit of scientific novelty can be misleading. We tend to consider 'science' as that which is boldly new and contentious - in natural history, for example, the discussion of plant sexuality that arose in the latter decades of the century – but there is also a standing body of knowledge on more or less any scientific topic, that retains its fire and energy, not least because science is embedded in the social – abortion or miscarriage are medical matters, but not discreetly, not only so.³⁸

Early modern abortion

In one of her manuscript poems entitled 'Upon the Sight of my Abortive Birth, the 31st of December, 1657', Mary Carey (c. 1609-1680) writes of her miscarriage: 'What Birth is

³⁵ Taylor and Wright, 'Patterns of annotation' 633, 637, noting, p. 629, that the annotations in *Plantarum* constitute 35% of the total word count, compared with 4% in *Of Plants*. They observe too that quite a number of notes in *Of Plants* are original, with no Latin equivalent – a fifth of the number in total.

³⁶ Moul, 'EEBO Introduction to *Plantarum*'.

³⁷ *Of Plants*, p. 50, Lines 825-6: Latin, 793-4, 'Cuique prius ternos mater natura calores / Attribuit, calidam iam quater ira facit.'

³⁸ Taiz and Taiz, *Flora Unveiled*; Begley, 'Pre-Linnaean Plant Sexualities'.

this? a poor despised Creature? / A little Embryo? void of Life, & Feature?’ It is, she writes, no less lovely than her seven ‘strong, right-proportioned, lovely Girls & Boys’ but she will have no regrets, she will positively rejoice in submitting to God’s inexplicable wisdom, rejoice that now the foetus is God’s ‘Sinc’t had a Soul, shall be forever blest’. The absolute beaten-down despair of the poem, and the wail it does not utter, is not hard to find: ‘I only now desire of my sweet God/ The Reason why he took in hand his Rod?’, the answer to which, in its biblical tapestry, is a multiform plea in the spiritual language of embryology: ‘Let not my heart, (as doth my Womb) miscarry ... Quickened me Lord, according to this word’.³⁹ The poetry of child death, and mourning by seventeenth-century women, writing of failed and dangerous pregnancy and the proximity of death is remarkable, in its rawness, in its sheer volume, in its effort to shape grief, to console, to have the measured character of verse form perform some kind of spiritual control. ‘Abortive Birth’ in Cary’s poem means miscarriage, and it can bear either this or its more modern meaning or deliberate ending of the pregnancy.

Do we pre-know that abortion (in the modern sense) lay beyond the pale, that the intense religiosity that so evidently structured early modern experience would, before the fact, exclude it from publishable discussion? This is not meant to be a question that bears on the actuality of rough life, where decisions are not always made with a prayer book in hand, where desperate poverty, reputation, family pride, rape or any number of reasons might cut through the moral, religious and social pressures against abortion. It is rather to ask whether it is plausible to read the kind of openness about abortion into Cowley’s argument that seems, I think, to be there. Dressed up nicely, hedged in metaphor and euphemism, was it debatable?⁴⁰ The blur in meaning between a pregnancy that ended in miscarriage and one that was helped towards that end was important – pregnancy was not, it seems, an all-or-nothing matter.

Eve Keller’s study of ‘the rhetoric of bio-medical writing about reproduction’ traces a culture where the pre-quickened embryo - the moment of quickening and ensoulment might range from three to five months - could be understood to be ‘in a liquid state’, that an early pregnancy interrupted by miscarriage or abortion, might be perceived as no more than a ‘shift or a slipping away’ of what had been at most a potential pregnancy.⁴¹ In large part this was a matter of the necessarily subjective moment when the embryo’s presence was ‘felt internally and apprehended gradually’ by the pregnant woman, as Laura Gowing puts it.⁴² Looking at the particular ‘richness of ordinary people’s ideas about the body’, Mary Fissell explores how generation could be what she terms ‘an imaginative resource’, a way of construing the world, where things came gradually into being. However, while this creative imaginary speaks to the mental world of women, pregnancy was also a social matter, and condemnation of women’s bodies, a suspicion of what went on behind closed doors, was as Fissell recounts it, always close at hand.⁴³ Indeed, all of these critical writings have a darker

³⁹ Carey, *Abortive Birth* in Adcock, Read and Ziomek, *Flesh and Spirit*, citing the poem’s numbered couplets, 1, 3, 17, 37, 40.

