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***Fertility,  
Folklore  
and the  
Reproductive  
Body***

***14 November 2023***

***1-day Symposium  
online and  
in-person at  
50 Fitzroy Street  
London W1T 5BT***



The conference is a collaboration between The Folklore Society and The Open University's *Reproductive Bodylore* project. The conference is supported by AHRC Grant Number AH/S011587/1

## **Fertility, Folklore and the Reproductive Body**

**14<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

### **Programme**

The conference is a collaboration between the Folklore Society and The Open University's 'Reproductive Bodylore' project. The conference is supported by AHRC Grant Number AH/S011587/1.

9.30-9.45	REGISTRATION	
9.45 – 10.00	WELCOME	Welcome and housekeeping: Dr Victoria Newton and Dr Caroline Oates
<b>Session 1</b>		<b>Chair: Prof. Richard Jenkins</b>
10.00-10.30	Paper 1 – in person	Dr Caroline Oates, The Folklore Society, UK <b>‘Where’s the baby?’ Antifertility and infanticide in a medieval werewolf romance.</b>
10.30-11.15	Paper 2 – in person	Dr Victoria Newton, Senior Research Fellow and Dr Mari Greenfield, Research Associate, The Open University, UK. <b>Reproductive Bodylore: the role of vernacular knowledge in contraceptive choices</b>
11.15-11.45	Paper 3 – in person	Mary Stratman, MLitt Student, Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen. <b>‘She was really with women, with me that day’: The Importance of Relational Continuity as Women Travel Through the Liminal Maternity Journey.</b>
11.45-12.00	BREAK	
<b>Session 2</b>		<b>Chair: Sophia Kingshill</b>
12.00-12.30	Paper 4 – online	Dr Pallabi Borah, Assistant Professor, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India <b>Folk Beliefs of Fertility and Menstruation: Narratives from Northeast India</b>
12.30-13.00	Paper 5 – online	Anna A. Lazareva, Independent Researcher <b>Plot structures of women’s stories about dreams predicting childbirth as reflections of folk beliefs about the soul (Eastern Slavic cultures)</b>
13.00-14.00	LUNCH	
<b>Session 3</b>		<b>Chair: Dr Victoria Newton</b>
14.00-14.30	Paper 6 – in person	Dr Claire Collins, Reading University Library, UK. <b>The use of plants and precious stones for the management and treatment of pregnancy and childbirth in late medieval England</b>
14.30-15.00	Paper 7 – online	Olivia Langford, PhD Student, The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, UK. <b>Milk, urine, earth: Reproductive care and female community within the Royal College of Physicians’ Early Modern Receipt Books</b>
15.00-15.30	Paper 8 – online	Dr Megan Kenny, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Sheffield Hallam University, UK. <b>Like Pulling Teeth: The History and Contemporary Relevance of Vagina Dentata Folklore</b>
15.30-15.45	BREAK	
<b>Session 4</b>		<b>Chair: Dr Caroline Oates</b>
15.45-16.15	Paper 9 – online	Dulce Morgado Neves, Ana Rita Monteiro and Mário JDS Santos, CIES-Iscte, Portugal <b>Motherhood and Folk Knowledge in Portugal: Narratives, Superstitions, and Beliefs</b>
16.15-16.45	Paper 10 – online	Sarah Shultz, Folk Studies & Anthropology Department at Western Kentucky University. <b>Salty for a Boy, Sweet for a Girl: Folk Belief About Pregnancy, Motherhood, and the Body</b>
16.45 – 17.00	CLOSE	Closing remarks: Prof. Richard Jenkins

**Dr Caroline Oates, The Folklore Society, UK**

***'Where's the baby?' Antifertility and infanticide in a medieval werewolf romance.***

In the Medieval Latin romance Arthur and Gorlagon, the werewolf is presented as a victim of his prying wife's spite, and then framed as a baby-killer by the adulterous wife of another man who helps him. But the absence of a baby where one ought to be draws attention to the werewolf figure as a threat to women's fertility and children.

