“SOMETIME THERE IS BREATH”:
GERTRUDE STEIN’S *TENDER BUTTONS* AS MATERNAL LEXICON

BY

KATHERINE MILLS WILLIAMS

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Approved By:

Mary K. DeShazer, Ph.D., Advisor

Gillian Overing, Ph.D., Chair

Omaar Hena, Ph.D.
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Abstract

A study of Gertrude Stein’s poetry collection *Tender Buttons*, this thesis uncovers and explores the text’s covert maternal trope. Although Stein staunchly evaded categorization as a feminist, the employment of maternal imagery and the exploration of a language predicated by the feminine space of the womb warrant a reassessment of Stein’s stance on feminism. This thesis identifies and elucidates the poetic exploration of the womb as a space containing one not yet formed, that is, the unnamed, ungendered, uninscribed in the restrictive and hegemonic yoke of culture. In this space, Stein delights in the indeterminacy of a language not yet born into the society that prescribes it to a single denotative method. Through consideration of French Feminism, this thesis identifies Stein’s poetry as a harbinger of Kristeva’s semiotic register yet resists its categorization as feminist. Interpreting *Tender Buttons* instead as a portent of diachronic linguistics, I hope to extend the analysis of the collection beyond the feminist position that increasingly dominates Stein scholarship. Positing the collection as an attempt toward the nullification of gendered writing, I suggest the potential to divest the employment of the female body as a tool solely for the construction of a feminist/linguistic argument.
Introduction

“Also there is why is it [sic] that in this epoch the only real literary
taking has been done by women.”

- Gertrude Stein

Upon her move to Paris to live with her brother Leo in 1903, Gertrude Stein had
never written creatively outside of courses at Harvard Annex where she failed
assignments in English and grammar. Her instructors were alternately disturbed by the
“fear of incest and sadomasochism” suggested by her writing and “annoyed by her poor
grammar and punctuation” (Knapp 25). Yet her relocation to Europe and immersion into
Parisian culture just as the modernist aesthetic movement began to take hold incited a
lasting fascination with language and representation. Stein’s encounter with visual
experimentalists such as Cezanne, Matisse and Picasso made an indelible impression on
her and she debated with them extensively on the philosophies of aesthetics. Her
inaugural publication, *Three Lives*, appeared in 1909 to mixed reviews, some echoing a
Harvard professor’s disparaging remark that her “vehemence ran away with her syntax”
(25). Yet she persisted, publishing over thirty works in her lifetime, including poetry,
prose, autobiography and even lecture series. A seminal work written at a particularly
disorderly time in her life, the 1914 poetry collection *Tender Buttons* exhibits some of the
most challenging writing of Stein’s oeuvre. Facing the departure of her cherished brother
Leo from their shared apartment and the nascent relationship with her lifetime partner

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1 Carl Van Vechten cites this remark in the introduction to “Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein.”
Unfortunately, he failed to verify this quotation, merely providing that “Miss Stein exclaims pleasurably
somewhere or other” (xxiv). As Van Vechten was especially close with Stein, the statement may never
have been published but rather recalled from conversation. Nevertheless, it provides important insight into
Stein’s stance of women’s writing.
Alice B. Toklas, *Tender Buttons* exhibits Stein’s struggle with the various perspectives explored not only in the aesthetic world of cubism but also in her own domestic life. She sought to demonstrate language’s undeveloped capacity to establish new perspectives just as Picasso demonstrated for the visual world with his abstract cubist paintings of the early twentieth century. As a linguistic rendering of these various perspectives, *Tender Buttons* exhibits language at the moment of conception, as a perpetually beginning and forming entity. Stein sought, and arguably succeeded, to enliven language through a novel rendering of it. This thesis seeks to excavate the collection of poems, finding in its linguistic approach and subtle allusions to the maternal sphere Stein’s attempt to initiate a new, undeveloped mode of writing. As she strips individual words of their assumed meanings, she discovers a language that only barely signifies in the traditional sense, yet with this challenge she invites the reader to adopt a new perspective to language, indeed to representation.

Stein’s brother Leo, who had functioned as her mentor, roommate, and closest friend since her relocation to Paris in 1903, moved out of the apartment at 27 rue de Fleures in 1913, leaving Stein and Toklas. Although Toklas had already lived at the apartment with Stein and her brother for four years, the adjustment to the household manifested in Stein’s writing as she continued to explore their relationship both sexual and domestic. Stein identified herself as the “husband” in the relationship and referred to Toklas often and endearingly as her “wife” (“The Genius and her Sanctuary” 122). The

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2 Knapp too notes the “family structure” that emerged when Leo left the household: “Stein was the husband and Toklas, the wife. In time, however, and this, too is significant in understanding such a relationship, Stein became the “Baby” and Toklas, the caring, nurturing, and comforting “Mother” (46). Knapp later expands on this relationship, claiming that Stein “always considered herself man, potentate, supreme consciousness, and creative principle, while Toklas was the woman, the homebody, and subservient in every way” (124).
application of such traditional marriage terms prompted a reconsideration of the domestic realm in which, bolstered by Leo’s departure from the home, Stein participated. *Tender Buttons*, written at the height of this transition, presents the image of the female body as Stein seeks to reestablish domestic order through her descriptions of objects, food, and rooms.

The experimental writing for which *Tender Buttons* is perhaps most often remembered yields a composition that complicates traditional reading practices, inspiring new approaches to language. Through illogical word juxtaposition and extraneous or absent syntax, Stein dismantles any potential for easy reading. *Tender Buttons* in particular of Stein’s work demands an attentiveness that conventional writing does not. The unfamiliar style mandates slow and repeated reading; the disorientation of the poems bids the reader to consider the words individually, free from the connective system that traditionally governs them, thereby alerting him or her to that relinquished system. This study of the relationship between semantics and syntax manifests in the maternal images evident in the text. By representing the female body as a means of understanding a body of language, the poems solicit the examination of the text as feminist. As a manifesto to the ever-forming body of language, *Tender Buttons* exalts the female body in its maternal capacity. Two factors of Stein’s life prior to her move to Paris and the onset of her writing career that may explain her interest in the development of a child and its inculcation into society are her “inadequate parenting” as a child and her later research

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3 Knapp notes that Stein, the youngest of seven children, had been deprived of “love and affection from her busy and self-involved mother and father … Lonely, thrust upon her own emotional resources, Stein’s virtually sole and steady companion—her only great love throughout her adolescence—was her brother Leo” (21).
in embryonic science while a medical student at Johns Hopkins University. Stein delights in the exploration of the womb—in Julia Kristeva’s linguistic studies, the *chora*—insofar as it supplies a space for perpetual beginning. This project aims to identify images of maternity within the collection, extend them to the linguistic structure of the poems, and finally consider whether the maternal trope of *Tender Button* indicates a specifically female access to the reappropriation of language.

Deliberating on the maternal character of *Tender Buttons*, I find an appropriate entry into Stein’s work in the semiotic mode expounded by Kristeva in *Desire and Language* (1980). Through examination of the semiotic, I link Stein’s approach to language with Kristeva’s studies, an association which will assist my reading of Stein’s collection as a representation of the maternal realm of the womb. Establishing this entry to Stein’s work, I then advance to identify the subtle maternal imagery of *Tender Buttons*, finding that through a focus on contained objects, Stein alludes to an image of a pregnant female and the fetal body that she contains. In the collection’s first section, “Objects,” the poems contend with a protective structure and the vulnerable object or substance that it conceals before Stein advances in the following sections, “Food” and “Rooms,” to the more explicit maternal tropes. Stein’s focus in the first section on the concealment of objects directs her to elucidate the quality of the contained objects. These substances are perpetually portrayed as vulnerable, suggesting their reliance on the materials surrounding them for protection. This is the particular case that allows Stein to analyze the relationship between a vulnerable substance and the object protecting it, an

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4 A medical student at Johns Hopkins University in her early twenties, Stein dropped out after failing the majority of her exams. In 1901, however, she returned to “attempt to salvage her medical degree” (Morgan 19). Her advisor Franklin Paine Mall offered her a second chance to graduate with her medical degree if she would agree to complete a model of the human embryonic brain. Although she completed the project, it ended, again, in failure and the “unintelligible” model was “swept into the trash” (17).
association which evokes images of pregnancy and birth in the latter two sections of *Tender Buttons*. In the second section of the work, “Food,” the focus shifts subtly to the maternal experience of containment and the event of birth. After the exercise of identifying the contained substance, the language begins to focus more on the process of ridding that substance from its vessel. Finally, with the third and final section of the collection, “Rooms,” Stein imagines an occupation of the container, thus orienting herself and her reader as the fetal body, protected and closed off from the outside.

The maternal subject matter of *Tender Buttons* is not limited to the images that Stein generates. The relationship between words and the grammar that organizes them extends the metaphor of pregnancy to the realm of linguistics. Stein’s disorienting writing style—discussed in her lectures, interviews and letters—compelled her to consider the structure of language that allows the reader to sustain preconceived definitions. She does not invent words in *Tender Buttons*; while there are instances of colloquial or personal speech—“Aider,” for example, may be a nickname for her lover Alice, Stein’s secretary and “aide”—Stein generally employs familiar words. What makes the text so challenging is the structure into which she arranges these words. She complicates the function of parts of speech with sentences such as “Roast potatoes for.”, “This is read butter.” and “Black ink best wheel bale brown” that abound in the poems. She proves the capacity of syntax to utterly de-authorize the significance of words. In “this is read butter,” “read” may be meant to indicate the color “red” or perhaps “bread;” “butter” may mean “better.” The reader has no way of knowing, only guessing. It is by this assault on syntax that Stein is able to reveal the vulnerability of the words themselves and their reliance on a familiar order.
This relationship—between words and structure—mimics the maternal relationship between container and contained. Words are entirely vulnerable to the structure of language and the order in which they are arranged. They must be contained: any arrangement is a structure, even one as erratic as Stein’s. But through her departure from familiar syntax she exposes its considerable role. In this sense, one can identify Stein’s linguistics as a manifestation of the maternal images identified in the first chapter of this thesis: with the alteration of language’s structure, she reveals its ability to ensure embodied meanings and understandings. While the reader may assign his or her confusion to the words, it is the syntax that baffles. And so, Stein draws a parallel between maternal subjects and linguistic experimentation, demonstrating the need for containment and structure for formation.

After identifying the images of pregnancy insinuated in *Tender Buttons* and extending that analysis to the collection’s syntax, the second chapter of this thesis will probe the implications of the female body as central to the collection. Stein, always reluctant to admit any loyalties to feminist writers, went so far as to alienate advocates of the feminist movement. But if, as argued in this thesis, Stein reinterprets objects and then language through images of pregnancy, does she suggest that women have particular access to linguistic appropriation? The employment of so many household objects in the poems furthers the inquiry; she could arguably have done the same linguistic work with any category of words yet she chooses to foreground the domestic. As I consider the potential presence of a feminist argument within Stein’s work, I will consult Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” (1971) published in *Power/Knowledge*, alongside Helene Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975). In these texts, both
Foucault and Cixous solicit the body as a means of understanding and reevaluating language and, thereby, culture. Foucault suggests that the conventional practice of cataloguing history limits the intellectual in its goal of obtaining some particular end. In response to this problem, he suggests a new approach to the past that “shortens its vision to those things nearest to it,” primarily, the body and its functions, an approach which he titles “effective history.” This notion of studying “what is closest” calls to mind Cixous’ manifesto “The Laugh of the Medusa” wherein she solicits the writing of the female body which she interprets as in contention with the patriarchal writing that dominates discourse. By this method, she claims that women could establish themselves in discourse as, historically, men have done. Both Foucault’s and Cixous’ studies posit the body as the source of knowledge, due (for Foucault) to its accessibility and (for Cixous) to its female sex. For Cixous, of course, the argument is feminist, while Foucault’s argument is essentially ungendered. Common between the two, however, is the suggestion that the writing of the body enables one to absolve himself or herself of the (perhaps detrimental) history of language. In the conclusion of my thesis, I will employ both arguments to illuminate the potential readings of the catalogue of maternal language within *Tender Buttons*.