⁴⁰ A more moralised, albeit libertine and slightly cynical poem on abortion is cited by Pickering, ‘Sir Oliver Style’, 475-6. The manuscript verse, ‘Said by a young lady to her child taking something to destroy it’ is a rough translation of a sonnet from Jean Hesnault’s *Oeuvres diverses* of 1670, in Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS Lt 10, f. 43r.

⁴¹ Keller, *Generating Bodies*, 132-3.

⁴² Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 112.

⁴³ Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 53-80, ‘The Womb goes Bad’.

tale to tell, that even while we may reconstruct how women understood their bodies in the era's hazier sense of the self, alongside this we see an increase in legal, social and scientific scrutiny.

It might seem that there is ample and more or less compelling evidence that there was no tolerance of abortion, but neither is that absolute. Joseph Hall, in his *Cases of Conscience* (1654), a casuistical collection of difficult legal-moral cases, can at least pose the question: 'Whether may it be lawfull, in case of extremity, to procure the abortion of the child, for the preservation of the mother?' noting that 'too many of the weaker sexe grossely culpable in matter of willing abortion ... they think it not unlawfull, or at least, venially so, ... to prevent the fulnesse of their conceptions'.⁴⁴ Hall's *Cases* pitches the decision, more or less wholly, as a matter for the moral compass of the physician rather than the woman. While his inclination is firmly to denounce the very thought of it, he will at least entertain, though he does not go along with, the counterargument: 'that howsoever it were no lesse than mortall sin, in a Physitian to prescribe a medicinall receit to cause abortion ... yet for the preservation of the life of the mother, in an extreme danger, (I say, before animation) it might be lawful'. Legal opinion also distinguishes between the act before and after quickening. Edward Coke, in *Third Part of the Institutions of the Laws of England* (1644) writes, 'If a woman be quick with child, and by a Potion or otherwise killeth it in her wombe; or if a man beat her, whereby the child dieth in her body, and she is delivered of a dead childe, this is a great misprison and no murder.'⁴⁵ Gowing notes how readily legal discussion of abortion in the pre-animated embryo performed a sidestep in the perceived offence: 'While abortion was only technically illegal after quickening, and infanticide only possible after the child was fully out of the mother's body, courts frequently recorded the attempts of single women to procure abortions earlier in pregnancy, treating it as further evidence of sexual crime'⁴⁶ This discursive and sometimes legal dynamic, where the non-offence of ridding the body of an unwanted pregnancy, was proof of the actual offence of illicit sexuality, is shared by at least some plants in Cowley's council of 'ecbolicks', who, while at times sounding like practical midwives, with their specialist herbal knowledge, remain suspicious of women's sexuality.

**

To return, then, to the puzzle of Cowley's second book – why are elegant plants discussing abortion, and in what sense are its staged dramatic monologues in elegiac couplets a formally astute mode in which to present competing gynaecological models? For one thing, it allows for a debate of the topic outside the legal parameters that so often attend it. Perhaps the opening dismissal of men, 'Into the Female Secrets do not pry, / Or them at least pretend you don't descry', might be a description of abortion discourse in early modernity, something not spoken of, but not quite secret either.

Cowley's debate, in any case, has no parallel, its speakers conspicuously proud not only of their plant-vertues (in the sense of their medical qualities), but also of their detailed and intuited knowledge. It is true that the subject matter is not kept entirely 'scientific', if by that we mean bleached of emotion or strictly medical, but this is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the debate, that it does not suppose science to exist in isolation from

⁴⁴ Hall, *Cases of Conscience*, 89. For a longer history of abortion and attitudes to abortion, see Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*; McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals*, 89-105.

⁴⁵ Coke, *Institutions of the Laws of England*, 50, quoted in McLaren, 121 and Keller, 132.