*Caroline Oates is Librarian of The Folklore Society and read just about everything on shape-shifting in the society's collection during the research for her PhD thesis 'Trials of Werewolves in the Franche-Comté in the Early Modern Period'.*

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**Dr Victoria Newton and Dr Mari Greenfield, The Open University, UK**

***Reproductive Bodylore: vernacular knowledge and contraceptive choices.***

A lot of what we know about the body is communicated informally, through conversations with friends, with family, and with our wider social network. Informal narratives about contraception cross several folkloric genres - personal experience narratives, popular belief, contemporary legend and 'friend of a friend' stories. These narratives are important because they can reveal much about everyday understandings of health and the body, including perceived risk and risk-behaviours. The Reproductive Bodylore project explores how vernacular knowledge influences contraceptive choices and mediates experiences of reproductive control. Our presentation reports on the findings from two datasets:

1) a qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) of over 140 transcripts from five UK research studies on women's contraceptive use and experiences of reproductive control undertaken between 2010 and 2016. The QSA was completed between May and November 2020;

2) participatory research with 18 volunteer researchers who conducted 47 qualitative interviews with friends and family members using a topic guide developed from the findings of the QSA. These friends-and-family interviews were carried out in 2021 and analysed thematically.

The Bodylore project culminated in a large public engagement exhibition in London in October 2023. We conclude our talk with a short discussion about engaging the public with our research.

*Victoria Newton is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care at The Open University (UK) where she leads the Reproduction, Sexualities and Sexual Health Research Group. Victoria is a qualitative researcher in sexual and reproductive health. Her research interests span the reproductive life course and include menstruation, contraception and fertility knowledge. A graduate of the University of Sheffield, Victoria undertook a Masters in Folklore and Cultural Tradition from NATCECT in 2006 and was awarded a PhD in Sociological Studies in 2011. Her PhD explored everyday knowledge and belief about menstruation.*

*Mari Greenfield is a Research Associate in the School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care at The Open University (UK). Mari works across the disciplines of health, sociology and psychology. Her*

research interests include participatory research, health inequalities, marginalised groups and perinatal wellbeing. She has a specific interest in the reproductive experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

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**Mary Stratman, MLitt Student, Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen.**

***'She was really with women, with me that day': The Importance of Relational Continuity as Women Travel Through the Liminal Maternity Journey***

The journey to motherhood can be sacred, daunting, wonderful, or even traumatic: as generations of women can and have attested to. The topic of neglect surrounding women's mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing while travelling through the liminal phases and rites of passage of pregnancy, labour, and childbirth enroute to motherhood is not a new concept; neither are the discussions about lack of community and relationship.

This is the very topic my postgraduate dissertation centres on. I specifically look at the importance of consistency in relationship for the mother with a person who accompanies her through the liminal phases of pregnancy, labour, childbirth, and early motherhood. I started by asking the questions: 'is the relationship between mother and midwife important?'; 'does the midwife act as guide to the mother through liminality?'; and 'is it important that the midwife role is fulfilled by a female?' The answers from contributors were varied and complex, and quickly changed and honed my topic into something less focused on gender, and more focused on authenticity and continuity of relationship.

My fieldwork has been Scotland-based, consisting so far of interviewing two mothers, three health visitors, two midwives, and two doulas, while also pulling on my own recent experience of giving birth in April. Although my contributors are divided into categories based on occupation, all of them are mothers. Through my fieldwork and discussions with these mothers, I have started to understand the importance of consistency and authenticity in relationship for the woman navigating liminality- having a direct impact on their emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. No matter if a mother has just had her first child, or five, the need for community and relationship throughout pregnancy and through early motherhood remains consistently important.

***Mary Stratman*** is a postgraduate student at the Elphinstone Institute studying Folklore and Ethnology. Mary moved to Scotland in September of 2022 and is from Idaho, United States. Mary has a background in Spanish culture and literature, English literature, and Secondary Education. Mary's MLitt dissertation surrounds relationship and community for mothers pre- and postnatally.

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**Dr Pallabi Borah, Assistant Professor, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India**

***Folk Beliefs of Fertility and Menstruation: Narratives from Northeast India***

This paper is an attempt to discuss the folk beliefs, rituals, and narratives associated with fertility and menstruation that are prevalent in Assam, a part of Northeast India. This region is endowed with bewildering racial and cultural variety with twenty-four indigenous tribal communities that can arguably be referred to as a folklorist's paradise.

Celebration of the menstruation of Goddess Kamakhya, the most important and sacred local deity is a very significant annual ritual in Assam. The Kamakhya temple, situated on the Nilachal Hill, remains

closed for three days in the last week of June as it is believed that Goddess Kamakhya menstruates during that period and an extravagant festival is held.

The Assamese community also performs an elaborate ritual when a girl attains puberty that incorporates certain taboos and strictures for her. However, the menstruating girl or a woman is considered impure in contrast to the tradition where the menstruating goddess is worshipped.

