

"We owe much to Adrienne Rich and *Of Woman Born*.... It should survive, with Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, as a permanent classic."
—*San Francisco Review of Books*

Of Woman Born



M O T H E R H O O D A S
E X P E R I E N C E
A N D I N S T I T U T I O N



Adrienne Rich

OF WOMAN BORN

BY ADRIENNE RICH

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ADRIENNE RICH

OF WOMAN

BORN MOTHERHOOD AS

EXPERIENCE AND INSTITUTION

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To my grandmothers
Mary Gravely Hattie Rice
whose lives I begin to imagine
and to the activists
working to free women's bodies
from archaic and unnecessary bonds

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. . . ma per trattar del ben ch'i vi trovai,
diro dell' altre cose, ch'io v'ho scorte.

(. . . but to treat of the good that I found there,
I will tell of other things I there discerned.)

—Dante, *Inferno*, 1:3

INTRODUCTION: 1986

There is a peculiar tension between an old idea system from which the energy is gone but which has the heaped-up force of custom, tradition, money, and institutions behind it, and an emerging cluster of ideas alive with energy but as yet swirling, decentralized, anarchic, constantly under attack, yet expressing itself powerfully through action. In our century there are several old ideas cohabiting in the enclave of their privileged status: the superiority of European and Christian peoples; the claim of force as superior to the claims of relation; the abstract as a more developed or "civilized" mode than the concrete and particular; the ascription of a higher intrinsic human value to men than to women.

This book was written more than ten years ago in resistance to all—but especially the last—of these ideas. I wrote it as a concrete and particular person, and in it I used concrete and particular experiences of women, including my own, and also of some men. At the time I began it, in 1972, some four or five years into a new politicization of women, there was virtually nothing being written on motherhood as an issue. There was, however, a movement in ferment, a climate of ideas, which had barely existed five years earlier. It seemed to me that the devaluation of women in other spheres and the pressures on women to validate themselves in maternity deserved exploration. I wanted to examine motherhood—my own included—in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms.

*This introduction was written for the Tenth Anniversary Edition.

Of Woman Born was both praised and attacked for what was sometimes seen as its odd-fangled approach: personal testimony mingled with research, and theory which derived from both. But this approach never seemed odd to me in the writing. What still seems odd is the absentee author, the writer who lays down speculations, theories, facts, and fantasies without any personal grounding. On the other hand, I have felt recently that the late 1960s Women's Liberation thesis that "the personal is political" (which helped release this book into being) has been overlaid by a New Age blur of the personal-for-its-own-sake, as if "the personal is good" had become the corollary and the thesis forgotten. Audre Lorde asks in a recent poem:

What do we want from each other
after we have told our stories
do we want
to be healed do we want
mossy quiet stealing over our scars
do we want
the all-powerful unfrightening sister
who will make the pain go away
the past be not so*

The question of what we do want beyond a "safe space" is crucial to the differences between the individualistic telling with no place to go and a collective movement to empower women.

Over the past fifteen years a vigorous and widespread women's health-care movement has grown up, challenging a medical industry in which women are the majority both as clients and as health workers (most in low-paying, horizontally segregated jobs)—a system notable for its arrogance and sometimes brutal indifference toward women, and also toward poverty and racism as factors in illness and infant mortality.† In particular, the women's health-care movement has focused on gynecology and

* Audre Lorde, "There Are No Honest Poems about Dead Women," in *Our Dead behind Us* (New York: Norton, 1986).

† See, e.g., Nancy Stoller Shaw, *Forced Labor* (New York: Pergamon, 1974); Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979); Michelle Harrison, *Woman in Residence* (New York: Penguin, 1983).

obstetrics, risks and availability of birth control and abortion, women's claiming of decision power over their reproductive life. Its activists have made strong political connections between knowledge of our bodies, the capacity to make our own sexual and reproductive decisions, and the more general empowering of women. If this movement began with women telling their stories of alienated childbirth, botched illegal abortions, needless caesareans, involuntary sterilizations, individual encounters with arrogant and cavalier physicians, these were never mere anecdotes, but testimony through which the neglect and abuse of women by the health-care system could be substantiated and new institutions created to serve women's needs.*

An early landmark institution, for example, was the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Center, founded in 1971 by Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman, where women were taught how to do cervical self-examination with a flashlight, mirror, and speculum. This teaching was both practical and symbolic; it overturned the orthodox assumption that the gynecologist examining a supine woman in stirrups on a table should be more familiar with her reproductive system than the woman herself. Activists like Downer and Rothman held that this imbalance of knowledge added to the mystification of women's bodies and sexuality. In learning to know her vulva and cervix and trace their changes through the menstrual cycle, a woman became less alienated from her body, more aware of her physical cycles, more capable of decision-making, and less dependent on the "experts" of the obstetrical/gynecological profession.

The movement to demedicalize childbirth—to treat it as an event in a woman's life, not as an illness—became a national one, with an increase in home births, alternative birthing practices, and the establishment of "birth centers" and "birthing rooms" in hospitals. Professional midwives were initially at the forefront of this movement, along with women who wanted to experience birth among family and friends with the greatest

* For a detailed historical overview of the women's health-care movement and a listing of present organizations, see "The New" *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984). See also Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay, 1975), p. 158.

possible autonomy and choice in the conduct of their labor. To the extent that the alternative-childbirth movement has focused on birth as a single issue, it has been a reform easily subsumed into a new idealism of the family. Its feminist origins have been dimmed along with its potential challenge to the economics and practices of medicalized childbirth and to the separation of motherhood and sexuality.* Birth centers have not necessarily remained as originally envisioned; nurse-midwives have been replaced by obstetricians who refuse to accept clients on welfare; expensive "obstetrical" beds have replaced simple furnishings.†

A movement narrowly concerned with pregnancy and birth which does not ask questions and demand answers about the lives of children, the priorities of government; a movement in which individual families rely on consumerism and educational privilege to supply their own children with good nutrition, schooling, health care can, while perceiving itself as progressive or alternative, exist only as a minor contradiction within a society most of whose children grow up in poverty and which places its highest priority on the technology of war.

In the ten years since this book was published, little has changed and much has changed. It depends on what you are looking for. A generation of politically active women had shaped much of the climate and hopes of the 1970s, working

* "The Christian Homesteading School offers two Homebirth Courses. . . . We believe and have found through our experience that most births belong at home and that parents can learn all they need for safe home-birth. . . . When you are at the Christian Homesteading School, . . . we ask you to refrain from alcoholic beverages, profanity, non-marital sex, drugs, and the use of such gadgets as transistor radios, recorders, flashlights and cameras. We also ask men to wear long pants and women ankle length dresses" (Janet Isaacs Ashford, ed., *The Whole Birth Catalogue: A Sourcebook for Choices in Childbirth* [Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983], p. 119).

† See Katherine Olsen, *In-Hospital Birth Centers in Perspective* (B.A. thesis, Board of Studies in Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1981). In April 1986 the California legislature will review in committee a bill to set up a licensing process to bring lay midwives into the health-care system. The movement for midwife-attended birth has been strenuously opposed by the medical profession, despite statistics showing dramatically lower rates of complications and perinatal death in midwife-attended home births. Lay midwifery is currently legal or unregulated in thirty-six states. (Janet Isaacs Ashford, "California Should Legalize Lay Midwives," *San Jose Mercury*, March 31, 1986.)

for quality low-cost child-care, for woman-and-child-centered birth instead of medicalized labor and obstetrical high tech, for equal pay for equal work, for the legalization of free and safe elective abortion, for the prevention of sterilization abuse, for the rights of lesbian mothers to custody of their children, for the recognition of rape, including marital rape, as an act of violence, for the recognition of sexual harassment in the workplace as sex discrimination, for affirmative action, for an overall health-care system responsive to women, for changes in the masculine bias of the social sciences and the humanities, and for much else. Yet all these have been at best partial victories, having to be won over and over in the courts and before the public conscience. Enough did change so that for some women—those almost entirely white and of educated background, and most likely to be featured in the media—the conditions of their lives were apparently light-years better than those of their mothers and grandmothers, even their elder sisters.

In 1976, a young woman with a college education could experiment sexually using the pill, enter law school, move in with a boyfriend, postpone childbearing with abortion—legal and safe—as a backup. By 1986, married and working as an attorney, she could decide to have a baby as part of a two-income household, give birth at home with a midwife and supportive obstetrician, find that while the early impetus of women's liberation had given support to her choices in the seventies, a society increasingly obsessed with family life and personal solutions now gave her a great deal of approval for being a mother. She had eaten her cake, she said, yet was having it, too. She was post-feminist, born free.*

Or, the media reported, she was saying that liberation didn't solve anything. Perhaps there were too many choices. The professional world of law (or corporate finance or administration or marketing) was cutthroat, relentless, too competitive if you

* On September 9, 1984, the *New York Times* ran as the cover story of the Sunday magazine an article on "The Working Mother as Role Model." The "working mothers" in question were young professional women with briefcases. All were white. Though the article endorsed their decision to work while raising children, it nagged at the familiar question of possible "psychological effects" on children.

aimed high; it forced you to bend your private life, put too much strain on relationships. There was more autonomy, more real freedom in full-time motherhood. Or so she was quoted as saying.

Had enough changed for her? Even for her the seemingly wider choices were strictly limited. She had the choice to compete in an economic system in which most paid women's work was done in the horizontally segregated female ghetto of service and clerical work, cleaning, waitressing, domestic labor, nursing, elementary-school teaching, behind-the-counter selling by women with less education and fewer choices. And the glossy magazines did not ask those women about their feelings of conflict, their problems with child-care. Rather, they interviewed middle-class white men about "parenting," about "male mothering," the luxury of caring for a baby whose mother chose to work outside the home.

By 1980 a new wave of conservatism—political, religious, deeply hostile to the gains made by women in the 1970s—was moving across the country. Although an ever-increasing majority of families in the United States do not fit the "nuclear" pattern, the ideology of the patriarchal family system was again ascendant. The 1980s "war against the poor" has been above all a war against poor women and their children, woman-headed households from whom, relentlessly, federal services and supports have been withdrawn. Antihomosexual and antiabortion campaigns, heavily funded by the Right and by the churches, have eroded the grounds of choice widened by the gay rights movement and the 1973 Supreme Court decisions on abortion. The working mother with briefcase was, herself, a cosmetic touch on a society deeply resistant to fundamental changes. The "public" and the "private" spheres were still in disjunction. She had not found herself entering an evolving new society, a society in transformation. She had only been integrated into the same structures which had made liberation movements necessary. It was not the Women's Liberation movement that had failed to "solve anything." There had been a counter-revolution, and it had absorbed her.

Enough changes did not occur for the 61 percent of poor

adults in 1984 who were women.* For the single mother imprisoned for a nonviolent crime—petty theft, writing a bad check, forgery—forbidden to see her children or even know where they had been taken.† For the Chicana mother and cannery worker, trying to feed her children for the duration of a strike (not for higher wages but against wage reduction), evicted for falling behind in her rent. For the Black domestic worker and community organizer, taking in her unemployed daughter and grandchildren to her tiny apartment. For the many others who, under the 1980s cuts in programs for mothers and children, and rising unemployment, found themselves not just poor but desperate and, increasingly, homeless. For the working-class lesbian couple trying to raise their children in a climate of intensified gay-hating and a depressed economy. For the blue-collar mothers once proud of their ability to cope, finding themselves on line outside the soup kitchen with their children. Women without briefcases, many of them refugees in the swirl of displacement, a new language, a new culture.

Some ideas are not really new but keep having to be affirmed from the ground up, over and over. One of these is the apparently simple idea that women are as intrinsically human as men, that neither women nor men are merely the enlargement of a contact sheet of genetic encoding, biological givens. Experience shapes us, randomness shapes us, the stars and weather, our own accommodations and rebellions, above all, the social order around us.

As I write this, the assault on women's right to safe and affordable abortion is in loud crescendo. The library of texts—pro and con, legal, theological, ethical, political—relating to abortion has doubled since I wrote the final chapter of this book. Self-described antiabortion pacifists and antiabortion feminists, as well as terrorists, have joined the fray, along with or including Christian fundamentalists with strong Right Wing

* See James Reston, "Do We Really Care?" *New York Times*, February 16, 1986.

† Laura Boytz, "Incarcerated Mothers Kept from Children," *Plexus: West Coast Women's Press*, Vol. 11, No. 9 (December 1984), p. 1.

convictions about the nuclear family and strong objections to interference by the State in the sphere of family life. "From their point of view, the family is both beleaguered and sacred, and any policy that seeks to address the members of a family as separate entities, rather than as an organic whole, is a priori harmful."*

Arguments against abortion have in common a valuing of the unborn fetus over the living woman. If "the debate about abortion is a debate about personhood,"† the Women's Liberation movement is also a movement about personhood (as is every liberation movement). The living, politicized woman claims to be a person whether she is attached to a family or not, whether she is attached to a man or not, whether she is a mother or not. The antiabortion stand seeks to drive a single monolithic wedge into a cluster of issues such as male sexual prerogatives, prescriptive heterosexuality, women's economic disadvantage, racism, the prevalence of rape and paternal incest. The woman is thus isolated from her historical context as woman; her decision for or against abortion is severed from the peculiar status of women in human history.‡ The antiabortion movement trivializes women's impulses toward education, independence, self-determination as self-indulgence. Its deepest unwritten text is not about the right to life, but about women's

* See Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984), p. 173. Luker goes on to note that "this explains the frequent opposition of pro-life people to . . . free school lunches, day care centers, extra nutrition for pregnant mothers, and anti-child abuse programs . . . not because they are necessarily opposed to the content of such programs but because they resist the idea of letting the state into the sacrosanct territory of the home." The "pro-life" movement also considers birth control by all means but one "abortifacient" (i.e., causing abortion). Only "Natural Family Planning"—an elaboration of the earlier "rhythm system"—or abstinence is considered acceptable as birth control. See Luker, pp. 165-66.

† *Ibid.*, p. 5.

‡ In *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), Beverly Wildung Harrison calls "the devaluation of women" an "unacceptable moral heritage that requires correction" (p. 7). She notes that "unless procreative choice is understood as a desirable historical possibility, substantially conducive to every woman's well-being, all debate concerning abortion is morally skewed from the outset. Yet no question is more neglected in the moral evaluation of abortion than the question of whether women should have procreative choice" (p. 41).

right to be sexual, to separate sexuality from procreation, to have charge over our procreative capacities.