⁴⁶ Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 142.

the messy rest of life. Over the course of its twelve sections - eleven formal speeches, together with a framing account of the bustling plant audience – Cowley’s parliament of embryology becomes increasingly rancorous, as its medical-botanical claims and counter-claims come under variously moralistic, misogynist and scientific scrutiny. Everything is contested: the rhetoric of science as well as its conceptual and empirical limits, the strange intellectual alliances of things and the emotional character of explanatory form. There is a degree of wit and caprice in this all, but blood, as a topic, stirs strong emotion, and over the course of several speeches, the plants consider it variously as a circulating marvel, a toxic clot, the substance of life, a terrible internal rage.

The moon-animated herbs and plants, though they are proud of their medical abilities, do not conceive of themselves as mere servants to humanity. They jostle in establishing their place in a hierarchy of planthood as well as within the intricacies of human generation. In the course of this, they disagree over anatomy, biological causes and processes. Some plants, all female, voice misogynist arguments, not without fervent reply from other herbs. All know the fragility of things, the possibility of miscarriage, or of women’s death in childbirth. The never-quite-settled character of the debates on menstruation and abortion are conspicuously intellectual and elegant – a women’s debate chamber, variously anatomical, pharmacological and Ovidian – but at the same time, shot through with the prosopopoeic gambit, that the speakers not only diagnose, but are themselves the speaking things, the curatives to ease the pains of birth or bring about abortion.

We reach roughly half way through the second book, before the debate turns explicitly from menstruation to abortion, but there is an important sense in which the latter has never not been the subject. Discussion of provoking menstruation was often, in works of midwifery, herbals and in legal contexts, tacitly understood to convey a particular knowledge of abortifacients, though the ostensible point in medical writing might be to warn that the midwife or physician should avoid them at the wrong moment of pregnancy.⁴⁷ I will recount here the substance of the exchange on abortion only, although the poem’s longer dynamics – from the wistful scientific monologues of the first book, through to the concerned gynaecological care of the menstruation debate – produces a more emotionally varied discussion than might seem the case in attending mainly to the recriminations of the abortion discussion itself.

The turn in the debate is occasioned by Birthwort (*Aristolochia*), whose privileged place as ‘Juno’s plant’, and whose place in midwifery, were well established. She begins by noting her own powers, ‘Easing all Births’, a herb with spectacular virtues ‘for I make way / And Lifes straight folding-doors wide open lay ... Straight passages I widen, stops remove, And every obstacle down headlong shove’.⁴⁸ Momentarily, at least, the poem marvels, in the manner of physico-theology, at the corporeally unlikely character of birth, and her propulsive part in it, though the herb checks herself, noting God, rather than Juno, as midwife:

But God (you know) performs the chiefest part,
This work is fit for the almighty art.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Read, *Menstruation and the Female Body*, 4 and passim.

⁴⁸ *Of Plants*, p. 47, l. 652, 663-4 674-5, *Plantarum*, pp. 92-93 l. 629, 635-6, 647-8 ‘partus solventem ... valvis bipatentibus arctas / Laxato vitæ cardine pando fores. / ... Dilato angustum nimis, obstructumque recludo, / Et late præceps omne quod obstat ago.’

He to the growing embryo bids the womb
Extend, and bids the limbs for that make room
He parts the meeting rocks, and with his hand
They gently forth at open order stand.⁴⁹

This is a rare appearance in the poem for a God more akin to the Christian than the pagan, insofar as he is described in terms that would evoke the psalms. Making this midwife male, albeit godmale, has its own connotations within the politics of birth and contested turf-wars of medical care in the era.⁵⁰ But hot on the heels of this, the speech changes course in both tone and subject, to discuss death - miscarriage and mothers dying in birth, veering between sympathy and apparently arbitrary primness, in a comment that such a death is no more than adulterers deserve, though there has been no mention of any sexuality or adultery till this moment. The passage warrants quotation at length – albeit only in the English, for reasons of space – to sense its strange tonal shifts between pity, blame, and the merely matter-of-fact, when a decision needs to be made between the mother's life and the embryo's. And if the male god-midwife seemed to blunder in on things a few lines earlier, men are told here, they have no place at all:

Sometimes within his Mothers fatal Womb,
Before he's born, the Infant finds his Tomb.
Life from her native soil Deaths terrors chase,
Who fertile is herself in such a place.
Th'included carcass breaths forth dire perfumes,
And its own Grave the buried Corps consumes.
Strange! the preposterous Child's his Mothers death,
And dead deprives his living Tomb of breath.
From that sad fate, ye Gods, chaste Women guard;
And let it be Adulteries reward.
As far as in me lies, I save the tree
And take the rotten away with me.
The goods to drown, 'tis the best way I think,
Lest in a storm the Ship and all shou'd sink.
Rash Infants often make escapes; unbind
Their cords and leave their luggage all behind.
Their thicker coats and thinner shirts they leave,
And that sweet Cake where they their food receive.
Lucina twice poor Women then implore
Their throws return although the Birth be o'r.
Here to the Womb again my aid I lend,
And hard as well as noisom work attend.
What I to cleanse the passage undergo,
You wot not, but, let no man, pray you, know.

⁴⁹ *Of Plants*, p. 47, l. 700-705, *Plantarum*, p. 94, l. 671-76. Re. Psalm 139-13.16

⁵⁰ On midwifery in the era, starting points include Evenden, *Midwives of Seventeenth Century London*, King, *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynaecology*.

For if he do, 'twill *Cupid's* power impair,
Nor will he such an awe o'r mortals bear.⁵¹

If initially, this is about the death of the foetus, Birthwort goes on to consider the danger to the mother's life from the dead embryo (the translator rather awkwardly following the Latin in 'Th'included carcass' - *inclusum funus*). Despite the brief and largely inexplicable venom around adultery, as though only adulterous women faced this danger, the Herb-midwife attends immediately to the mother. It is not that this moment features any explicit abortion, but rather than the curiously sudden inclusion of illicit sexuality changes the tenor of the debate before her piling up of world-weary metaphors - saving the tree and abandoning its fruit, throwing the goods overboard to save the ship - a sense of urgent priorities and the quotidian dark decisions that need to be made: 'For 'tis a riddle [though this renders 'Omnia sunt tenebrae', whose darkness may not only indicate riddling], wherefore I wou'd know / How I so oft have done the thing I do'.⁵² Birthwort, though, as an abortifacient has cover, so to speak, being used both to expel the foetus and to 'cleanse the passage'.

If abortion was not Birthwort's specific context, however, the next speaker makes it very explicitly part of the debate. The Mastick-tree (*lentiscus*) launches a blistering attack on 'curs'd Savin here', objecting that she should have any part with the council, reimagined as a sacred rite, because she, Savin, has no other function *except* to procure abortion. This speech is vehement and the rhetoric fierce, decrying her profanation of 'that living temple' and 'The naked hopes of thousand future Boys'. Even in war, she continues, no such child-snatching crimes are tolerated.

But these are trifles; since curs'd *Savin* here
Dares in a throng of pious Plants appear;
She, who the Altares of the Womb prophanes,
And deep in bloud that living Temple stains.
Impatient to be wicked she destroys
The naked hopes of thousand future Boys.
'Tis one of Wars extream and greatest harms,
To snatch an Infant from his Mothers Arms.
But here the Womb (oh strange!) close shut and barr'd,
The Mothers very bowels are no guard. ...
Whilst Poisons onely in a civil rage,
And lingring Ills the Step-dames hands engage.⁵³

There are few places in early modern literature quite so vituperative as this, with abortion rendered via the trope of children violently snatched and bludgeoned in the fury of war, one's enemies depicted as savage enough to desecrate the 'living Temple'. As Mastick goes on, with her array of classical models, she equates Savin first with Medea – cited earlier - who to revenge herself on Jason, kills their children, and then, in a skewed Ovidian scenario evokes the violent Tereus who, in revenge for his rape and mutilation of Philomel, was served his son to eat. Mastick, without much explanation then shifts to address women's

⁵¹ *Of Plants*, p. 48, l.712-37, *Plantarum*, pp. 94-5, l.683-708. Latin at:
<https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/plants/2lat.html#685>

⁵² *Of Plants*, l.745-6, *Plantarum*, p. 95, 715-6.