While the maternal imagery of the collection is certainly not overt, Stein’s experimental approach to writing sustains the trope’s subtle presence in the text. The examination of *Tender Buttons* as a model of the maternal semiotic that grounds the first chapter of this thesis enables the reader to perceive the semiotic relationship between a pregnant woman and fetus that Stein’s writing insinuates. In her exploration of the body of both the female and language, Stein conceives of a mode of writing that resembles the
fetal stage of the human body. This language of *Tender Buttons* is strikingly unfamiliar; it is rid of conventional patterns that French feminists would later identify as phallogocentric; it is newly born, and as such, it is ungendered. Writing in the semiotic register, then, Stein is able to explore the potential of language that, like the pre-Oedipal child of Kristeva’s studies, is not yet indoctrinated into the culture that restricts by signification. The collection thus illuminates a potential parallel between feminist writing and the sort of writing toward which Stein strove: writing that “[begins] again and again” (“Composition” 519).

The study of Stein’s writing as engaging a feminist view of the maternal only recently emerged as a prominent focus among scholars of her work. Richard Bridgman’s seminal 1970 text *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* was the first to identify Stein’s writing as feminist and only in recent years have scholars taken up his observations. Lisa Ruddick, Harriet Scott Chessman and Marianne DeKoven are prominent among them. Chessman begins her text by noting that the “idea of a return to the mother and to a ‘pre-symbolic’ maternal body is useful for an understanding of Stein” (4), a point with which each of these writers concurs, to varying degrees. Ruddick’s interpretations of Stein, particularly her work titled “A Rosy Charm: Gertrude Stein and the Repressed Feminine” but also a chapter on *Tender Buttons* contained in her book *Reading Gertrude Stein*, identifies the maternal body as a subject of recovery in Stein’s poetry. Focusing on the texts of the early part of the century—the period in which *Tender Buttons* was written—Ruddick labels Stein’s work as “meditations on the female body and its relation to a symbolic order that suppresses the female” (225). She discerns “the female body [as] very present in these texts” although she admits that “the references are oblique” (Ruddick 226).
Ruddick’s study focuses on the different insinuations of the female body in *Tender Buttons*, both sexual and maternal, which she sees as a return to the notion of the female body as capable and equal to the male body that dominates it in discourse.

Harriet Scott Chessman too notes the lesbian sexuality of the poems as evidence of a yearning for the pre-Oedipal stage. In *The Public is Invited to Dance*, Chessman boldly labels *Tender Buttons* a “feminist” text, a label which most Stein scholars only reluctantly suggest, if that. Chessman admits that “in calling Stein’s project ‘feminist,’ I enter into a lively and ongoing debate about whether Stein is feminist” (6). Indeed, there has hardly been a consensus on this topic. Chessman, however, identifies in *Tender Buttons* Stein’s effort to equate the female and male domains, concluding that this endeavor decrees it a feminist work. Rather than identifying Stein’s writing as elevating the female body or likening it to the semiotic, Chessman argues that she undercuts the “male” dominance of language, thereby constructing the two sexes as equal in terms of linguistic authority. She notes that Stein’s “disruption of conventional grammar, plot, genre, and modes of representation … allies itself with her attempt to bring female-to-female relationships to writing” (Chessman 5-6). By rejecting the conventional patterns of a patriarchal language, Stein invents what Chessman labels a “surprisingly ungendered language—a language that calls attention to its freedom from any gender at all” (6). The maternal space of the womb suggests that this potential for an “ungendered language” could resolve Stein’s contention with language. A space not yet gendered is not yet limited.

Chessman stipulates that we cannot assume Stein’s awareness of her subversion of a patriarchal system, suggesting that her drives may have been purely linguistic, only
happening to lead her toward the semiotic. “Because of a belief in language as patriarchal,” Chessman explains, “French feminists must discover alternative modes of discourse in order to disrupt or to escape from this language” (73); but if Stein never lamented—either in her writing or explicitly—male authority, we cannot assume that she too felt compelled to “disrupt” or “escape from” it. Of note is Stein’s heteronormative relationship with Alice in which she identified with the male: Stein the “powerful and active professional husband” of the household and Toklas the “less powerful and more submissive wife” (Chessman 7). Stein’s domestic life seems to indicate her compliance with—or perhaps indifference to—the heterocentrism of society. We can rightly assume, however, that Stein thought gender categories negligible, whether she was able to exhibit it in her household or not. As she remarked in *A Geographical History of America*: “I think nothing of men and women because that has nothing to do with anything” (178).

Stein may have initiated a return to the semiotic in *Tender Buttons*, but her stance on gender resists the suggestion that she did so as a means of deposing the “monolith of the Symbolic” (Chessman 73). Chessman’s studies, then, raise valid questions of Stein’s motives that illuminate the impact of her poetry. Did Stein intend to undermine patriarchal language, or would she not deem it “patriarchal” but rather “conventional”? While we cannot fruitfully debate a writer’s intent, this question certainly raises others that do impact our reading of *Tender Buttons*, particularly the correlation between a feminist style and a style that nullifies language’s history. Regardless of her opinions of

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5 Stein did later, in 1953, publish an essay titled “Patriarchal Poetry” which addresses the problem of the male presence in language. She writes, "For before let it be to be before spell to be before to be before to be to be before to be before to be tell to be . . . “ (*Yale* 106), alluding to a period “before” language (a “spell”). This insinuation of a pre-linguistic time evokes the approach to language in *Tender Buttons*. The fact that Stein does not indicate poetry in *Tender Buttons* as “patriarchal” may suggest that she did not yet realize the correlation between language and patriarchy. Perhaps the linguistic work begun in *Tender Buttons* led her to such a realization.
the gendering of language, Stein’s efforts to deconstruct conventional language certainly engendered a new mode that acutely resembles the feminine semiotic as defined by Kristeva. As such, her work leads us to consider the parallel between a reversal of language—an effort to rid words of their limiting definitions which have become the custom—and a pre-Oedipal language so closely related to the womb.

Marianne DeKoven takes up such questions in her extensive study, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing*. DeKoven’s study does not include *Tender Buttons* in particular but rather interprets other of Stein’s experimental writing on the basis of its being anti-patriarchal. She stipulates early in her introduction her opinion that “Stein never intended to be anti-patriarchal,” yet “opposition to patriarchal modes seems to me the ultimate raison d’etre for all experimental writing” (xvi). She construes Stein’s writing, then, as an unconscious effort to destabilize the patriarchal (conventional) writing to which it contrasts so greatly. Noting a “bitterness about female experience” evident in *Three Lives* (1909) “which seems to vanish as Stein’s writing becomes fully experimental” (xviii), DeKoven relates Stein’s linguistic experimentation to a remuneration for the subjugated class of women, albeit an unconscious one.

The recent feminist scholarship herein described classifies Stein’s experimental poetry as an exhibition of the semiotic mode in its return to more simplistic patterns of speech and discernible allusions to the female body, be they sexual or maternal. One indication of Stein’s awareness of this semiotic effort can be found in her “Transatlantic Interview” with Robert Bartlett Haas. Stein assesses “one human being … as important as another human being, and you might say that the landscape has the same values, a blade of grass has the same value as a tree” (16). This admission informs the semiotic insofar as
it indicates her desire to equalize humans, objects and even words. This equalization renders individual identity null, and as such corresponds with the pre-Oedipal child who cannot yet discern himself or herself from the “Other.” Stein’s manipulation of language that challenges the functions of a sentence’s words echoes this sentiment; the unfamiliar word order and juxtaposition of Stein’s poetry makes it nearly impossible to know which word should function as which part of speech (recall the “sentence” “black ink best wheel bale brown,” for example). Stein’s destabilization of sentence structure effectively equalizes its individual words and satisfies her feeling that each is as important as the other.

Stein admitted that she does not expect her readers to discern any particular aim in her writing: “I was not interested in what people would think when they read [Tender Buttons]; I was entirely taken up with my problem and if it did not tell my story it would tell some story. They might have another conception which would be their affair. It is not necessarily attached to the original idea I had when I wrote it” (“Transatlantic Interview” 30). Stein generously invites the reader to interpret her language. It is not a learned language, a familiar language, and as such, it does not discriminate against its reader. Intellect alone does not prepare one for Tender Buttons but rather willingness to experiment with the language and allow it to confuse, fascinate, and finally teach allows one to gain what he or she will from the collection. In this sense, Stein offered something extraordinary to her readers for whom she demonstrated such great respect and confidence in Tender Buttons. The perhaps insurmountable challenge of Stein’s more experimental work is resisting the temptation to decode or translate her language into something familiar. If we catalogue the repeated words—“umbrella” may mean one thing,
“red” another, “centre” another—we may be able to derive some anticipated meaning from it. But this would constitute a reductive practice that hardly does justice to the collection. Margueritte Murphy notes that “each reader [discerns] new possible codes or stories behind these very open, indeterminate texts, without such readings being mutually exclusive” (Murphy 384); opposing analyses of *Tender Buttons* may be equally valid.

Though she admitted that her own interpretations should not influence those of her readers, we are fortunate to have access to Stein’s own explications of a few of the poems from *Tender Buttons* in her “Transatlantic Interview.” Haas presented her with eleven of her poems, to each of which she provided her reasoning. The poet’s very own interpretations of her work seem at times unfounded by the poem itself; the leap from poetry to analysis is vast and effectively validates a greater range of interpretation than more conventional poetry. To the poem “A White Hunter” which consists of the single line “A white hunter is nearly crazy,” she explained: “This is an abstract, I mean an abstraction of color. If a hunter is white he looks white, and that gives you a natural feeling that he is crazy, a complete portrait by suggestion, that is what I had in mind to write” (“Transatlantic Interview” 24). In response to “Peeled Pencil, Choke” that runs “Rub her coke,” she responded “That is where I was beginning and went on a good deal after that to make sound pictures but I gave that up as uninteresting” (27). The line from “Sugar,” “Water is squeezing, water is squeezing on lard,” is in Stein’s view “really a perfect example of realism” (29). The reader could hardly agree. When asked to interpret her own poetry, she does not do so in a manner that a contemporary reader would consider satisfactory, that is, she only barely refers back to the poem itself. Stein even qualifies her explanation of one poem with “this was probably an effort to…” (25). She
herself cannot always recall the reasoning of such language because the language does not necessarily correlate with it. This of course does not make the language any less worthy of study. It simply proves that the imagery alone does not function in the way that readers may anticipate. As corollary to the syntactical structure, the images serve primarily to hint at Stein’s efforts to contend with language, not with meaning.

Accepting the indeterminacy of Stein’s poetry and the tenuous relationship between words and their meanings, the reader can adopt a more fluid approach to explication in *Tender Buttons*, incorporating alternative readings into his or her own. Expanding upon the current scholarship that argues for *Tender Button’s* position in the feminist canon, this thesis posits a reading of the collection in an effort to supplant the it from the field of feminism and place it instead in the canon of diachronic linguistics. By reimagining the insinuations of the female body in the text as maternal rather than sexual, I hope to adjust the critical response to the poems by suggesting that the implication of a female body may in fact negate rather than negotiate gender categories in discourse.
Chapter One

“The Difference between Single Lines and Broad Stomachs”: Tender Buttons and the Maternal Semiotic

“If you knew it all it would not be creation but dictation.”

-Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein’s confounding approach to language exhibits an effort to expose its deficiencies as an expressive mode. Her compositions problematize conventional reading practices, compelling the reader to reconsider the presumed, denotative function of language. To achieve this goal, she manipulates language into a form both unfamiliar and arduous, yielding work that demands scrupulous attention. This eccentric handling of language resembles the mode of writing examined by Julia Kristeva in her study of the semiotic. Kristeva’s identification of the semiotic as sourcing from the maternal body further correlates with Stein’s work if we consider the employment of the maternal, female body as a principal figure of Tender Buttons. Stein did not identify herself with any feminist movement, commenting on her disinterest with such a cause: in the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas she admitted that “she [does not] at all [mind] the cause of women or any other cause but it does not happen to be her business” (Autobiography 78). Here and elsewhere Stein insists that she does not spurn feminism, but neither does she associate herself with it. It seems curious, then, that her language so impeccably satisfies Kristeva’s delineation of the semiotic mode that she characterizes as distinctly feminine⁶. To justly assess Stein’s work through a feminist lens, we must identify the

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⁶ The distinction between “feminist” and “feminine” must be kept in mind throughout this thesis. As I explore the ways that Stein’s work can be read through a feminist lens, I do not intend to comment on her intentions, i.e. whether or not she intended to be a feminist writer. Rather, I hope to illuminate through
specific ways in which she informs this semiotic mode and consider whether her work necessarily achieves the goals posited by Kristeva as the impetus for its use.