Allowing the "discrete act" of abortion to be treated as the real issue, some advocates have fallen back on the barren ground of arguing that it is "simply a surgical procedure." But the overall feminist position has been more complex, having to do with contexts, with social transformation, with the use and abuse of power, with relationships freed from domination-submission models. For all its claims to a higher moral stance, antiabortion rhetoric shrinks the scope and richness of moral choice. It does not look at the world beyond the fetus unless in the slippery-slope argument that in countenancing the killing of fetuses we will go straight on to killing the old, the mentally retarded, the physically handicapped.* But the imbalance between concern for women and concern for fetuses is twinned by the imbalance between the attention antiabortionists accord the fetus and that accorded the most vulnerable people already living under terrible pressures in American society—the old, the homeless, the differently abled, the darker-skinned, the one out of four children of preschool age living in poverty, the abused child or children in the nuclear family.

An antiabortion morality that does not respect women's intrinsic human value is hypocrisy. But so is an antiabortion morality that is lavished upon the rights and values of the fetus, yet can condone the cynical indifference to the full spectrum of human life which is now official policy in the United States.

I would not end this book today, as I did in 1976, with the statement "The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers." If indeed the free exercise by all women of sexual and procreative choice will catalyze enormous social transformations (and I believe this), I also believe that this can only happen hand in hand with, neither before nor after, other claims which women and certain men

* For discussion of attitudes toward abortion on the part of differently abled women, see Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, *CARASA News*, Committee for Abortion Rights and against Sterilization Abuse (New York: June-July, 1984). See also in "The New" *Our Bodies, Ourselves* "Abortion, Amniocentesis and Disability," p. 303.

have been denied for centuries: the claim to personhood; the claim to share justly in the products of our labor, not to be used merely as an instrument, a role, a womb, a pair of hands or a back or a set of fingers; to participate fully in the decisions of our workplace, our community; to speak for ourselves, in our own right.

Most of the labor in the world is done by women: that is a fact. Across the world, women bear and care for children, raise, process, and market food, work in factories and sweatshops, clean the home and the office building, engage in barter, create and invent group survival. Procreative choice is for women an equivalent of the demand for the legally limited working day which Marx saw as the great watershed for factory workers in the nineteenth century. The struggles for that "modest Magna Carta," as Marx calls it, came out of a time when the employer literally owned the lifetime of the laborer. The Factory Acts did not end capitalism, but they changed the relation of the workers to their own lives.* They also replaced the individual worker's powerlessness with a realization that collective confrontation could be effective.

For centuries, women also have acted, often without direct confrontation, from a collective understanding that their bodies were not to be exploited. Orlando Patterson reports that in Jamaica under slavery, "not only was the mortality rate abnormally high but, more extraordinarily, slave women absolutely refused to reproduce—partly out of despair and outrage, as a form of gynecological revolt against the system, and to a lesser extent because of peculiar lactation practices." Angela Davis reports similar patterns under Afro-American slavery. Michael Craton notes that although slave women in Jamaica could be relieved of heavy field labor by having a certain number of children and raising them, they yet remained childless or had very few children. After emancipation the birthrate increased.†

* Karl Marx, *Capital* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1906), I, pp. 255–330.

† Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 133; Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 205;

Angela Davis emphasizes that although "Black women have been aborting themselves since the earliest days of slavery," abortion has not been seen as "a stepping-stone toward freedom," but as an act of desperation "motivated . . . by the oppressive conditions of slavery."* With due respect to Davis, I think that she may underestimate the degree to which white women have also resorted to abortion as an "act of desperation" within the context not of chattel slavery, but of other pressures: rape, sexual betrayal, familial incest, total lack of support for the unmarried mother, poverty, failure of attempts at birth control, and ignorance or unavailability of birth-control possibilities. Abortion can be an act of economic desperation under an economic exploitation which, though less total and overtly violent than slavery, offers women minimal options both in the workplace and the home. If the right to abortion is a stepping-stone toward freedom, it can be so only along with other kinds of stepping-stones, other kinds of action. And, as Davis points out, a feminist movement for reproductive rights needs to be very clear in dissociating itself from the racism of "population control" and eugenics movements, and in making opposition to involuntary sterilization an integral part of its politics.†

As a white, middle-class, educated woman who in the late 1950s had had to plead and argue for sterilization after bearing three children, I understood at first only that sterilization on

Michael Craton with Garry Greenland, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 96. See also Linda Gordon, "The Folklore of Birth Control," in *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman-Viking, 1976), pp. 26–46.

* Davis, pp. 204–5.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 202–21. See also *Sterilization: Some Questions and Answers* (1982; Committee for Abortion Rights and against Sterilization Abuse, 17 Murray Street, Fifth Floor, New York, NY 10007); Helen Rodriguez's comments on sterilization propaganda in Helen B. Holmes, Betty B. Hoskins, Michael Gross, eds., *Birth Control and Controlling Birth: Woman-centered Perspectives* (Clifton, N.J.: Humana Press, 1980), pp. 127–28; and Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 266–67, and Committee for Abortion Rights and against Sterilization Abuse, *Women under Attack: Abortion, Sterilization Abuse, and Reproductive Freedom* (New York: CARASA, 1979).

demand was as necessary as free and legal abortion. I vividly recall the impact of the contradiction that emerged in the seventies: while the medical establishment was reluctant to sterilize women like myself, the same professionals and the federal government were exerting pressure and coercion to sterilize large numbers of American Indian, Black, Chicana, poor white, and Puerto Rican women. A thirty-year policy under the U.S. Agency for International Development resulted in the sterilization of 35 percent of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age.* Between 1973 and 1976, 3,406 American Indian women were sterilized; at one Indian Health Services hospital in Oklahoma, one out of every four women admitted was sterilized—194 in a single year. (In 1981, 53.6 percent of teaching hospitals in North America still made sterilization a requirement for abortion.) Suits such as those brought by the Southern Poverty Law Center on behalf of the Relf sisters (see page 75n) or *Madrigal v. Quilligan* on behalf of ten Mexican-American women against the Los Angeles County Hospital in 1974 dramatized the contradiction and led to sterilization-abuse activism demanding the release of HEW (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) guidelines for voluntary sterilization.† Up to the release of the guidelines, HEW was financing 100,000 sterilizations a year through Medicaid and family-planning agencies.‡

In 1977, the Hyde Amendment cut off the use of Medicaid funds for abortions but continued funding for sterilizations. In the same year, at the National Conference on Sterilization Abuse, a broad-based coalition—American Indian, Black, and Latina women, feminist health activists, alternative media, religious and community social-action groups—pressured HEW to issue regulations for all federally funded sterilizations. “Informed consent about the procedure and alternatives was to be provided in the preferred language of the client; consent could not be obtained during labor; a thirty-day waiting period was mandated; and there was a moratorium on sterilizing people

* *Sterilization: Some Questions and Answers*, p. 9.

† Thomas M. Shapiro, *Population Control Politics: Women, Sterilization, and Reproductive Choice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), pp. 92–93.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

under the age of twenty-one.”* (The majority of people targeted for involuntary sterilization are women.)†

A storm of opposition came from hospital administrators, obstetricians, gynecologists, and a range of family-planning and also feminist organizations. The National Organization for Women and the National Abortion Rights Action League took the position that the regulations were an undesirable form of protective legislation, detracting from female autonomy.‡ Many white feminists could not understand that the facilities for “sterilization on demand,” with no waiting period, could and did easily turn into sterilization abuse if a woman was dark-skinned, was a welfare client, lived on a reservation, spoke little or no English, was a woman whose intelligence and capacity to judge for herself were assumed to be below par for any of the above reasons. I myself had to struggle with this contradiction. Drawing on my own experience, I had not felt the other edge of the policies in question. The sterilization issue did bring home to me how race and class make a difference of even the most basic shared experiences among women—the experience of having our reproductive choices made for us by male-dominated institutions.§

* *Ibid.*, pp. 137–42.

† See Robert H. Blank, “Human Sterilization: Emerging Technologies and Re-emerging Social Issues,” *Science, Technology and Human Values*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 1984), pp. 8–20.

‡ Shapiro, p. 139.

§ In a 1983 essay “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization and the State,” Gisela Bock deals with this issue as it manifested itself in the Nazi period (and, according to her essay, as it is again surfacing in Germany). She suggests that “where sexism and racism exist, particularly with Nazi features, all women are equally involved in both, but with different experiences. They are subjected to one coherent and double-edged policy of sexist racism or racist sexism (a nuance only of perspective) but they are segregated as they live through the dual sides of this policy, a division that also works to segregate their forms of resistance to sexism as well as to racism. . . . As far as the struggle for our reproductive rights—for our sexuality, our children and the money we want and need—is concerned, the Nazi experience may teach us that a successful struggle must aim at achieving both the rights and the economic means to allow women to choose between having or not having children. . . . Cutbacks in welfare for single mothers, sterilization abuse, and the attacks on free abortion are just different sides of an attack that serves to divide women. Present population and family policy in the United

With the promulgation of HEW regulations in 1978, many sterilization-abuse groups disbanded or regrouped around the abortion issue. But regulations have not been a solution to the structural problems surrounding the issue. Shapiro found in 1985 that while "minorities, until recently, were sterilized in substantially greater proportions than whites," currently

the poor are sterilized at disproportionately high rates. . . . Sterilization against minorities has not declined. Instead, sterilizations among whites are increasing. . . . Furthermore, the "catch-up" appears to come among poorer whites on welfare.*

Engrained attitudes about women (discussed in Chapters IV, V, and VIII of this book), about poor people, about people of color; an ever-growing reliance on medicine and technology to solve social problems; a neo-Malthusian population-control mindset that focuses on "overpopulation" instead of the just allocation of resources—these persist. As Shapiro has put it, "The state makes it easier for a mother on welfare to obtain a sterilization than to keep warm in winter, find child care, or provide nourishing meals for her children."†

The linking of abortion rights with sterilization abuse is very powerful because it connects women's reproductive issues across lines of class and race and because it dramatizes the necessity for women, whoever they are, to decide how their bodies shall be used, to have or not have children, to be sexual and maternal as they choose. Abortion may be criminalized again within the next half-decade or less. If so, thousands of women will die in pain and loneliness from botched illegal abortions or self-abortions. Poor women will suffer most and have the highest mortality. Racketeers of abortion will make thousands of dollars, and conscientious practitioners willing to risk themselves (including women helping other women) will go to, or risk, prison. But today there is a critical mass of women

States and the Third World make the German experience under National Socialism particularly relevant" (Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* [New York: Monthly Review Press New Feminist Library, 1984], pp. 271-96).

* Shapiro, pp. 98-103.

† *Ibid.*, p. 189.

who collectively know far more than most women have known in this century about physical caring for themselves and each other. There exists not simply a nearly two-decades-old political movement of women, but a movement of women's self-education and health education which has created a wealth of resources. The struggle will be carried on, above- and underground, by women and some men fully aware that this is not an isolated issue or a simplistic one, that the availability of safe abortion on demand is merely one of the issues on which we must come together, that the stakes are not abortion per se, but the power of women to choose how and when we will use our sexuality and our procreative capacities, and that this in all its many implications opens the gate to a new kind of human community.

Like much radical-feminist writing of its period, this book relies heavily on the concept of patriarchy as a backstop in which all the foul balls of history end up. I tried in these pages to define patriarchy as concretely as possible, not let it slide into abstraction. But I didn't, and most certainly today don't, want to let "patriarchy" become a catchall in which specific areas of women's experience get obscured. The problem of framing women's specific oppression as women has been taken up in various ways by different groups of feminists. For example, in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, a volume of essays published in 1979 and edited by Zillah Eisenstein, you can see the difficulties white Marxist-feminists have encountered in trying to bring together both a feminist and class analysis—"dissolving the hyphen" in Rosalind Petchesky's phrase. In the same collection, in "The Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement" you can see Black women working both to separate out and to reconnect the battle fronts of class, race, and sex.*

Patriarchy is a concrete and useful concept. Whether it is con-

* Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979). See also Gloria I. Joseph, "The Incompatible M^{énage} à Trois: Marxism, Feminism, and Racism," in Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

sidered as a phenomenon dating from capitalism or as part of the precapitalist history of many peoples, which must also be confronted under existing socialisms, it is now widely recognized as a name for an identifiable sexual hierarchy. We are not in danger of losing our grasp on patriarchy as a major form of domination parallel and interconnected to race and class. But to view patriarchy as a pure product, unrelated to economic or racial oppression, seems to me today to skew the lines of vision along which we proceed to act.

The other side of patriarchy-as-catchall is the idealization of women. White feminists have not, it seems, found it easy to express a feminist vision without tripping on the wires of that realm known as "women's culture" which so often corresponds strongly to the "separate sphere" of the Victorian female middle class. As mothers, women have been idealized and also exploited. To affirm women's intrinsic human value in the face of its continuing flagrant and insidious denial is no easy thing to do in steady, clear, unsentimental terms. For white middle-class women in particular, the mystique of woman's moral superiority (deriving from nineteenth-century ideals of middle-class female chastity and of the maternal) can lurk even where the pedestal has been kicked down.

In this regard I find myself dubious about the politics of women's peace groups, for example, which celebrate maternity as the basis for engaging in antimilitarist work. I do not see the mother with her child as either more morally credible or more morally capable than any other woman. A child can be used as a symbolic credential, a sentimental object, a badge of self-righteousness. I question the implicit belief that only "mothers" with "children of their own" have a real stake in the future of humanity.

And this is surely one of the lines on which, in the United States, American Indian and Black women have had a very different understanding rooted in their respective community history and values: the shared concern of many members of a group for all its young.

I treated such differences insubstantially, if at all, in my chapter "Motherhood and Daughterhood." There, I was trying

to scan the territory using instruments then most familiar to me: my own experience, literature by white and middle-class Anglo-Saxon women (Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood), and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's analysis of white middle-class female relationships in the nineteenth-century eastern United States. While I did not confine myself solely to these materials, they became the lens for viewing my subject, to such a degree that even personal testimony was skewed. In writing, for example, of having been cared for by a Black nurse, I tried to blur that relationship into the mother-daughter relationship. But a personalized "understanding" did not prevent me from gliding over the concrete system within which Black women have had to nurture the oppressor's children. (See my 1986 note to this passage, p. 255.) Moreover, relying on ready-to-hand Greek mythology, I was led to generalize that "the cathexis between mother and daughter" was endangered always and everywhere. A consideration of American Indian, African, and Afro-American myth and philosophy might have suggested other patterns.