Again, there are ceremonies of some exotic rituals associated with fertility. Bas puja is a fertility ceremony centering on a bamboo that is considered to be a phallic symbol. The narrative songs sung at this ceremony tell stories about the birth of different species of bamboo, wild hemp, cotton, flower, and so on. The rites and songs of the Bas-puja are the men's preserve and many non-narrative songs are erotic in content and some even verge on the obscene. The Hudum Puja (to appease the rain god Hudum Deo) is performed by the women at the time of drought with highly secret and exclusive rituals that include not only the singing of obscene songs but even erotic dances in the nude in a bid to invoke the god. Similarly, many other tribes have social folk customs and rituals of faiths associating fertility, childbirth, menstruation, and reproduction.

***Pallabi Borah*** teaches Folklore at Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India. A postgraduate and PhD in geography and M. Phil in folklore, her areas of interest include folk narratives, social geography, and gender studies. She has presented papers at many national and international conferences, edited three books, and has a number of research papers published in national and international journals and books to her credit. She has guided thirteen M Phil scholars and currently eight Ph D scholars are working under her guidance.

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**Dr Anna A. Lazareva, Independent Researcher**

***Plot structures of women's stories about dreams predicting childbirth as reflections of folk beliefs about the soul (Eastern Slavic cultures)***

My report is devoted to the analysis of women's oral narratives about prophetic dreams predicting the birth of a baby. I used my field materials, recorded in the Poltava region of Ukraine during 2012-2018 (the majority of my informants were women having children, so many of them reported about dreams, predicting pregnancy/birth of their child) as well as archival and published texts collected by folklorists in Eastern Slavic regions during the last century.

Folklorists describing the tradition of dream interpretation tend to regard separate symbols (isolated from a plot) like fish or mushrooms (so-called "oral dream books"). In my research, I considered whole dream plots, implementing the structural-semiotic analysis of the narratives. That allowed me to reduce the variety of prophetic dream plots to repetitive plot structures and present the system of invariants in the form of a motif index.

Comparing the structures of dream plots, signifying the birth of a child, with structures of dream plots foreshadowing the death of a family member, I noticed parallelism between them. The structures of dreams, predicting birth, can be viewed as inverted versions of plot structures of the dreams, regarded as predictions of someone's death. For example, in the first ones, a supernatural creature (an angel, an ancestor, a woman in the white dress, etc.) can give something to the dreamer (a child, an animal, or an object). On the contrary, in the dreams foreshadowing death, the creature often takes something away from the dreamer. In my report, I am going to show how the narrative structures of dreams predicting the birth of a baby (regarded on the background of plot structures of other narratives about prophetic dreams) represent folk notions about the soul and

relationships between our world and the great beyond, filled with angels, ancestors, and unborn souls.

**Anna Lazareva** is an independent researcher, social anthropologist and folklorist, Ph.D. in folklore studies. Her main research areas are folklore of the Eastern Slavs, folklore semiotic, narrative grammar of folklore texts, folkloric elements in personal experience narratives, stories about prophetic dreams, and symbolism of dreams. During 2019-2021 she worked as a university lecturer at the Center for Social Anthropology of the Russian state university for the Humanities. In 2020, she developed a method of revealing, describing, and systematizing invariants in the framework of the project "Creation of a Type and Motif Index of the Folk Tales about Dreams (East Slavonic Material of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries)" supported by a university grant. She has written a monograph and over 45 publications devoted to revealing story schemas of folklore dream narratives, their variations, transformations, and personal usage of such schemas during the process of discussing and interpreting dreams.

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**Dr Claire Collins, Reading University Library, UK.**

***The use of plants and precious stones for the management and treatment of pregnancy and childbirth in late medieval England***

In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, people relied on a variety of practices for the management and treatment of pregnancy and childbirth, including the use of prayers, charms, medicinal plants, precious stones, and practical medical interventions. This paper will focus on the use of plants and precious stones, by examining a selection of Middle English herbals and lapidaries. Plants and stones were used both prophylactically and curatively, with applications including easing childbirth and aiding the delivery of the baby, as well as fertility and contraception.

