

Was Ezra Pound the “midwife” of *The Waste Land*? Surgeons, midwives, and “sage homme”

Abstract

This essay reveals a flaw in the critical consensus that regards Ezra Pound as the intellectual “midwife” of *The Waste Land*, a metaphor used so frequently over the last century it has become a critical commonplace. By detailing the various ways that Pound’s use of reproductive language was drawn from a contemporaneous medical debate about midwifery – a hitherto unrecognized influence – this essay provides a fuller understanding of the rhetoric Pound used to discredit female writers and editors, while also highlighting the importance of feminist attention to the critical conversation itself.

Keywords

Ezra Pound, *The Waste Land*, midwife, surgeon, “sage homme,” metaphor

Ezra Pound’s role as the “midwife” of *The Waste Land* (1922) is something of a modernist legend. As Hugh Kenner tells it, T.S. Eliot’s poem was long and sprawling before Pound’s keen editorial eye shaped it into the masterpiece we know today.¹ In a letter to Eliot, Pound memorialized their collaboration with an obscene poem titled “SAGE HOMME.” The title is a twist on the French “sage femme,” which literally translates as “wise woman” but is an old-fashioned name for a midwife. In the decades since, scholars have frequently referred to Pound as the midwife of *The Waste Land* or modernism in general. Yet Pound’s self-declaration as “sage homme” and the heated political, cultural, and legal climate surrounding midwifery in the WWI era has not received scholarly attention. Pound wrote this poem at a time when doctors (predominately male) and midwives (overwhelmingly female) had distinct roles, especially

regarding surgery. This essay considers Pound's self-assigned role in modernism in light of a medical debate about the regulation and licensure of English midwives, in which many doctors characterized midwives as ignorant, unskilled, and slovenly. Attending to this history leads to a provocative claim: Pound is not the "midwife" of *The Waste Land*. I do not dispute his role in editing the poem but the assignation of the title "midwife." Pound neither uses this word nor describes his activities as those of midwifery. Rather, he distances his work from this profession, figuring himself as a surgeon and using the same rhetoric as doctors who sought to discredit midwives in the licensure debates.² As such, calling Pound the "midwife" of *The Waste Land* misrepresents his self-assigned role in modern literature.

I argue that the term "surgeon" is a more accurate translation of "sage homme," as it both reflects the historical context and Pound's engagement with it. For Pound's use of doctors' rhetoric is best understood as part of his well-known pattern of discrediting female writers and editors. At the time, doctors were achieving some success in their efforts to push female professionals out of the delivery room, and Pound, I am arguing, leveraged the rhetorical force of doctors' arguments for modern literature. In characteristic fashion, then, Pound took the old intellectual midwifery metaphor and "made it new" by associating it with the knowledge ("sage") and masculinity of surgeons. This essay is concerned with *labor* – in the sense of parturition as well as work – and the counterintuitive use of reproductive rhetoric to position women as unsuited to involvement in (pro)creation. Situating Pound's poem in context with this contemporaneous medical debate, a hitherto unacknowledged influence, provides a fuller understanding of the rhetoric Pound used to delegitimize female writers and editors he considered competition. Moreover, by turning a feminist lens on the scholarly conversation, this

essay highlights the importance of feminist attention to our received stories about modernism, particularly the metaphors we use to discuss the processes of writing, editing, and publication.

“SAGE HOMME” in the critical conversation

Eliot wrote most of *The Waste Land* in 1921.³ Between November of that year and January 1922, Pound reviewed various drafts of the poem, recommending excision of nearly half of the original lines and substantive revisions for the remainder.⁴ Throughout the writing and revision process, Eliot relied on his first wife, Vivien, for editorial feedback; her role in shaping the poem is most evident in “A Game of Chess.”⁵ When the poem was nearing completion, Pound offered spiteful congratulations to Eliot, writing in a letter on Jan. 24, 1922, “Complimenti, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies, and cogitating an excuse for always exuding my deformative secretions in my own stuff...Some day I shall lose my temper, blaspheme Flaubert, lie like a shit-arse and say ‘Art shd. embellish the umbilicus.’”⁶ The relationship between art and reproduction introduced in this statement is further elaborated upon in the poem “SAGE HOMME,” which immediately follows in the letter. In “SAGE HOMME,” Pound invokes long-standing tropes of creativity: the poet pregnant with verse and the intellectual midwife who aids the development of ideas (though the latter of these tropes, I am arguing, Pound revised for the modern era). The first four stanzas of “SAGE HOMME” read:

These are the Poems of Eliot
By the Uranian Muse begot;
A Man their Mother was,
A Muse their sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
From Nuptials thus doubly difficult?

If you must needs enquire
Know diligent Reader

That on each Occasion
Ezra performed the caesarean Operation.

E.P.

References to Pound as the midwife of *The Waste Land* or modernism in general are now common. While many of these references mention “SAGE HOMME” directly, the idea of Pound-as-midwife has become such a critical commonplace that scholars frequently make no mention of Pound’s poem. One of the better-known analyses of Pound and Eliot’s collaboration is that of Jean-Michel Rabaté. Of “SAGE HOMME,” Rabaté said that it “leaves no doubt as to the role Pound has chosen: he is only the midwife (‘Ezra performed the caesarean operation’ [sic]) and not the impregnator of his friend.”⁷ In saying that Pound is “only” the midwife, Rabaté is commenting on the frequently discussed homosexual overtones in the poem. Many critics, including Rabaté, Wayne Koestenbaum, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, have interrogated the gender and sexual politics of Pound and Eliot’s collaboration, as well as Pound’s arrogation of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth to the male poetic realm.⁸