A rich literature by Afro- and Caribbean-American women, and more and more by American Indian, Asian-American, Latina women, offers the complexity of this different perspective. In Alice Childress's play *Florence*, the mother is both fiercely protective of her daughter and fiercely determined to support her daughter's aspirations in a world which wants her daughter to be nothing but a domestic worker. Pauline Breedlove, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, has herself been so damaged by internalized racism that she can neither love nor try to protect her own child, while doting on her employer's blonde children. Toni Cade Bambara's story "Medley" is written in the voice of a mother "just now getting it together," "an A-1 manicurist" unfooled and unfazed by men. Doing the nails of a big-time cardsharp or scat-singing in the shower with her boyfriend, her declared agenda "is still to make a home for my girl." In the title story of Bambara's *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, the mother, a revolutionary in some part of the world suggestive of Vietnam, hands her daughter over to a woman comrade to keep safe till the liberation of the city, in which the maternally schooled child will also do her part. Though the

characters are not ostensibly Black, the story has behind it the history of nineteenth-century slave rebellions and the Underground Railroad. Intense conflict between mother and daughter, in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*, marks what Mary Helen Washington has called "the most complex treatment of the mother-daughter bond in contemporary American literature." Eva Peace, in Morrison's *Sula*, is forced to pour all her forces into fighting for her children's survival; her maternal love expresses itself in action to the last, in a context so basic in its stringencies that it allows for no "female world of love and ritual." In *Zami*, Audre Lorde depicts a West Indian immigrant mother raising three daughters in the alien world of Harlem, U.S.A.; she is strict, self-contained, loyal to her husband, unaffectionate save at the time of her daughter's first menstruation. It is her house that the daughter must leave to become a poet and a lesbian. But even in this short list, specific cultural differences mediate mother-daughter interactions—Afro-American, West Indian, urban, rural.*

Consider the implications of Joyce Ladner's statement that

Black females are socialized . . . in early life to become strong, independent women who because of precarious circumstances growing out of poverty and racism, might have to eventually become heads of their own households.†

* Alice Childress, *Florence, in Masses & Mainstream*, Vol. III (October 1950), pp. 34-47; Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972, 1976); Toni Cade Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (New York: Random House, 1977); Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (New York: Feminist Press, 1981); Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam, 1974); Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1982). For a valuable analysis of the mothers and daughters in Toni Morrison's fiction, see Renita Weems, "'Artists without Art Form': A Look at One Black Woman's World of Unrevered Black Women," in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983).

† Joyce Ladner, *Labeling Black Children: Some Mental Health Implications*, V (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Urban Affairs and Research, Howard University, 1979), p. 3; quoted in Gloria I. Joseph, "Black Mothers and Daughters: Traditional and New Populations," *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 1984), p. 17.

To be a Black and female head of household does not mean possessing wider social and political power, though it can often imply leadership and responsibility within the community. It involves the diverse tasks of providing, protecting, teaching, setting goals, always in the antagonistic and often violent context of racism. Gloria I. Joseph, who has done pioneering studies on Black mother-and-daughterhood, amplifies Ladner in finding that

there is a tremendous amount of teaching transmitted by Black mothers to their daughters that enables them to survive, exist, succeed, and be important to and for the Black communities throughout America. These attitudes become internalized and transmitted to future generations.*

Joseph also notes that it is typical in the Black family for mothering to be done by many, including siblings.

Black women play integral parts in the family and frequently it is immaterial whether they are biological mothers, sisters, or members of the extended family. From the standpoint of many Black daughters it could be: my sister, my mother; my aunt, my mother; my grandmother, my mother.†

Psychoanalysis and psychology have placed a high priority on the "primal" relationships assumed within the nineteenth-century, European, nuclear middle-class family, where psychoanalysis arose: male parent, female parent, female child, male child. But in reading the above comment by Gloria Joseph, I'm reminded of a poem by Bea Medicine, Lakota anthropologist:

* Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Anchor Books, 1981), pp. 75-186. Joseph's work is particularly rich in its analysis of cultural styles and cultural institutions such as "Mother's Day," and maternally transmitted attitudes toward men and marriage.

† *Ibid.*, p. 76. In her 1984 article in *SAGE*, Joseph examines both lesbian and teenage motherhood. She calls on Black communities to accept lesbian mothers and their children, and she suggests the part played by racism and poverty as well as sexism in dispossessing poor young Black women of other possible aspirations besides an infant of their own.

A woman of many names
 all kinship designations—
 Tuwin—aunt
 Conchi—grandmother
 Hankashi—female cousin
 Ina—mother
 all honorable,
 all good.*

In recent writing by women of color in this country the affirmation of the mother-daughter bond is powerfully expressed, not primarily in terms of a dyad but as a facet of a culture of women and a group history that is not merely personal. There are, of course, wide variations of culture and history, framed by the fact of racism and of the positions occupied by women of color in a racist and sexist economy. The first bilingual volume of fiction by Latina women begins:

Most Latinas, in looking to find some kind of literary tradition among our women, will usually speak of the "cuentos" our mothers and grandmothers told us. . . . For the most part, our lives and the lives of the women before us have never been fully told, except by word of mouth. But we can no longer afford to keep our tradition oral—a tradition which relies so heavily on close family networks and dependent upon generations of people living in the same town or barrio.†

Thus, the mother's telling, if not the mother tongue, is the source of literature. The same idea has been expressed by Paule Marshall, by Andre Lorde in *Zami*, by Cherrie Moraga in "La Güera,"‡ and is furiously explored in Nellie Wong's poem "On the Crevices of Anger":

* Bea Medicine, "Ina 1979," in Beth Brant, ed., *A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women* (Montpelier, Vt.: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984), pp. 109-110.

† Alma Gomez, Cherrie Moraga, Mariana Romo-Camma, eds., *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983), p. vii.

‡ Cherrie Moraga, "La Güera," in Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1981), pp. 27-35.

Ai ya, yow meng ah! How can we even begin
 to know, to understand if we close our ears,
 if we shut our eyes to the moon,
 crater our own bodies, ignore
 the human touch?
 I hold my mother now in my arms
 though she's not here.
 She never held me
 she never held me
 but it's not too late,
 not when I breathe and decipher her voice,
 though harsh, shrill and calling
 through my skin's flakings.
 . . . I still seek my mother
 who knew no fame, no notoriety, who shelled shrimps
 for pennies a day. . . .
 She wrote some English, some Chinese
 and she wept after the birth
 of each daughter.
 She is the poet who saw and didn't see me.*

In an essay on Asian-American feminism, Merle Woo writes of ending the silence of Asian women—a manifesto written as a letter to her mother. In Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan*, the protective (and self-protective) silence of the Issei great-aunt is broken by the militant Nisei aunt, the family historian and fact-seeker. Kogawa examines the decimation of an extended Japanese-Canadian family through war and racism; yet the child whose mother only briefly survived Hiroshima has two female guardians, each doing what she does best—against the grain of years of relocation, dispossession, and fragmentation.†

Writing of the resistance to the Relocation Act by the Hopi and Navajo people of Big Mountain, Arizona, Victoria Seggerman underscores the role played by the "grandmothers"—mature and elder women—both in extended family life and as leaders of resistance. "Mothers are responsible for the economic, social and ritual knowledge of their daughters. . . . Grand-

* Nellie Wong, "On the Crevices of Anger," *Conditions*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1978), pp. 52-57. "Yow meng ah!" (have mercy!).

† Merle Woo, "Letter to Ma," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, op. cit., pp. 140-47; Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Boston: Godine, 1981, 1984).

mothers hold a special position because they pass on the clan and the lineage as well as the mythology and ceremonies. . . . Relationships of power, authority and influence are structured along matrilineal lines; descent and socialization are the responsibility of the mother's lineage. Women are respected for their counsel, their motherhood and their earning abilities." Unfortunately, some white feminists have tended to idealize and expropriate American Indian values, trying to absorb them into an eclectic and unrooted feminist spirituality or utopianism, with little active concern for ongoing white destruction of Indian families, tribes, nations, peoples; the forcible severing of children from their maternal homes; the driving of people from their grandmothers' lands; the rates of sterilization abuse on Indian women. The spiritual and practical power of the mature Indian woman is cruelly constrained by the coercions of the United States government.*

I mention these as a few of the works that have challenged and amplified my thinking as it existed in Chapter IX.

In 1986, the visibility and varieties of lesbian motherhood are greater than they were in 1976. At that time it seemed important to discuss lesbian mothering as an integral part of the experience of motherhood in general, not to set lesbian mothers apart, in a separate chapter. Lesbians raising children from previous marriages, alone or in lesbian couples, were beginning to be visible, as many women who had formerly identified

* Victoria Seggerman, "Navaho Women and the Resistance to Relocation," *off our backs* (March 1986), pp. 8-10. See also Kate Shanley's "Thoughts on Indian Feminism," Beth Brant's "A Long Story," and Lynn Randall's "Grandma's Story," in *A Gathering of Spirit, op. cit.*, pp. 213-16, 100-7, and 57-60, respectively.

As this manuscript goes to press, Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* has just been published (Boston: Beacon, 1986). Allen treats in depth Indian attitudes towards motherhood and mothering—attitudes so different from white and Christian-influenced ones that they are almost inevitably bent and distorted when reported on by white sources, or shallowly expropriated into white, nontribal ideas of gynocracy. See especially her essays "Grandmother of the Sun" (pp. 13-29), "When Women Throw Down Bundles" (pp. 30-42), "Where I Come From Is Like This" (pp. 43-50), and "Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism" (pp. 209-21).

heterosexually began to leave marriages and come out as lesbians.*

Perhaps the most overtly painful and divisive issue in the 1970s was that of sons. Many lesbian communities struggled as to the place of male children, of whatever age or beyond a certain age, in the actual physical spaces or the political concerns of the community. At bedrock, the argument was between the objection to "giving energy" to males, however young, and the hope that a young male raised in a politically conscious female community would grow into a new kind of man. As is obvious from Chapter VIII of this book, I hold to such hopes.

Today, after a decade of court battles for the rights of lesbian mothers to custody of their children, new issues and new perspectives have emerged. Many lesbians, in and outside of couples, are having children by artificial insemination. Women who coparent with lesbian mothers are seeking recognition as parents, including visitation and custody rights. To sign a school report card, visit a hospitalized child, or give consent to medical treatment in the mother's absence becomes a legal-rights issue for the lesbian coparent as it does not for a married step-parent. On the death or incapacity of the biological mother, however long and close the bond between coparent and child, that child is most likely to be assigned to the father or any surviving blood relative instead. Meanwhile, biological lesbian mothers still face homophobic prejudice in any custody challenge.

Sandra Pollack notes that much research on lesbian mothering has come out of the struggle for custody, and that its empha-

* Sandra Pollack has noted, however, that in the mainstream mind the lesbian mother is still in a "theoretically impossible category, while in the early 1970's open lesbians working in the women's movement were often 'closet mothers.'" As of 1976, it was estimated that 10 percent to 20 percent of adult women were lesbians and that 13 percent to 20 percent of these were mothers (Sandra B. Pollack, "Lesbian Mothers: An Overview and Analysis of the Research, a Lesbian Feminist Perspective," to appear in a book on lesbian parenting, coedited by Sandra B. Pollack and Jeane Vaughan and published in 1987 by Firebrand Books, Ithaca, N.Y.). The statistics quoted by Pollack are from Nan Hunter and Nancy Polikoff, "Custody Rights of Lesbian Mothers: Legal Theory and Litigation Strategy," *Buffalo Law Review*, Vol. 25, No. 691 (1976), p. 691.

sis has lain on showing that "lesbian mothers are just like other mothers—or at least like other single mothers." Where the courts attempt to establish "parental fitness," heterosexuality and traditional sex-role stereotyping are held as norms for the children; the daughter of a lesbian will be seen as healthy and stable if she wears dresses, plays with dolls, and is seemingly unaffected by her mother's nontraditional choices. Pollack challenges this perspective, suggesting that lesbian mothers *are* different and that the differences are complex, having to do partly with societal homophobia and its effects through housing and job discrimination, anxiety about disclosure, and lesbian invisibility, but also with an absence of rigid social roles, with models of independence, self-sufficiency, self-confidence, and cultural and individual diversity within lesbian households. She urges a research directed away from the "homogenization" of lesbian mothering into the heterosexual mainstream and toward the actual lives and needs of lesbians and their children.*

It is precisely because the lesbian *is* different that a value system bent on prescribing a limited set of possibilities for women can neither tolerate nor affirm her. It is precisely because difference is so powerful (though the "different" may be socially disempowered) that it becomes the target of threats, harassment, violence, social control, genocide. The power of difference is the power of the very plenitude of creation, the exhilarating variance of nature. Every infant born is testimony to the intricacy and breadth of possibilities inherent in humanity. Yet from birth, in most homes and social groups, we teach children that only certain possibilities within them are livable; we teach them to hear only certain voices inside themselves, to feel only what we believe they ought to feel, to recognize only certain others as human. We teach the boy to hate and scorn the places in himself where he identifies with women; we teach the girl that there is only one kind of womanhood and that the incongruent parts of herself must be destroyed. The repetition or reproduction of this constricted version of humanity, which one generation transmits to the next, is a cycle whose breaking is our only hope.

* Pollack, *op. cit.*

In 1976 I discussed the entrance of men into child-care, both in families and in comprehensive day-care systems. Today the issue of child-care seems to me much broader than the project of developing nurturant skills in men or having children receive primary care from both men and women. The question becomes more and more pressing: How can we have nonexploitative child-care in this society, whether staffed and organized by women or men or both? Franchised day-care centers, commercially instigated, already abound as increasing numbers of mothers have to enter the labor force, however they may feel about staying home with children. Corporate day-care may soon become a multimillion-dollar service industry.* If we think of the health-care or educational systems in this country as possible models, we know that these are organized for the benefit of those who can pay the most, and even then are weighted more towards technology than towards respect and caring for the individual. Who will actually care for children? How will the caregivers be trained? How much will they be paid in a service profession long denigrated as "women's work"? How much will parents determine policies? Who will determine standards? Whose experience and imagination will be recognized? How will cultural and sexual diversity be respected in a country whose yet prevailing norm is the blonde, blue-eyed, stable, nuclear family?

Many Americans have a stereotype of public child-care derived from Cold War antisocialist propaganda: children at a tender age forcibly severed from their mothers into the arms of the State; a stereotype of collectivist uniformity and indoctrination as opposed to maternal/paternal individualism. In this nightmare, children are turned into tiny robots and taught to betray their parents. But we know—have reluctantly been forced into knowing—that within the individual nuclear American family unit there has been epidemic sexual violation, usually father to daughter or brother to sister, sometimes with the mother's denial or passive collaboration; there has been child-battering as well as woman-battering; also, particularly with teenagers, extreme parental rejection leading to the voluntary

* See, e.g., "Corporate Child Care Grows Up," *San Jose Mercury News*, June 10, 1986, p. 1E.

abandonment or handing over of youths to the juvenile justice system. Through her research on serial murders of women and on juveniles on the street, Jean Swallow has drawn connections between childhood sexual abuse and adolescent "delinquency" in girls—runaways, prostitutes, street kids, teenage alcoholics. The battered and violated children of the unexamined American family are found on the streets of Seattle or St. Paul as young people trying to survive, dependent on strangers.*

Between a patriarchal State and the patriarchal family as guardians of children, there is little to choose. But there is another possibility: the emergence of a collective movement which is antipatriarchal, which places the highest value on the development of human beings, on economic justice, on respect for racial, cultural, sexual, and ethnic diversity, on providing the material conditions for children to flower into responsible and creative women and men, and on the redirection and eventual extirpation of the propensity for violence.

