



Monstrosity, monument and multiplication: The lamenting Lady Margaret of Henneberg (and her 365 children) in Early Modern England

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Author(s)	Reid, Lindsay Ann
Publication Date	2014-08-28
Publisher	Cambria Press

Monstrosity, Monument and Multiplication:
“The Lamenting Lady” Margaret of Henneberg (and Her 365 Children)
in Early Modern England

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Abstract: Extraordinary and fantastical stories about Margaret of Henneberg, a cursed thirteenth-century Countess who had allegedly birthed 365 infants in one day, were popular with early modern English audiences. A range of printed sources from the early seventeenth century elaborate on the retributive nature of the haughty Dutch Countess’ reproductive destiny and indicate that the medieval woman’s supposed resting place in Loosduinen had even become a real life tourist attraction for curious British travelers of the era. As numerous early modern eyewitness accounts attest, in this village just outside The Hague one could find material evidence supposedly confirming the various tales about Countess Margaret and her monstrous brood of multiples. As it was developed and embellished in various early modern English versions, Countess Margaret’s story consistently displayed an ambivalence towards multiples and multiplication and also gave prominence to the idea that monumentality could serve as an indicator of credibility. A sustained exploration of how these issues of multiplication and monument inform a relevant c. 1620 ballad entitled “The Lamenting Lady” reveal a potent convergence of form and content: the broadside’s first-person lyrics about Countess Margaret’s hyperfertile reproductive plight simultaneously speak to the conditions under which “The Lamenting Lady” and other early modern ballads were historically disseminated and consumed.

In the fall of 1635, the English clergyman and theologian Thomas Bedford observed evidence of a “strange-birth” that had recently occurred near Plymouth, Devon. In a printed, seemingly authoritative eyewitness account entitled *A True and Certain Relation of a Strange-birth which was Borne at Stone-house in the Parish of Plimmouth*, Bedford would later describe the short-lived progeny of Mr. and Mrs. John Persons thus: “Two heads, and neckes, two backes, and sets of ribbes, foure armes and hands, foure thighes and legges: in a word, from head to heele (so farre as the eye could discerne) two compleat and perfect bodies, but concorporate and ioyned together from breast to belly, two in one” (4). A mere three days after the conjoined twins’ birth, Bedford appears to have officiated over their untimely funeral. Subsequently, the words preached by Bedford on the 23rd of October “at the interring of the sayd Birth” were appended (as “Notes

of a Sermon”) to his printed verification of the birth itself. Amongst the copious annotations that Bedford included in this printed version of his sermon is a long marginal digression devoted to the relevant topic of “Multiplication of severall births.” Though he asserts that such phenomena are exceptional—particularly in England’s “colder climat”—Bedford reminds his audience that higher order multiple births are well attested. “Aristotle, Pliny, and some Moderne Authors” affirm the existence of such cases and, furthermore, Bedford’s notes on this subject cite “that story of *Margaret*, Sister to Earle *Floris* the fourth” as a convincing instance of just such a “miracle, or miraculous accident.” It is this “miraculous” story of Countess Margaret of Henneberg that I take as the subject of this essay—a grotesque medieval tale of multiple birth so familiar to Bedford and his English audience that he refers to it as being “[n]otorious and in the mouth of every man” (12).

A staple character in medieval Dutch chronicle history, Countess Margaret of Henneberg also proved to be a figure of fascination for early modern English audiences. In this essay, after examining the various textual channels through which her story was disseminated, I proceed to discuss what I see as the most significant features of Countess Margaret’s early modern story: its uneasy treatment of multiplication and its strong emphasis on the role of monument as an indicator of credibility. The final section of this essay offers a detailed exploration of how these issues of multiplication and monument are manifested in a particular text, “The Lamenting Lady,” arguing for the convergence of form and content in this c. 1620 broadside ballad.