Several Kristevan themes can be found in *Tender Buttons*, among them Stein’s proclivity toward infantile modes of speech, her rejection of grammar and conventional linguistic patterns and her employment of rhyme, to say nothing of the images of the specifically female body alluded to throughout the collection. The fact that Kristeva was to consolidate these qualities some sixty years after the publication of *Tender Buttons* under the term “semiotic” was of course not anticipated by Stein. Nevertheless, the Kristevan definition of the semiotic does well to elucidate Stein’s own efforts in *Tender Buttons*, suggesting parallels between their projects. Taking the example of “a signifying practice such as ‘poetic language,’” Kristeva defines the “semiotic disposition” as “the various deviations from the grammatical rules of language” (*Reader* 28). As a mode wherein “articulatory effects … shift the phonemative system back towards its articulatory, phonetic base and consequently towards the drive-governed bases of sound-production” (28), the semiotic rejects or undercuts the “over-determination of a lexeme” that informs a rigid, limited language. This destabilization can be achieved through “syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions, indefinite embeddings, etc.; … by a system of relations based on fantasy; and so forth” (28-9). Managing language within this semiotic register, then, requires the manipulation of conventional linguistic practice by means of disorienting the reader, thereby alerting him or her to the restriction of that rejected language. Kristeva identifies this semiotic order as

consideration of Stein’s writing as feminist any potential parallels between efforts to nullify linguistic preconceptions and the feminine mode of writing later posited by French feminism.

7 Kristeva expands on what Jacques Lacan calls the “imaginary,” developing the idea to maintain that the subject, even after the mirror stage, vacillates between the symbolic and semiotic; as a subject-in-process, Kristeva sees all writing as representative of both modes.
derivative to the woman’s, specifically mother’s, body. To elucidate the source of the mother/infant relationship associated with the semiotic, Kristeva adopts the term *chora*—meaning “nourishing and maternal” space or “womb” (94, 12)—to “denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemera stases” (93). In interpreting a word the literal meaning of which is “womb” to connote “rupture and articulations (rhythm)” which precede “evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality” (94), Kristeva further elucidates the maternal body as a semiotic realm. As a “nourishing and maternal” space, the *chora* is fundamentally a bodily notion, and as such, “previous and necessary to the acquisition of language” (96). Thus the semiotic is posited against the “symbolic”—“syntax and all linguistic categories” (96)—that are incited by the evolution past the maternal body into the sphere of self-identification and communication.

As a pre-linguistic stage, the semiotic, Kristeva claims, concerns bodily “drives and their articulations” (98) that are not fully enough realized for expression through language. Once the “mirror phase” has been initiated, however, the subject becomes able to perceive objects apart from the semiotic *chora* and thus able to advance beyond it. After this point, the *chora* becomes “more or less successfully repressed” and thus a mere disruption to the symbolic order into which the child has entered and by which he or she signifies. The *chora*, then, is (to the post-Oedipal subject who has gone through the mirror stage) “perceived only as pulsional [*sic*] *pressure* on or within symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences” (13). It is the

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8 Plato, from whom Kristeva borrows the term, defines the *chora*, or “receptacle” as “unstable, uncertain, ever changing and becoming; it is even unnameable, improbable, bastard: ‘Space, which is everlasting, not admitting destruction; providing a situation for all things that come into being but itself apprehended without the senses by a sort of bastard reasoning’” (*Reader* 126).

9 This, too, Kristeva adopts from Lacan.
gradual linguistic process of “separation from the mother’s body … [that acts] as a permanent negativity that destroys the image and the isolated object even as it facilitates the articulation of the semiotic network” (100-1); and so, the ability to recognize and identify the semiotic is the admission of its passing, recognition being a quality exclusive to the symbolic stage.

Extending beyond the psychoanalysis of the *chora* and the semiotic phase, Kristeva’s studies illuminate genres of writing that she interprets as gendered. Kristeva was reluctant to totalize “female” as “semiotic” and “male” as “symbolic,” but the return to the body and pre-formed identity designated by the semiotic does direct us to the female, maternal body. Too, the identification of the semiotic subject as a constant “subject-in-process” (13) reflects the function of the womb as a space that literally fosters the process of bodily formation. Kristeva defines “all poetic ‘distortions’ of the signifying chain and the structure of signification” as “those drives that the thetic phase was not able to sublate by linking them into signifier and signified” (103). This “thetic phase” is the term by which Kristeva identifies the transference from the semiotic to the symbolic, a process marked by the mirror stage and the “castration” of the mother from the child. After this phase, the child successfully enters into the symbolic stage wherein he or she is able to discern the mother now as “other” and thus to identify as an individual. In this process the child sheds those communicative qualities associated with the semiotic: gesturing, crying, repeating and so forth. But, remembering that no communication is exclusively semiotic or symbolic, Kristeva identifies poetic expression as a form which

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10 Toril Moi in *The Kristeva Reader* acknowledges that Kristeva’s later work exhibited a shift away from the “tendencies toward an idealization of the pre-Oedipal mother … by introducing the concept of the ‘father of personal prehistory’ or pre-Oedipal father,” yet this too is understood in the female register, as “the mother’s desire for the phallus” (12).
recalls those qualities of the semiotic (pre-thetic) stage that the thetic process failed to fully integrate into the symbolic stage. And so she submits all poetry as an identification—however partial—with the largely bygone semiotic. As such, through poetry one identifies to some extent with his or her pre-Oedipal self. As an attempt at “a resumption of the functioning characteristic of the semiotic *chora* within the signifying device of language” (103), experimental poetry such as Stein’s can be interpreted as an attempted representation of the womb.

In regards to the various genres of writing, Kristeva contends that the “two modalities”—semiotic and symbolic—“are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved” (92). As all language is “marked by an indebtedness” (93) to both modes, genre is determined by the ascendency of one over the other, to varying degrees. Thus, genre becomes an exhibition of the play between the semiotic and the symbolic as any literary work simultaneously recalls its precondition as semiotic and yet maintains its present condition as a signifier, that is, symbolic. In her claim that language cannot be exclusively semiotic or symbolic, Kristeva echoes Stein’s own admission that “it is impossible to put [words] together without sense … Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them” (“Transatlantic Interview” 18). Displeased by the ubiquity of “sense,” Stein attempted to fashion a purely semiotic language, finding the metaphorical space for this language within the womb, the *chora*; she envisions this language as the fetus, the not yet fully formed, the ungendered and unnamed. This vision corresponds with Kristeva’s comment on the semiotic as founded in the maternal, nourishing space of the *chora*.
Kristeva’s crucial identification of the semiotic with the infantile becomes fundamental to reading Stein’s work. Noting that “the child’s first so-called holophrastic enunciations include gesture, the object and vocal emission,” Kristeva claims that “generative grammar is not readily equipped to account for them” (*Reader* 98), that is, as long as the child remains unable to communicate through speech, he or she remains within the semiotic realm of communication. Stein’s effort to reconstruct this realm through poetry indicates a desire to envision the pre-Oedipal stage wherein a child lacks communicative skills and is thus neither oppressed by the authority of signification nor an extension of that authority. As I turn to *Tender Buttons*, this study of Kristeva will aid in the identification of the maternal trope within the collection; the subtlety of the maternal images benefits from a grasp of the semiotic intimations of Stein’s mode of writing.

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For a writer as enigmatic as Gertrude Stein, language serves a peculiar and contradictory function. By deconstructing its conventional structures, Stein manipulates language into an assault on itself. She laments the fact that language, predetermined as it is in conventional use, is nothing but a “straight climb to a line” (*Tender Buttons* 464). If we allow each word to have a single fixed meaning then, she suggests, we limit language. Frustrated with this practice, Stein asks the reader to reject these static associations that words carry in favor of the more fluid language that she exhibits in her poetry. She strives to strip words of their meaning by positioning them in unfamiliar order; for example, the
title, *Tender Buttons*: “tender” and “buttons” hardly seem two words that can be logically paired. The various connotations of “tender” include soft, injured, kind, or even monetary transaction while “buttons” usually connotes either the device on a piece of clothing or fabric that brings two parts together or a button that is pressed, such as on a keyboard. Taking any of these definitions, “tender” and “buttons” seem unrelated and thus a perplexing pair. By using combinations such as this, Stein asks her reader to interrogate the words, to actively consider the various connotations of the words and the ways in which they could be associated. In point of fact, the French translation of the phrase “Tender Buttons” may reveal potential reasoning behind the combination.

An indication of Stein’s cognizance of the parallel between her studies of the “inside” of language and pregnancy is evident in the title. “Tender Buttons,” Margueritte Murphy notes, may reference the French slang term for nipples\(^{11}\) (Murphy 384) of which Stein, proficient in French, would surely have been aware. While in English “tender” hardly seems an appropriate word to describe inanimate “buttons,” the French translation may explain Stein’s reasoning in choosing the words for her collection’s title. The insinuation that the title may reference nipples supports the argument regarding Stein’s use of the trope of pregnancy here identified. Like the womb, nipples’ sole biological function is lactation, an exchange serving only the child and not the mother. As the source of nourishment and the site of connection between mother and child, they also serve as a site of inculcation, recalling the semiotic stage wherein the child connects

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\(^{11}\) Scholars have also identified the title to indicate nipples without reference to the French term (“les boutons tendres”). Deborah M. Mix in *A Vocabulary on Thinking: Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women’s Innovative Writing* (pg. 50), Sonja S bamberger in *Artistic Outlaws: The Modernist Poetics of Edith Sitwell, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein and H.D.* (122) and Marjorie Perloff in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (pg. 99) all make this interpretation based, it seems, solely on the English words.
solely with the mother. The title thus designates the collection’s poems as evidence of that pre-Oedipal stage. Too, in regards to the title in its original English, we recognize that nipples become “tender” with the act of breastfeeding. The phrase “tender buttons” may, of course, also suggest eroticism; however, the title more convincingly indicates breastfeeding as breasts do not seem to be mentioned elsewhere in the collection while the process of lactation certainly is. The poem “Milk” includes the line “climb up in sight climb in the whole utter” (*Tender Buttons* 487), a line which Lisa Ruddick cites as an effort to “reenter the womb” (Ruddick 232), the “utter” punning on a lactating and thus maternal source, the udder. Including in this line “climb up in sight,” Stein insinuates that this return to the womb would prompt a return to better perception or “sight.” Ruddick’s reading of Stein, then, locates efforts to return to the mother’s body and associates such an endeavor with improved perception. This insinuation endorses the title as a likely reference to breastfeeding.

*Tender Buttons* contains, in Stein’s estimation, “some of the best uses of words that there are” (“Transatlantic Interview” 18) because they are freed from the restrictive method of denotation. The collection reveals Stein’s search for an alternative mode to the “straight climb” toward meaning. What results from her search is a text that insinuates images of pregnancy and maternity, tropes by which Stein enables herself to consider the vulnerability of language—and thus her ability to manipulate it—and its need for protection. Throughout the text, Stein returns to the trouble of the “single line” (*Tender Buttons* 504) and delights in the opposing act of “spreading” meaning and thus the potential of language. Stein writes in the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in which she borrows the voice of her lover Alice, that “she always was, always is, tormented by
the external and the internal” (*Autobiography* 112). While “hitherto she had been concerned with seriousness and the inside of things, [*Tender Buttons*] began to describe the inside as seen from the outside,” that is, she began “mixing the outside and the inside” (*Autobiography* 147). Such a search for the “inside as seen from the outside” leads Stein to the theme of containment, an endeavor which comes to insinuate pregnancy. The vessel of a pregnant woman containing and thereby protecting a fetus parallels the linguistic work that Stein presents in the text. Lamenting the stagnancy of conventional and defined language, she acknowledged that “it is impossible to put [words] together without sense … Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them” (“Transatlantic Interview” 18). Disappointed with this fact, she experimented with words to see how she could best demonstrate their dynamism. Even if she could not escape meaning, she could at the very least confound her readers, thereby alerting them to the limits of standard language. Indeed, images do emerge from Stein’s poetry, unconventional as it may be. Reading *Tender Buttons* can be a disorienting experience from which one takes away little beyond confusion, but the repeated reading of the text allows one to discern the inevitable sense that emerges from its language.