It's been strange to live closely and critically again with this book. Once more, I have felt the ardor and necessity which carried me through four years of research and writing. For the subject did not exhaust itself in me once the book was finished. I went on to other subjects, but it has continued in me, underground and in the concrete ways my children and I have been together and apart. In the concrete ways I and other women have been together and apart.

I never wished this book to lend itself to the sentimentalization of women or of women's nurturant or spiritual capacity. I was chided by a respected woman mentor for ending the book

* See Jean Swallow, "Not So Far from Here to There," unpublished essay, 1986. Recent works on incest include Louise Armstrong, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight: A Speakout on Incest* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979); Sandra Butler, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest* (San Francisco: New Glide Publications, 1978); Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Toni McNaron and Yarrow Morgan, eds., *Voices in the Night: Women Speaking about Incest* (Minneapolis: Cleis Press, 1982); and Florence Rush's pioneering book *The Best-kept Secret* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980). See also Wini Breines and Linda Gordon, "The New Scholarship on Family Violence," *Signs*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 495-531, for an important analysis of "the family as the historical locus of sharp struggles between the two sexes and different generations."

with a chapter on maternal violence. She thought that I had given ammunition to the enemy by the very placement of that chapter. But what I wrote in 1976 I believed: *Theories of female power and female ascendancy must reckon fully with the ambiguities of our being, and with the continuum of our consciousness, the potentialities for both creative and destructive energy in each of us.* I believe it still. Oppression is not the mother of virtue; oppression can warp, undermine, turn us into haters of ourselves. But it can also turn us into realists, who neither hate ourselves nor assume we are merely innocent and unaccountable victims.

In preparing this 1986 edition, I chose not to revise into the body of the book as I originally wrote it, except for a few deletions for brevity; to bring as many facts as possible up to date in footnotes; and to indicate, both in footnotes and in this introduction, some places where I today question or differ with what I wrote ten years ago. This book is the work of one woman who has continued to learn, reflect, act, and write. It is also a document grounded in a worldwide political movement which has itself been in continuous process, travail, and internal debate over the past ten years. I want this new edition to show the traces of both.

I have again received help from many quarters. For resources and research, I thank Carolyn Arnold and Toni Fitzpatrick of Stanford University, Sandra Goldstein of the San Francisco Coalition for the Medical Rights of Women, and Katherine Olsen, Acting Director of the Women's Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz. My reconsidering of some questions was enriched by the members of my San Jose State University course on women novelists. For splendid typing on very short deadlines, I thank Kirsten Allrud and Birdie Flynn. For an expert and informed editorial eagle eye on the manuscript, I am grateful to Carol Flechner. For scholarly references, critical reading, and ten years of conversation and comradeship, my deepest debt is to Michelle Cliff.

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OF WOMAN BORN

FOREWORD

All human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman's body. Because young humans remain dependent upon nurture for a much longer period than other mammals, and because of the division of labor long established in human groups, where women not only bear and suckle but are assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman.

We carry the imprint of this experience for life, even into our dying. Yet there has been a strange lack of material to help us understand and use it. We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood. In the division of labor according to gender, the makers and sayers of culture, the namers, have been the sons of the mothers. There is much to suggest that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*, the son's constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is "of woman born."

Women are also born of women. But we know little about the effect on culture of that fact, because women have not been makers and sayers of patriarchal culture. Woman's status as childbearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like "barren" or "childless" have been used to negate any further identity. The term "nonfather" does not exist in any realm of social categories.

Because the fact of physical motherhood is so visible and dramatic, men recognized only after some time that they, too, had a part in generation. The meaning of "fatherhood" remains tangential, elusive. To "father" a child suggests above all to beget, to provide the sperm which fertilizes the ovum. To "mother" a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years. Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct.

A man may beget a child in passion or by rape, and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded "illegitimate," usually in poverty, always outside the law. In some cultures she faces murder by her kinsmen. Whatever her choice, her body has undergone irreversible changes, her mind will never be the same, her future as a woman has been shaped by the event.

Most of us were raised by our mothers, or by women who for love, necessity, or money took the place of our biological mothers. Throughout history women have helped birth and nurture each others' children. Most women have been mothers in the sense of tenders and carers for the young, whether as sisters, aunts, nurses, teachers, foster-mothers, stepmothers. Tribal life, the village, the extended family, the female networks of some cultures, have included the very young, very old, unmarried, and infertile women in the process of "mothering." Even those of us whose fathers played an important part in our early childhood rarely remember them for their patient attendance when we were ill, their doing the humble tasks of feeding and cleaning us; we remember scenes, expeditions, punishments, special occasions. For most of us a woman provided the continuity and stability—but also the rejections and refusals—of our early lives, and it is with a woman's hands, eyes, body, voice, that we associate our primal sensations, our earliest social experience.

2

Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between "private" and "public" life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities. In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. At certain points in history, and in certain cultures, the idea of woman-as-mother has worked to endow all women with respect, even with awe, and to give women some say in the life of a people or a clan. But for most of what we know as the "mainstream" of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities.

The power of the mother has two aspects: the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women. We do not actually know much about what power may have meant in the hands of strong, prepatriarchal women. We do have guesses, longings, myths, fantasies, analogues. We know far more about how, under patriarchy, female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood. Most women in history have become mothers without choice, and an even greater number have lost their lives bringing life into the world.

Women are controlled by lashing us to our bodies. In an early and classic essay, Susan Griffin pointed out that "rape is a form of mass terrorism, for the victims of rape are chosen indiscriminately, but the propagandists for male supremacy broad-

cast that it is women who cause rape by being unchaste or in the wrong place at the wrong time—in essence, by behaving as though they were free. . . . The fear of rape keeps women off the streets at night. Keeps women at home. Keeps women passive and modest for fear that they be thought provocative.”* In a later development of Griffin’s analysis, Susan Brownmiller suggests that enforced, indentured motherhood may originally have been the price paid by women to the men who became their “protectors” (and owners) against the casual violence of other men.† If rape has been terrorism, motherhood has been penal servitude. *It need not be.*

This book is not an attack on the family or on mothering, *except as defined and restricted under patriarchy*. Nor is it a call for a mass system of state-controlled child-care. Mass child-care in patriarchy has had but two purposes: to introduce large numbers of women into the labor force, in a developing economy or during a war, and to indoctrinate future citizens.†† It has never been conceived as a means of releasing the energies of women into the mainstream of culture, or of changing the stereotypic gender-images of both women and men.

* “Rape: The All-American Crime,” in Jo Freeman, ed., *Women: A Feminist Perspective* (Stanford, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1975).

† *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975). Reviewing Brownmiller’s book, a feminist newsletter commented: “It would be extreme and contentious . . . to call mothers rape victims in general; probably only a small percentage are. But rape is the crime that can be committed because women are vulnerable in a special way; the opposite of ‘vulnerable’ is ‘impregnable.’ Pregnability, to coin a word, has been the basis of female identity, the limit of freedom, the futility of education, the denial of growth.” (“Rape Has Many Forms,” review in *The Spokeswoman*, Vol. 6, No. 5 [November 15, 1975].)

†† To these American capitalism is adding a third: the profit motive. Franchised, commercially operated child-care centers have become “big business.” Many such centers are purely custodial; overcrowding limits physical and educational flexibility and freedom; the centers are staffed almost entirely by women, working for a minimum salary. Operated under giant corporations such as Singer, Time Inc., and General Electric, these profit-making preschools can be compared to commercial nursing homes in their exploitation of human needs and of the most vulnerable persons in the society. See Georgia Sassen, Cookie Arvin, and the Corporations and Child Care Research Project, “Corporate Child Care,” *The Second Wave: A Magazine of the New Feminism*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 21–23, 38–43.

3

I told myself that I wanted to write a book on motherhood because it was a crucial, still relatively unexplored, area for feminist theory. But I did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen me.

This book is rooted in my own past, tangled with parts of my life which stayed buried even while I dug away at the strata of early childhood, adolescence, separation from parents, my vocation as a poet; the geographies of marriage, spiritual divorce, and death, through which I entered the open ground of middle age. Every journey into the past is complicated by delusions, false memories, false naming of real events. But for a long time, I avoided this journey back into the years of pregnancy, child-bearing, and the dependent lives of my children, because it meant going back into pain and anger that I would have preferred to think of as long since resolved and put away. I could not begin to think of writing a book on motherhood until I began to feel strong enough, and unambivalent enough in my love for my children, so that I could dare to return to a ground which seemed to me the most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous I had ever traveled, a ground hedged by taboo, mined with false-namings.

I did not understand this when I started to write the book. I only knew that I had lived through something which was considered central to the lives of women, fulfilling even in its sorrows, a key to the meaning of life; and that I could remember little except anxiety, physical weariness, anger, self-blame, boredom, and division within myself: a division made more acute by the moments of passionate love, delight in my children’s spirited bodies and minds, amazement at how they went on loving me in spite of my failures to love them wholly and selflessly.

It seemed to me impossible from the first to write a book of this kind without being often autobiographical, without often saying “I.” Yet for many months I buried my head in historical research and analysis in order to delay or prepare the way for

the plunge into areas of my own life which were painful and problematical, yet from the heart of which this book has come. I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours. On the other hand, I am keenly aware that any writer has a certain false and arbitrary power. It is *her* version, after all, that the reader is reading at this moment, while the accounts of others—including the dead—may go untold.

This is in some ways a vulnerable book. I have invaded various professional domains, broken various taboos. I have used the scholarship available to me where I found it suggestive, without pretending to make myself into a specialist. In so doing, the question, *But what was it like for women?* was always in my mind, and I soon began to sense a fundamental perceptual difficulty among male scholars (and some female ones) for which "sexism" is too facile a term. It is really an intellectual defect, which might be named "patrivincialism" or "patriochialism": the assumption that women are a subgroup, that "man's world" is the "real" world, that patriarchy is equivalent to culture and culture to patriarchy, that the "great" or "liberalizing" periods of history have been the same for women as for men, that generalizations about "man," "humankind," "children," "Blacks," "parents," "the working class" hold true for women, mothers, daughters, sisters, wet-nurses, infant girls, and can include them with no more than a glancing reference here and there, usually to some specialized function like breast-feeding. The new historians of "family and childhood," like the majority of theorists on child-rearing, pediatricians, psychiatrists, are male. In their work, the question of motherhood as an institution or as an idea in the heads of grown-up male children is raised only where "styles" of mothering are discussed and criticized. Female sources are rarely cited (yet these sources exist, as the feminist historians are showing); there are virtually no primary sources from women-as-mothers; and all this is presented as objective scholarship.

It is only recently that feminist scholars such as Gerda Lerner, Joan Kelly, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg have begun to suggest that, in Lerner's words: "the key to understanding

women's history is in accepting—painful though it may be—that it is the history of the *majority* of mankind. . . . History, as written and perceived up to now, is the history of a minority, who may well turn out to be the 'subgroup.'"^{*}

I write with a painful consciousness of my own Western cultural perspective and that of most of the sources available to me: painful because it says so much about how female culture is fragmented by the male cultures, boundaries, groupings in which women live. However, at this point any broad study of female culture can be at best partial, and what any writer hopes—and knows—is that others like her, with different training, background, and tools, are putting together other parts of this immense half-buried mosaic in the shape of a woman's face.

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^{*} "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1-2 (Fall 1975), pp. 8, 13.

sternly and tenderly demands, through her work and her example, that we all search more relentlessly into our hidden life as women, and the language in which we name it. Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie provided insights, crucial resources, and the spur of emulation, through their friendship and their work. Janice Raymond began as a vital critic and has become a friend as well. Kenneth Pitchford gave me the benefit of a sensitive critique of Chapter VIII. Richard Howard gracefully recreated in English the words of a seventeenth-century French midwife for Chapter VI. John Benedict, my editor, contributed a close, honestly responsive reading, and many suggestions which helped me to clarify the structure of the book; he more than once said the right words at the right time, and more than once have we argued the themes pursued here. I have all along been fortunate in the support of W. W. Norton, my publishers.

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New York City
February 1976

I ANGER AND TENDERNESS

. . . to understand is always an ascending movement; that is why comprehension ought always to be concrete. (one is never got out of the cave, one comes out of it.)

—Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*

Entry from my journal, November 1960

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage. There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom.*

And yet at other times I am melted with the sense of their helpless, charming and quite irresistible beauty—their ability to

* The term “barren woman” was easy for me to use, unexamined, fifteen years ago. As should be clear throughout this book, it seems to me now a

go on loving and trusting—their staunchness and decency and unselfconsciousness. *I love them*. But it's in the enormity and inevitability of this love that the sufferings lie.

April 1961

A blissful love for my children engulfs me from time to time and seems almost to suffice—the aesthetic pleasure I have in these little, changing creatures, the sense of being loved, however dependently, the sense too that I'm not an utterly unnatural and shrewish mother—much though I am!

May 1965

To suffer with and for and against a child—maternally, egotistically, neurotically, sometimes with a sense of helplessness, sometimes with the illusion of learning wisdom—but always, everywhere, in body and soul, *with* that child—because that child is a piece of oneself.

To be caught up in waves of love and hate, jealousy even of the child's childhood; hope and fear for its maturity; longing to be free of responsibility, tied by every fibre of one's being.

That curious primitive reaction of protectiveness, the beast defending her cub, when anyone attacks or criticizes him—And yet no one more hard on him than I!

September 1965

Degradation of anger. Anger at a child. How shall I learn to absorb the violence and make explicit only the caring? Exhaustion of anger. Victory of will, too dearly bought—far too dearly!

March 1966

Perhaps one is a monster—an anti-woman—something driven and without recourse to the normal and appealing consolations of love, motherhood, joy in others . . .

Unexamined assumptions: First, that a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless; that children and

term both tendentious and meaningless, based on a view of women which sees motherhood as our only positive definition.

mothers are the “causes” of each others' suffering. I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is “unconditional”; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren't those parts then abnormal, monstrous? And—as my eldest son, now aged twenty-one, remarked on reading the above passages: “You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there is no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment.” Yes, I tried to explain to him, but women—above all, mothers—have been supposed to love that way.

From the fifties and early sixties, I remember a cycle. It began when I had picked up a book or began trying to write a letter, or even found myself on the telephone with someone toward whom my voice betrayed eagerness, a rush of sympathetic energy. The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness, in his own dreamworld; but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys. And I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself. My anger would rise; I would feel the futility of any attempt to salvage myself, and also the inequality between us: my needs always balanced against those of a child, and always losing. I could love so much better, I told myself, after even a quarter-hour of selfishness, of peace, of detachment from my children. A few minutes! But it was as if an invisible thread would pull taut between us and break, to the child's sense of inconsolable abandonment, if I moved—not even physically, but in spirit—into a realm beyond our tightly circumscribed life together. It was as if my placenta had begun to refuse him oxygen. Like so many women, I waited with impatience for the moment when their father would return from work, when for an hour or two at least the circle drawn around mother and children would grow looser, the intensity between us slacken, because there was another adult in the house.