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While there is no doubt that Countess Margaret was indeed a thirteenth-century historical personage—and perhaps, if speculative modern diagnoses are to be believed, a woman who had actually experienced a hydatidiform mole (Rather 509-510)—the trajectory by which she became popularly remembered as the cursed mother of hundreds is less clear. Sensational legends, as

farfetched as they were widely believed, about Countess Margaret's aberrant reproductive capacities seem to have first made their mark on English culture around the turn of the seventeenth century. Probably the first account of Countess Margaret's story to have appeared in English print was an anecdote included in Edward Grimeston's 1608 *Generall Historie of the Netherlands*, itself a translation of Jean François Le Petit's earlier *Grande Chronique Ancienne et moderne de Hollande*. As Grimeston's work recounts:

Cont *Floris* had...one daughter called *Mathilde* (some say *Marguerite*) married to Cont *Herman* of Henneberg....To describe the monstrous child-birth or deliuerie of this Lady, you must vnderstand, that on a time this Contesse of Henneberg did see a poore widow woman begging her bread for Gods sake, hauing in eyther arme a child both which she had had at one birth: This poore woman crauing her almes, the Contesse reiected her with reprochfull words: whereupon this poore woman, hauing her heart full of discontent, for her bitter speeches, lifted vp her eyes to heauen, and said: O great and mightie God, I beseech thee for a testimonie of mine innocencie, that it will please thee to send vnto this Lady as many children as there be daies in the yeare. A while after this Contesse was big with child by her husband; and for her lying in, she went into Holland to see the Earle of Holland her nephew, lodging in the Abbey of religious women of Losdunen [i.e. Loosduinen]: whereas she grew so exceeding great, as the like was neuer seene. Her time being come, the friday before Palme-sunday, in the yeare 1276. she was deliuered of three hundred sixtie and fiue children, halfe sonnes and halfe daughters the odde one being found a Hermaphrodite, all complete and well fashioned with their little members: the which were layed in two basins and baptized by *Guidon*, Suffragan to the bishop of Vtrecht, who named the sonnes *Iohn* and the daughters *Elizabeth*. As soone as they had been baptized, they died all, and their mother with them. (52).

In the following year, Grimeston would again briefly mention this "strange & miraculous deliuerie..., the which is against all the rules of Physick and naturall Philosophy" in another Le Petit translation entitled *The Low-Country Common Wealth* (127). Shortly thereafter, Thomas Coryat's *Coryats Crudities* of 1611 provided audiences with a long account of this same tale, there marked as "the most monstrous and prodigious matter that was in any place of the whole world since the creation thereof" (646); in the 1615 edition of John Stow's *Annales*, edited and significantly expanded by Edmond Howes, Countess Margaret and her brood of multiples made yet another appearance; and a rendition was featured in John Molle's 1621 translation of Philipp

Camerarius' work, *The Living Librarie*. Notably, a common refrain amongst all of these texts is their repeated insistence on the tale's demonstrable veracity. "*Erasmus, Vives, and others have written of the strange deliverance*" asserts one text, and "of this you may reade more in *Guychardine, and manie other Authentique Authors*" assures a second (Molle 157; Stow 217). A third text, vouching the account "is so absolutely and undoubtedly true as nothing in the world more," claims not only that Countess Margaret's story may not only be "read...in a good author" and in "sundry ancient Chronicles of infallible certainty, both manuscript and printed," but also has been further verified by "many worthy travellers...that were the eie witnesses," individuals who had seen incontestable physical proof of the births (Coryat 647-48).

A number of small discrepancies exist between these various early seventeenth-century versions of Countess Margaret's story. Was the Countess 40 or 42 years old when this monstrous multiple birth occurred? Was the fateful year 1276 or 1314? Had Countess Margaret been woefully barren before the incident, and was it 363, 364, or 365 miniature babies that she gave birth to all at once? Nonetheless, despite these minor inconsistencies between versions, I wish to draw attention to two particular elements of Countess Margaret's story that are consistently emphasized across the relevant early seventeenth-century texts: the fraught dynamics of multiplication and the role that monument plays in establishing credibility.

To begin with the complex issue of how multiplication is represented in various versions of this tale, it is worth noting that Countess Margaret's story is one of infectious as well as prodigious reproduction. After all, it is as a direct consequence of Countess Margaret's uncharitable interaction with the beggar woman—herself burdened both physically and financially by multiple babies (most often described as twins, though the *Annales* claims they were quadruplets)—that Countess Margaret is punished in kind with an even more massive brood of her own. There is something seemingly contagious or transmissible about the multiples in this

story of poetic justice, and Countess Margaret's punishment is one of duplication and twinning in more than one sense. Not only does she become twinned with the beggar woman—duplicating her subjective experience and identifying with her by essentially sharing her plight as the mother of multiples—but Countess Margaret's own experience of hyperfertility is further intensified by the exponentially more excessive duplication of little Elizabeths and Johns that takes place in her own womb.