Although she recognized that words cannot be put together without meaning, Stein certainly understood that traditional linguistic structure made this meaning vastly easier to comprehend. In her interrogation of the protective structure of syntax, she exposes a parallel image in pregnancy. A growing fetus, as a thing apart from the external world, cannot subsist without the woman who carries it, nurtures it and protects it. This relationship mirrors that of words and syntax that Stein finds so troubling. And so she crafts images that represent such qualities—of protection and concealment—in the
household to explore this relationship. It is such images that make up the opening section of *Tender Buttons*. Bettina Knapp notes that the division of the text “into three parts—Objects, Food, and Rooms—may be viewed as an inner trajectory, Stein’s descent into being, into the collective unconscious, *the source of creation*” (Knapp 112, emphasis mine). In order to reach a cohesive understanding of Stein’s images, the reader must keep in mind her concern with language itself. It is with the structure of language that she—both explicitly and implicitly—experiments. And so, while perusal of the collection may not permit a single satisfactory interpretation anticipated by the contemporary reader, it can provide insight into Stein’s efforts regarding the system of language.

Pamela Hadas, in “Spreading the Difference: One Way to Read Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons,*” comments on the pervasiveness of “covers, curtains, tops, shadows, and denials … the surrounded and the surrounding, the entering and the entered, the contained and all sorts of containers,” interpreting these dichotomies as “[adding] up to a house of significant disorder” (Hadas 59). Instead, I contend that these images indicate a search for balance within the home, an objective solicited by Stein’s exploration of the domestic sphere of family and maternity. The household objects of *Tender Buttons* suggest the poet’s concern with the domestic, reflecting probably the shifting status of her home at 27 rue de Fleures. Facing the anxiety provoked by her brother Leo’s departure, Stein writes to rectify the unbalanced relationship between container and contained, surrounder and surrounded. Examining both, she equalizes them by identifying their mutual need for one another. Where she “had [in the past] been concerned with seriousness and the inside of things” she began to study “the inside as seen from the outside,” that is, to cease contending exclusively with the “inside,” ignoring what
contains it. *Tender Buttons* thus exhibits an attempt to correct this biased view of language of which Stein accuses herself as well as her readers. Hadas argues that Stein studies “those psychological differences between men and women, past and future, brothers and sisters” (Hadas 61). Indeed, Stein admits in a 1946 interview with Robert Bartlett Haas that “one human being is as important as another human being, and you might say that the landscape has the same values, a blade of grass has the same value as a tree” (“Transatlantic Interview” 16). Taking this valuation into account, the reader can discern in *Tender Buttons* the fervent effort to strip words of their meaning so that no word is prioritized over any other.

In reference to Stein’s work, Knapp notes that “struggle is seminal: it helps give birth to image, idea, and word; it is instrumental in assisting the gestation period and in developing keenness of thought, psychological awareness, and body sensitivity. During the process, struggle serves to cut and bruise body and soul, as happens during birth—both being acts of creation” (Knapp 37). Stein’s handling of language forces the reader to struggle to make meaning of it, that is, make it function in the anticipated sense. This struggle with language forced her to “make it ugly” (37) a comment which Stein herself applied to Pablo Picasso’s work as he pioneered the cubist movement which many critics liken to her poetry. In reference to the artist’s work—with which Stein was indelibly involved—she suggests the act of birth: “something had been coming out of him, certainly it had been coming out of him, certainly it was something, certainly it had been coming out of him and it had meaning” (*Selected Writings* 335). Beyond the word choice of this statement, the tension in the repetition of the clauses, the building and releasing, evokes the image of birth. But as Knapp notes, “Whereas Picasso focused on objects as
concrete phenomena existing in the visible world, Stein’s interest lay in the humanization of the object” (Knapp 38). Striving to enact language as dynamic by liberating it from its conventional structure, she discerned that perhaps language and objects—in that they are both static, inanimate, limited—are analogous. And so, in her efforts to humanize language, she found herself humanizing the objects that that language portrayed.

The experimental style exercised in Tender Buttons makes the pursuit of a comprehensive interpretation particularly challenging. In order to best make sense of the seemingly incongruent poems, one must identify the repeated images or words within the work. In the first section, “Objects,” Stein repeats the words “spreading,” “resembling,” “spectacle,” “centre,” “direction,” and “arrangement” to name a few. The images, while they do not yet inform the trope of pregnancy, become familiar through these repetitions, ultimately allowing the reader to become privy to the lexical relationships that Stein arranges in the poems. For example, she continually comments on “spreading”: the oft-cited dictum “the difference is spreading” (Tender Buttons 461) is located significantly at the end of the collection’s preliminary poem, positing it as the work’s thesis. With the persistent reminder of this “spreading” action, Stein works to rectify the trouble of the “straight line” mandated by definition and from which she hopes to deviate.

While the theme of pregnancy does not develop until the second and third chapters of Tender Buttons, the recurrent trope of concealment and protection in the first chapter, “Objects,” becomes a significant implication of pregnancy. In this first chapter, Stein portrays objects and the substances that they contain, interrogating the relationship between the two. With these images, she begins to imply that through the trope of pregnancy a pregnant woman can be seen to serve a parallel function as the containing
object. While this is certainly not the obvious or only interpretation of the images, Stein
does gesture throughout the poems toward acts of pregnancy and birth. The language of
the titles—“A Carafe,” “Glazed,” “In a Cushion,” “A Box”—come to imply containment,
a method by which Stein alerts the reader to the vulnerability of the contained object. In
the first poem, “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass” (*Tender Buttons* 461), she considers the
function of a carafe and its ability to “spread” beyond what it contains. The poem reads:

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color
and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not
unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

The carafe, “cousin” to “a glass,” is both a “spectacle and nothing strange,” introducing
the collection’s fundamental notion that something need not be extraordinary in order to
merit the reader’s attention. Something as simple as familiar language patterns, worked
into extreme disarray in this collection, can be a “spectacle.” Stein describes the “single
hurt color”—perhaps indicating wine or some other consistent and dark, bruised color—
contained by the carafe and comments on the “arrangement in a system to pointing.” The
carafe “arranges” the liquid into an efficient “system” for pouring, which is of course the
purpose of a carafe. The “system to pointing” illustrates the distention at the lip of the
carafe by which the liquid exits neatly. With this first poem Stein introduces many of the
images that will recur throughout the collection, especially in its first section. The notion
of a “cousin,” signifies kinship and suggests the two objects (the carafe and the glass) as
readily comparable; along with “resemblance,” “cousin” marks Stein’s investigation of
comparison. As Hadas observes, “the separation is necessary to the relation” (Hadas 64),
that is, the difference between two objects defines their relationship to one another. And
so Stein likens objects by identifying their differing qualities. Put another way, “two ‘kinds’ must be in some sense close for separation to mean anything much” (64). By introducing the concept of comparison through the image of the carafe, Stein enables the investigation of the “inside as seen from the outside.” In order to identify between the inside and the outside, one must first learn to differentiate between the two. And so, in this first poem Stein works to make that differentiation by exploring the qualities of the carafe and its function as a container. Extending this analysis to inform the trope of pregnancy, Knapp notes that “pictorially, the carafe suggests the female body with its rounded, uterine-looking container at the bottom and the spreading outer lip or vagina at the top, which permits the entrance and exit of substances” (Knapp 117). Such an image is better substantiated by a return to the “Objects” chapter after reading the rest of the collection, having observed its more overt pregnant imagery.

The “hurt” color—perhaps a dark liquid resembling a bruise in color—of the contained substance also reverberates throughout the collection. The categorization of a contained substance as vulnerable becomes prominent in the first few poems and recalls Stein’s quandary that words cannot be “[put] together without sense.” Although she wants to make some composite of words devoid of meaning, she knows that she cannot because any structure—even one as erratic as that displayed in Tender Buttons—necessarily creates meaning. Consequently, Stein identifies individual words as within the system of syntax, inevitably vulnerable to signification. Through an investigation of contained objects, she explores this relationship between the individual word or object and its (lamentably) cohesive structure. As she identifies the objects of these poems as contained, she simultaneously comments on the containment of words within the system.
of language. The subject matter of these first poems thus parallels the linguistic experimentation that she conducts with the poems: as she considers the objects apart from their containers (the liquid within the carafe, for example) she also considers the individual words of the poems outside of the conventional pattern of language. The poems in *Tender Buttons* are, from the beginning, perplexing, as can be seen in “Carafe, That is a Blind Glass” as in any other poem. The structure is difficult to understand, the result of Stein’s presentation of the words as individuals rather than part of the greater system of language. The challenge that this presents to the reader notifies him or her to the word’s need for structure in order to signify.

Words such as “weaken,” “hurt,” “painful,” “sore,” “desperate,” “exhaust,” “sick,” “trembling,” and “disease” abound in the text, extending the association of the contained object as vulnerable. The contained substances are perpetually portrayed as weak, suggesting their reliance on the materials surrounding them for protection. This is the particular case that allows Stein to analyze the relationship between a vulnerable substance and the object protecting it. Again, while the vulnerability of these images does not yet connote the vulnerability of a fetus and the containing objects are not yet likened to a pregnant woman, this “Objects” section alerts the reader to this protection that will become manifest in the latter two sections as valid references to pregnancy.

Following the initial poem’s analysis of a contained liquid, the second poem contends with a glazed—again protected—substance. “Glazed Glitter” (*Tender Buttons* 461) begins with the single-sentence stanza, “Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover.” “Rid of a cover,” the nickel substance is exposed. The poem continues:
The change in that is that red weakens an hour. The change has come. There is no search. But there is, there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be a sinecure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing.

Glitter, a “handsome and convincing” image, is presumably dulled by the glaze that covers it. And so the concealing “glaze” both hinders and protects it, much like Stein’s revelation regarding language: syntax makes sense of words, but it may simultaneously restrict them to a single meaning. The conventional juxtaposition of words (unlike, say, “tender buttons”) perpetuates the connotations that each word carries. For example, if Stein had written “red buttons,” the reader most likely wouldn’t pause to consider the individual words and their potential meanings; instead, the usual connotations would hold and the reader could move on to the next words. “Tender buttons,” however, does not correspond with the connotations of the individual words “tender” and “buttons.” In order to consider the phrase as a whole, the reader must thus consider each of the words independently, reevaluating its connotations to reveal potential reasons for their pairing.

The third poem deals more ostensibly with a substance protected by concealment. “A Substance in a Cushion” (Tender Buttons 461-2) begins with a return to the exercise of comparison exhibited in “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass.” The poem’s first stanza reads:

The change of color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared.

Sugar is not a vegetable.
The speaker observes “a very little difference” prepared by a “change of color” before noting that “sugar is not a vegetable.” She acknowledges that a change of color is only a slight difference, but there are also extreme differences, such as the differences between sugar and a vegetable. Vegetables comprise a category that in multiple ways contrasts—even excludes—sugar. Stein concedes that categories do exist and that they cannot always be blurred. Although it seems an obvious comment, Stein feels the need to explain that there are slight as well as extreme differences, a distinction which becomes crucial to the collection as it resists preconceived associations. After establishing this potential for varying degrees of difference, the poem returns to themes of protection. Suggesting in the fifth stanza that “in any kind of place there is a top to covering,” she admits that this “cover” is ubiquitous, that protection can be identified when it is sought, which was certainly the case when Stein realized that words must always make sense (recall her remark that “it is impossible to put [words] together without sense”). They function always under the “cover” of syntax. The exposure of vulnerability, she suggests, can be extended to all objects if only one scrutinizes them.

Throughout this first section, Stein considers the opposing options of conventional and unconventional language; looking “at the inside as seen from the outside” she enables herself to consider a language rid of its organizing, protective structure. She admits the difficulty of the reappropriation of language that she advocates: In “Dirt and Not Copper” (Tender Buttons 464) she claims that “[dirt and not copper] makes mercy and relaxation and even a strength to spread a table fuller. There are more places not empty. They see cover.” She acknowledges the “strength” that it takes to deviate from conventional syntax and “spread” rather than perpetuate the conventional
meanings and definitions of words. But she continues to advocate this “spreading,” alerting the reader to the fact that “there are more places [that] see cover,” that is, that are protected, and thereby restricted.