I am less concerned here with the sexual politics of the poem and more with the slippage between “midwife” and “surgeon” manifest in Rabaté’s phrasing, which is quite common in discussions of *The Waste Land*’s composition. Mark Ford similarly conflates midwives and medical men when he states that Pound “figured himself as the male midwife...who had performed a ‘caesarean Operation’ on Eliot’s poem.”⁹ Michael K. Gold extends the medical metaphor in his discussion of Roger Vittoz, the Swiss doctor who treated Eliot for the nervous breakdown he suffered while writing the poem. Gold argues that Vittoz’s role in the composition of *The Waste Land* “is comparable to Ezra Pound’s famous ‘caesarean Operation.’ If Pound was the midwife of the poem, as Wayne Koestenbaum and others (including Pound himself) have

claimed, then Dr. Vittoz was the anesthesiologist on call during the delivery, guiding Eliot through the birthing process and slipping him an epidural when the pain became too great.”¹⁰ James E. Miller, Jr., even goes so far as to characterize Pound’s work as “using the editorial knife to bring to birth the poem published in 1922.”¹¹ The language of Gold and Miller places Pound’s editorial work firmly in the surgical theater, yet neither notes the disparity between this setting and the label “midwife.”¹²

That Pound’s role in the composition of *The Waste Land* should be so frequently discussed, and the difference between midwives and surgeons remain unnoticed for so long, is a telling reminder that the history of reproduction is not well known by scholars and the general public alike, despite this history being one that, quite literally, involves every human being. Only in the last 65 years or so has “women’s history” been considered a legitimate area of historical study in academia. As Jean H. Baker stated in 2004, “Women have always considered their past, often through genealogies, storytelling, oral histories, and even quilts. But in the last half-century women’s history in books and articles has come of age.”¹³ The social histories of pregnancy, childbirth, midwifery, and related subjects are slowly making their way into other fields, including literary criticism.¹⁴

Conversely, reproductive metaphors are well-known and frequently discussed in literary circles. More specifically, intellectual midwifery – both the practice and the terminology describing it – dates back at least to Socrates and has been used regularly by writers since.¹⁵ Some critics may argue, then, that use of the term “midwife” to describe Pound is less a reference to “SAGE HOMME” than a reference to Pound’s place in the tradition of intellectual midwives throughout literary history. Yet Pound was a poet obsessed with *le mot juste*, the “word that did justice to the thing.”¹⁶ Ignoring or glossing over the differences between midwife,

surgeon, and “sage homme” in favor of a stock metaphor presents a skewed picture of Pound’s self-assigned role in Anglo-American modernism.

I am sympathetic to DuPlessis’s argument that many male modernists, including Pound, were ambivalent about women’s increasing literary power, and that their manifestoes and non-fiction statements about writing are often more misogynistic than their poems written for publication, where far more nuance is present.¹⁷ I furthermore agree with Calvin Thomas when he characterizes the “conventional account” of modernist gender politics as “a portrait of the artist as a young (or old) misogynist.”¹⁸ In other words, pointing out Pound’s misogyny is hardly groundbreaking. Nevertheless, we have not yet rooted out the lingering effects of attitudes such as Pound’s in the critical conversation. The frequency of references to Pound as the midwife of *The Waste Land*, and the absence of discussion about actual midwives, is a case in point. I am not arguing that references to Pound-as-midwife are impelled by attitudes similar to Pound’s, but that the field of modernist literary scholarship arose in societies that were, and still are, organized around patriarchal values. Recognizing the reverberations of misogyny takes persistence, care, and attention.

Midwifery at the turn of the twentieth century

In the years preceding WWI, English midwives and doctors engaged in a professional dispute over licensing and registration of midwives. Midwives advocated for these regulations as a way to professionalize the field and improve the public’s perception of it.¹⁹ Midwives eventually prevailed with the passage of the Midwives Act of 1902, though not without vigorous opposition from a sizeable number of doctors. At this time, the term “doctor” referred to physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries, which professions banded together in 1858 as part of an

attempt to differentiate themselves from quacks, with whom they associated midwives, and to justify higher fees.²⁰ The medical specialization of obstetrics emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, a development that intensified the dispute between midwives and medical men. Since women were largely barred from medical schools, they were effectively barred from obstetrics.

Some doctors supported midwives in their licensure efforts, seeing the profession as one that relieved doctors of work requiring long and irregular hours. Many other doctors, however, viewed midwives as competition for work that was an important component in a financially viable career, particularly for young doctors who were still building their practices.²¹ The strongest opposition came from general practitioners and doctors in rural locations, where attending childbirth tended to be a larger share of doctors' practice than in urban locations.²² Some of the arguments against licensing midwives were self-serving, though not all. Many arguments against midwives stemmed from a genuine conviction that the English public would be better served if midwives were put out of business entirely. The reputation of midwives was quite poor at the turn of the century. People such as R.R. Rentoul, one of the most vocal critics, tried to leverage midwives' poor reputation to doctors' advantage. The general public tended to think of midwives as untrained, sloppy, immoral women similar to "Sairey Gamp" of Dickens' imagination.²³ In some regards, these characterizations were justified. Several prominent legal cases in the second half of the nineteenth-century concerned midwives who ran lying-in homes, places where women could conceal pregnancy and give birth in secret. As Jean Donnison explains, "the unwanted children of these women were then put out to nurse, many being placed with [women known as "baby-farmers"], under whose regime of neglect, starvation and slow poisoning they soon died."²⁴ In general, however, evidence suggests that midwives had better outcomes than medical men. The maternal mortality rate among women attended by

midwives was significantly lower than the national average, despite the fact that their clientele generally came from the lower socio-economic classes and were therefore more likely to suffer from malnutrition and over-work.²⁵