Most early modern English accounts tended to be more specific about the nature of what Grimeston had obliquely referred to as Countess Margaret's "reprochfull words" to the beggar woman, providing audiences with detailed explanations of the ways in which Countess Margaret had behaved badly towards her social inferior. Countess Margaret clearly subscribes to what appears to have been a widespread medieval superstition—seen elsewhere, for example, in Marie de France's *Le Fresne*—that "more than one childe at a byrth" reveals the mother must have been inseminated by "severall Fathers" (Stow 217). As one account puts it, Countess Margaret haughtily told the other woman "it was a thing against nature (in her opinion) for a woman that is honest to conceive by her husband two children of one birth; and therefore that this her deliverance had bewraied that she had lewdly abandoned herselfe to some others" (Molle 157). And another source has Countess Margaret boldly and maliciously taunting: "goe gette thou hence thou harlotte; thou shaly never make me beleeve. But those thy brattes had foure Fathers, thou insatiate strumpet" (Stow 217). In other words, convinced that the beggar's children can only be the result of heteropaternal superfecundation, Countess Margaret initially perceives the twin infants as compelling, tangible, and damning proof of another woman's adultery.

Though Countess Margaret is roundly punished for her ill treatment of the beggar woman, nonetheless, the tale as a whole evinces a tangible sense of uneasiness when it comes to issues of multiplication and twinning. While Countess Margaret's initial belief that the beggar woman's

multiples must be the product of licentious sexual behavior is proven to be faulty, even so, twins, quadruplets, and so on form an unusual and potentially suspect category of progeny—one that is fraught with semiotic uncertainty. Left unanswered by the tale is the question: if multiples do not confirm adultery, as Countess Margaret originally supposed, what *do* they mean? Several versions imply that there may be something subhuman about multiple births, which potentially confound the boundaries between animal and person. To this effect, Countess Margaret’s own brood is described more than once as being “the biggenesse of new hatched Chickens” (Stow 217). What is more, while God Himself intervenes to clear the beggar woman’s name, the nature of Countess Margaret’s divine castigation again reveals a greater ambivalence about multiples at the root of the tale. We might say that, even if twins/quadruplets are not damning proof of maternal misbehavior, neither are they a blessing to be wished for since hyperfecundity itself figures as an effective, unequivocally disagreeable form of punishment.

The second element of Countess Margaret’s story that is unfailingly emphasized throughout early seventeenth-century accounts is its emphasis on monument. The sources repeatedly tell us that “to this day there remaines a memorable monument of her in *Holland*” and that “two [baptismal] basins are yet to be seene in the said church of Losdunen, with their Epitaph both in Latine and Dutch” (Stow 217; Grimeston, *Generall Historie* 52). By the time that Bedford wrote his sermon in 1635, legends about this historical woman’s aberrant reproductive capacities had already drawn a host of curious British travelers to Loosduinen, and, later in the century, this site would go on to attract the likes of John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys. Though his account was not printed until 1617, Fynes Morison claimed to have visited the site decades earlier, in 1591: “when [he] staid at the Hage, [he] walked out in halfe an houres space to the village *Lausdune*, where [he] saw a wonderfull monument” including “two basens of brasse...in which the children...were baptized” (52). In a 1622 publication, James Howell similarly

describes visiting “a Church-Monument, where an Earl and a Lady are engraven with 365 Children about them, which were all delivered at one birth,” and he elaborates that “the Bason hangs in the Church which carried them to be Christned, and the Bishops Name who did it; and the Story of this Miracle, with the year and the day of the month mentioned” (14). Elsewhere, Coryat laments that he *almost* made it to the site in the course of his own continental travels, but “a certaine sinister chance” kept him from actually visiting (646). Nonetheless, the author claims to have “heard many worthy travellers report that were the eie witnesses of the matter,” and these truthful tourists assured him that one could find a “monument in the Church of the...Monastery of Laudun, which is to this day shewed...with a most memorable Latine inscription upon it, together with two brasen basons wherein all those infants were baptized” (647).