I did not understand that this circle, this magnetic field in which we lived, was not a natural phenomenon.

Intellectually, I must have known it. But the emotion-

charged, tradition-heavy form in which I found myself cast as the Mother seemed, then, as ineluctable as the tides. And, because of this form—this microcosm in which my children and I formed a tiny, private emotional cluster, and in which (in bad weather or when someone was ill) we sometimes passed days at a time without seeing another adult except for their father—there *was* authentic need underlying my child's invented claims upon me when I seemed to be wandering away from him. He was reassuring himself that warmth, tenderness, continuity, solidity were still there for him, in my person. My singularity, my uniqueness in the world as *his mother*—perhaps more dimly also as Woman—evoked a need vaster than any single human being could satisfy, except by loving continuously, unconditionally, from dawn to dark, and often in the middle of the night.

2

In a living room in 1975, I spent an evening with a group of women poets, some of whom had children. One had brought hers along, and they slept or played in adjoining rooms. We talked of poetry, and also of infanticide, of the case of a local woman, the mother of eight, who had been in severe depression since the birth of her third child, and who had recently murdered and decapitated her two youngest, on her suburban front lawn. Several women in the group, feeling a direct connection with her desperation, had signed a letter to the local newspaper protesting the way her act was perceived by the press and handled by the community mental health system. Every woman in that room who had children, every poet, could identify with her. We spoke of the wells of anger that her story cleft open in us. We spoke of our own moments of murderous anger at our children, because there was no one and nothing else on which to discharge anger. We spoke in the sometimes tentative, sometimes rising, sometimes bitterly witty, unrheterical tones and language of women who had met together over our common work, poetry, and who found another common ground in an unacceptable, but undeniable anger. The words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being

broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through.

For centuries no one talked of these feelings. I became a mother in the family-centered, consumer-oriented, Freudian-American world of the 1950s. My husband spoke eagerly of the children we would have; my parents-in-law awaited the birth of their grandchild. I had no idea of what *I* wanted, what *I* could or could not choose. I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be "like other women."

To be "like other women" had been a problem for me. From the age of thirteen or fourteen, I had felt I was only acting the part of a feminine creature. At the age of sixteen my fingers were almost constantly ink-stained. The lipstick and high heels of the era were difficult-to-manage disguises. In 1945 I was writing poetry seriously, and had a fantasy of going to postwar Europe as a journalist, sleeping among the ruins in bombed cities, recording the rebirth of civilization after the fall of the Nazis. But also, like every other girl I knew, I spent hours trying to apply lipstick more adroitly, straightening the wandering seams of stockings, talking about "boys." There were two different compartments, already, to my life. But writing poetry, and my fantasies of travel and self-sufficiency, seemed more real to me; I felt that as an incipient "real woman" I was a fake. Particularly was I paralyzed when I encountered young children. I think I felt men could be—wished to be—conned into thinking I was truly "feminine"; a child, I suspected, could see through me like a shot. This sense of acting a part created a curious sense of guilt, even though it was a part demanded for survival.

I have a very clear, keen memory of myself the day after I was married: I was sweeping a floor. Probably the floor did not really need to be swept; probably I simply did not know what else to do with myself. But as I swept that floor I thought: "Now I am a woman. This is an age-old action, this is what women have always done." I felt I was bending to some ancient form, too ancient to question. *This is what women have always done.*

As soon as I was visibly and clearly pregnant, I felt, for the first time in my adolescent and adult life, not-guilty. The at-

mosphere of approval in which I was bathed—even by strangers on the street, it seemed—was like an aura I carried with me, in which doubts, fears, misgivings, met with absolute denial. *This is what women have always done.*

Two days before my first son was born, I broke out in a rash which was tentatively diagnosed as measles, and was admitted to a hospital for contagious diseases to await the onset of labor. I felt for the first time a great deal of conscious fear, and guilt toward my unborn child, for having “failed” him with my body in this way. In rooms near mine were patients with polio; no one was allowed to enter my room except in a hospital gown and mask. If during pregnancy I had felt in any vague command of my situation, I felt now totally dependent on my obstetrician, a huge, vigorous, paternal man, abounding with optimism and assurance, and given to pinching my cheek. I had gone through a healthy pregnancy, but as if tranquilized or sleep-walking. I had taken a sewing class in which I produced an unsightly and ill-cut maternity jacket which I never wore; I had made curtains for the baby’s room, collected baby clothes, blotted out as much as possible the woman I had been a few months earlier. My second book of poems was in press, but I had stopped writing poetry, and read little except household magazines and books on child-care. I felt myself perceived by the world simply as a pregnant woman, and it seemed easier, less disturbing, to perceive myself so. After my child was born the “measles” were diagnosed as an allergic reaction to pregnancy.

Within two years, I was pregnant again, and writing in a notebook:

November 1956

Whether it’s the extreme lassitude of early pregnancy or something more fundamental, I don’t know; but of late I’ve felt, toward poetry,—both reading and writing it—nothing but boredom and indifference. Especially toward my own and that of my immediate contemporaries. When I receive a letter soliciting mss., or someone alludes to my “career”, I have a strong sense of wanting to deny all responsibility for and interest in that person who writes—or who wrote.

If there is going to be a real break in my writing life, this is as

good a time for it as any. I have been dissatisfied with myself, my work, for a long time.

My husband was a sensitive, affectionate man who wanted children and who—unusual in the professional, academic world of the fifties—was willing to “help.” But it was clearly understood that this “help” was an act of generosity; that *his* work, *his* professional life, was the real work in the family; in fact, this was for years not even an issue between us. I understood that my struggles as a writer were a kind of luxury, a peculiarity of mine; my work brought in almost no money: it even cost money, when I hired a household helper to allow me a few hours a week to write. “Whatever I ask he tries to give me,” I wrote in March 1958, “but always the initiative has to be mine.” I experienced my depressions, bursts of anger, sense of entrapment, as burdens my husband was forced to bear because he loved me; I felt grateful to be loved in spite of bringing him those burdens.

But I was struggling to bring my life into focus. I had never really given up on poetry, nor on gaining some control over my existence. The life of a Cambridge tenement backyard swarming with children, the repetitious cycles of laundry, the night-wakings, the interrupted moments of peace or of engagement with ideas, the ludicrous dinner parties at which young wives, some with advanced degrees, all seriously and intelligently dedicated to their children’s welfare and their husbands’ careers, attempted to reproduce the amenities of Brahmin Boston, amid French recipes and the pretense of effortlessness—above all, the ultimate lack of seriousness with which women were regarded in that world—all of this defied analysis at that time, but I *knew* I had to remake my own life. I did not then understand that we—the women of that academic community—as in so many middle-class communities of the period—were expected to fill both the part of the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the House, and also of the Victorian cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse. I only sensed that there were false distractions sucking at me, and I wanted desperately to strip my life down to what was essential.

June 1958

These months I’ve been all a tangle of irritations deepening to

anger: bitterness, disillusion with society and with myself; beating out at the world, rejecting out of hand. What, if anything, has been positive? Perhaps the attempt to remake my life, to save it from mere drift and the passage of time . . .

The work that is before me is serious and difficult and not at all clear even as to plan. Discipline of mind and spirit, uniqueness of expression, ordering of daily existence, the most effective functioning of the human self—these are the chief things I wish to achieve. So far the only beginning I've been able to make is to waste less time. That is what some of the rejection has been all about.

By July of 1958 I was again pregnant. The new life of my third—and, as I determined, my last—child, was a kind of turning for me. I had learned that my body was not under my control; I had not intended to bear a third child. I knew now better than I had ever known what another pregnancy, another new infant, meant for my body and spirit. Yet, I did not think of having an abortion. In a sense, my third son was more actively chosen than either of his brothers; by the time I knew I was pregnant with him, I was not sleepwalking any more.

August 1958 (Vermont)

I write this as the early rays of the sun light up our hillside and eastern windows. Rose with [the baby] at 5:30 A.M. and have fed him and breakfasted. This is one of the few mornings on which I haven't felt terrible mental depression and physical exhaustion.

. . . I have to acknowledge to myself that I would not have chosen to have more children, that I was beginning to look to a time, not too far off, when I should again be free, no longer so physically tired, pursuing a more or less intellectual and creative life. . . . The *only* way I can develop now is through much harder, more continuous, connected work than my present life makes possible. Another child means postponing this for some years longer—and years at my age are significant, not to be tossed lightly away.

And yet, somehow, something, call it Nature or that affirming fatalism of the human creature, makes me aware of the inevitable as already part of me, not to be contended against so much as brought to bear as an additional weapon against drift, stagna-

tion and spiritual death. (For it is really death that I have been fearing—the crumbling to death of that scarcely-born physiology which my whole life has been a battle to give birth to—a recognizable, autonomous self, a creation in poetry and in life.)

If more effort has to be made then I will make it. If more despair has to be lived through, I think I can anticipate it correctly and live through it.

Meanwhile, in a curious and unanticipated way, we really do welcome the birth of our child.

There was, of course, an economic as well as a spiritual margin which allowed me to think of a third child's birth not as my own death-warrant but as an "additional weapon against death." My body, despite recurrent flares of arthritis, was a healthy one; I had good prenatal care; we were not living on the edge of malnutrition; I knew that all my children would be fed, clothed, breathe fresh air; in fact it did not occur to me that it could be otherwise. But, in another sense, beyond that physical margin, I knew I was fighting for my life through, against, and with the lives of my children, though very little else was clear to me. I had been trying to give birth to myself; and in some grim, dim way I was determined to use even pregnancy and parturition in that process.

Before my third child was born I decided to have no more children, to be sterilized. (Nothing is removed from a woman's body during this operation; ovulation and menstruation continue. Yet the language suggests a cutting- or burning-away of her essential womanhood, just as the old word "barren" suggests a woman eternally empty and lacking.) My husband, although he supported my decision, asked whether I was sure it would not leave me feeling "less feminine." In order to have the operation at all, I had to present a letter, counter-signed by my husband, assuring the committee of physicians who approved such operations that I had already produced three children, and stating my reasons for having no more. Since I had had rheumatoid arthritis for some years, I could give a reason acceptable to the male panel who sat on my case; my own judgment would not have been acceptable. When I awoke from the operation, twenty-four hours after my child's birth, a young

nurse looked at my chart and remarked coldly: "Had yourself spayed, did you?"

The first great birth-control crusader, Margaret Sanger, remarks that of the hundreds of women who wrote to her pleading for contraceptive information in the early part of the twentieth century, all spoke of wanting the health and strength to be better mothers to the children they already had; or of wanting to be physically affectionate to their husbands without dread of conceiving. None was refusing motherhood altogether, or asking for an easy life. These women—mostly poor, many still in their teens, all with several children—simply felt they could no longer do "right" by their families, whom they expected to go on serving and rearing. Yet there always has been, and there remains, intense fear of the suggestion that women shall have the final say as to how our bodies are to be used. It is as if the suffering of the mother, the primary identification of woman as the mother—were so necessary to the emotional grounding of human society that the mitigation, or removal, of that suffering, that identification, must be fought at every level, including the level of refusing to question it at all.

3

"Vous travaillez pour l'armée, madame?" (You are working for the army?), a Frenchwoman said to me early in the Vietnam war, on hearing I had three sons.

April 1965

Anger, weariness, demoralization. Sudden bouts of weeping. A sense of insufficiency to the moment and to eternity . . .

Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relations, between e.g. my rejection and anger at [my eldest child], my sensual life, pacifism, sex (I mean in its broadest significance, not merely physical desire)—an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately—Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs—

I weep, and weep, and the sense of powerlessness spreads like a cancer through my being.

August 1965, 3:30 A.M.

Necessity for a more unyielding discipline of my life.

Recognize the uselessness of blind anger.

Limit society.

Use children's school hours better, for work & solitude.

Refuse to be distracted from own style of life.

Less waste.

Be harder & harder on poems.

Once in a while someone used to ask me, "Don't you ever write poems about your children?" The male poets of my generation did write poems about their children—especially their daughters. For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself.

The bad and the good moments are inseparable for me. I recall the times when, suckling each of my children, I saw his eyes open full to mine, and realized each of us was fastened to the other, not only by mouth and breast, but through our mutual gaze: the depth, calm, passion, of that dark blue, maturely focused look. I recall the physical pleasure of having my full breast suckled at a time when I had no other physical pleasure in the world except the guilt-ridden pleasure of addictive eating. I remember early the sense of conflict, of a battleground none of us had chosen, of being an observer who, like it or not, was also an actor in an endless contest of wills. This was what it meant to me to have three children under the age of seven. But I recall too each child's individual body, his slenderness, wiriness, softness, grace, the beauty of little boys who have not been taught that the male body must be rigid. I remember moments of peace when for some reason it was possible to go to the bathroom alone. I remember being uprooted from already meager sleep to answer a childish nightmare, pull up a blanket, warm a consoling bottle, lead a half-asleep child to the toilet. I remember going back to bed starkly awake, brittle with anger, knowing that my broken sleep would make next day a hell, that there would be more nightmares, more need for consolation, because out of my weariness I would rage at those children for no reason they could understand. I remember thinking I would never dream again (the unconscious of the young mother—

where does it entrust its messages, when dream-sleep is denied her for years?)

For many years I shrank from looking back on the first decade of my children's lives. In snapshots of the period I see a smiling young woman, in maternity clothes or bent over a half-naked baby; gradually she stops smiling, wears a distant, half-melancholy look, as if she were listening for something. In time my sons grew older, I began changing my own life, we began to talk to each other as equals. Together we lived through my leaving the marriage, and through their father's suicide. We became survivors, four distinct people with strong bonds connecting us. Because I always tried to tell them the truth, because their every new independence meant new freedom for me, because we trusted each other even when we wanted different things, they became, at a fairly young age, self-reliant and open to the unfamiliar. Something told me that if they had survived my angers, my self-reproaches, and still trusted my love and each others', they were strong. Their lives have not been, will not be, easy; but their very existences seem a gift to me, their vitality, humor, intelligence, gentleness, love of life, their separate life-currents which here and there stream into my own. I don't know how we made it from their embattled childhood and my embattled motherhood into a mutual recognition of ourselves and each other. Probably that mutual recognition, overlaid by social and traditional circumstance, was always there, from the first gaze between the mother and the infant at the breast. But I do know that for years I believed I should never have been anyone's mother, that because I felt my own needs acutely and often expressed them violently, I was Kali, Medea, the sow that devours her farrow, the unwomanly woman in flight from womanhood, a Nietzschean monster. Even today, rereading old journals, remembering, I feel grief and anger; but their objects are no longer myself and my children. I feel grief at the waste of myself in those years, anger at the mutilation and manipulation of the relationship between mother and child, which is the great original source and experience of love.