Midwives employed a number of strategies to improve their reputation. Among these strategies was a campaign to establish a government-backed system of licensing and registration based on similar models in place on the continent. No such system existed in England, though religious bodies had previously exerted loose control over midwives' social behaviors – requiring them to christen infants, to prevent false attribution of paternity, and so forth – but did not regulate their skills in any meaningful way.²⁶ Prominent midwives and even some nurses (including Florence Nightingale) pushed for registration for decades before seeing results. Efforts became more organized and vocal in the mid-1800s as women gained political organizing skills in women's rights campaigns.²⁷ The largest organizations representing midwives saw licensing and registration as essential to stamping out the stereotype of midwives as unprofessional and uneducated, and agitated for legislation to that effect throughout the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Although several proposals failed, midwives' persistence paid off and in 1902 they won an important victory. The Midwives Act of 1902 is a landmark piece of legislation that established the Central Midwives Board. The Board was to serve as a mechanism for training and certifying midwives; as Robert Stevens explains, “a woman could not call herself, nor practise as a midwife, unless she was certified under the Act.”²⁸ Practicing without certification was a criminal offense. The Central Midwives Board was responsible for creating exams to determine eligibility, issuing certifications, and maintaining the roll of certified midwives.²⁹

Throughout the years leading up to the 1902 Act, many doctors and organizations representing them worked to heighten the public's perception of the difference between doctors and midwives. Several influential doctors' organizations, such as the British Medical Association and the Obstetrical Society, objected to proposals to license and register midwives.³⁰ Arguments against the bill that would eventually become law often relied on hyperbole, fear-mongering, and paternalism. For instance, in an 1895 letter to the editor, M. Greenwood, M.D., argued that the proposed law would create a class of medical professionals who lacked the education and skills of doctors but, by virtue of the credentials, pregnant women would think of as equally trustworthy. In Greenwood's estimation, the bill would create an "Inferior Order" of midwives, "than which I can conceive no greater public evil."³¹ Robert Barnes, also a medical doctor, similarly argued that midwives lacked education, and implied that midwives were immoral, to boot. The bill, he said, would "fail in providing security against the many criminal malpractices to which pregnant women are exposed."³² Finally, George Brown, a member of the General Medical Council, argued that "the evil" caused by "ignorant and untrained midwives...is admitted by all members of the medical profession," and that "the vast majority of the profession throughout the country are opposed" to licensure and registration."³³ As these examples attest, much of the rhetoric stressed the assumed need to protect pregnant women from midwives' injurious presence.

This rhetoric was complemented by the simultaneous medicalization of pregnancy. Medicalization describes a rhetorical shift in language used by medical practitioners that, over time, expands "medical jurisdiction into the realms of other previously nonmedically defined problems."³⁴ With regard to pregnancy, an event traditionally thought to be normal and healthy was increasingly characterized as an illness requiring management by skilled medical

professionals. J.H. Keay, for instance, argued in the pages of the *British Medical Journal* in 1901 that doctors have a responsibility to attend poor women in labor, because no woman should have to “entrus[t] her life to an unskilled person” for lack of ability to pay a doctor’s fee.³⁵ Keay implies that all pregnancies are life-threatening events and, since Keay seems to assume doctors are uniformly better skilled, midwives are unfit to attend childbirths. Discourse such as this contributed to a significant change in labor and delivery trends. Whereas midwives had once attended all births, by 1909 medical men were attending half of all births in England.³⁶

Even the passage of the 1902 Act was a victory that came with many compromises. The board established by the Act to certify midwives was mostly comprised of medical men, and midwives were prohibited from becoming a majority of the membership.³⁷ Furthermore, the Midwives Act made it illegal for midwives to use instruments, such as forceps, or from attending complicated births. When midwives recognized complications, they were obliged to send for a doctor. In this regard, the law formalized longstanding tradition.³⁸ Donnison explains that this tradition arose in the thirteenth century with the creation of surgeons’ guilds: “under the guild system the right to use surgical instruments belonged officially only to the surgeon. The surgeon was therefore considered the appropriate person to send for in labours where natural delivery was not possible.” When surgeons joined forces with physicians and apothecaries in the aforementioned 1858 union, this right transferred to the new group known as doctors.³⁹ After the 1902 Act, midwives could not legally attend complicated births, much less perform caesarean operations.

Pound and midwifery

Was Pound aware of this dispute between midwives and medical men? A preponderance of evidence indicates he was. Pound moved from the United States to England in 1908, living in London until 1920.⁴⁰ During this period, newspapers regularly covered events related to continuing disputes between midwives and doctors. For example, in 1910 *The Times* of London ran several Letters to the Editor regarding matters of payment when midwives sent for doctors in complicated cases.⁴¹ The issue again came to public notice in 1913, when a medical-ethical society in Cheshunt launched a protest against midwives by refusing to respond to their emergency calls “without immediate payment of a higher fee than usual,” claiming that emergency calls resulted in many unpaid bills. A parturient woman died when her midwife called on three doctors and all refused because payment was not immediately given.⁴² Other issues related to the licensure dispute appeared in the news thereafter, including in 1918 when a law finally passed to clarify payment questions in emergency cases, placing the burden of responsibility on local authorities.⁴³

In addition to the salience of the dispute between midwives and doctors, several of Pound’s friendships were likely to have brought him into contact with contemporary pregnancy-related issues. Pound’s friendship with William Carlos Williams is one possible source of such information. Williams frequently attended births in his medical practice and occasionally mentioned these cases in letters to Pound.⁴⁴ More relevant still are H.D.’s two pregnancies. H.D. and Pound were, of course, young lovers and briefly engaged to be married. In 1915, H.D. endured a traumatic parturition that resulted in stillbirth. She was attended by a female obstetrician (one of the first) at the Professional Classes War Relief Council’s maternity clinic in London.⁴⁵ Significantly, H.D. did not blame the obstetrician for the stillbirth, and opted again for

an obstetrician when she gave birth to Perdita in 1919.⁴⁶ Pound was emotionally distraught over Perdita's birth.⁴⁷ He visited H.D. in the maternity ward and, in her recollection, Pound said, "my only real criticism is that this is not my child [while] pounding (*Pounding*)" on a wall with a walking stick.⁴⁸ Both Williams' obstetric experience and H.D.'s pregnancies are personal avenues by which Pound might have learned about differences between midwives and doctors.