Repeatedly, these various accounts of Countess Margaret’s demise emphasize that the story could be verified: incontrovertible material evidence existed which affirmed the birth of the 365 miniscule children. This external, physical evidence seemed to substantiate the tale, locating it in a particularized temporal frame and geographical place. In a rather ironic twist, however, as Jan Bondeson reports in an extensive discussion of Countess Margaret’s tale, the authenticating basins and inscriptions so widely reported to have been seen by seventeenth-century British travelers were actually counterfeits. Bondeson explains, that, although from at least the late 1500s there had been a similar monument erected in memory of Countess Margaret, the original had been destroyed and replaced before the wave of seventeenth-century British tourists ever encountered the site:

In 1572, there was a civil war in Holland, between Philip II and the insurgent troops of William of Orange. The abbey of Loosduinen was demolished by the Spanish troops....When the adherents of William of Orange occupied Loosduinen, the old abbey was completely ruined, and the old wooden tablet, as well as the original basin, were among the items destroyed by iconoclasts. Some years later, when Loosduinen Abbey became a Protestant church, one of its first rectors, Reverend Jacobus Meursius, wanted to revive the Legend. He had a new wooden tablet made, with another text...in both Dutch

and Latin. Two copper basins, which the rector bought in a shop in Delft, were hung on each side of this inscription. (72)

Nonetheless, contemporary accounts relied upon the faulty logic that the existence of these Dutch monuments confirmed the historical truth of the tale.

* * *

Having established the narrative outlines and two most remarkable features of Countess Margaret's early modern story, at this juncture I want to return to the 1635 commentary of Bedford with which this essay began. More particularly, I am interested in Bedford's assertion that the tale of the medieval Countess' horrifying fecundity was "notorious and in the mouth of every man." His suggestion that this story was being transmitted orally, or by "mouth," is significant. For, in addition to the numerous printed accounts available in the early seventeenth-century, British audiences' widespread acquaintance with Countess Margaret's story no doubt also owed much to a relevant printed broadside ballad entitled "The Lamenting Lady." It is this c. 1620 ballad that I take as the focus of the remainder of this essay, and, bearing in mind the issues of multiplication and monument which I earlier discussed in relation to the tale, my approach to "The Lamenting Lady" centers around the various ways in which the ballad's "notorious" narrative content and the broadside medium in which it circulated as it passed through "the mouth of every man" converge to create new meanings.

"The Lamenting Lady" was printed in London by Henry Gosson, who, along with Francis Coules and John Wright, was one of the most prolific printers of ballads during the era. A first-person complaint delivered from the perspective of Countess Margaret herself, the song's lyrics are prefaced and contextualized by the following prose description:

for the wrongs done to her by a poore woman, for having two children at one burthen, [Countess Margaret] was by the hand of God most strangely punished, by sending her as many children at one birth, as there are daies in the yeare, in remembrance whereof, there

is now a monument builded in the Citty of *Lowdon*, as many English men now living in *Lowdon*, can truely testifie the same and hath seene it.

The broadside is also decorated with two purpose-made woodcuts. The first shows Countess Margaret standing in a doorway, gesticulating towards a woman who stands outside, holding a baby in the crook of each arm and bearing an empty basket. The second shows the Countess lying in bed following “Gods wondrous worke” with her hands clasped into a prayer-like position; a servant throws up her hands in despair and a basket full of tiny, dehumanized babies sits on a nearby table.

The lyrics of the two-part ballad proceeds to recount the traditional details of the story, told in the voice of Countess Margaret herself. Finding herself infertile and increasingly bitter, the narrator recalls her aggravation that even “people poore” were able to enjoy “those happy joyes” of parenthood that remained elusive to her. Predictably, Countess Margaret tells us how she took out these frustrations on “a woman poore / With two sweet children in her armes” who happened to come to her door. Infuriated that “Beggars [can] have what Ladies want,” the Countess recounts how she “most spightfully” hurled “A hundreth...taunting tearmes” at the woman, accusing the beggar:

Thou art some Strumpt sure I know,
and spend'st thy dayes in shame,
And stained sure thy marriage bed
with spots of black defame:
Else unto these two lovely babes
thou canst no mother be,
When I that live in greatest grace
no such content can see.