⁵³ *Of Plants*, l.764-73, *Plantarum*, p. 98, 733-744.

lack of choice, who must bear even marriage-rape, 'Lie with thy husband though against thy will', a scenario that changes nothing in her moral strictures forbidding abortion. Savin, the herb, in this scenario plays the role of Progne, Tereus wife, as cook to 'dress the fatal banquet in the Womb' and serve 'the reeking bits' and 'meat of thine and his own bowels'.⁵⁴

Moul's account of the poem's thoroughgoing post-Ovidianism makes the case that the plants self-consciously represent themselves oscillating between their scientific identity, their thoroughly-internalised concern with their own medical virtues, while at the same time recalling, in slant form, stories of Ovidian transformation that 'are marked by the, often heart-rending, loss of bodily autonomy and, very often, of coherent speech'. This makes the herbs, with their searing dramatic monologues (within their ostensibly collegial debate-world), curious users of classical myth:

These female speaking plants are both very Ovidian (female subjects of metamorphosis and the victims of sexual violence) and also very un-Ovidian in their eloquence, their scientific knowledge (remember, these ideas about menstruation are presented as a learned debate in an entirely female company), and their medicinal utility'.⁵⁵

This astute sense of an always equivocal Ovidianism in the poem is troubled all the more in the Mastick-tree's attack on Savin. Is this meant to be Ovid misplaced, and bilious? Does the poem allow for bad Ovidianism, skewed and ill-applied, in depicting an end to pregnancy as infanticide? The plant-audience, it seems, are unsure. The narrator (ostensibly this is all Laurel's recounting of the debate, as told to the poet) speaks of an uncertainty in the listeners, at how to respond ('At this they were divided; and the sound / Of various murmurs flew the Court around'), which riles Savin all the more, in her equally vehement response and defence of her abortifacient qualities.⁵⁶

Savin's reply firstly attacks Mastick for her relative uselessness, medically speaking, being merely a plant for toothache, before launching her defence of abortion and herself. She, at least, is honest, goes the argument. She admits her abortive qualities, unlike those who will rely on ridiculous superstitions - clasping a loadstone or various jewels to prevent miscarriage. This becomes quite an extensive list of medical hocus-pocus - eagle stones carried under the armpits or found in the uterus of a deer - citing Daniel Sennert and Levinus Lemnius' *Occulta naturae miracula* (1559) in the Latin notes.⁵⁷ But none of these protective remedies against miscarriage is strong enough to withstand Savin's powers, and at this point, we begin to discern a longstanding animosity between Mastick and Savin in their contrary medical effects. In fact, this was hinted at in the notes, earlier: 'Lentiscus [Mastick]... perhaps

⁵⁴ *Of Plants*, p. 49-50, l.778-93, *Plantarum*, p. 98, l.747-62. Thanks to Hania Siebenpfeiffer, for pointing out that in various woodcut prints of Mastic (Lentiscus), the plant is depicted surrounded by flies.

⁵⁵ Moul, 'The Transformation of Ovid' 227-8, 232. Moul's introduction to the EEBO edition engages with McAuley, 'Matermorphoses'.

⁵⁶ *Of Plants*, p. l.820-21, *Plantarum*, p. 99, l.789-90. There are some minor discrepancies between the online version here and Cowley's Latin of 1662 (p. 99) and 1668 (p. 94).

⁵⁷ We probably cannot discern Cowley's opinion of Sennert and Lemnius, with their signaturism, directly from this. An advocacy of Royal Society science does not rule out either an admiration or disdain, and the notes cite the signaturist, Oswald Croll, extolling Savin, 'Crollius in ea signaturam Venarum Uteri vidit, mira (ut mihi videtur) perspicitate'. ('Crollius saw in it [savin] the signature of the veins of the uterus, with remarkable clarity (it seems to me).')

derives its Latin name from the viscosity of its tears and its leaves. It restrains all discharges, not only menstruation. Deservedly are these properties attributed to it against Savin; for it is believed not only to prevent abortion but to make fertile'.⁵⁸ We are, here, in the strange position of seeing the plants (or the poem) transpose their straightforwardly pharmacological qualities (that Mastick can or cannot prevent Savin's power to effect abortion) into fiercely-polarised moral positions.