Furthermore, in the years surrounding Pound's collaboration with Eliot, Pound's theories of art manifest awareness of key reproductive debates of the day. When describing the process of artistic creation, Pound used terminology drawn from biology, eugenics, and Malthusianism, demonstrating that he paid more than passing attention to these issues. For example, he called Marianne Moore a "Malthusian of the intellect,"⁴⁹ and he castigated the United States Comstock Act for "lump[ing] literature and instruments for abortion into one clause."⁵⁰ Pound also developed a theory of artistic creation in biological terms, albeit a controlled, sanitized biology. In 1914 he argued for the idea of the artist "as DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance, as CONCEIVING instead of merely observing and reflecting."⁵¹ And in the 1922 postscript to Remy de Gourmont's *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, Pound notoriously surmised that the brain is a "great clot of genital fluid" and London a "passive vulva" into which he was driving new poetic ideas.⁵² The salience of the fight between midwives and medical men, combined with Pound's use of language affiliated with reproductive debates, makes Pound's awareness of the dispute more than likely, and leads to the conclusion that he coined a term to align himself with doctors rather than midwives.

Pound's Metaphors of Creation

Contra Rabaté, then, “SAGE HOMME” leaves little doubt that Pound has chosen the role of surgeon, not midwife. The line “Ezra performed the caesarean Operation” is the most obvious evidence, characterizing his own editorial activities as those of a surgeon. This characterization makes sense in the context of a pregnancy Pound describes as “doubly difficult.” C-sections are done, then as now, for high-risk pregnancies. As such, Pound’s poem implies that Eliot’s delivery of *The Waste Land* would not have been a success without Pound’s intervention; the poem, Eliot-as-Poet, or both, would have metaphorically died without the operation. And Eliot was, indeed, on the verge of a nervous breakdown while composing the poem, particularly before giving the drafts to Pound for review.⁵³

Pound had ready alternatives to the term “sage homme,” though neither affords the same metaphoric possibilities. Both “man-midwife” and “accoucheur” were in use at the time as names for men who attended women in childbirth. Pound would have been aware of both terms as they appear in *Tristram Shandy*, a novel he considered required reading.⁵⁴ Instead of using “accoucheur” or “man-midwife,” however, Pound coined a term by adapting the French “sage femme.” This adaptation aligns with a familiar epistemology of embodiment. As Alicia Ostriker describes it, “the body is base and the mind is exalted. If anatomy is destiny, we all want to escape it....As to woman: woman in our mythology *is* the flesh.”⁵⁵ Pound aligns his editorial work with this epistemology by coining a term that simultaneously emphasizes intelligence (“sage”) and distances himself from a profession associated with women. He amplifies that connotation by discarding the part of the term with links to the body (“femme”), replacing it with a word long-associated with the mind (“homme”). The poem then confirms these associations by

connecting Pound with doctors, a profession, as we saw, that prided itself on knowledge, skill, and technical precision. These associations and connotations map directly onto the rhetoric employed by doctors in the licensure debates to discredit midwives and burnish their own reputations. Significantly, both Pound and Eliot referred to “SAGE HOMME” in the language of obstetrics rather than midwifery, with Eliot calling the poem Pound’s “caesarean operation” and Pound referring to it as “my obstetric effort.”⁵⁶ As mentioned earlier, obstetrics was a relatively new specialization open to medical men only.

Reading the first stanzas of “SAGE HOMME” through the lens of obstetrics opens new interpretive possibilities for the remainder of the poem.⁵⁷ Consider the following lines, which immediately follow Pound’s claim to have performed the operation:

Cauls and grave clothes he [Pound] brings,
 Fortune's outrageous stings,
 About which odour clings,
 Of putrifaction,
 Bleichstein's dank rotting clothes⁵⁸
 Affect the dainty nose,
 He speaks of common woes
 Deploring action

He writes of A.B.C.s.
 And flaxseed poultices,
 Observing fate’s hard decrees
 Sans satisfaction;
 Breeding of animals
 Humans and cannibals,
 But above all else of smells
 Without attraction

Vates cum fistula

E.P.

Critics typically translate “*Vates cum fistula*” as “poet/singer with a pan pipe” or “poet/singer with an ulcer” (*fistula* referring to a hole of some sort).⁵⁹ Pound ended an earlier collection, *A Lume Spento*, with a series of nine poems titled *Fistulae*. Unlike “SAGE HOMME,” the tone of

the *Fistulae* poems is youthful desire and joy.⁶⁰ The distinct differences in tone imply that a different approach to the word “fistula” in “SAGE HOMME” is in order.

The reproductive theme in the latter poem leads to an alternative translation, an obstetric fistula. Reading the line as such shows symmetry between the first section of the poem, which feminizes Eliot-as-poet, and these stanzas, which feminize Pound-as-poet. An obstetric fistula, also sometimes referred to as a vesico-vaginal fistula, is a medical condition that develops during childbirth, particularly prolonged labor. A hole torn in the vaginal wall leads to urinary and sometimes fecal incontinence. The condition is associated with strong, unpleasant smells, and renders women incapable of further childbearing.⁶¹ It is not an exaggeration to say that obstetric fistulae often destroyed women’s lives before successful methods of repair were discovered. John Dieffenbach, a German physician, explained the side effects in *The Lancet* in 1836:

The constant passage of the urine into the vagina must necessarily produce considerable irritation, and even inflammation...the skin assumes a bright-red colour, and is partially covered with [boils]. The patients complain of a most disagreeable burning and itching sensation, which often compels them to scratch themselves until the blood comes forth ...washing with cold water is of little avail, since the linen is quickly saturated with the fluid which escapes...The air in the chambers of such patients acts injuriously on their lungs, and wherever they go they taint the atmosphere...This unhappy accident breaks through all family ties...Some of these unhappy patients...would willingly resign their lives to get rid of the misery which surrounds them.⁶²