As per usual, the narrator of “The Lamenting Lady” finds herself roundly cursed by the offended woman: “heaven send thee such a number [of children] / At once, as dayes be in the yeare, / to make the world to wonder.” Afterwards, “a heavie hand of heaven, / revengd this womans woes,” and Countess Margaret does indeed give birth to a litter of tiny babies “all like new bred mice.”

These “poore creatures,” predictably “short-lived,” are “strangely buried” all together “in one grave” by the end of the Countess’ lament.

Given seventeenth-century Britain’s literary inheritances and tastes, it is hardly surprising that the story of Margaret suggested itself as apt ballad material. In terms of content, “The Lamenting Lady” is heavily indebted to a genre which often provided fodder for contemporary broadsides: *de casibus*-style complaints. Though the prototype for such lamentations was Giovanni Boccaccio’s fourteenth-century *De casibus virorum illustrium*, this genre had been widely popularized in late sixteenth-century England by the derivative *Mirror for Magistrates*, and by the early seventeenth century the genre’s influence was tangible in a multitude of confessional style first-person ballads. Such *de casibus* lamentations work as *exempla in malo* by featuring repentant first-person narrators who have been dramatically reduced from their former positions of power, influence, or wealth; these extended monologues typically have didactic overtones, with the narrators condemning the vices that lead to their various falls from grace. While their guilt is clearly established, the regret and sorrow of *de casibus* subjects mitigate their villainy, often making them into surprisingly sympathetic characters. The moralistic overtones “The Lamenting Lady” are typical of the *de casibus* genre, as its narrator—now the world-weary and remorseful voice of experience—warns her explicitly female audience to avoid the sin of “pampered pride.” She explicitly instructs her audience to forego “the joyes of worldly things.” Moreover, as in the *de casibus* tradition more generally, “The Lamenting Lady” carefully contrasts portraits of Margaret before and after her fall. Whereas she “once was lovely, faire, and young, / by nature sweet and kinde, / And had those joyes that might content / a gallant Ladies minde,” her vices and crimes against the beggar took a toll on both her “minde” and her formerly beautiful physical body:

My cheekes that were so lovely red,

of natures choycest dye:
Grew blacke and ugly to behould,
to every weeping eye.
And in my wombe distempered griefes,
so vext me day and night:
I sweld so bid that I appeared,
a strange and monstrous wight.

Additionally, “The Lamenting Lady” should be understood in relation to a second genre which was equally prevalent in the broadside ballads of the day: narratives of monstrous births. As Bedford’s description of Mr. and Mrs. John Persons’ conjoined twins would suggest, accounts of unusual, misshapen, or otherwise ‘monstrous’ children were highly vendible during the era, appearing most frequently in pamphlet or ballad form but also in learned tomes authored by physicians, theologians, and natural philosophers. Frequently, as in the case of “The Lamenting Lady,” such broadside tales of monstrous children involved stories about multiple births, as evidenced by titles such as “The True Discription of Two Monsterous Chyldren Borne at Herne in Kent” (STC 6774) or “The True Description of Two Monsterous Children, Laufully Begotten Betwene George Steuens and Margerie his Wife, and Borne in the Parish of Swanburne in Buckingham shyre” (STC 17803). Since ancient times, human abnormalities and oddities had been a source of fascination, and travel literature had long evinced the compulsion to interpret the existence of allegedly monstrous human races such as the dog-headed *cynocephali*. Nonetheless, there was a sharp and marked increase in monstrous birth accounts in the early modern era that has been linked to both religious and political circumstances. These accounts no doubt also proliferated and spread due to advances in technology; as Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan Landes have noted, developments in early modern print culture assisted in the era’s remarkable “dissemination of the monstrous—not merely as text but as printed image” (9).