The medicinal use of plants and stones was undoubtedly a part of oral and popular culture in late medieval England, but it is difficult to find evidence for this in the textual sources. This knowledge was, however, also part of learned culture, contained in herbals, lapidaries, and other encyclopaedic works. Though these texts themselves were mostly owned by only a small section of society – usually male, educated, and wealthy – this paper will suggest that the information contained within their pages represents popular knowledge and practice in wider society. This is especially likely for Middle English herbals and lapidaries, composed or translated contemporaneously and in the vernacular. These texts were accessible to those who could not read Latin, and better represented current knowledge and practice - though usually copied from older works, those who translated and adapted these herbals and lapidaries from the older texts often omitted and added material in line with contemporary knowledge. The paper will also suggest that consideration of the medieval uses of these plants and stones may contribute to our understanding of plant and stone lore in the post-medieval period.

**Claire Collins** completed her PhD at the University of Reading in 2022. Her doctoral thesis, 'Pregnancy and childbirth in late medieval English vernacular culture', examined an interdisciplinary range of Middle English texts to present an improved understanding of pregnancy and childbirth in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. She currently works at the University of Reading Library.

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**Olivia Langford, PhD Student, The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, UK.**

***Milk, urine, earth: Reproductive care and female community within the Royal College of Physicians' Early Modern Receipt Books***

Gail Kern Paster has described how early modern society 'increasingly sought to regulate and regularize a subject's experience of his/her own body and relations with the bodies of others.' (The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England, p. 164). This process of regulation was never more rigorously attempted than when dealing with the maternal body, which became a source of medical debate, intrigue and even eroticism within Europe in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. This can be attributed in part to an increase in midwifery treatises being published, predominantly by men, that attempted to categorise the reproductive body and control menstruating, pregnant and post-natal women's' behaviour.

At the same time, there appeared a prevalence of manuscripts now known as receipt books, usually written by a number of different women or at least contributed to by women within a domestic unit, that included medical treatments as well as culinary receipts. Within such a collection of these receipt books held at the Royal College of Physicians can be found examples of reproductive treatments. This paper will present my research on a number of early modern receipt books, with a particular focus on the use of breast milk, urine, the earth and other magical rituals that were derived from, or involved interaction with, the maternal body. I will aim to show how through such treatments we can gain a sense of the physiological connections between early modern women and how such methods resisted the attempts to regulate a woman's experience of her own body and her interactions with those around her.

***Olivia Langford*** is a PhD student at The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, fully funded by the AHRC Midlands4Cities. *Olivia's research considers the perception of non-English maternity by European travellers and Shakespeare's dramatic representation of these mothers onstage.*

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**Dr Megan Kenny, Sheffield Hallam University, UK.**

***Like Pulling Teeth: The History and Contemporary Relevance of Vagina Dentata Folklore***

Vagina dentata describes a folktale in which a vagina is said to contain teeth. Folklore around vagina dentata has endured throughout human history and is prevalent in cultures across the globe. This folklore is often associated with fears of female sexuality and 'castration anxiety', with the implication that sexual intercourse will result in injury and emasculation for men. Thus, these tales often focus on the violent destruction of these teeth. However, in some cultures the toothed vagina is a symbol of death, acting as an inverse expression of the 'life-giving' abilities of women. Regardless of the ultimate goal of these teeth, whether they seek to kill, or emasculate, the corresponding goal of the male 'hero' is fixed on destroying them. This demonstrates that this folklore, whether focused on desire or death, links heavily to perceived dangers of women's sexuality and the role of men in rendering this nonthreatening, through the 'heroic' act of pulling the teeth, thus removing the danger they represent and returning to the patriarchal status quo. This paper will explore the prevalence of this folklore across different cultures, and its role in gender-based violence; identifying that, despite the folklore acting as an apparent rape deterrent, it has often been used as an excuse for violence towards women. This paper will also explore this folklore's role in contemporary society using the comedy-horror film *Teeth* (2007) as a case study. Finally, this

paper will explore how this folklore has inspired real cases of toothed vaginas, namely the existence of anti-rape devices including Rape-aXe.

**Megan Kenny** is a writer, researcher and Senior Lecturer in Psychology. Megan's research interests centre on folklore and paranormal belief, the impact of horror cinema and positive representations of sex and sexuality.

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**Dr Dulce Morgado Neves, Ana Rita Monteiro and Dr Mário JDS Santos, CIES-Iscte, Portugal.**

### ***Motherhood and Folk Knowledge in Portugal: Narratives, Superstitions, and Beliefs***

This proposal seeks to delve into folk knowledge and beliefs pertaining to motherhood, with a specific focus on the gestation and postpartum period, drawing on a sociological approach conducted within the context of ABRIL MATER: Motherhood and Childbirth before and after the Revolution – a project focused on the impacts of the Portuguese revolution in 1974 on maternal experiences and portrayals.