Sixteen years later, in 1852, the American physician J. Marion Sims published the results of his experiments on three enslaved women that led to the discovery of the first successful method for

surgical repair. This discovery resulted in world-wide fame for Sims and the now-dubious title as “the father of American gynaecology.”⁶³ Obstetric fistulae were thereafter repairable by surgeons. Between Pound’s emphasis on disagreeable smells and rotting fabrics, as well as the reproductive theme carried throughout “SAGE HOMME,” an obstetric fistula is a logical referent for the line *vates cum fistula*.⁶⁴

Read as such, the stanzas immediately preceding the *vates* line imply that Pound needs a surgeon to clean up and masculinize his poetry, just as he did to Eliot’s.⁶⁵ While the first section of “SAGE HOMME” celebrates Pound-as-editor, these lines focus on Pound’s own poetic output and find it lacking. As a result, the poem implies that Pound is a more successful surgeon than poet. He describes his own writing as animalistic, primitive, and unclean (“breeding of animals / Humans and cannibals / But above all else of smells / Without attraction”). His poetry, then, is characterized by traits diametrically opposed to the technical precision and intellectual mastery Pound associated with modern poetry. Descriptions of the body as leaky and animalistic have a long history of gendered associations extending far beyond Pound’s metaphors, but to which his metaphors hew quite closely. Indeed, Pound’s frequent use of bodily excretions, particularly urine, to denigrate women led Koestenbaum to argue that misogyny of this sort “probably served as common ground” for his friendship with Eliot and the lawyer/agent John Quinn, all three of whom used similar language in letters exchanged between one another.⁶⁶ To wit, Quinn said of Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap of *The Little Review*: “I think of female literary excrement; washy, urinacious menstruations.... These people seem to sweat urine and probably urinate sweat...by God! I don’t like the thought of women who seem to exude as well as bathe in piss, if not drink it, or each other’s.”⁶⁷ The parallels between Quinn’s rhetoric and the aforementioned

medical description of women suffering from obstetric fistulae – “wherever they go they taint the atmosphere” with the smell of urine – do not need belaboring.

Pound’s association of leakiness with femininity is consistent in this period of his career, even when he ascribes these traits to himself. A less visceral example can be found in a letter Pound wrote to Marianne Moore in 1919:

The female is a chaos ,
 the male
 is a fixed point of stupidity
 [...]
 You , my dear correspondent ,
 are a stabilized female ,
 I am a male who has attained the chaotic fluidities⁶⁸

As Ronald Bush explains, these metaphors align with “a theme that runs through Pound’s middle and later work: that ‘the female is a chaos,’ the male a principle of form and order.”⁶⁹ The latter, of course, he associated with modern poetry. Pound admired Moore’s poetry and, as such, the passage above is best read as praise for Moore’s masculine qualities. Pound’s gender-bending claim bears comparison with Virginia Woolf’s more famous one, the androgynous mind. Woolf, too, argues that female artists ideally have some masculine traits.⁷⁰ Yet, unlike Pound, Woolf argues that the reverse is also true, that male artists benefit from feminine traits. Pound, conversely, devalues feminine traits. Immediately after stating “the male / is a fixed point of stupidity,” he writes, “but only the female / can content itself with prolonged conversation / with but one sole other creature of its own sex and / of its own unavoidable specie / the male / is more

expansive.”⁷¹ That Pound laments the feminine traits he sees in himself is only made clearer in “SAGE HOMME.”

The reference to cauls in this poem (“cauls and grave clothes he brings”) continues the reproductive theme into the second section. Instead of Eliot, however, here Pound is the parturient poet, and his childbirth is far less successful. In rare instances, infants are born with a portion of the caul, the amniotic membrane that encloses fetuses in the womb, still attached. The caul is easily removed and generally harmless. The condition is often considered good luck.⁷² Nevertheless, “SAGE HOMME” connects cauls with the “outrageous stings” of “fortune,” which suggests it be read as another example of female leakiness, of biological material exceeding the boundaries of the body. That Pound carries with him “cauls and grave clothes” implies that he, like Eliot, recently gave birth, but that Pound’s childbirth experience was less successful than Eliot’s, resulting in an obstetric fistula and clothes that smell of death and decay. Given Pound’s and Eliot’s frequent use of smells and bodily excretions to describe women, these lines would have signaled to Eliot, the intended reader of “SAGE HOMME,” that Pound aligned his own poetry with that written by the literary women they so often maligned. This portrait of Pound-as-poet thus exemplifies what would have happened to Eliot if Pound-as-surgeon had not performed the caesarean section. Pound’s poetry, “SAGE HOMME” implies, needs a male surgeon to sanitize and modernize it as he did for Eliot’s.

Much of Pound’s metaphors of creation is posturing, part of the many outrageous personae Pound constructed throughout his life. My reading of “SAGE HOMME” is consistent with this posturing: in the first four stanzas, Pound adopts the role of the wise man, the trained, educated surgeon who performs a “caesarean Operation” on a feminized Eliot. In later stanzas, he becomes a leaky, uneducated, feminized writer who needs a surgeon to deliver his poetry.

Since midwives were, at the time, thought to be sloppy, unskilled, old-fashioned women, calling on an intellectual midwife to deliver his and Eliot's modern poetry would hardly serve the metaphorical purpose. In this context, the sanitation, intelligence, and skill then associated with surgeons made this profession a better fit.

Pound began experimenting with the old trope of intellectual midwifery at least three years prior to writing "SAGE HOMME." Images of childbirth and fertility suffuse Canto V, a poem first published in *The Dial* in 1921. Pound began the poem in 1915 but quickly abandoned this early draft, leaving it unfinished until 1919.⁷³ The version published in 1921 includes the line "Fracastor (lightning was midwife)."⁷⁴ Pound's 1954 revision of the poem makes the lightning allusion clearer: "Fracastor had Zeus for midwife, / Lightning served as his tweezers."⁷⁵ Girolamo Fracastoro was a sixteenth-century physician and poet whose mother was killed by lightning while holding the infant Fracastoro shortly after his birth.⁷⁶ Pound's lines imply that although Fracastoro's mother may have given birth to the physical infant, the birth of the artist/doctor was facilitated by Zeus. This dual role as artist/doctor is precisely that which I am arguing Pound claims for himself in "SAGE HOMME."