Much has been written about British—and, indeed, other European—audiences’ seemingly insatiable taste for such true/‘true’ accounts of monstrosity and unusual births in the

early modern era, but perhaps a familiar Shakespearean example best illustrates how “The Lamenting Lady” coincides with this genre. Readers will recall the often-invoked peddler Autolycus, who unexpectedly arrives in Act 4 of *The Winter’s Tale* “sing[ing] several tunes faster than you’ll tell money” (4.4.184). A duly impressed servant reports that this balladmonger, whose “traffic is sheets” (4.3.23): “hath songs for man or woman, of all sizes. No milliner can so fit his customers with gloves” (4.4.190-91). Amongst his various musical wares, Autolycus touts “a very doleful” ballad that is purportedly “true, and but a month old” (4.4.253, 4.4.257). Containing a tale allegedly attested by the attendant midwife “one Mistress Tail-Porter, and five or six honest wives that were present” (4.4.259-60), Autolycus’ song, presented as a typical sample of circulating ballad fare, shares both the monstrous/multiple birth theme and the clearly moralistic vice/punishment dynamic later evidenced in “The Lamenting Lady”: the fanciful Shakespearean broadside tells of “how a usurer’s wife was brought to bed of *twenty money-bags at a burden*” (4.4.253-54; emphasis my own).

It is not only its associations with both *de casibus*-derived and monstrous birth ballads that made Countess Margaret’s story such an apt subject for the broadside ballad, however. Rather, as I go on to argue in the concluding sections of this essay, the narrative and thematic content of this story intersects in fascinating ways with the historical, material conditions surrounding the production and consumption of broadside ballads in early modern Britain. As such, it is worth briefly reflecting on the dissemination and consumption of broadside ballads during this era.

Although the ballad as a poetic form predated the advent of print culture in Britain, nonetheless, it was the press that enabled the pervasive material spread of the genre in the form of broadsides—so called due to their format. First appearing in the mid-sixteenth century, these broadside ballads were printed on single, unfolded sheets of paper. Although a number of formats

were possible, typically, as in the case of “The Lamenting Lady,” an early modern broadside ballad included a title, one or more woodcut illustrations, a note indicating the familiar tune to which the lyrics were meant to be sung, and the corresponding lyrical text, most often rendered in black letter font. The subjects of early modern ballads were diverse, and recent scholarly estimates of precise numbers printed during the period vary (due to the fact that many were not properly registered as well as the fact that broadsides, ephemeral by nature, tend to have a low rate of modern survival). Bruce R. Smith estimates that as many as 4,000 ballads had been published by the turn of the seventeenth century, while Tessa Watt argues for a minimum of 600,000 circulating ballads in this same timeframe (Smith, *Acoustic World* 168; Watt 11).

Regardless of the accuracy of these modern scholarly estimates, numerous early modern accounts attest to the ubiquity of broadside ballads in daily life by the turn of the seventeenth century. Satirist Thomas Nashe, for example, disparagingly complained of “our babbling Ballets...which every rednose Fidler hath at his fingers end, and every ignorant ale knight will breath foorth over the pottle, as soone as his braine waxeth Hote” (sig. Biv). Enjoyed by wide variety of audiences—by the literate and illiterate, by “great personages” and “poor husbandmen” alike (Bownde 242)—these omnipresent, relatively cheap, and physically versatile printed sheets fulfilled a number of functions beyond the obvious, serving as everything from wall decorations to convenient wrapping materials for parcels or edibles to toilet paper.

In thinking about the intersections between form and content in the case of “The Lamenting Lady,” I want to return to what I earlier identified as the two characteristic elements of Countess Margaret’s early modern story: that is, multiplication and monument. To begin with the issue of multiplication, I would note that the human reproduction described within the song’s lyrics also serves as an apt (and, in the early modern era, commonly invoked) metaphor for the mechanics of textual reproduction that produced printed broadside versions of “The Lamenting Lady.”

It has often been remarked that the language of sexual reproduction and the generative process overlapped significantly with discourses surrounding print technology in early modern Britain. We need only think, for example, of the gender-bending imagery of the first sonnet in *Astrophel and Stella*, where Philip Sidney is “great with child to speak, and helpless in [his] throes” (12); of Shakespeare’s rather self-effacing reference to *Venus and Adonis* the “first heir of [his] invention” in the poem’s famed dedication; or of Edmund Spenser’s anonymous instructions to his book in *The Shepheardes Calender*:

Goe little booke: thy selfe present,
As child whose parent is unkent:
.....
And asked, who thee forth did bring,
A shepheards swaine saye did thee sing,
.....
But if that any ask thy name,
Say thou wert base begot with blame:
For thy therof thou takest shame.
And when thou art past jeoparddee,
Come tell me, what was sayd of mee
And I will send more after thee.