Savin's argument centres on a moral frankness – she is what she is: 'I the truth of what I am disclose. / Children, I own, I from the belly wrest.' In any case, her properties are well known and at least avoid the hypocritical use of plants pretending to be emmenagogues as abortifacients. Savin is nature's gift, her particular virtues bestowed on her for this purpose alone (880-81), and her medical uses extend to healing and saving the woman: 'For I the Courses and the After-birth, / With the dead Members deadly weight bring forth'.⁵⁹ If this is her core defence, however, Savin does not exactly dispute Mastick's accusations, so much as side-step the blame – 'That which you call a Crime, I own to be, / But you must lay't on Men and not on me.' Her argument is rather a social one, on the terrible passage that the child must go through, by which she means the world as much as the terribleness of birth:

Ah! what at first wou'd tender Infants give
(When newly form'd they scarce begin to live)
For this, if possibly they cou'd but know,
Through what a passage they must after go?
Ah! why did Heav'n (with reverence let me say)
Into this World make such a narrow way?
You'd think the Child by 's pains to Heav'n shou'd go,
Whilst he through pain's born to a world of woe.⁶⁰

Perhaps we cannot think of this as scientific, as such, but the argument around abortion rarely remains as a strictly medical matter. Savin is, she insists, the voice of realism, well-enough known not to deceive those who use the herb. What may or may not be her clinching argument, is nevertheless the poem's most telling move, when Savin lists the numerous other herbs that must accompany her if she is, as Mastick demanded, banished. The list that includes many of the herb-speakers – Myrrh, Sowbread, Dittany, Birthwort and indeed, Mugwort, the president of the council – as well as some twelve others, is accompanied by a sudden density in the Latin notes, detailing the abortifacients, including those whose use is 'only' to induce menstruation ('Menses ciet'), and in the English by the more synoptic list of 'Plants that procure abortion'.

How do we judge the performance, the argument, and how does this in turn transpose back to the human world? Certainly, we are directed by the reported response to suppose that Savin's arguments have swept the floor. Where Mastick's speech produced its uncertain murmuring, that of Savin's is altogether more warmly received: 'She ended, with great favour and applause; / And there's no doubt but she obtain'd her cause.'⁶¹ The

⁵⁸ Note to *Plantarum*, l.729, 'Lentiscus ... Nomen Latinum fortassis à Lentore lacrymae et folii. Omnes fluxiones, non solum Mensium, cohibet. Meritò ei hae partes contra Sabinam attribuuntur; non solum enim abortum prohibere creditur, sed et ipsa semper foecunda est'

⁵⁹ *Of Plants*, p. 51, l. 882-83, *Plantarum*, p. 102, l.849-50

⁶⁰ *Of Plants*, p. 52, l. 892-99, *Plantarum*, p. 102, l.861-6

⁶¹ *Of Plants*, p. 53, l. 952-53, *Plantarum*, p. 107, l.915-6

President, Mugwort, likewise pronounces on the rising anger of the debate in support of Savin, as noted earlier: ‘If the green nation, sister, banish thee, / I’ll go along and bear thee company.’ Cowley’s poem can certainly be read as censuring women who use the herbs as abortifacients and Mugwort concludes that they, the *ecbolicae*, are a ‘wretched race’ if they have to bear the blame for abortion. But then again, life is frail: ‘the smell of a Candles Snuff, tis said, will make Women Miscarry’, we find in the margin.

