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“She is spread of late/ Into a goodly bulk”: Portrayals of Pregnancy in Shakespearean Drama (*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.19-20)

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Elizabeth Joceline, the author *The Mother's Legacy to her Unborn Child* (1632), is famously known for buying a winding sheet when faced with a prospect of pregnancy. Joceline started writing her manuscript in 1622 as soon as she realized she was pregnant and was suddenly seized by an overpowering fear that she might not live to instruct her child herself. Her terror of labour turned out to be prophetic as she died in childbed. For Joceline and many other early modern women pregnancy, labour and post-partum were both identity-shaping processes and existential limit situations. Since women were believed to be redeemed from the original sin by childbearing, pregnancy was a rite of passage that was welcomed, albeit with trepidation. Interestingly, the early modern period is characterized by a flourishing of popular medical treatises and midwifery books that address the topic of reproduction, pregnant women's proper conduct, diet and antenatal care. Simultaneously, pregnancy was a notoriously fluid condition; hard to detect before and even after quickening, subject to many pseudo-medical ideas surrounding female monstrous imagination, female bestiality and threatening maternal influence. The papers in this panel argue that these ideas find their way into early modern drama and are reworked to problematise, rather than demonize pregnant embodiment. Shakespeare's drama offers numerous fascinating portrayals of pregnant figures; from terrifying Tamora to idealized and eventually silenced Hermione. Feminist-oriented research has so far focused on maternity; treating the condition of pregnancy or pregnant embodiment rather perfunctorily or underscoring male, usually negative, perceptions of female corporeality. The aim of this panel is to address this research niche, by focusing on the experience of pregnant embodiment in Shakespeare's drama. We argue that pregnancy is not merely a transition phase, but a separate identity-building experience, central to the structure of selected “pregnancy plays”. The papers presented in this panel are invested in the early modern medical background as much as modern theory on phenomenology of pregnancy.