Introduction: Conversations on Abortion Rights and Bodily Autonomy in the Eighteenth Century and Today

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Recommended Citation
http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.13.2.1386
Available at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss2/13

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Abstract
This piece serves as an introduction to the discussions of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, revised from roundtable presentations held at ASECS 2023. This collection of essays contributes to the resounding responses of frustration and anger toward the overturning of Roe v. Wade. The collection was written and presented by eighteenth-century scholars who have a comprehensive knowledge of the eighteenth-century legal, social, and medical histories that center around reproductive rights and bodily autonomy.

Keywords
bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, feminist histories, legal history

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Cover Page Footnote
Our humble thanks go to the incredible presenters of the two presidential panels held in St. Louis in 2023. We remain in solidarity with the millions impacted by the recent overturning of Roe v. Wade and will strive to ensure that history (both of the eighteenth century and of our current moment) remains accurate and fully contextualized.

This conversation is available in ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss2/13
On June 24, 2022, the decision to protect the federal rights of people in the United States who can become pregnant was overturned, making a person’s right or medical need to have an abortion predicated upon their state of residence. On Thursday, March 9th, and Friday, March 10th, 2023, ASECS members came together in panels organized by the Women’s Caucus to discuss, share, lament, and challenge the recent Dobbs v. Jackson decision that undid these federal protections enacted in 1973 with Roe v. Wade. Significant to our discussions was that the deciding justices in the case, most publicly spearheaded by Justice Samuel Alito, relied—or so they claimed—on historical precedence dating to the seventeenth century to support their position. Alito’s 98-page leaked draft, which forecast the eventual overturning of Roe v. Wade, cites bits of eighteenth-century English Justice William Blackstone (1723-1780), seventeenth-century legal scholar Matthew Hale (1609-1676) and seventeenth-century jurist Edward Coke (1552-1634) as historical evidence for the criminality of abortion under English common law.

These sources, inspiring the twenty-first-century decision to reject the bodily autonomy of child-bearing people, were denounced as “cherry picked,” with contextual omissions for many of the quotations that Alito uses in his draft. But equally important to the historians and scholars of the period are the political, social, and medical environments in which these historical documents were penned. As noted by journalist Gillian Brockell, the world of Blackstone, Hale, and Coke is one wherein “women were property, babies could be ‘monsters’ and abortion was dangerous” (Brockell). More directly focusing on the eighteenth-century jurisprudence over the pregnant body in the context of the more recent court case over mifepristone, literary historians Manushag N. Powell (in this collection), Stephanie Hershinow, and Katherine Bergevin write that, in fact, the case shows that “the cultural and legal apparatuses to manage pregnancy were not state interest in protecting fetal life, but rather a struggle for control over the bodies of women” (Bergevin). The papers presented at the ASECS panels, and presented to the readers here, address that, in fact, the eighteenth-century world and treatment of the pregnant body was less benighted than Alito would have the public believe. Indeed, in some instances, it can be argued that the period was far less willing to make abortion a matter for the courts as it is today. At the same time, these essays also make clear that even pre-Dobbs, academia was not a friendly place for pregnancy and child-rearing.
The papers in this collection are a reflection of these conversations, shared with us by scholars, historians, and frustrated humans who firmly believe that an individual’s bodily autonomy should NOT be determined by their location. The writers of this collection believe that access to abortion should be made safely available to every single person in this country. The right to an abortion is a medical right, a right to safe healthcare; it is not a privilege that is only afforded to a few. States with built-in trigger laws—including the state of Missouri, which hosted the 2023 ASECS conference—put many people in this country in real medical danger. It bears repeating that those who are marginalized, particularly those who sit on multiple axes of marginalization, are most at risk of losing their lives with these laws in place. At the time of this publication in the fall of 2023, along with the state of Missouri, laws in Idaho, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, West Virginia, Indiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Arkansas, have made abortion illegal, making no exceptions for rape and incest. Indeed, abortion for cases in some of these states (Texas, Louisiana, South Dakota, Idaho, and Tennessee) is criminalized. There is an excellent interactive map from the Center of Reproductive Rights that provides updated information on states’ laws relating to abortion (“After Roe”). Since the ASECS meeting in March of 2023, more states have made abortion illegal, and our frustration and anger has only continued since the conference.

Moreover, the contributors to this essay cluster—like the audiences that participated in the ASECS panel discussions—show in different ways that nothing begins or ends with the question of safe, legal abortion. Without supportive care for birth, abortion, and unplanned miscarriage; without meaningful leave policies; without interrogating the long cultural traditions embedded in some of our most canonical works that treat reproductive health with callousness and patriarchal cruelty; without a respect for historical evidence that embraces the complex totalities of our past—things are not going to improve. Not for pregnant people, not for women, not for the academy, not for any of us.

These essays, drawn from the March 2023 panels, are written by historians who have a keener understanding of the pregnant body than all of the cis-identifying men throughout history could ever know. These essays are written by academics, many of whom study eighteenth-century gender and culture as their career. Chelsea Phillips is a professional dramaturg and author of *Carrying All Before Her: Celebrity Pregnancy and the London Stage, 1689-1800*. In addition to her co-written *Washington Post* article and her works on print, performance and piracy, Manushag Powell co-edited *Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture in*
Britain, 1690-1820. Servanne Woodard, lecturer of eighteenth-century French feminist literature at Western University, Ontario, Canada. Lisa Vandenbossche, a lecturer at the University of Michigan, has written capaciously on matters of settler colonialism, intersectionality, and the precarity of the academy. We hope that the reader finds solace in the voices they hear, and rage at the very fact that we need to have these voices raised in the first place. We hope that the reader takes action, either big or small, either in the everyday act or in supporting those who make action a part of their lives every day.

Notes

1 This essay contributes to a Conversations cluster on “Abortion Rights and Bodily Autonomy in the Eighteenth Century and Today,” guest edited by Vicki Barnett Woods and Manushag N. Powell. To read other contributions to this collection, visit https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss2/.

Works Cited