On an early spring day in the 1970s, I meet a young woman friend on the street. She has a tiny infant against her breast, in a bright cotton sling; its face is pressed against her blouse, its tiny hand clutches a piece of the cloth. "How old is she?" I

ask. "Just two weeks old," the mother tells me. I am amazed to feel in myself a passionate longing to have, once again, such a small, new being clasped against my body. The baby belongs there, curled, suspended asleep between her mother's breasts, as she belonged curled in the womb. The young mother—who already has a three-year-old—speaks of how quickly one forgets the pure pleasure of having this new creature, immaculate, perfect. And I walk away from her drenched with memory, with envy. Yet I know other things: that her life is far from simple; she is a mathematician who now has two children under the age of four; she is living even now in the rhythms of other lives—not only the regular cry of the infant but her three-year-old's needs, her husband's problems. In the building where I live, women are still raising children alone, living day in and day out within their individual family units, doing the laundry, herding the tricycles to the park, waiting for the husbands to come home. There is a baby-sitting pool and a children's playroom, young fathers push prams on weekends, but child-care is still the individual responsibility of the individual woman. I envy the sensuality of having an infant of two weeks curled against one's breast; I do not envy the turmoil of the elevator full of small children, babies howling in the laundromat, the apartment in winter where pent-up seven- and eight-year-olds have one adult to look to for their frustrations, reassurances, the grounding of their lives.

4

But, it will be said, this is the human condition, this interpenetration of pain and pleasure, frustration and fulfillment. I might have told myself the same thing, fifteen or eighteen years ago. But the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the "human condition" any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are. (Those who speak largely of the human condition are usually those most exempt from its oppressions—whether of sex, race, or servitude.)

Motherhood—unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. My individual, seemingly private pains as a

mother, the individual, seemingly private pains of the mothers around me and before me, whatever our class or color, the regulation of women's reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology, and extrauterine reproductive experiments—all are essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers.

Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, "the devil's gateway." On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life. These two ideas have become deeply internalized in women, even in the most independent of us, those who seem to lead the freest lives.

In order to maintain two such notions, each in its contradictory purity, the masculine imagination has had to divide women, to see us, and force us to see ourselves, as polarized into good or evil, fertile or barren, pure or impure. The asexual Victorian angel-wife and the Victorian prostitute were institutions created by this double thinking, which had nothing to do with women's actual sensuality and everything to do with the male's subjective experience of women. The political and economic expediency of this kind of thinking is most unashamedly and dramatically to be found where sexism and racism become one. The social historian A. W. Calhoun describes the encouragement of the rape of Black women by the sons of white planters, in a deliberate effort to produce more mulatto slaves, mulattos being considered more valuable. He quotes two mid-nineteenth-century southern writers on the subject of women:

"The heaviest part of the white racial burden in slavery was the African woman of strong sex instincts and devoid of a sexual conscience, at the white man's door, in the white man's dwelling." . . . "Under the institution of slavery, the attack against the integrity of white civilization was made by the insidious influence of the lascivious hybrid woman at the point of weak-

est resistance. In the uncompromising purity of the white mother and wife of the upper classes lay the one assurance of the future purity of the race."¹

The motherhood created by rape is not only degraded; the raped woman is turned into the criminal, the *attacker*. But who brought the Black woman to the white man's door, whose absence of a sexual conscience produced the financially profitable mulatto children? Is it asked whether the "pure" white mother and wife was not also raped by the white planter, since she was assumed to be devoid of "strong sexual instinct?" In the American South, as elsewhere, it was economically necessary that children be produced; the mothers, Black and white, were a means to this end.

Neither the "pure" nor the "lascivious" woman, neither the so-called mistress nor the slave woman, neither the woman praised for reducing herself to a brood animal nor the woman scorned and penalized as an "old maid" or a "dyke," has had any real autonomy or selfhood to gain from this subversion of the female body (and hence of the female mind). Yet, because short-term advantages are often the only ones visible to the powerless, we, too, have played our parts in continuing this subversion.

5

Most of the literature of infant care and psychology has assumed that the process toward individuation is essentially the *child's* drama, played out against and with a parent or parents who are, for better or worse, givens. Nothing could have prepared me for the realization that I *was* a mother, one of those givens, when I knew I was still in a state of uncreation myself. That calm, sure, unambivalent woman who moved through the pages of the manuals I read seemed as unlike me as an astronaut. Nothing, to be sure, had prepared me for the intensity of relationship already existing between me and a creature I had carried in my body and now held in my arms and fed from my breasts. Throughout pregnancy and nursing, women are urged to relax, to mime the serenity of madonnas. No one mentions the psychic crisis of bearing a first child, the excita-

tion of long-buried feelings about one's own mother, the sense of confused power and powerlessness, of being taken over on the one hand and of touching new physical and psychic potentialities on the other, a heightened sensibility which can be exhilarating, bewildering, and exhausting. No one mentions the strangeness of attraction—which can be as single-minded and overwhelming as the early days of a love affair—to a being so tiny, so dependent, so folded-in to itself—who is, and yet is not, part of oneself.

From the beginning the mother caring for her child is involved in a continually changing dialogue, crystallized in such moments as when, hearing her child's cry, she feels milk rush into her breasts; when, as the child first suckles, the uterus begins contracting and returning to its normal size, and when later, the child's mouth, caressing the nipple, creates waves of sensuality in the womb where it once lay; or when, smelling the breast even in sleep, the child starts to root and grope for the nipple.

The child gains her first sense of her own existence from the mother's responsive gestures and expressions. It's as if, in the mother's eyes, her smile, her stroking touch, the child first reads the message: *You are there!* And the mother, too, is discovering her own existence newly. She is connected with this other being, by the most mundane and the most invisible strands, in a way she can be connected with no one else except in the deep past of her infant connection with her own mother. And she, too, needs to struggle from that one-to-one intensity into new realization, or reaffirmation, of her being-unto-herself.

The act of suckling a child, like a sexual act, may be tense, physically painful, charged with cultural feelings of inadequacy and guilt; or, like a sexual act, it can be a physically delicious, elementally soothing experience, filled with a tender sensuality. But just as lovers have to break apart after sex and become separate individuals again, so the mother has to wean herself from the infant and the infant from herself. In psychologies of child-rearing the emphasis is placed on "letting the child go" for the child's sake. But the mother needs to let it go as much or more for her own.

Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is *one part* of female

process; it is not an identity for all time. The housewife in her mid-forties may jokingly say, "I feel like someone out of a job." But in the eyes of society, once having been mothers, what are we, if not always mothers? The process of "letting-go"—though we are charged with blame if we do not—is an act of revolt against the grain of patriarchal culture. But it is not enough to let our children go; we need selves of our own to return to.

To have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness. But also, it can mean the experiencing of one's own body and emotions in a powerful way. We experience not only physical, fleshly changes but the feeling of a change in character. We learn, often through painful self-discipline and self-cauterization, those qualities which are supposed to be "innate" in us: patience, self-sacrifice, the willingness to repeat endlessly the small, routine chores of socializing a human being. We are also, often to our amazement, flooded with feelings both of love and violence intenser and fiercer than any we had ever known. (A well-known pacifist, also a mother, said recently on a platform: "If anyone laid a hand on *my* child, I'd murder him.")

These and similar experiences are not easily put aside. Small wonder that women gritting their teeth at the incessant demands of child-care still find it hard to acknowledge their children's growing independence of them; still feel they must be at home, on the *qui vive*, be that ear always tuned for the sound of emergency, of being needed. Children grow up, not in a smooth ascending curve, but jaggedly, their needs inconstant as weather. Cultural "norms" are marvelously powerless to decide, in a child of eight or ten, what gender s/he will assume on a given day, or how s/he will meet emergency, loneliness, pain, hunger. One is constantly made aware that a human existence is anything but linear, long before the labyrinth of puberty; because a human being of six is still a human being.

In a tribal or even a feudal culture a child of six would have serious obligations; ours have none. But also, the woman at home with children is not believed to be doing serious work; she is just supposed to be acting out of maternal instinct, doing chores a man would never take on, largely uncritical of the meaning of what she does. So child and mother alike are de-

preciated, because only grown men and women in the paid labor force are supposed to be "productive."

The power-relations between mother and child are often simply a reflection of power-relations in patriarchal society: "You will do this because I know what is good for you" is difficult to distinguish from "You will do this because I can *make* you." Powerless women have always used mothering as a channel—narrow but deep—for their own human will to power, their need to return upon the world what it has visited on them. The child dragged by the arm across the room to be washed, the child cajoled, bullied, and bribed into taking "one more bite" of a detested food, is more than just a child which must be reared according to cultural traditions of "good mothering." S/he is a piece of reality, of the world, which can be acted on, even modified, by a woman restricted from acting on anything else except inert materials like dust and food.*

* 1986: the work of the Swiss psychotherapist Alice Miller has made me reflect further on the material in this chapter and in Chapters IX and X. Miller identifies the "hidden cruelty" in child-rearing as the repetition of "poisonous pedagogy" inflicted by the parents of the generation before and as providing the soil in which obedience to authoritarianism and fascism take root. She notes that "there is one taboo that has withstood all the recent efforts at demystification: the idealization of mother love" (*The Drama of the Gifted Child: How Narcissistic Parents Form and Deform the Emotional Lives of Their Talented Children* [New York: Harper & Row, 1981], p. 4). Her work traces the damages of that idealization (of both parents, but especially the mother) upon children forbidden to name or protest their suffering, who side with their parents against themselves. Miller notes, "I cannot listen to my child with empathy if I am inwardly preoccupied with being a good mother; I cannot be open to what she is telling me" (*For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983], p. 258). Miller explores the sources of what has been defined as *child abuse*—i.e., physical violation and sadistic punishment—but she is equally concerned with the "gentle violence" of child-rearing, including that of "antiauthoritarian" or "alternative" prescriptions, based on the denial and suppression of the child's own vitality and feelings. Miller does not consider the predominance of women as primary care-givers, the investment of authoritarian or fascist systems in perpetuating male control of women's sexuality and reproductivity, or the structural *differences* between father-as-parent and mother-as-parent. She does acknowledge that in America, women especially "have discovered the power of their knowledge. They do not shrink from pointing out the poisonous nature of false information, even though it has been well-concealed for millennia behind sacrosanct and well-meaning labels" (*For Your Own Good*, p. xii).

6

When I try to return to the body of the young woman of twenty-six, pregnant for the first time, who fled from the physical knowledge of her pregnancy and at the same time from her intellect and vocation, I realize that I was effectively alienated from my real body and my real spirit by the institution—not the fact—of motherhood. This institution—the foundation of human society as we know it—allowed me only certain views, certain expectations, whether embodied in the booklet in my obstetrician's waiting room, the novels I had read, my mother-in-law's approval, my memories of my own mother, the Sistine Madonna or she of the Michelangelo *Pietà*, the floating notion that a woman pregnant is a woman calm in her fulfillment or, simply, a woman waiting. Women have always been seen as waiting: waiting to be asked, waiting for our menses, in fear lest they do or do not come, waiting for men to come home from wars, or from work, waiting for children to grow up, or for the birth of a new child, or for menopause.

In my own pregnancy I dealt with this waiting, this female fate, by denying every active, powerful aspect of myself. I became dissociated both from my immediate, present, bodily experience and from my reading, thinking, writing life. Like a traveler in an airport where her plane is several hours delayed, who leafs through magazines she would never ordinarily read, surveys shops whose contents do not interest her, I committed myself to an outward serenity and a profound inner boredom. If boredom is simply a mask for anxiety, then I had learned, as a woman, to be supremely bored rather than to examine the anxiety underlying my Sistine tranquility. My body, finally truthful, paid me back in the end: I was allergic to pregnancy.

I have come to believe, as will be clear throughout this book, that female biology—the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body—has far more radical implications

than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life we require not only *control* of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence.

The ancient, continuing envy, awe, and dread of the male for the female capacity to create life has repeatedly taken the form of hatred for every other female aspect of creativity. Not only have women been told to stick to motherhood, but we have been told that our intellectual or aesthetic creations were inappropriate, inconsequential, or scandalous, an attempt to become "like men," or to escape from the "real" tasks of adult womanhood: marriage and childbearing. To "think like a man" has been both praise and prison for women trying to escape the body-trap. No wonder that many intellectual and creative women have insisted that they were "human beings" first and women only incidentally, have minimized their physicality and their bonds with other women. The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit.

But this reaction against the body is now coming into synthesis with new inquiries into the actual—as opposed to the culturally warped—power inherent in female biology, however we choose to use it, and by no means limited to the maternal function.

My own story, which is woven throughout this book, is only one story. What I carried away in the end was a determination to heal—insofar as an individual woman can, and as much as possible with other women—the separation between mind and body; never again to lose myself both psychically and physically in that way. Slowly I came to understand the paradox contained in "my" experience of motherhood; that, although different from many other women's experiences it was not unique; and that only in shedding the illusion of my uniqueness could I hope, as a woman, to have any authentic life at all.

II THE "SACRED CALLING"

One of the letters quoted in Margaret Sanger's *Motherhood in Bondage* (1928) comes from a woman seeking birth-control advice so that she can have intercourse with her husband without fear, and thus carry out her duties both as mother and wife: "I am not passionate," she writes, "but try to treat the sexual embrace the way I should, be natural and play the part, for you know, it's so different a life from what all girls expect."¹ The history of institutionalized motherhood and of institutionalized heterosexual relations (in this case, marriage), converge in these words from an ordinary woman of half a century ago, who sought only to fulfill the requirements of both institutions, "be natural and play the part"—that impossible contradiction demanded of women. What strategy handed from ashamed mother to daughter, what fear of losing love, home, desirability as a woman, taught her—taught us all—to fake orgasm? "What all girls expect"—is that, was it for her, more than what the institution had promised her in the form of romance, of transcendent experience? Had she some knowledge of her own needs, for tenderness, perhaps, for being touched in certain ways, for being treated as more than a body for sex and procreation? What gave her the courage to write to Margaret Sanger, to try to get some modest control over the use of her body—The needs of her existing children? Her husband's demands? The dim, simmering voice of self? We may assume all three. For generations of women have asserted their courage

on behalf of their own children and men, then on behalf of strangers, and finally for themselves.

The institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love. Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not "reality" but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives. The new scholars of women's history have begun to discover that, in any case, the social institutions and prescriptions for behavior created by men have not necessarily accounted for the real lives of women. Yet any institution which expresses itself so universally ends by profoundly affecting our experience, even the language we use to describe it. The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests; behavior which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy, abortion, lesbianism, is considered deviant or criminal.