The connection between Pound and Fracastoro hinted at in Canto V solidifies with reference to a letter Pound wrote in 1916. In response to a fan, Pound composed a short autobiography in which he directly compares his life to Fracastoro's:

Born in Hailey, Idaho. First connection with vorticist movement during the blizzard of '87 when I came East, having decided that the position of Hailey was not sufficiently central for my activities – came East behind the first rotary snow plough [sic], the inventor of which vortex saved me from death by croup by feeding me with

lumps of sugar saturated with kerosene. (Parallels in the life of Fracastorius.) After that period, life gets too complicated to be treated coherently in a hurried epistle.⁷⁷

In this passage, Pound likens himself to a baby by implying that he was incapable of feeding himself and by reference to croup, an illness common in children. The connection of the snow plow to vorticism, in turn, implies that this journey facilitated the birth of Pound-as-poet just as lightning (here, kerosene) facilitated Fracastoro's birth. Science and technology implicitly figure into both passages, via the inventor of the snow plow and Fracastoro's profession.

Taken together, this letter and Canto V indicate that Pound understood his poetic career to be facilitated by science and technology, a point not surprising to those familiar with Pound's biography. The childbirth references in both this letter and Canto V suggest he was playing with metaphors for the birth of the artist at the same time that he was thinking through the relationship between poetry and science. Because midwives were in disrepute among the general public in the early decades of the twentieth century, the old trope of intellectual midwifery ill-fit Pound's idea of modern poetry as scientific, intellectual, and masculine. Whereas the intellectual midwifery metaphor might now connect writers to a respected profession, the opposite was true in 1922.

"Sage homme" offers a resolution to this metaphorical conundrum. The term connects Pound to the long tradition of intellectual midwives while eschewing associations with the profession of midwifery. The line stating that Pound performs the "caesarean Operation" emphasizes his connection with medical men, linking Pound's editorial work to surgeons, a profession whose exclusionary rhetoric was trying, with some success, to push female professionals out of business. At the time Pound was writing, then, labor and delivery was a realm in which male hegemony was on the rise, with increasing numbers of the general public

believing that attendance by a medical man led to better outcomes. Whereas women were slowly gaining rights and power elsewhere, in the literary realm no less than the political, in the realm of childbirth women were losing ground, paradoxical though it may seem. In the familiar binaries of mind/body, man/woman, literary production/physical reproduction, Pound distances himself from the second terms when it comes to his editorial role. And although he may have associated his unsuccessful poetry with the body and femininity, he associated Pound-as-editor with the mind and masculinity.

Pound, of course, made no secret of his desire to stem the unprecedented growth of women's power and prominence in literature, even attempting to start a magazine for which "no woman shall be allowed to write."⁷⁸ It is telling that Pound marked his editorial work as masculine, since this is a realm in which women's new-found power was particularly conspicuous. Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, castigated in the aforementioned letter as "women who seem to bathe in piss" by John Quinn, were undeniably influential in modern letters. At a time when Pound was financially strapped and keen to establish his reputation in literary circles, he found himself beholden to the judgment of women editors such as Dora Marsden of *The Freewoman* and Harriet Monroe of *Poetry*. Evidence leads to the conclusion that Pound felt an especial need to distance his editorial efforts from those of women. The language of ownership in childbirth parallels that of editorial work in a way that further illuminates Pound's rhetoric. The interventions of an editor usually go unnamed and unremarked in the text itself. Credit for the textual creation goes to the author. In childbirth, midwives typically say that the woman delivers the baby while the midwife assists. Credit for the delivery goes to the parturient person. Conversely, the language used in conjunction with doctors and surgeons asserts ownership over the childbirth process. Doctors are said to deliver the baby rather than the

woman. Pound similarly claims his stake in *The Waste Land* by insisting that “the printed Infancies result[ed]” from his operation on them. Eliot’s dedication of *The Waste Land* to Pound (“il miglior fabbro”), affirms Pound’s right to claim a degree of ownership over the poem.

Conclusions

In 1922, the language of surgery carried rhetorical force and the evidence indicates that Pound engaged that force for his literary movement. His desire to “masculinize” literature is consistent with doctors’ efforts to delegitimize midwives by emphasizing doctors’ supposedly superior training and knowledge. *Le mot juste* for Pound, therefore, is not “midwife.” Neither, however, is “sage homme” for critics committed to feminist principles. By replacing “femme” with “homme,” this term recapitulates the erasure of women that doctors sought to enact, without reference to those historical circumstances. “Surgeon” is a far more accurate reflection of Pound’s chosen role *and* of the historical moment. As the surgeon of *The Waste Land*, Pound literally cut into the body of the poem with his editorial revisions and metaphorically distanced himself from women’s work by figuring himself as a male medical professional. Recognizing the difference between “midwife,” “surgeon,” and “sage homme” acknowledges reproductive language as an important part of the rhetoric Pound used to discredit female authors.