The reversibility of such metaphors was also prevalent, and, to this effect, one might consider the innumerable instances in literature of the era where children posited as the “print” or “copy” of their parent. This early modern slippage between human and mechanical reproduction was, in some senses, nothing new; the metaphorical connections between the textual and the sexual were long standing. “Since ancient times,” as Margreta de Grazia writes, “reproductive mechanisms, particularly the signet and the wax, have provided a model for reproductive bodies and minds—for the conception and generation of ideas and children” (52). However, the advent of print culture and the introduction of moveable type further nuanced this extant discourse by introducing technology capable of seemingly unbounded repetition—a wholly new sort of textual hyperfecundity. De Grazia makes the relevant point: “A signet or stamp could produce only one insignia; the forme of

the press, however, made up of variable letters, could produce a virtually infinite number of impressions” (52). Like twin births (or those of higher order multiples), the products of the press were simultaneously, almost paradoxically, singular and yet double.

The multiple textual births facilitated by the mechanics of print and the attendant possibility of excessive and/or erroneous duplication perhaps contributed, in turn, to metaphors which linked textual and sexual reproduction more particularly with monstrous births. In the prefatory materials to the posthumously published *Arcadia*, for instance, Sidney publically confides to his sister, the Countess of Pembroke:

For my part, in very truth (as the cruel fathers among the Greeks were wont to do to the babes they would not foster) I could well find it in my heart to cast out in some desert of forgetfulness this child which I am loath to father. But you desired me to do it, and your desire to my heart is an absolute commandment. Now it is done only for you, only to you: if you keep it to yourself or to such friends who will weigh errors in the balance of goodwill, I hope, for the father’s sake, it will be pardoned, perchance made much of, though in itself it have deformities. . . . In sum, a young head, not so well staid as I would it were (and shall be when God will) having many, many fancies begotten in it, *if it had not been in some way delivered, would have grown a monster.* (687; emphasis my own)

What is more, that Countess Margaret’s own story could *itself* be adopted as an apt metaphor for monstrous, multitudinous textual (re)production is evidenced by Robert Waring’s “To the Memory of his deceased Friend, Mr William Cartwright,” which prefaced the posthumous 1651 collected edition of Cartwright’s *Comedies, Tragi-Comedies, With Other Poems*:

As the Dutch Lady, who at once did bear,
Numbers, not Births, to date each day i’ th’ year,
Grew barren by Encrease; and after all,
None could Her, Mother, or them Children, call.
So whilst All write, None judge, we multiply
So many Poems, and no Poetry.

To bring these metaphorical concerns back more directly to “The Lamenting Lady,” it is of particular relevance that, as vehicles of mass communication conducive to both somatic and material transmission, early modern broadside ballads participated equally in what are often

conceived as distinct oral and print cultures. While, in their printed forms, broadsides were sold in city shops, such ballads were also disseminated by itinerant chapmen, real-life versions of Shakespeare's previously mentioned Autolycus. As "The Lamenting Lady" indicates, for instance, it was intended "to be sold at [Gosson's] shop on London Bridge," conveniently located along the route taken by southbound chapmen and balladmongers exiting the city and bound for more rustic destinations (Watt 76). Though ballads were sold to both urban and rural customers in broadside format, their dissemination was complicated by the fact that a consumer did not necessarily *need* to purchase access to the ballad's lyrics. Rather, ballads underwent what Joy Wiltenburg has described as "two distinct, though overlapping, levels of consumption" since their lyrics could be easily memorized and disseminated orally, independent of the printed form in which they also appeared (1). Communicated through private and public performances, early modern ballads could be heard not only "in taverns & alehouses...of base resort," but also "in playes," and "in the streete," and they were a standard form of entertainment at festive gatherings such as "Christmasse diners and brideales" (Puttenham sig. M1). As objects, ballads were vendible, yet they also enjoyed an immaterial existence; the medium of the human voice as well as the technology of print enabled their reproduction.

We might say that broadside ballad circulation is, in and of itself, a sort of out-of-control form of textual reproduction, fuelled both by the press, with its often-remarked capability of producing infinite physical copies, and also by an oral culture in which lyrics could be learned, shared, sung, and even modified in seemingly irrepressible and disorderly ways. Just as Countess Margaret's story is a tale of unbridled multiplication, so is the form in which it appeared as "The Lamenting Lady." The spread of ballad lyrics from individual to individual mirrors the conceptual twinning of the beggar woman and Countess Margaret that occurs at the narrative level as the subjective experience of the former is almost infectiously transferred to and

intensified for the latter. It is thus that the form and content of “The Lamenting Lady” worked in tandem to provide meaning as the ballad spread to the point where, as Bedford reports, it was “in the mouth of every man.”