Institutionalized heterosexuality told women for centuries that we were dangerous, unchaste, the embodiment of carnal lust; then that we were "not passionate," frigid, sexually passive; today it prescribes the "sensuous," "sexually liberated" woman in the West, the dedicated revolutionary ascetic in China; and everywhere it denies the reality of women's love for women. Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self. Motherhood is "sacred" so long as its offspring are "legitimate"—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother. It is "woman's highest and holiest mission," according to a socialist tract of 1914;² and a racist southern historian of 1910 tells us that "woman is the embodied home, and the home is the basis of all institutions, the buttress of society."³

A more recent version of the argument comes from the British critic Stuart Hampshire, who equates the "liberated woman" of today with Ibsen's panic-driven, suicidal heroine Hedda Gabler (who also refuses motherhood), in the following melancholy prophecy:

An entirely enlightened mind, just recently conscious of its strength and under-employed, finally corrodes and bleaches all the material of which respect is made—observances, memories of a shared past, moral resolutions for the future: no stain of weak and ordinary sentiment will remain, no differentiation of feeling and therefore no point of attachment. Why carry on the family, and therefore why carry on the race? Only a feminine skepticism, newly aroused, can be so totally subversive.⁴

Patriarchy would seem to require, not only that women shall assume the major burden of pain and self-denial for the furtherance of the species, but that a majority of that species—women—shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened. On this "underemployment" of female consciousness depend the morality and the emotional life of the human family. Like his predecessors of fifty and a hundred and more years ago, Hampshire sees society as threatened when women begin to choose the terms of their lives. Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore they have to be treated as axioms, as "nature" itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, "alternate life-styles" for certain individuals are tolerated.

2

The "sacred calling" has had, of course, an altogether pragmatic reality. In the American colonies an ordinary family consisted of from twelve to twenty-five children. An "old maid," who might be all of twenty-five years of age, was treated with reproach if not derision; she had no way of surviving economically, and was usually compelled to board with her kin and help with the household and children.⁵ No other "calling" was open to her. An English working-woman whose childhood was lived in the 1850s and 1860s writes that "I was my mother's seventh child, and seven more were born after me—fourteen in all—which made my mother a perfect slave. Generally speaking, she was either expecting a baby to be born or had one at

the breast. At the time there were eight of us the eldest was not big enough to get ready to go to school without help."⁶
Under American slavery,

. . . it was common for planters to command women and girls to have children. On a Carolina plantation of about 100 slaves the owner threatened to flog all of the women because they did not breed. They told him they could not while they had to work in the rice ditches (in one or two feet of water). After swearing and threatening he told them to tell the overseer's wife when they got in that way and he would put them on the land to work.⁷

Both the white pioneer mother and the Black female slave worked daily as a fully productive part of the economy. Black women often worked the fields with their children strapped to their backs. Historically, women have borne and raised children while doing their share of necessary productive labor, as a matter of course. Yet by the nineteenth century the voices rise against the idea of the "working mother," and in praise of "the mother at home." These voices reach a crescendo just as technology begins to reduce the sheer level of physical hardship in general, and as the size of families begins to decline. In the last century and a half, the idea of full-time, exclusive motherhood takes root, and the "home" becomes a religious obsession.

By the 1830s, in America, the male institutional voice (in this case that of the American Tract Society) was intoning:

Mothers have as powerful an influence over the welfare of future generations, *as all other earthly causes combined*. . . . When our land is filled with pious and patriotic mothers, then will it be filled with virtuous and patriotic men. The world's redeeming influence, under the blessing of the Holy Spirit, must come from a mother's lips. *She who was first in the transgression, must yet be the principal earthly instrument in the restoration.* It is maternal influence, after all, which must be the great agent in the hands of God, in bringing back our guilty race to duty and happiness. (Emphasis mine.)

The mother bears the weight of Eve's transgression (is, thus, the first offender, the polluted one, the polluter) yet precisely

because of this she is expected to carry the burden of male salvation. Lest she fail, there are horrible examples to warn her:

It was the mother of Byron who laid the foundation of his pre-eminence in guilt. . . . If the crimes of the poet deserve the execration of the world, the world cannot forget that it was the mother who fostered in his youthful heart those passions which made the son a curse to his fellow-man.⁸

But female voices, also, swell the chorus. Maria McIntosh, in 1850, describes the ideal wife and mother:

Her husband cannot look on her . . . without reading in the serene expression of her face, the Divine beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart". Her children revere her as the earthly type of perfect love. They learn even more from her example than from her precept, that they are to live, not in themselves, but to their fellow-creatures, and to the God in them. . . . She has taught them to love their country and devote themselves to its advancement . . .⁹

Certainly the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions.

The nineteenth-century "mother at home" seems, however, to have suffered from certain familiar evil traits, such as ill-temper.

. . . can a mother expect to govern her child when she cannot govern herself? . . . She must learn to control herself, to subdue her own passions; she must set her children an example of meekness and of equanimity. . . . Let a mother feel grieved, and manifest her grief when her child does wrong; let her, with calmness and reflection, use the discipline which the case requires; but never let her manifest irritated feeling, or give utterance to an angry expression.¹⁰

This from the male expert. *The Mother's Book* (1831), by Lydia Maria Child, advises:

Do you say it is impossible always to govern one's feelings? There is one method, a never-failing one—prayer. . . . You will say, perhaps, that you have not leisure to pray every time

your temper is provoked, or your heart is grieved.—It requires no time.—The inward ejaculation of “Lord, help me to overcome this temptation” may be made in any place and amid any employments; and, if uttered in humble sincerity, the voice that said to the raging waters, “Peace! Be still!” will restore quiet to your troubled soul.¹¹

Such advice to mothers gives us some sense of how female anger in general has been perceived. In *Little Women*, Marmee tells Jo, the daughter with an “Apollyon” of a “temper”:

I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so.¹²

I recall similar indoctrination in my own girlhood: my “temper” was a dark, wicked blotch in me, not a response to events in the outer world. My childhood anger was often alluded to as a “tantrum,” by which I understood the adult world to mean some kind of possession, as by a devil. Later, as a young mother, I remember feeling guilt that my explosions of anger were a “bad example” for my children, as if they, too, should be taught that “temper” is a defect of character, having nothing to do with what happens in the world outside one’s flaming skin. Mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood.

3

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideal of the mother and children immured together in the home, the specialization of motherhood for women, the separation of the home from the “man’s world” of wage-earning, struggle, ambition, aggression, power, of the “domestic” from the “public” or the “political”—all this is a late-arrived development in human history. But the force both of the ideal and of the reality is so great that, clearly, it serves no single, simple purpose.

How did this notion begin? And what purpose does it serve?
From earliest settled life until the growth of factories as

centers of production, the home was not a refuge, a place for leisure and retreat from the cruelty of the “outside world”; it was a part of the world, a center of work, a subsistence unit. In it women, men, and children as early as they were able, carried on an endless, seasonal activity of raising, preparing, and processing food, processing skins, reeds, clay, dyes, fats, herbs, producing textiles and clothing, brewing, making soap and candles, doctoring and nursing, passing on these skills and crafts to younger people. A woman was rarely if ever alone with nothing but the needs of a child or children to see to.* Women and children were part of an actively busy social cluster. Work was hard, laborious, often physically exhausting, but it was diversified and usually communal. Mortality from childbirth and pregnancy and the loss of infant lives was extremely high, the lifespan of women brief, and it would be naive to romanticize an existence constantly threatened by malnutrition, famine, and disease. But motherhood and the keeping of the home as a private refuge were not, could not be, the central occupation of women, nor were mother and child circumscribed into an isolated relationship.

On the Wisconsin frontier, pioneer mothers were innkeepers, schoolteachers, pharmacists, running a home as a subsistence unit with perhaps ten to fifteen children, taking in passing travelers and feeding and lodging them. The mother “collected wild plants, berries, barks, flowers and roots. . . . These she

* Agnes Smedley, writing of her grandmother at the turn of the century, sketches a vigorous, powerful woman involved in productive work:

She milked the cows each morning and night with the sweeping strength and movements of a man. She carried pails of skimmed milk and slopped the hogs; when she kneaded bread for baking it whistled and snapped under her hands, and her arms worked like steam pistons. She awoke the men at dawn and she told them when to go upstairs at night. She directed the picking of fruit—apples, pears, peaches, berries of every kind, and she taught her girls how to can, preserve and dry them for the winter. In the autumn she directed the slaughtering of beef and pork, and then smoked the meat in the smokehouse. When the sugar cane ripened in the summer she saw it cut, and superintended the making of molasses in the long, low sugar cane mill at the foot of the hill.

This woman had five children of her own, and eight of her husband’s from a prior marriage. (*Daughter of Earth* [Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1973], pp. 18–19.)

. . . dried and labeled . . . to be used upon short notice. . . . At times she was a surgeon . . . and fitted and bound together fingers, hanging on shreds; or removed a rusty spike from a foot, washed the wound . . . and saved the injured member."¹³ The real, depleting burdens of motherhood were physical: the toll of continual pregnancies, the drain of constant childbearing and nursing.

The nineteenth century saw crucial changes in Western assumptions about the home, work, women, and women's relationship to productivity. The earliest factories were actually the homes of agricultural workers who began producing textiles, iron, glass, and other commodities for sale to a middleman, who might supply the raw materials as well as the market for the finished goods.¹⁴ Women had worked alongside men even at the forges, had had almost a monopoly of the brewing trade, and the textile industry in particular had always depended on women; as early as the fourteenth century in England women had woven not only for the home but outside it.

Gradually those women who still worked at hand-spinning or weaving in the home were driven into the mills by the competition of power-spinning machines. There were no laws to limit the hours of labor; a woman worked for twelve hours, then returned to take up the burdens of her household. By 1844 a British factory inspector could report that "a vast majority of the persons employed at night and for long periods during the day are females; their labour is cheaper and they are more easily induced to undergo severe bodily fatigue than men."¹⁵

These same women left children at home; sometimes in the care of a six- or seven-year-old daughter, a grandmother, or a neighbor's hired child. Sometimes an older woman would keep infants and young children in her house for a fee; instead of breast-milk the unweaned babies were fed watery gruel or "pap," or the mother, if she could afford it, was forced to buy cow's milk for her child. The children were dosed with laudanum to keep them quiet. The severance of the sphere of work from the sphere of child-raising thus immediately created disadvantage and hardship for both child and mother.

These women worked from necessity, to supplement a husband's inadequate or nonexistent wages; and because they were

paid less, their employment was seen as threatening to male workers. Women's work was clearly subversive to "the home" and to patriarchal marriage; not only might a man find himself economically dependent on his wife's earnings, but it would conceivably even be possible for women to dispense with marriage from an economic point of view.* These two forces—the humanitarian concern for child welfare and the fear for patriarchal values—converged to provide pressure which led to legislation controlling children's and women's labor, and the assertion that "the home, its cares and employments, is the woman's true sphere."

The home thus defined had never before existed. It was a creation of the Industrial Revolution, an ideal invested with the power of something God-given, and its power *as an idea* remains unexpunged today. For the first time, the productivity of women (apart from reproductivity) was seen as "a waste of time, a waste of property, a waste of morals and a waste of health and life." Women were warned that their absence from home did not only mean the neglect of their children; if they failed to create the comforts of the nest, their men would be off to the alehouse. The welfare of men and children was the true mission of women. Since men had no mission to care for children or keep house, the solution was to get the women out of the factories.

As public opinion became aroused over the fate of children whose mothers worked in the mills, some efforts were made to set up nurseries; but in Victorian and Edwardian England, as in twentieth-century America, state-supported child-care was opposed on the grounds that it would violate "the sanctity of the domestic hearth and the decent seclusion of private life. . . . The family is the unit upon which a constitutional Government has been raised which is the admiration and envy of mankind. Hitherto, whatever the laws have touched, they have not dared invade this sacred precinct; and the husband and

* The social historian A. W. Calhoun suggests that in America the factory opened the way to a new economic independence for women which they had never had in the colonial period or the opening of the frontier. The need to keep the family patriarchal was at least one force behind the enactment of child-labor laws and of laws restricting the hours and conditions of work for women.

wife, however poor, returning home from whatsoever occupation or harassing engagements, have *there* found *their* dominion, *their* repose, *their* compensation for many a care."¹⁶

In 1915 the Women's Cooperative Guild in Britain published a volume of letters written by the wives of manual laborers about their lives as mothers and workers in the home. These lives stood as far as possible in contradiction to the ideal of the home as a protected place apart from the brutal realities of work and struggle. The average woman had from five to eleven children with several miscarriages, most of them with no prenatal care and inadequate diet. "At the time when she ought to be well fed she stints herself in order to save; for in a working class home if there is saving to be done, it is not the husband and children, but the mother who makes her meal off the scraps which remain over, or 'plays with meatless bones.'"¹⁷ The anxiety and physical depletion of incessant childbearing is a theme which runs throughout these letters. Many—against their principles, and often facing a husband's opposition—took drugs to bring on abortion, which were usually ineffective and on which the sickness of the forthcoming child was blamed. But along with the ill-health, mental strain, and exhaustion of which the women write, go an extraordinary resiliency of spirit, the will to make do, and an active sense of the injustice of their situation.

In my early motherhood I took it for granted that women had to suffer at these times, and it was best to behave and not make a fuss. . . . I do not know which is the worst—childbearing with anxiety and strain of mind and body to make ends meet, with the thought of another one to share the already small allowance, or getting through the confinement fairly well, and getting about household duties too soon, and bringing on other ailments which make life and everything a burden.¹⁸

Many wrote of the damage done by ignorance, the young woman's total lack of preparation for marriage and pregnancy; and even more of the insensitivity of husbands demanding sex throughout pregnancy or immediately after delivery:

During the time of pregnancy, the male beast keeps entirely from the female: not so with the woman; she is the prey of a

man just the same as though she was not pregnant. . . . If a woman does not feel well she must not say so, as a man has such a lot of ways of punishing a woman if she does not give in to him.¹⁹

I do not blame my husband for this birth. [The writer had had seven children and two miscarriages.] He had waited patiently for ten months because I was ill, and thinking the time was safe, I submitted as a duty, knowing there is much unfaithfulness on the part of the husband where families are limited. . . . It is quite time this question of maternity was taken up, and we must let the men know we are human beings with ideals, and aspire to something higher than to be mere objects on which they can satisfy themselves.²⁰

The women were not only pregnant for much of their lives, but doing heavy labor: scrubbing floors, hauling basins of wash, ironing, cooking over coal and wood fires which had to be fed and tended. One woman, against her doctor's orders, did her ironing and kneading in bed while recovering from a miscarriage.²¹ Despite their resentment of the husbands' sexual demands and opposition to abortion, the women tried to spare their men, who had worked hard all day, from further strain in the home:

I dare not let my husband in his precarious condition hear a cry of pain from me, and travail pain cannot always be stifled; and here again the doctor helped me by giving me a sleeping draught to administer him as soon as I felt the pangs of child-birth. Hence he slept in one room while I travailed in the other, and brought forth the liveliest boy that ever gladdened a mother's heart.²²

But there was no homecoming from work for the women.