But is it science? Is it natural history? And did the reader learn anything beyond recycled Pliny and Fernel? In her account of New World plant-hunting or ‘Colonial Bioprospecting’, Londa Schiebinger explores what might be thought of as a curious counter-case, when an evidently effective plant-abortifacient, the Peacock Flower (*Poinciana pulcherrima*), with its attractive flaming reds and yellows, was brought back to Europe, by itinerant botanists and medical travellers – the book returns to two figures in particular, Hans Sloane and Maria Sibylla Merian.⁶³ But though the material flower made it to Europe, it was met with a scholarly-scientific silence, a thoroughgoing absence in the written record of its use, and Schiebinger addresses the palpable ‘*nontransfer* of important bodies of knowledge from the New World into Europe’. The reasons are complex – a distrust of indigenous knowledge around abortion medicines, intertwined with the history of slavery, sexual abuse and plantation culture – but the reasons are also straightforward: this was a *materia medica* for women. Most readers would understand this instance of non-knowledge of abortion as an episode in the history of pharmacology, or of natural history, whereas Cowley’s in-depth discussion of *ecbolicae* relating their qualities in detail has, in a curious counterpoint, made no dint in histories of medicine or the annals of abortion. It may be true that Cowley is not describing something particularly new – abortion’s history is long - but science is not necessarily all about newness, nor only about that kind of empiricism that Royal Society science so excelled at. How plants care for their humans, pharmacologically and emotionally, and how they involve themselves in abortion, anatomically as well as socially, are Cowley’s questions in *Plantarum*. They are medical-scientific enquiries, but it is not necessarily the kind of interrogation that yields answers, as such, so much as more puzzlement about the parameters of natural philosophy.

Bibliography

Begley, Justin. ‘Pre-Linnaean Plant Sexualities in England and France, c. 1670–1720’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 62:4 (2022): 40–55.

Blake, Liza. ‘Non-Atomic Atomisms and Atomic Epistemologies in the Poetry of Margaret Cavendish and Lucy Hutchinson’, *ELR* 53:3 (2023): 401–424.

Bradner, Leicester. *Musae Anglicanae: a history of Anglo-Latin poetry, 1500– 1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).

Carey, Mary. *Upon the Sight of my Abortive Birth the 31st December 1657* (1658) from *Lady Cary’s Meditations and Poetry*, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson D. 1308 (1720), in *Flesh and Spirit: An anthology of seventeenth-Century Women’s Writing*, ed. Rachel Adcock, Sara Read and Anna Ziomek (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

⁶³ Schiebinger, *Colonial Bioprospecting*. Thanks to Hannah Murphy for pointing me to Schiebinger, as a parallel to Cowley.

- Caroline Spearing, 'The Fruits of Retirement: Political Engagement in the *Plantarum Libri Sex*' in *Royalists and Royalism in 17th-Century Literature: Exploring Abraham Cowley*, ed. Philip Major (New York: Routledge, 2020), 180-201.
- Coke, Edward. *Third Part of the Institutions of the Laws of England* (London, 1644).
- Cowley, Abraham. *Abrahami Couleij Angli, Poemata Latina. In Quibus Continentur, Sex Libri Plantarum, Viz. Duo Herbarum, Florum, Sylvarum, Et Unus Miscellaneorum* (London, 1668)
- Cowley, Abraham. *A. Covleii Plantarum Libri duo* (Londini: Nath. Brooks, 1662).
- Cowley, Abraham. *The Third Part of the Works of Mr Abraham Cowley, Being His Six Books of Plants, viz. The First and Second of Herbs, The Third and Fourth of Flowers, The Fifth and Sixth of Trees, Now made English by several hands* (London, 1689).
- Cox, Virginia. 'The Female Voice in Italian Renaissance Dialogue', *MLN* 128.1 (2013): 53-78.
- Cox, Virginia. *The Renaissance Dialogue. Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- Evenden, Doreen. *The Midwives of Seventeenth Century London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- Fissell, Mary. *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- Fraunce, Abraham. *The Arcadian rhetorike: or The præcepts of rhetorike made plaine* (1588),
- Gowing, Laura. *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).
- Grierson, H.J.C. and Smith, J.C., *A Critical History of English Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944).
- Hall, Joseph. *Cases of conscience practically resolved*, 3rd ed. (London, 1654).
- Hillyer, Richard. *Four Augustan science poets: Abraham Cowley, James Thomson, Henry Brooke, Erasmus Darwin* (London: Anthem Press, 2020).
- Hinman, Robert B. *Abraham Cowley's World of Order* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).
- Hughes, Ann. *Gender and the English Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2011)
- Keller, Eve. *Generating Bodies and Gendered Selves: The Rhetoric of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).
- King, Helen. *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynaecology: The Uses of a Sixteenth-Century Compendium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).
- Kinney, Daniel. *Of Plants* (1662) from Cowley, *The Third Part of the Works* (1689) at: <https://cowley.lib.virginia.edu/works/Bk2.htm>
- Lecky, Katarzyna. 'Abraham Cowley's *Six Books of Plants* and the Diversification of Textual Authority' in *Abraham Cowley (1618-1667): A Seventeenth-Century English Poet Recovered*, ed. Michael Edson and Cedric D. Reverand (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2023), 171-194
- Lindsay, Alexander. ODNB entry on Abraham Cowley, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/6499>
- Martin, L.C. (ed.). *Abraham Cowley: Poetry and Prose: With Thomas Sprat's Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).
- McAuley, Mairead. 'Matermorphoses: Motherhood and the Ovidian Epic Subject', *Eugesta* 2 (2012): 123-68.
- McLaren, Angus. *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Methuen, 1984).
- Monreal, Ruth. *Flora Neolatina: Die Hortorum libri IV von René Rapin SJ und die Plantarum libri VI von Abraham Cowley. Zwei lateinische Dichtungen des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).
- Moul, Victoria. 'EEBO Introduction to Plantarum' n.p. *EEBO Introductions Series 11*, https://www.proquest.com/go/eebo_intro_11.pdf;