By observing the vulnerability of these objects, Stein concurrently comments on their need for protection. The carafe that “orders” the liquid within it, the glaze that shields (although dulls) glitter, the substance within a cushion: each of these images allows the reader to perceive the substance and the container as complementary. While these internal substances require the protection of the container, the container would be futile without the contained. By identifying this mutual need—neither the container nor the contained would function in the same way without the other—she identifies “what use there is in a whole piece if one uses it” (Tender Buttons 462). Although no references to pregnancy occur within the first chapter, the images of protective structures predicate such imagery which develops as the collection progresses.

In the collection’s second and third chapters, “Food” and “Rooms,” the images of pregnancy become more apparent. While the preliminary poems contend with objects that cover or conceal, the poems comprising the “Food” chapter advance from these images to the process of removing the once vulnerable substance from its container. It is here that there emerges the perceptible theme of pregnancy and birth. “Roastbeef” (Tender Buttons 477-82), the first poem of the collection’s second chapter, presents a much more discernible image of pregnancy than had been provided in “Objects.” The poem’s first sentence reads: “In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling” (Tender Buttons 477). This sequence arguably relates the stillness of a fetus within a pregnant woman, the physical
changes of that woman’s body, the significance of “morning” sickness and finally the shifting of a fetus felt while lying still at night: all routine aspects of pregnancy. The speaker then observes that “in feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching” (*Tender Buttons* 477). Again, these lines can be interpreted as a catalogue of the maternal responses to the feeling of a fetus shifting inside. The “resting” that a pregnant women requires toward the end of the gestation period, the “mounting” size of both the growing child and woman, the “resignation” to the case that the child is entirely enclosed from the mother (and by the mother), the “recognition” of life within her, the “recurrence” of the movement and the uncomfortable feeling of “pinching” that it may instigate all suggest such a reading. “Roastbeef” is the longest poem of the section and abounds with words regarding the woman’s body and state during pregnancy: “enlarge,” “inside,” “mounting,” “contained” as well as words pertinent to the procedure of birth: “transfer,” “organ,” “medicine,” “wailing,” “stretcher” and “images of cutting, wounding, separating, replacing, exchanging, emptying, and filling” (Hadas 65). The title and subject of roast beef, as something that cooks inside of an oven for an extended time, enables Stein to discuss the process of preparation and development that parallels the process of gestation.

This same poem provides a lengthy collection of words illustrating the overwhelming sensations that can be applied to a maternal experience: “tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular and simple and the same and the surface and the circle and the shine and the succor and the white and the same and the better and the red and the same and the centre and the yellow and the tender and
the better, and altogether” (Tender Buttons 478). The extended polysyndeton reveals that “altogether” these sensations of pregnancy can overwhelm the woman who “surrounds” the “centre,” that is, the fetus inside of her. With this rumination on pregnancy, the speaker considers whether it is necessary to deliver the inside to the outside, or if she can continue to “describe the inside as seen from the outside” (Autobiography 147).

Ruddick discerns allusions to the female body in the “versions of red—pink, scarlet, crimson, rose” (Bridgman 126) throughout the collection. Although identified by Richard Bridgman in Gertrude Stein in Pieces, Bridgman himself does not interpret this trope and so Ruddick assumes the task. Considering them to “have sexual associations,” she interprets the instances of red to indicate “menstruation and defloration” (Ruddick 226). Stein first presents this redness—these “stains”—as “shameful” but then subverts that association, making them “charming” instead. In so doing, she “[reverses] conventional valuations” (227) and “[suggests] that discredited objects can be just as charming as anything else” (228). By making these “bodily stains”—“tokens of stigmatized femininity”—charming, Stein subverts “patriarchal and androcentric values” (228), effectively elevating the female body from something dirty to something valued: “by focusing on these bodily blots that are normally overlooked or even thought of as bad, Stein works against culturally imprinted habits of selective attention” (229). The second “set of bodily emblems” that Ruddick identifies is the “interior ‘space’ or the womb,” another “falsely discredited object” (229). The womb, in Ruddick’s view, represents more than just the uterus: it also evokes the “mental state that recreates the feeling of the womb, or the primary unity that one had with one’s own mother” (230). In exploring this “imagined recovery of the mother,” Stein anticipates the theories of French feminism. In
liberating the female body from its repressed status as “shameful,” she returns to the body through its own somatic language. Thus the persistent solicitation to reject conventional, restricted language is bolstered by this notion of recalling the maternal body in that it elicits the undeveloped fetal body. Conventional language is a language that has been developed into its current form while unconventional language, not yet a cultural implement, is not yet developed. This investigation of maternal imagery in *Tender Buttons* leads Ruddick to the subject of her linguistic practice. She inquires whether Stein’s motivation to create a language without meaning can be charged with the reversion to a semiotic mode.

In this second chapter, references to the birthing process begin to appear. Alluding throughout the collection to “an occasion” and “a spectacle,” Stein has hinted that these ruminations will lead to a specific event. In a rhyming sequence, the speaker presents the process of a Ceasarean section: “Lovely snipe and tender turn, excellent vapor and slender butter, all the splinter and the trunk, all the poisonous darkening drunk, all the joy in weak success, all the joyful tenderness, all the section and the tea, all the stouter symmetry” (*Tender Buttons* 479). The “tender turn” of the fetus to the proper orientation for birth, the “excellent vapor” and “poisonous darkening drunk” of the anesthesia commonly administered, the “splinter” perhaps a needle for anesthesia or a knife to execute the surgery on the “trunk” of the woman’s abdomen, “all the joy in weak success” of the birthing process, “all the section” echoing a Cesarean section, and finally the “stouter symmetry” of the newborn imply a focus on maternity. Stein’s study of contained inanimate objects from her first chapter directs her to the event of birth in later sequences such as the one quoted above. As she studies the reliance of objects and words
on the structures that govern them, she inevitably envisions the potential for these individuals to escape that which contains them.

*Tender Buttons* has fascinated scholars in a wide range of disciplines and analyses are abundant. Among these responses, one can discern observations that apply to my reading of the poetry. Margueritte Murphy’s essay “Familiar Strangers: The Household Words of Gertrude Stein’s ‘Tender Buttons,’” for example, helpfully breaks down the foods on which Stein ruminates in the text’s second chapter, exposing a significant parallel between the foods and the maternal body. “Custard,” she claims, “refers, in Stein’s private code, to something feminine, for like women, custard ‘has’ eggs and milk” (Murphy 397). While Murphy identifies Stein’s writing as a sexual message to Toklas, this observation informs the trope of pregnancy as well, as it references the themes of “milk,” connoting breastfeeding, and “eggs,” the ovum. Murphy’s apt observation can be extended to many of the foods catalogued in the “Foods” section. Not only do foods and their preparation allude to the domestic and—in 1914 certainly—female sphere, but the ingredients comprising these foods (that, significantly, Stein does not entirely divulge, as would the cookbooks that she imitates¹²) can be seen as references not only to the domestic realm but to the fertility of women. Murphy discerns in the poem “Salad Dressing and an Artichoke” (*Tender Buttons* 496) the sexual undertones that she claims as references to Toklas’ and Stein’s relations. The sequence “please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red stranger, please butter all the beef-steak with regular feel faces” employs, in Murphy’s interpretation, a pun on “–er” for “her,” “giving us

¹² Murphy notes that Stein “takes the form of domestic guides to living: cookbooks, housekeeping guides, books of etiquette, guides to entertaining, maxims of interior design, fashion advice” by way of forming “her very private ‘counter-discourse’ … explaining her own idiosyncratic domestic arrangement by using and displacing the authoritative discourse of the conventional woman’s world” (389).
‘please ache her in the red stranger’” which she argues is “a probable reference to cunnilingus” (Murphy 396-7). Again, the openness of Stein’s language evades the substantiation of any interpretation, and Murphy’s in this case may be unconvincing, but it nevertheless draws on the many techniques by which Stein disguises meaning. The pun on “-er” assists the reader throughout to make better sense of grammatical structure and suggests that there may indeed be a structure encoded in Stein’s writing. Rather than utilize conventional aspects of language—such as definition—Stein uses sound devices such as pun and rhyme to indicate the organization of her language. By this method, she aligns her writing with the semiotic mode that relies on infantile modes of gesture, repetition and sound rather than the symbolic tool of signification.

Stein utilizes rhyme, repetition and “baby-talk” throughout the collection, techniques alternately rebuked and praised by her reviewers. In The Dumb Ox, Wyndham Lewis—a particularly harsh critic of Stein—comments that “this infantile, dull-witted dreamy stutter compels whoever uses it to conform to the infantile, dull-witted type. He passes over into the category of those to whom things are done, from that of those who execute” (Lewis 195). By declaring the passivity of this mode of speech, Lewis not only chastises Stein for writing in this manner but also the reader who seeks to comprehend it. He deems the collection’s “half-wit simplicity,” due to its “every-day proletarian speech and feeling,” “valueless as writing” (202). The likening of Stein’s writing style to that of a child was first noted in The Cubies’ ABC, a 1913 text written in children’s grammar-school primer style with parodic intent. The work, now obscure but endorsed at the time by The Dial, equated her style “with the linguistic habits of children,” an analogy which Kirk Curnutt identifies as inciting “the frequent ‘baby-talk’ jibe” (“Parody” Footnote 8,
such as Lewis’ comment above, that Stein’s work continues to provoke today. The use of such infantile speech patterns, though, does not always incite criticism. James R. Mellow addresses this employment of “nursery rhyme” language and the tendency of Stein’s work to “[read], at times, like a child’s reading exercise” (Mellow 352, 364) as her representation of the process of learning language, aligning her voice with the voice of a child. William Carlos Williams once remarked in a letter to Stein: “I hope it pleases you, but things that children write seemed to me so Gertrude Steinish in their repetitions. Your quality is that of being slowly and innocently first recognizing sensations and experience” (292), a comment which evidently pleased Stein greatly. The proclivity to regress to, or resume, the speech of a child further indicates Stein’s exploration of this not yet fully formed psyche and her discovery of the capacity of language as she writes. By lapsing her language back into this infantile mode and by employing the nursery rhyme techniques of rhyme and repetition, she equates herself with the child who has not yet been instilled with determinate, restrictive language. Further, this mode of speech may serve to exaggerate the trait for which critics chastised her, suggesting that she mocks them by exaggerating their claims against her intellect.

Considering instead that this infantile mode of speech was quite intentional, we can determine that it informs the aim of reverting back to the “primitive mode” noted by Knapp. Identification of this mode returns us to the semiotic qualities of the text. Of the scholars interpreting Tender Buttons, Catharine Stimpson is among the few to identify its

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13 See Kirk Curnett’s article Parody and Pedagogy: Teaching, Style, Voice, and Authorial Intent in the Works of Gertrude Stein wherein he notes that critics often “attribute Stein’s experimentation to various character flaws” (12). Curnett cites “an unsigned 1914 Atlantic Monthly column entitled ‘Gertrude Stein and a Robin,’ which describes the distraction of a twittering bird: ‘There came to me from the front lawn the voice of a robin, and imitating—I remember this with the clearness of a miracle—the moderns. It seemed to me that this particular bird was attempting to do for bird language what Gertrude Stein was doing for the English language’” (12). Stein’s contemporaries Wyndham Lewis and Sinclair Lewis too deem her use of experimental language as evidence of her lack of intellect.
pregnant imagery, an aspect of the poem that echoes this semiotic mode. Stimpson categorizes Stein as “a woman deep within the process of creation” as she “reaches back and down into pre-Oedipal speech” and as she explores an infant’s “acquisition of language” through “the mother’s body” (“Somagrams” 77, 78). Stein’s understanding of the “post-Oedipal” world wherein the infant learns the “father’s rule” that constitutes and perpetuates male “power over and within the female body” (78) compels her study of language acquisition and thus informs her study of the female body. By exploring the pre-Oedipal language associated with the female body, Stein “assumes power over and within language” (79), allowing her to reclaim her authority. Stimpson’s study of Stein’s language acquisition pertains to my study of pregnancy insofar as it considers the female body as a source of production—of both language and life.