Finally, to return again to the second characteristic feature found in seventeenth-century accounts of Countess Margaret, I want to focus once more on the issue of monument. At the level of narrative content, “The Lamenting Lady,” like its sources and analogues, cites the existence of the objects in Loosduinen that had become early modern tourist attractions. As the aforementioned prefatory header to the ballad confirms, “many English men...can truely testifie” to having seen the authenticating “monuments,” and, within the ballad itself, Countess Margaret reminds her audience of how the “poore creatures in one grave / were strangely buried all,” going on to elaborate once more:

And on the grave where now [the 365 babies] lye
a monument still stands
To shew this wondrous hap of mine
unto all Christian lands

Such concerns with establishing physical evidence to substantiate the historical existence of Countess Margaret’s multitudinous progeny intersect, first of all, with the material production of new textual artifacts in the form of printed broadsides; a printed broadside ballad hung on the wall of an alehouse or private home could replicate the sense of monumentality invested in the famed inscriptions of Loosduinen. In addition, the ballad’s insistence on the link between monumentality and veracity resonates with the discourse surrounding early modern news ballads more generally. To return once more to Autolycus’ appearance in *The Winter’s Tale*, there is a well-known and humorous moment when the shepherdess Mopsa—perhaps naïvely, perhaps slyly—declares that she “love[s] a ballad in print...for then we are sure they are true” (4.4.251-52). Autolycus, too, vouches for the ‘truth’ of his ballads’ eccentric and unlikely stories. “Why

should I carry lies abroad?” the ballad-seller muses, swearing that the outlandish “ballad of a fish, that appeared upon the coast on Wednesday the four-score of April, forty thousand fathom above water, and sung this ballad” was duly authenticated by “Five justices’ hands...and witnesses more than my pack will hold” (4.4.260-61; 4.4.265-67; 4.4.272-73).

These concerns with establishing physical evidence and witnesses to substantiate the existence of Countess Margaret’s 365 progeny also intersect in fascinating ways with the dynamics of embodied performance. As Smith has convincingly argued, we must “consider ballads in relationship to the bodies of the people who sang them and heard them” (“Female Impersonation” 287); thus, in the case of “The Lamenting Lady,” singers relating a first-person narrative are themselves monumentalized as they begin:

Regard my griefe kinde Ladies all,
my heart now bleeding dyes,
And shewers of silver pearled teares
falls from my weeping eyes

This emphasis on physical, bodily description with which the ballad begins establishes a direct link between Countess Margaret and each singer voicing ‘her’ first-person lament. Every time that this ballad is sung, the successive bodies of various singers become, in turn, the authenticating physical conduits through which Countess Margaret’s lamenting words flow. We might say that Countess Margaret is, however momentarily, situated in the bodies and voices of the ballad’s performers who bewail her sins, repent her behavior, and beg the other women in her audience to prudently “regard” the moral of her story. Listeners and audience members witnessing each performance of Countess Margaret’s words are thereby figured as eyewitnesses, and they are given the further possibility of becoming participants/monuments by taking up the song with their own voices. Simultaneously anticipating the song’s wide circulation and

acknowledging Countess Margaret's notoriety, the ballad's lyrics prophetically comment: "...I in Countries farre and neere / a wonder thus be showne."

To conclude, as I have sought to demonstrate, the story of the thirteenth-century Countess Margaret of Henneberg as recounted in "The Lamenting Lady" represents an extraordinary coincidence of form and content. Not only do the song's lyrics speak to the seemingly uncontrollable duplication and the almost infectious proliferation of early modern broadside ballads, but the lyrics' concerns with substantiating the existence of Countess Margaret's 365 progeny also intersect with the material form of the printed broadside and the dynamics of embodied performance. In summation, with its dual emphases on multiplication and monumentality, Countess Margaret's narrative of deviant sexual reproduction metaphorically speaks to the conditions of textual reproduction through which broadside ballads were replicated during the early modern period.

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