- Moul, Victoria. 'Horatian Odes in Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Sex* (1668),' in *Neo-Latin Poetry in the British Isles*, ed. L. B. T. Houghton and Gesine Manuwald (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 87-104.
- Moul, Victoria. 'The Transformation of Ovid in Cowley's herb garden' in *The Afterlife of Ovid*, ed. Peter Mack and John North (London: University of London Press, 2015), 221-234.
- Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. *The Breaking of the Bircle: Studies in the Effect of "New Science" upon Seventeenth Century Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1960).
- Perkin, M.R. *Abraham Cowley: a Bibliography* (Folkestone: Dawson Publishing, 1977).
- Pickering, Oliver. 'Sir Oliver Style, his Verse, and the Smyrna Earthquake of 1688 3rd Baronet, c. 1656-1703', *The Seventeenth century*, 39:3 (2024): 467-490.
- Preston, Claire. *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- Purkiss, Diane. *Literature, Gender and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- Read, Sara. *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave, 2013)
- Riddle, John. *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- Schiebinger, Londa. *Plants and Empire, Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- Spearing, Caroline. "'Expelling the Purple Tyrant from the Citadel": The Menstruation Debate in Book 2 of Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Sex* (1662)', in *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity*, ed. Mark Bradley, Victoria Leonard, and Laurence Totelin (London: Routledge, 2021) 369–380.
- Spearing, Caroline. *Abraham Cowley's Plantarum Libri Sex: A Cavalier Poet and the Classical Canon* (PhD, Kings College London, 2017).
- Sprang, Felix C.H., *Londons Fontaine of Arts and Sciences Bildliche und theatrale Vermittlungsinstanzen naturwissenschaftlichen Denkens im frühneuzeitlichen London* (Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008).
- Sprat, Thomas. 'An Account of the Life and Writings of Mr Abraham Cowley', in *Abraham Cowley: Poetry and Prose: With Thomas Sprat's Life*, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).
- Sutton, Dana: *De Plantis Libri VI* (1668): <https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/plants/2lat.html>.
- Taaffe, James G. *Abraham Cowley* (New York: Twayne, 1972).
- Taiz, Lincoln and Taiz, Lee. *Flora Unveiled: The Discovery and Denial of Sex in Plants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)
- Taylor, Kathleen and Wright, Gillian. 'The rich help of books': Patterns of Annotation in Latin and English Versions of Abraham Cowley's *Sex Libri Plantarum*', *The Seventeenth Century*, 38:4 (2023): 625-648.
- Wright, Gillian. *The Restoration Transposed: Poetry, Place and History, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).