Ruddick too finds in Stein’s style an effort to recall the semiotic, pre-Oedipal stage. “By using words noninstrumentally”—for “even where we can identify discursive content, there is an element of verbal play that distracts us”—Stein “undoes the symbolic order” (Ruddick 236). By her disorientating style, she makes us question which words are most valuable within the sentence, again subverting our “imprinted habits” of word valuation. In a line such as “Black ink best wheel bale brown” (Tender Buttons 476) in “It was Black, Black Took,” it is difficult, if not impossible, to know which word is “most important”; the structure makes it so that “everything strikes us as important, so we attend to all impressions equally” (Ruddick 236). Stein effectively divests us of any indication of which word or words require our attention; she does not let us differentiate between them. “If it is true that the thing that makes the symbolic order possible is the elevation of the phallus over the womb,” Ruddick argues, “one begins to destabilize the
symbolic order by bringing the womb back into view” (236). Ruddick connects the image of the womb noted throughout the collection as Stein’s attempt to return us to the precondition of knowledge and self-identification. Stein achieves this by recalling images of the womb, returning us to functions of the womb (“climb up in sight climb in the whole utter”), and by using language that recalls our psychological state (pre-Oedipal, i.e. unable to differentiate) prior to language acquisition. This effort is further signaled by Stein’s notable use of household objects: the domestic sphere, as a space which man does not “occupy,” has not yet been “regulated” (237) by him and the symbolic order. As such, it is particularly available to Stein to experiment with a return to the pre-symbolic realm. Finding this return to the maternal evident in the sexual undertones of the poems, Ruddick claims that the lesbian sexuality insinuated by coded references to the female body functions as an effort to “erotically [rediscover] the mother through a female lover” (238).

Contending with the “inside” of language and finding in pregnancy an image of this symbiotic relationship, Stein continues in the second section of Tender Buttons to explore the event of birth, directed by the language of protection presented in “Objects.” Language throughout the second chapter perpetuates the image of surgery and birth: “The sooner the round it is not round the sooner it is withdrawn in cutting” (Tender Buttons “Roast Beef” 481), “A transfer, a large transfer, a little transfer, some transfer” (481), “No middle space in cutting,” “a centre can place and four are no more and two and two are not middle” (Tender Buttons “Mutton” 482), “A separation is not tightly in worsted and sauce, it is so kept well and sectionally” (Tender Buttons “Sugar” 486). By the return to words such as the “middle,” “cutting,” “transfer,” “round,” and perhaps more
significantly “not round,” Stein implies the removal of that which occupied the “centre.” She later asserts that “the shape is there and the color and the outline and the miserable centre, it is not very likely that there is a centre, a hill is a hill and no hill is contained in a pink tender descender” (*Tender Buttons* “Rooms” 502). The allusion to the birth canal as a “pink tender descender” by which the fetus exits the womb illustrates the event of birth. The “hill” of the pregnant woman’s abdomen is not “contained” in the birth canal because it does not remain there as it did in the womb. Instead, it occupies the birth canal temporarily as it exits the woman’s body. It is no longer “likely that there is a centre” after this process is initiated because the womb no longer serves its function of containment.

Stein’s own comments on her theories of writing, though at times as difficult to decipher as *Tender Buttons* itself, help to elucidate her attitude toward language and her aim in experimenting with it. Composed as a lecture given at Cambridge University and later published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press in 1926, “Composition as Explanation” serves as an elucidation of Stein’s philosophies of writing. With customary repetition, she emphasizes the notion of “beginning” writing. She insists that her writing is “beginning again and again” and she would at every moment “begin again. I would begin again I would naturally begin. I did naturally begin. This brings me to a great deal that has begun” (“Composition” 519). While the lecture does not reference *Tender Buttons* directly, the focus on this “beginning” applies to a newborn, one at the beginning of life. It is with this beginning that Stein finds a place to explore a not yet determined language, one that does not yet inform a particular agenda. When she claims that “this brings me to a great deal that has begun,” she concedes that her interest has expanded
beyond the beginning of language to the beginning of other things as well. She does not identify an interest in pregnancy in this lecture, but this discussion of her linguistic interests does suggest the parallel between the two, and thereby supports the claim of pregnant imagery as central to the collection.

In *Tender Buttons*’ third and final chapter, the very first words return us to the crucial “centre” that has troubled Stein, but with a new response. She suggests, in a departure from the preceding linguistic exercises, that we “act as if there is no use in a centre.” Instead of valuing the center and “[protecting] the centre,” we are asked to eschew it. Rather than interpret the center—such as language structure, the womb—as an “orienting principle” (Knapp 30), she asks us to reject its role as such. When considered as a place of containment for a fetus, the womb serves a very peculiar function. A pregnant woman can be seen to center on her womb when pregnant, but once the birth has taken place, it is no longer an imperative organ. The womb is thus a transitory center. Taking into account Stein’s interpretation of language, this notion of a center that does not last aids her investigation of language and structure. It enables her to contemplate the function of an entity that serves only as it protects. This contested relationship, then, justifies Stein’s vacillation in her attitude toward the center. She says paradoxically, “protect the centre” and “act as if there is no use in the centre.” The reader witnesses her acknowledgment of this center’s necessity and yet her trouble with its sole function of containment. It is a liminal space that not only allows but is required for the formation of the baby, yet once the act of birth rids the womb of the fetus, it no longer serves any particular biological function. It is thus an especially anomalous entity, one that is required for the development of the child that will persist after it is born, but that is itself
discounted with that event. For this reason, Stein contemplates how to approach or interpret this “centre,” both essential for birth and discounted after it. The womb is indeed a space that “protects” but that is later “eliminated.” These shifting priorities enacted by pregnancy and birth make this a particularly fruitful recurring image for Stein as she looks to the structure of language and questions the function of elements such as nouns.

In addition to a discontinued space, the womb represents a space that is not yet a part of—and, as just identified, never will be a part of—culture. It is a necessarily embodied, internal space. The womb and the fetus that it contains are thus entirely free of the limitations imposed by the culture to which the newly born child will immediately be subject and to which the womb never will be. Again, this fact allows Stein to consider the “inside” of language the way that she would prefer: as not yet formed, as not complicit in the making of meaning. A metaphorical space as removed from culture as the womb allows her to put words together without meaning the way that she desires (recall her frustration with the fact that “it is impossible to put [words] together without sense”). And so it is in this metaphorical space that she experiments with language and with the discontinuity of experience that a womb signifies. After the extensive investigation of the center that propelled the poems prefacing this section, Stein implores the reader to reject the notion of the center.

“All change was in the ends of the centre” (*Tender Buttons* 498), she claims, implying that the change occurs by either the elimination or the perimeter of the center. In either interpretation, when the birth has taken place the center no longer holds and as such no longer serves. Alternately, “any change was in the ends of the centre” may

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14 Stein explained that “in *Tender Buttons* and then on I struggled with the ridding of myself of nouns” (*Selected Writings* 460).
indicate that any change occurs *in deference to* the center, that is, the center controls what occurs within it. Regardless, Stein implores her readers to “act as if there is no use in the centre.” As *Tender Buttons* nears its conclusion, she suggests that the reader act as though this center no longer functions as an orienting unit. She had demonstrated in the first sections of *Tender Buttons* the capacity and necessity of this center through her use of maternal imagery and language. But with this closing section Stein suggests that this method of order and arrangement need not exist. She finds in the relationship between womb and child an ideal manifestation of the linguistic relationship between words and structure, inside and outside. *Tender Buttons* first acknowledges this parallel and then questions it. Now that she has begun in section two to look at language as unavoidably meaningful, she wonders if it is possible to stop seeing “the inside as it is seen from the outside.” Is it possible to see the “inside” of language uninhibited by structure?

Reminding the reader that “if the centre has the place then there is distribution” (*Tender Buttons* 499), she suggests that a designated center (one that “has the place”) endowed with significance functions as a point of authority with the power to “distribute.” Stein admits that this “distribution” of meaning is “natural” and confirms that it “can all be seen from the description” (499), that is, that one can see in language the distribution of meaning. By calling this distribution “natural,” she concedes that it may be automatic and not a conscious choice on the reader’s part, but she cautions the reader against allowing language to have this authority. Her descriptions—and her poetry here is nothing if not abstract description—verify her warnings that language works in this authorizing way. The language of *Tender Buttons* disorients the reader because it does not abide by its conventional denotative guidelines. “If the opening is assumed why
should there not be kneeling” (499), she asks. Kneeling, an indication of acquiescence and thus an acknowledgement of the presence of an authority, is mandated by an “opening” being “assumed.” If we allow meaning to be predetermined then we kneel to its authority, thus displacing ourselves as the authority of our own language though we use it. Stein acknowledges the effectiveness of such a system: “this is so nice and sweet and yet there comes the change, there comes the time to press more air” (499). Noting the sentiment only lines before that “The change has come. There is a disturbance” (498), the reader can infer that this text, *Tender Buttons*, represents the change that she describes. What he or she is actively reading is the vessel of this change, this new approach to language that disregards its authority. Labeling the present as “the time to press more air,” Stein indicates that this is the time to push back against authority, to speak up against the dictations of this central governing entity. But this urging to denounce the familiar order of things “does not mean the same as disappearance” (499), she concedes. There is a method by which we can continue to engage in language but one that circumvents the “miserable centre” of its authority.

The “Room” that serves as the title of the final chapter presents a place of seclusion. The speaker occupies a single room; rather than simply observe the “inside from the outside” she has become the “inside.” Knapp identifies this room as “the solitary area within the psyche into which libido (energy) withdraws in order to revitalize what has become worn and arid within being,” making it “comparable to the womb, where the seed is nourished” (Knapp 131). As the location where Stein concludes the collection, the room is a place of discovery and revelation. The result of the linguistic exercises leading up to this final section, the room “provides the seclusion and separation from the outside
world that is crucial to the evolution of the individual” (131), making evident Stein’s motives. If we recognize this room, then, as an exploration of the womb and its effect on the status and identification of the woman containing it and the fetus inhabiting it, then we can discern the significant parallel between language and this condition of pregnancy. “Secluded and separated” from a society that uses and limits it, language is able to “evolve” into its own, liberated entity. Stein has positioned herself and her reader within this room at the collection’s close, providing them both with the opportunity to explore such a language. “Rooms” is the only one of the collection’s three sections that is not divided into separate poems; it consists of one singular poem while “Objects” comprises fifty-eight and “Food,” fifty-one. This arrangement suggests that the “room” is a space without differentiation, again suggesting the womb and the semiotic stage wherein the child cannot differentiate between himself or herself and all else. Everything, in this semiotic stage, is cohesive and contained in that realm of the chora. This arrangement alerts us to the fact that the collection begins with a look outwards, at empirical “objects” around us, separate from us; the poems then transition to “food,” that which we ingest, take in to our bodies; and they finally explore a “room” that we occupy, where everything (the singular poem making up the section suggests as much) is composite, singular. This progression from outside to inside, then, reverses the process of pregnancy and birth, effectively reversing the advancement from semiotic to symbolic, recalling Knapp’s observation that the collection’s division into three parts “may be viewed as an inner trajectory, Stein’s descent into being, into the collective unconscious, the source of creation” (112). Tender Buttons engages an imagined return to the semiotic stage wherein Stein satisfies her hope for undifferentiated words.
In a discussion of the creative process with John Hyde Preston, a writer who had reached a crisis that halted his writing, Stein observed that “you cannot go into the womb to form the child; it is there and makes itself and comes forth whole – and there it is and you have made it and have felt it, but it has come itself” (Preston 188). She explains to him that he cannot anticipate creative inspiration but must instead allow it to form as he writes. Stein acknowledges the conflicted relationship between mother and unborn child: while the mother has indeed “made it,”—the child—“it has come itself,” that is, the mother does not have agency over it while it forms. Too, this metaphor concedes the inaccessibility of the womb to the woman who contains it. It is a part of her yet she cannot access it. It is a part, strangely enough, apart from her. Not only that, but it serves, when occupied by a child, the function of that child and not the woman. With this statement, Stein confirms her cognizance of the vexed agency between mother and child, perhaps providing reason for her use of images of pregnancy in her poetry.