At the same time, recognizing these differences highlights the importance of feminist attention to the metaphors, similes, and other figurative language that circulates in critical discourse. An instructive example can be found in L.D. Burnett’s recent survey of verbs that historians use to discuss their subjects. Burnett points out the gendered connotations that verbs carry, stating that historians frequently describe women’s intellectual endeavors with ones connected to the material world, such as “‘fashioned,’ ‘crafted,’ [and] ‘shaped.’”⁷⁹ These terms,

Burnett argues, are a reminder that the lives of women were often “relegated to the realm of materiality; to men alone belonged significant ideation.”⁸⁰

The term “midwife,” too, carries with it a gendered history that merits consideration in contexts beyond “SAGE HOMME.” How, for example, does the intellectual midwifery metaphor construct the relationship between mind and body, and how does it vary depending on context? Does it recapitulate stereotypes and reinforce biases? What of other metaphors for writing, editing, and creation? Critics have done this kind of feminist work on literary devices and figures of speech, notably Barbara Johnson on apostrophe and Susan Stanford Friedman on the childbirth metaphor. Yet the need for such work persists, in part because figurative language is easy to overlook when it’s a critical commonplace. For instance, in my 2013 article “Modernism, Monsters, and Margaret Sanger,” I compared Sanger to “the system builder, the modernist idea of the artist as an architect who builds frames to organize the chaos of modern life.”⁸¹ I concluded that Sanger’s system, the birth control movement in the United States, failed to control the complicated political and cultural climate of reproduction, just as other modernist system builders like Yeats, Eliot, and Pound could not make the center hold. Although my article addressed Sanger’s sometimes narcissistic dominance over the birth control movement in the United States, I did not consider the implications of my architecture metaphor. This metaphor suggests that Sanger was a lone figure, drawing out blueprints and raising the birth control movement from the ground up. In fact, Sanger built on decades of work done by other activists and medical workers, and relied on huge numbers of volunteers to drive the movement. The “system builder” was a metaphor I left unexamined. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in *Metaphors We Live By*, human conceptual systems are “fundamentally metaphorical in nature,” with the result that metaphors “govern our everyday functioning down to the most

mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.”⁸² For this reason, metaphors are a feminist concern. As this essay makes clear, modernism would benefit from further feminist consideration of its metaphors.

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Notes

1. Kenner, "The Waste Land," 7-12.
2. Jaffe notes briefly that Pound depicts himself as a surgeon rather than a midwife. Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, 127.

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3. As many feminist critics have discussed, Eliot's poem has much in common with Hope Mirrlees's *Paris* (1919), first published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press. Julia Briggs refers to *Paris* as "modernism's lost masterpiece," while Bruce Bailey, Melissa Boyde, and others have noted that Eliot likely read *Paris* prior to composing *The Waste Land*. See also Suzanne Henig's "Hope Mirrlees: Queen of Lud." Briggs, "Hope Mirrlees," 261.
 4. Ricks and McCue, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 549-554.
 5. See Sorensen Emery-Peck for a detailed analysis of Vivien Eliot's editorial influence on *The Waste Land*. Vivien's emendations are printed in *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, edited by Valerie Eliot, Tom's second wife. Valerie's efforts to recover and edit the drafts of the poem, which were long believed lost, contributed substantially to critical understanding of *The Waste Land*'s composition history. Pound states in the preface to the facsimile: "'The mystery of the missing manuscript' is now solved. Valerie Eliot has done a scholarly job which would have delighted her husband." Pound, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, ii.
 6. Ricks and McCue, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, 550.
 7. Rabate, *The Ghosts of Modernity*, 198.
 8. Koestenbaum, *Double Talk*, and DuPlessis, "Propounding Modernist Maleness."
 9. Ford, "Ezra Pound," par. 11.
 10. Gold, "The Expert Hand," 519.
 11. Miller, Jr., "T. S. Eliot's 'Uranian Muse,'" 4.
 12. After publication, Eliot responded to Conrad Aiken's praise of *The Waste Land* by sending him a clipping about menstruation from *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives' Journal* [often quoted as *The Midwives Gazette* following Aiken's mistaken memory], with various words underlined: "blood," "mucus," "shreds of mucus," "purulent offensive discharge." That Eliot would choose an article in *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives' Journal* as representative of *The Waste Land* is not as significant as it first seems, for he did not have to seek out the journal. As Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden explain, "TSE did not have to look far for his cutting: F&G [Faber & Gwyer, his employer] had just taken over publication of that periodical, so recent issues were to be found at their new offices." It is

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- therefore likely that Eliot saw the publication lying around at work, not that he sought it out. Eliot, *Letters of T.S. Eliot*, 43.
13. Baker, "Women's History," 66.
 14. Beginning in the 1990s, Susan Merrill Squier and Christina Hauck have produced, independently, some of the most insightful scholarship on modernism and the social history of reproduction. Hauck's "Through a Glass Darkly" and "Abortion and the Individual Talent" are particularly relevant here as they address reproductive discourse in *The Waste Land*. Beth Widmaier Capo's *Textual Contraception* and Layne Parish Craig's *When Sex Changed* focus on depictions of birth control in twentieth-century literature, as does my own *Conceived in Modernism*. Paul Peppis discusses birth control and sexology in "Rewriting Sex: Mina Loy, Marie Stopes, and Sexology." For compelling recent essays on pregnancy in modernist literature, see "Olive Moore's Headless Woman" by Jane Garrity, "'In the centre of a circle': Olive Moore's *Spleen* and Gestational Immigration," by Erin Kingsley, "Birth Giving, the Body, and the Racialized Other in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight*," also by Kingsley. Joyce E. Kelley discusses pregnancy as a travel trope in the chapter "'I am going on and on to the end of myself where something else begins': Travel, Pregnancy, and Modernism." On abortion in American literature, see Karen Weingarten's *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880–1940*. Daylanne K. English's *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* is an important study of reproduction and race.
 15. See, for instance, the comparison between idea development and childbirth in Plato's *Symposium*, 36-42.
 16. Moody, *Ezra Pound*, 278.
 17. DuPlessis, "Virile Thought," 22.
 18. Thomas, "Modernism and Masculinity," 259-60.
 19. The dispute between midwives and medical men has a long and complex history dating back to at least the thirteenth century. For more, see Donnison, Cahill, and Stacey.
 20. Cahill, "Male Appropriation," 336.
 21. Donnison, *Midwives and Medical Men*, 45.
 22. *Ibid.*, 120, 132.
 23. *Ibid.*, 102.