Folk knowledge has deep historical roots, with narratives passed down from one generation to another, serving as a mode of instruction. The culturally diverse nature of this subject makes exploring the Portuguese collective consciousness particularly intriguing, providing insights into enduring individuals' motivations, beliefs, and behaviors.

Based on literature review and documental analysis, this presentation intends to explore how motherhood and its associated beliefs have undergone diverse transformations over time, persistently evolving rather than entirely vanishing. Furthermore, our aim is to bring to light a series of beliefs, discussing how they shaped practices and norms regarding motherhood and the gestational period, particularly in the Portuguese 20th century.

Gender also emerges as a pivotal factor after birth, influencing childcare rituals. As such, we will address gender roles as well as the status of the mother as the ultimate nurturer of children. Actually, in collective narratives and imaginary, the mother's influence and the knowledge she imparts play a significant role in the child's destiny, making her accountable for any deviations from what is perceived as being the norm.

Finally, this presentation intends to highlight certain correlations between popular beliefs and reality. While individuals may lack a scientific explanation for specific events, narratives stemming from past experiences and accounts have resulted in the development of folk knowledge. This accumulated knowledge has influenced maternal practices and traditions passed down through generations, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of motherhood and its significance in the Portuguese society.

**Dulce Morgado Neves** is an integrated researcher at the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES-Iscte) and an invited Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology of Iscte-IUL. She holds a PhD in Sociology (Iscte-IUL - 2013) and her main research interests are related to childbirth, gender, parenting and social movements. Currently she coordinates the project "ABRIL MATER: motherhood and childbirth before and after the Revolution" and co-coordinates the Laboratory of Social Studies in Childbirth – *nascer.pt*

**Ana Rita Monteiro** is a sociologist, having completed her Bachelor's degree at ISCTE-IUL (2022). Currently, she is pursuing a Master's degree in Communication, Culture, and Information Technology at the same institution. Currently, she participates, as research assistant, in the scientific "ABRIL



*MATER: motherhood and childbirth before and after the Revolution," conducted at the Center for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES-Iscte).*

**Mário JDS Santos** is Integrated Researcher at CIES-Iscte, the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology. He is a health sociologist specialized in qualitative methodologies. He holds a degree in Nursing (2007), an MSc in Health, Medicine and Society (2012), and PhD in Sociology (2020). He coordinates the Laboratory for Social Studies in Childbirth - *nascer.pt*

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**Dr Sarah Shultz, Folk Studies & Anthropology Department at Western Kentucky University, USA.**

***Salty for a Boy, Sweet for a Girl: Folk Belief About Pregnancy, Motherhood, and the Body***

This presentation will analyze folk beliefs surrounding pregnancy cravings: where they come from and what they mean for characteristics of the baby and health of the mother. I will present an analysis of interviews with eight North American women who have been pregnant, covering a range of experiences in terms of age and stage of life during pregnancy. This paper will explore what interviewees had heard about pregnancy cravings before getting pregnant, their experience of cravings and food aversions while pregnant, and what they had heard or believed about the meanings of these cravings or aversions. Were specific cravings or food aversions believed to indicate the sex of the baby? What traditional understandings about health and nutrition for both baby and pregnant person are reflected in these beliefs about food cravings? I also ask participants about their beliefs about ownership of these cravings or aversions: did they understand these preferences as their own, or as belonging to their unborn children? In exploring these traditional beliefs around food cravings and aversions from people who were pregnant both recently and in previous decades, this presentation will trace changing attitudes towards health, gender, and women's sense of ownership of their bodies over time.

**Sarah Shultz** recently received a Ph.D. in Folklore from the Memorial University in Newfoundland in Canada. Sarah's research focuses broadly on the connections between food and personal experience narratives in the creation of individual and group identities. Sarah's dissertation, "*Spice, Culinary Tourism, and Expressions of Whiteness in London, England and Nashville, Tennessee*", explores spicy food and the construction and performance of racial identity in the context of the tourism industry using curry in east London and hot chicken in Nashville as case studies. Sarah is currently a part-time instructor in the Folk Studies & Anthropology Department at Western Kentucky University, teaching undergraduate courses in Foodways and Supernatural Folklore.

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