Compounded by the linguistic parallels between Tender Buttons and the semiotic realm, these images of pregnancy indicate her examination of a domain prior to the formation of identity and inculcation into restrictive language. While I find that recent feminist scholarship of Tender Buttons provides both plausible and valuable arguments, these studies neglect to interrogate the assumption that Stein’s linguistic work ties to an attempt to subvert patriarchal language. The convincing argument of Stein’s writing as semiotic brings to the forefront the question of her crafting a specifically female language. We need to consider whether Stein’s writing in the semiotic mode is concomitant with her desire to rid language of its history, that is, do her efforts to revitalize language engender a mode that pertains so closely to the semiotic because of an inherent similarity
between the two approaches to language? Even taking into account the striking parallels between her work and the semiotic, can we assume that Stein’s motivations were the same as those posited by Kristeva as the impetus for a return to the semiotic in poetic writing? If not—if we deem Stein’s motives linguistic rather than feminist—then why does her writing resemble the semiotic? Taking into consideration the correspondence between Stein’s poetic language and the semiotic mode and compounding that observation with the images of pregnancy in *Tender Buttons*, we must consider whether Stein posits women as having particular access to linguistic reappropriation or whether she employs images of the female body simply due to her own access to it. Consultation of Helene Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” and Michel Foucault’s essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in the second chapter of this thesis will elucidate alternate ways in which a body can be employed to understand linguistic and cultural history that prove valuable to the interpretation of Stein’s enigmatic work in light of more recent feminist scholarship.
Chapter Two

Excavating History through the Maternal Body: Theorizing Tender Buttons

“The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.”

-Hélène Cixous

Stein’s alignment with feminism, evidenced by recent scholarship on Tender Buttons, exposes her writing to the charge of essentialism. Writing in the experimental mode theorized by French feminist semiotics, Stein seems to suggest a particularly female access to linguistic appropriation. Resultantly, Stein’s work may be interpreted as evoking the physical traits and maternal capacity of the female body as essential to the revitalization of language. Indeed, if, as this thesis has argued, Stein identifies the maternal body as a nucleus for language acquisition, then Tender Buttons may effectively suppress the role of the male body in discourse. However, while I have thus far conceived of Tender Buttons as an example of the semiotic mode and furthered that categorization with the identification of maternal imagery throughout the text, I do not contend that the collection reveals a feminist agenda, but rather that its semiotic properties suggest an attempt to divest the body of the historical inscription by conventional discourse. By considering Tender Buttons alongside Helene Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” I hope to clarify Stein’s position in regards to French feminism and link her instead to the realm of diachronic linguistic writing, such as Michel Foucault touches upon in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” While I find that Stein’s writing corresponds with Cixous’ solicitation of écriture féminine in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” I argue that Foucault’s studies will help us identify Stein as more fluid in her posture on language than are the French feminists, Cixous particularly, who radically advocate the rejection of
conventional linguistic practices. While Cixous argues that representing the female body in writing will enable the resurgence of women in discourse, Stein demonstrates that this mode may be employed to different ends; that in fact writing the woman’s body may be extended to the maternal capacity of that body and as such this writing may enable one to write the ungendered, fetal body.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” translated into English in 1976, Cixous aggressively lobbies for women to “put [themselves] into the text” (875). She advocates a new language which will wrest authority from the current male-dominated discourse that excludes women, rendering them silent. Titling this language écriture féminine, she expounds:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, refutations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse … Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord. (Cixous 885)

In her lobbying for the writing of the woman’s body, Cixous demands a linguistic revolution that would depose the phallocentrism of current discourse. She beseeches the “woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man” (875), declaring the need for an innovative mode of writing that will represent the female body and as such reject the male body that has historically dominated the construction of discourse. Emphatically resisting the “enormity of the repression that has kept [women] in the dark” (876), Cixous demands the establishment of this insurgent language that will incite the inclusion of
women into discourse. Women, who will be “[brought] to their senses” (875) by this new language, will emerge from the unconscious state to which they are currently bound in their silence, where they “[wander] around in circles, confined to the narrow room in which they’re been given a deadly brainwashing” (877). Although she describes the space currently occupied by these submissive women as a “narrow room,” Cixous perceives this “unconscious” as “impregnable” (877). In this restrictive space, woman can discover a means of escape by raising the voice that has been silenced.

The term “Dark Continent"15 frequently frequents the argument, a continent which Cixous does not distinguish other than to say that she, and few others, “[has] been there” (885). Yet “the Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexploorable” (885), she claims. She declares that this “dark continent” is “unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable” (884) but that it is in fact a compelling space to survey. Her insistence that “the continent is not impenetrably dark” for “I have been there often” (885) returns us to her earlier claim that she is an “exception” to the writers who perpetuate the “phallocentric tradition” in their “same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory” writing; she distinguishes herself as “woman, escapee” (879). With the ensuing comment that she has “been [to the Dark Continent] often,” a place which she illustrates as largely unexplored, we can imagine that she enabled herself to occupy this space by “escaping” the phallocentric tradition. Thus the “Dark Continent” comes to indicate a space only inhabited or visited by those who escape this standard and thus strive to explore an unfamiliar space. In light of the analysis of Tender Buttons

15 Sigmund Freud initially used the phrase “Dark Continent” in a remark that “the sexual life of women is a ‘dark continent’ for psychology” (Freud 38). Cixous’ use of the term alongside her discussion of the maternal figure, I argue, expands its meaning from “the sexual life of women” to include the maternal life of women, both deriving from the female body that grounds Cixous’ argument.
herein, the metaphor of this “Dark Continent,” which Cixous herself does not indicate with any empirical corollary, can be interpreted as a womb-like space, or in Kristeva’s terminology, the *chora*. This space that in Stein’s poetry enables linguistic experimentation is for Cixous worthy of exploration in that it evidences the power of the female body that derives from a maternal capacity that men lack. It is depicted as a space visited only by those who escape the historically male-dominated discourse and to which Cixous, with her understanding of semiotic writing and female empowerment, has gained access. Stein too explores a “Dark Continent” in her poetry which, in a highly semiotic mode, presents images of maternity and gestation. Appealing to the woman who ventures to write her body, Cixous warns: “Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified! Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers. ‘Common’ nouns are also proper nouns that disparage your singularity by classifying it into a species” (892). The signifying function of the noun, she suggests, informs its ability to place words into categories and thus to limit their potential connotations. The conventional determinacy of nouns rebuked by Stein in *Tender Buttons* indeed does constitute an effort to evade this classification “into a species”; Stein’s experimental writing casts off the generalizations that constitute a “species” of meaning. For example, the word “red” traditionally connotes a color and a category such as color can be interpreted as a “species,” yet in Stein’s poetry “red” may not connote a color; instead, it may be employed to indicate “read,” “bread” or some other corollary to the word “red” rather than the *signifier* “red.” Thus Stein eliminates categories or “species” of meaning and continues to align with Cixous’ appeals.
In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Cixous briefly approaches the subject of the female body as maternal. Finding that “a woman is never far from ‘mother’ … There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (881), Cixous celebrates the connection between a mother and her daughter. The daughter first encounters the female body through the nourishment provided by her mother and comes to understand, and potentially appreciate, her own body through that relationship. Thus “there is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other” (881); the potential to produce and nurture is characterized as inherent in the female body. The mother, enlivened by this relationship, “stands up against separation”; she is a “force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out the codes” (882). With this statement, Cixous recalls the crucial attachment of the newly born child to its mother prior to the thetic phase wherein the child “castrates” the mother from itself. The woman, during her child’s pre-Oedipal stage, fights against the separation of the child occasioned by the thetic phase, Cixous suggests. She concludes her analysis of the maternal aspect of the female body by demanding that women “rethink womankind beginning with every form and every period of her body” (882). This urging recalls Stein’s writing in *Tender Buttons* as her efforts to “examine the inside as seen from the outside” direct her to the maternal body and finally to the fetus contained by that body.

Cixous maintains the association between a woman who works to reclaim her body through writing and the maternal, saying: “secretly, silently, deep down inside she multiplies” (888). She claims that the woman who dares to write her body “alone dares and wishes to know from within” (889). Such statements remind us that Stein dares to explore the “inside” with her catalogue of contained objects: she interrogates the
possibility of the “inside” rid from the “outside” through images insinuating birth and she finally becomes the “inside” when she imagines an occupation of the “room” at the conclusion of *Tender Buttons*. Thus “The Laugh of the Medusa” parallels the progression of *Tender Buttons* in that both texts enact a reversion to the feminine, semiotic sphere; the conclusion of *Tender Buttons* reunites the reader with the *chora*—just as écriture féminine strives to do—in that Stein’s poems recall the female body and its drives, among them the “gestation drive” (890). Cixous’ venerated woman considers the “wonder of being several,” identifying herself as “spacious” and “capable of others” (889). Repeatedly Cixous depicts this woman as willing to explore her capacity for reproduction, and this exploration directs her to an “inside,” this “Dark Continent” that had been thought impenetrable.

Naming “the gestation drive” among “the drives that are [women’s] strengths,” Cixous likens this drive to “the desire to write: a desire to live from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language” (890). This claim further evokes Stein’s triumph in “Rooms” when she imagines an occupation of the containing unit. Cixous and Stein both imagine “[living] from within,” as does the fetus. The evolution of *Tender Buttons* from individual, truncated poems consisting of as few as three words (“Peeled Pencil, Choke,” for example, runs “Rub her coke.”) to a single, twelve page poem (“Rooms”) suggests a cohesion by the collection’s conclusion that did not characterize the poems of the first two sections. By characterizing the occupation of a woman’s body with “a desire for language,” Cixous too intimates a fundamental correlation between the “inside” and appropriation of language and discourse. Stein’s words in “Milk,” “climb up in sight climb in the whole utter” (*TB* 487), echo this correlation. Lines such as this one in “Milk”
suggest that the fetus—“that still invisible other” (891)—can be elevated through écritoire féminine.

To bolster the feminist analysis of the female body as a source of power such as Cixous suggests, we can look to Adrienne Rich’s study of the woman of the pre-Christian era. The historical reference of pottery making as a craft credited to women evokes the first poem of Tender Buttons as an example of écritoire féminine as Cixous defines it. Rich cites the “Neolithic, pre-Columbian, Cypriot, Cycladic, Minoan, predynastic Egyptian” (94) woman as an early example of the maternal role. Recapitulating studies showing that “pottery-making was invented by women,” she argues that “the making of the pot is just as much a part of the creative activity of the Feminine as is the making of the child” (Rich 96). Through this craft the primal woman demonstrated her capacity to create. The shape of the “pot, vessel, urn, pitcher,” Rich notes, “was not an ornament or a casual container; it made possible the long-term storage of oils and grains, the transforming of raw food into cooked” (97). By likening the capacity to produce these objects to the “biological endowment” (97) to produce children, Rich’s study reminds us of the very first poem of Tender Buttons, “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass.” An examination of a carafe or vessel, the poem parallels Rich’s studies that liken the vessel to the maternal capacity. While in Stein’s poem the carafe is not explicitly associated with the maternal, it does inform the study of vessels that will later develop into the maternal trope. Stein’s placement of the poem at the very beginning of Tender Buttons suggests its significance within the collection. An understanding of the history of the primal woman such as Rich provides, then, illuminates the initial poem of Stein’s collection. The carafe that begins Tender Buttons serves as a reminder of the primordial
female capacity for creation and nourishment. Further, the statement that woman-made pots “made possible … the transforming of raw food into cooked” recalls the *Tender Buttons* section “Food” and especially its longer poem “Roast Beef” wherein Stein considers the process of cooking and preparing food and which I liken in the first chapter of this thesis to the process of gestation. The inclusion of foods, such as “custard” that consist of eggs and milk and “[make] a whole little hill” (“Tender Buttons” 490) as well as foods that need to be cooked or roasted in an oven render this “Food” chapter indicative of female fertility and gestation. Rich rightly resists the essentialist view of women as “receptacle,” that is, valuable on the sole basis of producing children, that may be evoked by this parallel between pottery and the maternal drive; instead, she advocates the view of the vessel as a derivation of the creative drive, the “primordial creative force” (Rich 96).