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24. Ibid., 80.
 25. Ibid., 189.
 26. Ibid., 6-7.
 27. Ibid., 65.
 28. Stevens, "The Midwives Act 1902, par. 4.
 29. Ibid., par. 9-10.
 30. Donnison, *Midwives and Medical Men*, 80-3.
 31. Greenwood, "Midwives Registration Bill," 13.
 32. Barnes, "The Registration Of Midwives," 14.
 33. Brown, "The Registration Of Midwives," 6.
 34. Gabe and Calnan, "The Limits of Medicine," 223.
 35. Keay, "Doctors and Midwives," 1506.
 36. Donnison, *Midwives and Medical Men*, 185. Although attendance by midwives in the first half of the twentieth century rose to as much as 60% at times, this increase is attributable to WWI, when large numbers of medical men were sent to the front, and to changes to insurance policies, particularly relating to the establishment of the Ministry of Health in 1919. Ibid., 192.
 37. Ibid., 178-9.
 38. McIntosh, *A Social History*, 29.
 39. Donnison, *Midwives and Medical Men*, 2.
 40. Moody, *Ezra Pound*, xiv-xv.
 41. Fremantle, "The Midwives Bill," 9.
 42. Donnison, *Midwives and Medical Men*, 185.
 43. McIntosh, *Social History*, 160.
 44. Pound and Williams, *Pound/Williams*.
 45. Caloyeras, *H.D.: The Politics and Poetics*, 6.
 46. Ibid., 62.
 47. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that these visits reignited their romantic relationship.
Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 300n16.
 48. Ibid., 27.
 49. Pound, "Doggerel," 364.

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50. Moody, *Ezra Pound*, 334. Carole R. McCann succinctly describes the Comstock Act:
 “Named for its author, Anthony Comstock, this 1873 amendment to the U.S. Postal Code prohibited the shipping of obscene materials on both public and private freight carriers. All information and devices that could ‘be used or applied for preventing conception’ were included among the obscene materials proscribed under the law.” McCann, *Birth Control Politics*, 23.
51. Moody, *Ezra Pound*, 257.
52. Pound, “Translator’s Postscript,” 206.
53. Koestenbaum discusses the gendered implications of Eliot suffering from hysteria, a condition closely associated with women. See especially *Double Talk*, 112-117.
54. Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 78, and Gioia, T., “The First Postmodern Novel,” par. 9.
55. Ostriker, “Body Language,” 248.
56. Ricks and McCue, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 553-554.
57. The remainder of the poem reads as follows. Qtd. in Koestenbaum, 122-3.

E.P. hopeless and unhelped

Enthroned in The marmorean skies
 His verse omits realities,
 Angelic hands with mother of pearl
 Retouch the strapping servant girl,

The barman is to blinded him
 Silenus bubbling at the brim, (or burbling)
 The glasses turn to chalices
 Is his fumbling analysis
 And holy hosts of hellenists
 Have numbed and honied his cervic cysts,
 Despite his hebrew eulogists.

Balls and balls and balls again
 Can not touch his fellow men.
 His foaming and abundant cream
 Has coated his world. The coat of a dream;
 Or say that the upjut of his sperm
 Has rendered his senses pachyderm

Grudge not the oyster his stiff saliva
 Envy not the diligent diver. et in aeternitate

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58. The line “Bleichstein’s dank rotting clothes” manifests Pound’s anti-Semitism, which Andrew Parker, Daniel Swift, and others have discussed at length.
59. See, for instance, Moody, *Ezra Pound*, 53, for pan pipe translation, and Ricks and McCue, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 551, for ulcer translation.
60. Moody, *Ezra Pound*, 53-4.
61. Morantz-Sanchez, *Conduct Unbecoming a Woman*, 93.
62. Dieffenbach, “On the Cure,” 757-8.
63. Morantz-Sanchez, *Conduct Unbecoming a Woman*, 94. As Morantz-Sanchez notes, Sims’s medical legacy needs to be considered in its historical context, which includes Sims’s operations on enslaved women, without anesthesia, and in situations that negated their ability to give informed consent. Moreover, the rest of Sims’s career was undistinguished, which raises questions about his ability to make such a discovery in the absence of “the racial and class system that made these women available to him as human guinea pigs.” The growing attention to this historical context led recently to a statue of Sims being relocated from Central Park to Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery, near Sims’s grave, where it will be placed on a lower pedestal that will include reference to this history. Morantz-Sanchez, 93-4, and Zhang, “The Surgeon,” par. 14.
64. J. Marion Sims’s grandson, John Allan Wyeth, was a poet who occupied some of the same circles as Pound. In 1926, Wyeth took up residence in Rapallo, Italy, where he almost certainly met Pound. Dana Gioia explains: “Although there is no documentary evidence that Wyeth knew Pound (who moved from Paris to Rapallo in 1924), the English-speaking community was so small that it would have been unlikely for them to have missed one another.” Gioia also states that “Wyeth family members have confirmed the friendship” with Pound. The timeline makes it impossible for Wyeth and his family connections to have exerted influence on Pound’s thinking in 1922, but it is possible they had an influence on Pound’s later reproductive rhetoric. Gioia, “The Unknown Soldier,” 256-7.
65. C-sections are today an important prevention measure for women likely to develop obstetric fistulae. I have not been able to determine if this recommendation was common in 1922. Wall, “Preventing Obstetric Fistulas,” p. 11.
66. Koestenbaum, *Double Talk*, 174.
67. *Ibid.*, 174.

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68. Pound, "Doggerel," 362.
 69. Bush, *The Genesis*, 353.
 70. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 94-103.
 71. Pound, "Doggerel," 362.
 72. Forbes, "The Social History," 495.
 73. Preda, *Cantos Project*, Canto V.
 74. Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 20.
 75. qtd. in Bacigalupo, "Safe with My Lynxes," 114.
 76. Terrell, *A Companion*, 21.
 77. Pound, *Letters*, 120.
 78. qtd. in Moody, *Ezra Pound*, 317.
 79. Burnett, "A Material World of Ideas," par. 3.
 80. *Ibid.*, par. 5.
 81. Wilson, "Modernism, Monsters, and Margaret Sanger," 456.
 82. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 3.