Rich’s observations of women’s creative capacity bolster my interpretation that *Tender Buttons* overwhelmingly satisfies Cixous’ solicitation for écriture féminine. The highly semiotic mode of writing, the perceptible attachment to the womb (and thus the female body), the embrace of female sexuality as observed by many Stein scholars—recall Ruddick, Chessman, DeKoven—and, finally, the ridding of language’s determinacy all suggest that Stein’s experimental poetry informs the agenda outlined in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” The singular aspect of Cixous’ feminist theory absent from *Tender Buttons* in this formulation is a condemnation of the patriarchal (i.e. conventional) discourse, which Cixous identifies as sourcing from the phallus. Cixous clearly identifies

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16 In this thesis, the maternal woman has been labeled “receptacle” or “vessel” in terms of her womb; I, however, do not mean to suggest that the womb is metonymous of the woman.
what Chessman titles the “monolith of the Symbolic” (73) as the impetus for écriture féminine; she violently rejects the “imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against [women] and off [their] backs … smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses [who] don’t like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts” (Cixous 877). While Stein’s poetry aligns with Cixous’ appeal, she does not identify or even imply the male as an antagonistic force, nor does she “write” the female body with the fierceness that Cixous demands. Cixous calls the woman who writes her body a “militant” (882) who forges the “antilogos weapon” and makes a “shattering entry” into language with “insurgent writing” (880). Stein, rather than suggest insurgency, writes affectionately of the female body, and sensually rather than vulgarly; her references to sexuality are subtle and her experimentation with language is rarely admonishing. The fact that her writing nevertheless aligns with Cixous’ manifesto suggests that a non-feminist approach to language may nonetheless direct one to a form of writing identified by Cixous—and theorized by Kristeva—as representative of the female body.

As Tender Buttons concludes with an imagined occupation of a “room,” Stein posits the reader as analogous to a developing body, one that has not yet encountered language or the symbolic realm. The readers’ prolonged encounter with Stein’s semiotic language exhibited in the text initiates them into this state. Thus the language of Tender

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17 In discussion of Stein and French feminism, Chessman argues that “instead of focusing on the monolith of the Symbolic” which incites feminists to “discover alternative modes of discourse in order to disrupt or escape from this language,” Stein “recreates language as a field of immense possibility” (73). Chessman suggests that while patriarchal language motivates French feminists to invent a new language, Stein does not identify language as oppressive but rather limiting, and so she attempts to liberate it, not subvert it.

18 Stein’s exploration of the female body, in both its sexual and maternal capacity, is interpreted by many as evidence of her devotion to Alice. Tender Buttons was written as Stein’s brother Leo moved out of the apartment that he had inhabited with his sister and Alice, and thus her relationship with both her brother and her lover changed in this period. The subtlety of the exploration of the female body in Tender Buttons marks it as discreet rather than explicit or crude.
Buttons, while a model of the maternal semiotic, aligns better with the developing fetal body than the female womb. The collection may begin as an examination of “the inside as seen from the outside” but it develops into an occupation of the “inside,” so that the reader becomes separated from the outside. As the collection parallels a reversion from the symbolic to the semiotic, Stein depicts a state of writing that is perpetually in the stage of formation. By practicing this connotative language, she implies that one can escape the conventional denotative function of words; by utilizing a language protected by the womb or chora, Tender Buttons implements and advocates a language that is not yet inculcated into society and thereby limited by its habits of denotation. Discussing psychoanalytic theory, Peter Barry claims that “the child”—by whom he means the pre-Oedipal child—“lives in an Eden-like realm, free of both desire and deprivation” (124). The unborn child allows Stein to extend this notion as she imagines a fetus literally enclosed by the maternal body from the society that would induct it into the post-Oedipal, symbolic realm and thus seize it from this “Eden-like realm.” And so, rather than writing the female body, Stein writes the body contained by the female, the fetal body. As such, Tender Buttons extends Cixous’ study of écriture féminine as it considers that which a pregnant woman protects. This suggestion complicates Cixous’ solicitation of women to write their own bodies, since Stein writes not the woman’s body, yet she does write a body reliant on the woman.

While Stein strives for a discourse unrestricted by gender, the language of Tender Buttons inadvertently relies on the protection of the female womb. The initial chapter of Tender Buttons, “Objects,” foreshadows as much in its emphasis on concealment and protection that the collection finally resolves in its final chapter. Although Stein resisted
assignment to a specific gender category and her writing can be seen as an attempt to maintain a state of gender neutrality, her highly semiotic language evokes the female body, recalling Cixous’ solicitation for the writing of that body. A possible explanation for this mode of writing that evades gender yet relies on imagery of the female womb may be found in what Michel Foucault labels “effective history.”

Foucault’s study of history and genealogy, found in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” posits “effective history” against “traditional history,” which he defines as the retrospective gaze back to distant points in time and thus “given to a contemplation of distances and heights” (89). Conversely, effective history “shortens its visions to those things nearest to it” (Foucault 89), primarily the body. Finding that this “effective” historical approach maintains its connection to the present (the body being presently available, not exclusive to any historical moment yet present in that moment), Foucault argues that effective history is “without constants” (87) and as such evades the determinism with which he charges traditional history. The representation of the fetal body in Stein’s poetry does well to elucidate this effective history in that Stein posits the body as parallel to language, suggesting that bodily formation incites language acquisition. In identifying the body as the source of language, Foucault implies that any person has access to that language. A history that finds its source in close proximity rather than in distance grants each human equal access to language, regardless of the historical treatment of language that has altered it and transformed it into a variety that excludes certain bodies. Foucault charges Nietzsche, on whose studies he elaborates, with “[challenging] the pursuit of origin” on the basis that such a pursuit assumes the occurrence of a singular moment that “assumes the existence of closed off immobile
forms” (78). The endeavor to ascertain an origin is thus an “attempt to capture the true essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities” (78, emphasis mine). No wonder, then, that Foucault’s critique of the “pursuit of [an] origin” directs him to the body. If culture can be said to have a beginning then surely it begins with the body, from which all knowledge is derived. Foucault’s study pertains to Tender Buttons as it may clarify the impact of Stein’s work when interpreted alongside the bodily solicitations of Kristeva and Cixous. Cixous especially links the (female) body with the woman’s status in culture; Foucault too discerns this connection, though he does not gender it. Both Cixous and Foucault hope to rectify the detrimental or misguided past by a return to the body that has been ever present yet not necessarily acknowledged in linguistic or historical studies.

The aspect of Foucault’s study that precisely pertains to Tender Buttons is the return to the body that he claims is mandated by “effective history.” He notes, “effective history studies what is closest” (89), finding in the body the marker of both the present and the past; it simultaneously evidences both. Significantly, he does not remark on gender in this passage, indeed in the entire essay. The effective history with which he contends does not concern gender or sex. Instead, it draws upon the physical functions of the body, the “nervous system, nutrition, digestion, and energies” (89). Foucault illustrates this return to the body as a reevaluation of history; he contends that a return to the body can initiate or indicate a detachment from history’s progression as we understand it. The self, culturally inscribed, can reverse the effects of this inscription by a return to the purely physical, the body. This shift in focus, then, liberates one from the “strict distinctions and laid-down structures” lamented by feminists such as Cixous.
Foucault admits that the body is not a constant throughout cultural time—it “is molded by distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances” (87)—yet he argues that it is nevertheless an element of both the past and present and thus applies to any point in cultural time. The physical body, while marked by cultural response, is yet a “point of reference” (89) to the past, and so through the body we can imaginatively cast off the effects of cultural inscription. As it is this cultural inscription (identified as phallocentric) that Cixous denounces, the two studies intersect at the female body.

Equipped with Foucault’s study, we can identify the maternal female body as a temporal representation of liberation. The body’s link to history enables that body to identify with any point in cultural time, not limited to the present. The maternal body and the fetus that is protects and nourishes, as a space of perpetual beginning, specifically represent a space that has not yet been inculcated into culture. Understanding the womb as a space for exemption from this culture, we can interpret it as a space of temporal respite. Further, this representation of the female body is not necessarily the result of its opposition to the male body—Cixous claims that phallocentric writing “[exaggerates] all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference)” (878)—but rather its opposition to the temporal process of cultural oppression directed toward women. The maternal body, then, serves in Tender Buttons as a platform for Cixous’ écriture féminine yet it evades the male antagonism that incites her argument.
Conclusion

“After all everybody, that is, everybody who writes is interested in living inside themselves in order to tell what is inside themselves.”

-Gertrude Stein

*Tender Buttons* represents through experimental poetry a return to the maternal semiotic and so to the fetal state of protection. This thesis has argued that the subtle imagery of containment and birth in the collection illustrates the trope that it enacts through a semiotic mode of language. I suggest that Stein signifies a reversion to the pre-Oedipal, semiotic state through this experimental writing style, asking the reader to cast off the conventional practice of reading that perpetuates word denotations. Instead, Stein’s writing forces the reader to consider alternate approaches to language than the custom. This reevaluation, predicated on the maternal body presented in the poems, raises the possibility of a female reappropriation of language that evokes the later studies of Helene Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Stein’s efforts to reverse the cultural inscription of language seems to direct her to the female body that Cixous posits as the basis for the new insurgent language of *écriture féminine*. Thus Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” and Stein’s *Tender Buttons* ostensibly align as both women write the female body as a means of opposing the effects of the lamentable aspects of cultural progression. This equation, however, becomes problematic when we consider Stein’s staunch efforts to thwart gender categories, identifying them as irrelevant. Stein’s hereronormative life-long relationship with Alice B. Toklas and her insistence that she thinks “nothing of men and women because that has nothing to do with anything” (*A Geographical History* 178) both evidence her indifference to gender roles and their cultural implications which serve
as the basis for Cixous’ argument. Why, then, do Cixous’ and Stein’s works align? I find in Foucault’s studies of effective history a solution to the perplexing parallel between the two women.

Foucault’s study of effective history which identifies the physical body as an element of both the present and the past argues that a return to this body would enable a better understanding of history and cultural progression. Present in both the historic moment and the contemporary moment, the physical body allows the intellectual, Foucault argues, to relate to the past and thereby expose the constant between past and present. Foucault’s identification of the body as a space equally pertinent to both periods illuminates Stein’s attempt to return to that body, particularly to its fetal state of formation.

This thesis thus simultaneously links Stein’s studies with the semiotic elements of French feminism and exposes the challenge that arises with their affiliation. By reorienting these feminist studies with the aid of Foucault, I locate a solution to this enigma, arguing that a return to the female body may not indicate an opposition to the male body as Cixous suggests with her remark that phallocentric writing “[exaggerates] all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference)” (878). Instead, the maternal body allows Stein to explore an individual not yet incorporated into the linguistic evolution that she laments. Accepting this, we can read *Tender Buttons* as employing the maternal trope as an effort to represent the individual sheltered from cultural inscription, not necessarily one at odds with the “phallocentric” standard as a feminist analysis of *Tender Buttons* may contend. It can thus be reevaluated as an ungendered text, though it alludes to the female body. While *Tender Buttons* satisfies Cixous’ solicitation of écriture
féminine, it can best be understood through Foucault’s concept of effective history. Stein thus recontextualizes Cixous’ agenda, finding a way to rectify discursive female suppression that yet doesn’t require a “shattering entry” into language.

By considering the application of Cixous’ and Foucault’s theories to *Tender Buttons*, I hope to extend the analysis of *Tender Buttons* beyond the feminist position that increasingly dominates Stein scholarship. Positing the collection as an attempt toward the nullification of gendered writing, we may divest the employment of the female body as a tool solely for the construction of a feminist/linguistic argument. Rather than identify the female body as in opposition to the male body and interpret its presentation in language to suggest a reversal or contestation of the male body, this new reading of *Tender Buttons* deploys a position for the female body unrelated to the debate surrounding gender.
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Curriculum Vitae

Katherine M. Williams

Graduate Study
Wake Forest University
Winston Salem, NC
Master of Arts, December 2013
Thesis title: “Sometime There is Breath”: Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons as Maternal Lexicon
Advisor: Mary K. DeShazer

Undergraduate Study
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, VA
Bachelor of Arts, June 2010
Major: English; minor: Russian

International Experience
Summer abroad, Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow

Professional Experience
Manuscript Editor, May – December 2013
Fatherhood, Authority, and British Reading Culture, 1848-1900 (forthcoming from Ashgate Press) by Melissa Jenkins, Assistant Professor at Wake Forest University

Medieval Studies Assistant, Fall 2013
Wake Forest University

Honors and Awards
Summer Research Grant, preliminary thesis research
Wake Forest University, 2013

Summer Tuition Scholarship
Wake Forest University, 2013