Within the home or outside it, reality has always been at odds with the ideal. In 1860 in America a million women were employed; by the end of the Civil War there were 75,000 working-women in New York City alone. In 1973 the United States Census reported more than six million children under the age of six whose mothers worked full time outside the home.²³ Without free, universal, child-care, any woman who has ever

had to contrive and improvise in order to leave her children daily and earn a living can imagine the weight of anxiety, guilt, uncertainty, the financial burden, the actual emergencies which these statistics imply. The image of the mother in the home, however unrealistic, has haunted and reproached the lives of wage-earning mothers. But it has also become, and for men as well as women, a dangerous archetype: the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal; the feminine, leavening, emotional element in a society ruled by male logic and male claims to "objective," "rational" judgment; the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of wars, brutal competition, and contempt for human weakness.

4

The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. It cannot be compared with slavery or sweated labor because the emotional bonds between a woman and her children make her vulnerable in ways which the forced laborer does not know; he can hate and fear his boss or master, loathe the toil; dream of revolt or of becoming a boss; the woman with children is a prey to far more complicated, subversive feelings. Love and anger *can* exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not "loving"; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration. This "powerless responsibility" as one group of women has termed it,* is a heavier burden even than providing a living—which so many mothers have done, and do, simultaneously with mothering—because it is recognized in some quarters, at least, that economic forces, political oppression, lie behind poverty and unemployment; but the mother's very character, her status as a woman, are in question if she has "failed" her children.

* 1986: A New York feminist group called "The Matriarchists."

Whatever the known facts,* it is still assumed that the mother is "with the child." It is she, finally, who is held accountable for her children's health, the clothes they wear, their behavior at school, their intelligence and general development. Even when she is the sole provider for a fatherless family, she and no one else bears the guilt for a child who must spend the day in a shoddy nursery or an abusive school system. Even when she herself is trying to cope with an environment beyond her control—malnutrition, rats, lead-paint poisoning, the drug traffic, racism—in the eyes of society the mother is the child's environment. The worker can unionize, go out on strike; mothers are divided from each other in homes, tied to their children by compassionate bonds; our wildcat strikes have most often taken the form of physical or mental breakdown.

For mothers, the privatization of the home has meant not only an increase in powerlessness, but a desperate loneliness. A group of East London women talked with Hannah Gavron of the difference between trying to raise children in a street of row houses and in the new high-rise flats of postwar London: the loss of neighborhood, of stoop life, of a common pavement where children could be watched at play by many pairs of eyes.²⁴ In Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1950s, some married graduate students lived in housing built on the plan of the "lane" or row-house street, where children played in a common court, a mother could deliver her child to a neighbor for an hour, children filtered in and out of each others' houses, and mothers, too, enjoyed a casual, unscheduled companionship with each other. With the next step upward in academic status, came the move to the suburbs, to the smaller, then the larger, private house, the isolation of "the home" from other homes

* Twenty-six million children of wage-earning mothers, 8 million in female-headed households in the United States by the mid-1970s (Alice Rossi, "Children and Work in the Lives of Women," a paper delivered at the University of Arizona, February 7, 1976).

1986: In March 1984 the Current Population Reports, U.S. Bureau of the Census, showed 32.4 million children under eighteen years with mothers in the labor force; 10.4 million "own children" (by birth, adoption, or stepchildren) were recorded in female-headed households, no husband present.

increasing with the husband's material success. The working-class mothers in their new flats and the academic wives in their new affluence all lost something: they became, to a more extreme degree, house-bound, isolated women.

Lee Sanders Comer, a British Marxist-feminist, reiterates the classic Marxist critique of the nuclear family—the small, privatized unit of a woman, a man, and their children. In this division of labor the man is the chief or the sole wage-earner, and the woman's role is that of housewife, mother, consumer of goods, and emotional support of men and children. The "family" really means "the mother," who carries the major share of child-rearing, and who also absorbs the frustrations and rage her husband may bring home from work (often in the form of domestic violence). Her own anger becomes illegitimate, since her job is to provide him with the compassion and comfort he needs at home in order to return daily to the factory or the mine pit. Comer sees this division of labor as demanded by capitalism. But why should capitalism *in and of itself* require that women specialize in this role of emotional salvager, or that women and never men rear children and take care of the home? How much does this really have to do with capitalism, and how much with the system which, as Eli Zaretsky points out, predated capitalism and has survived under socialism—patriarchy?²⁶

The dependency of the male child on a woman in the first place, the spectacle of women producing new life from their bodies, milk from their breasts, the *necessity* of women for men—emotionally and as reproducers of life—these are elements we must recognize in any attempt to change the institutions that have germinated from them. Under patriarchal socialism we find the institution of motherhood revised and reformed in certain ways which permit women to serve (as we have actually served through most of our history) *both* as the producers and nurturers of children *and* as the full-time workers demanded by a developing economy. Child-care centers, youth camps, schools, facilitate but do not truly radicalize the familiar "double role" of working women; in no socialist country does the breakdown of the division of labor extend to bringing large numbers of men into child-care. Under Marxist or Maoist socialism, both motherhood and heterosexuality are still institu-

tionalized; heterosexual marriage and the family are still viewed as the "normal" situation for human beings and the building-blocks of the new society. Lesbianism is announced to be non-existent in China, while in Cuba homosexuals are treated as political criminals.* Birth control may or may not be available to women, depending on economic, military, and demographic pressures; in China women are pressured to become experimental subjects for new methods of birth control "for the revolution."²⁸ There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men. The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected.

* 1986: For a more searching look at homosexuality and heterosexism in Cuba, see Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience," *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1984), pp. 683-99. See also John d'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press New Feminist Series, 1983).

III THE KINGDOM OF THE FATHERS

For the first time in history, a pervasive recognition is developing that the patriarchal system cannot answer for itself; that it is not inevitable; that it is transitory; and that the cross-cultural, global domination of women by men can no longer be either denied or defended. When we acknowledge this, we tear open the relationship at the core of all power-relationships, a tangle of lust, violence, possession, fear, conscious longing, unconscious hostility, sentiment, rationalization: the sexual understructure of social and political forms. For the first time we are in a position to look around us at the Kingdom of the Fathers and take its measure. What we see is the one system which recorded civilization has never actively challenged, and which has been so universal as to seem a law of nature.*

* Jane Harrison in 1912, Helen Diner in the 1920s, Virginia Woolf in 1938, all indicated, questioned, and challenged the prevalence of patriarchal values. Simone de Beauvoir, in 1949, stated categorically that "this has always been a man's world"; but her discussion of the widest implications of this is largely by inference. The first extensive analysis of patriarchy in contemporary American feminist literature is that of Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970). An even more detailed and widely ramified treatment is found throughout Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973). Daly depicts at length the patriarchal bias which saturates all culture as an unacknowledged assumption. The earlier writings of men like J. J. Bachofen, Robert Briffault, Frederick Engels, Erich Neumann, among others, though useful as preliminary steps in identifying the phenomenon and in suggesting that the patriarchal family is not an inevitable "fact of nature," still stop short of recognizing the omnipresence of patriarchal bias as it affects even the

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. It does not necessarily imply that no woman has power, or that all women in a given culture may not have certain powers. Among the matrilineal Crow, for example, women take major honorific roles in ceremony and festival, but are debarred from social contacts and sacred objects during menstruation. Where women and men alike share a particular cultural phenomenon, it implies quite different things according to gender. "Where men wear veils—as among the North African Tuareg—this remoteness serves to increase the status and power of an individual, but it hardly does so for women in purdah." "Ultimately the line is drawn," as it is drawn, albeit differently, in every culture.¹

Nor does patriarchy imply a direct survival of the father's power over the son, although this power-relationship was once culturally unquestioned, as for example under feudalism, or in the Victorian family. The German psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich traces the decline of this father-son relationship under the pressures of industrialization, mass production, and the specialization of labor: as "work" moves outside the home and society becomes more complex and fragmented the father becomes a figure largely absent from the family, one who has lost the "substance" of his old practical authority. Yet, as Mitscherlich points out, "the patriarchal structural components in our society are closely associated with magical thought. It assumes the omnipotence-impotence relationship between father and son, God and man, ruler and ruled, to be the natural principle of social organization." This omnipotence-impotence relationship exists above all between men and women; and education, social organization, and our own "magical thought" still bear the imprint of that paternalistic image.²

The power of the fathers has been difficult to grasp because it

categories in which we think, and which has made of even the most educated and privileged woman an outsider, a nonparticipant, in the molding of culture.

permeates everything, even the language in which we try to describe it. It is diffuse and concrete; symbolic and literal; universal, and expressed with local variations which obscure its universality. Under patriarchy, I may live in *purdah* or drive a truck; I may raise my children on a *kibbutz* or be the sole breadwinner for a fatherless family or participate in a demonstration against abortion legislation with my baby on my back; I may work as a "barefoot doctor" in a village commune in the People's Republic of China, or make my life on a lesbian commune in New England; I may become a hereditary or elected head of state or wash the underwear of a millionaire's wife; I may serve my husband his early-morning coffee within the clay walls of a Berber village or march in an academic procession; whatever my status or situation, my derived economic class, or my sexual preference, I live under the power of the fathers, and I have access only to so much of privilege or influence as the patriarchy is willing to accede to me, and only for so long as I will pay the price for male approval. And this power goes much further than laws and customs; in the words of the sociologist Brigitte Berger, "until now a primarily masculine intellect and spirit have dominated in the interpretation of society and culture—whether this interpretation is carried out by males or females . . . fundamentally masculine assumptions have shaped our whole moral and intellectual history."³

Matrilineal societies—in which kinship is traced and property transmitted through the mother's line—or matrilocal societies—where the husband moves into the house or village of the wife's mother—exist as variations on the more familiar western pattern of the patriarchal family which is also patrilineal, patrilocal, and in which, without the father's name, a child is "illegitimate." But these variations merely represent different ways of channeling position and property to the male; they may confer more status and dignity on women and reduce the likelihood of polygamy; but they are not to be confused with "matriarchy." Nor, as Angela Davis has noted, can a Black woman who is the head of her household be termed a "matriarch" while she is powerless and oppressed in the larger society.⁴

In matrilineal descent groups, women are responsible for the

care of children, and every child is the primary responsibility of a particular woman even where other women share its care; adult men have authority over women and children; and descent-group exogamy (marrying out of the maternal family) is required. David Schneider makes the relative power of men and women extremely clear: women and children are under male authority "except perhaps for specially qualifying conditions applicable to a very few women of the society. Positions of highest authority within the matrilineal descent group will . . . ordinarily be vested in statuses occupied by men."⁵

The advantages to women of a matrilineal over a patrilineal order are actually slight. The emotional bonds between a mother and her children are subject to the strain of the father's kinship group pulling the child away from the maternal descent group; particularly in the case of sons, "economic cooperation and the transfer of property between father and child" has a compelling effect in weakening the emotional and psychological authority of the mother. The reverse is not true in patrilineal societies because the mother, however strongly bonded with her children emotionally, has no power beyond that relationship which might challenge the power of father-right (descent and inheritance in the male line).⁶

The terms "matriarchy," "mother-right," and "gynocracy" or "gynarchy" tend to be used imprecisely, often interchangeably. Robert Briffault* goes to some pains to show that matriarchy in primitive societies was not simply patriarchy with a different sex in authority; he reserves the term "gynocracy" for a situation in which women would have economic domination and control through property. He points out that the matriarchal elements in any society have had a *functional* origin—i.e., the maternal function of gestating, bearing, nurturing, and educating children; and that with this function in early society went a great deal of activity and authority which is now relegated to the male sphere outside the family. Briffault's matriarchal society is one in which female creative power is pervasive, and women have organic authority, rather than one in which the woman establishes and maintains domination and control over

* *The Mothers* (1927); for a further discussion of Briffault's work, see Chapter IV.

the man, as the man over the woman in patriarchy. There would be, according to Briffault, a kind of free consent to the authority of woman in a matriarchal society, because of her involvement with the essential practical and magical activity of that society. He thus sees matriarchy as organic by nature: because of the integration of agriculture, craft, invention, into the life centered around the mother and her children, women would be involved in a variety of creative and productive roles.* Patriarchy, in Briffault's view, develops when men revolt against this organic order, by establishing economic domination and by taking over magical powers previously considered the domain of women. "Gynocracy," like patriarchy, would thus mean a holding of power through force or economic pressure, and could only exist with the advent of private ownership and the economic advantage of one group over another.⁷

At the core of patriarchy is the individual family unit which originated with the idea of property and the desire to see one's property transmitted to one's biological descendants. Simone de Beauvoir connects this desire with the longing for immortality—in a profound sense, she says, "the owner transfers, alienates, his existence into his property; he cares more for it than for his very life; it overflows the narrow limits of his mortal lifetime, and continues to exist beyond the body's dissolution—the earthly and material incorporation of the immortal soul. But this survival can only come about if the property remains in the hands of its owner; it can be his beyond death only if it belongs to individuals in whom he sees himself projected, who are *his*."⁸ A crucial moment in human consciousness, then, arrives when man discovers that it is he himself, not the moon or the spring rains or the spirits of the dead, who impregnates the woman; that the child she carries and gives birth to is *his* child, who can make *him* immortal, both mystically, by propitiating the gods with prayers and sacrifices when he is dead, and concretely, by receiving the patrimony from him. At this crossroads of sexual possession, property ownership, and the desire to tran-

* See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970): "One might . . . include the caveat that such a social order need not imply the domination of one sex which the term 'matriarchy' would, by its semantic analogue to patriarchy, infer. Given the simpler scale of life and the fact that female-centered fertility religion might be offset by male physical strength, pre-patriarchy might have been fairly egalitarian" (p. 28).

scend death, developed the institution we know: the present-day patriarchal family with its supernaturalizing of the penis, its division of labor by gender, its emotional, physical, and material possessiveness, its ideal of monogamous marriage until death (and its severe penalties for adultery by the wife), the "illegitimacy" of a child born outside wedlock, the economic dependency of women, the unpaid domestic services of the wife, the obedience of women and children to male authority, the imprinting and continuation of heterosexual roles.

Again: some combination or aspect of patriarchal values prevails, whether in an Orthodox Jewish family where the wife mediates with the outer world and earns a living to enable the husband to study Torah; or for the upper-class European or Oriental couple, both professionals, who employ servants for domestic work and a governess for the children. They prevail even where women are the nominal "heads of households." For, much as she may act as the coequal provider or so-called matriarch within her own family, every mother must deliver her children over within a few years of their birth to the patriarchal system of education, of law, of religion, of sexual codes; she is, in fact, *expected* to prepare them to enter that system without rebelliousness or "maladjustment" and to perpetuate it in their own adult lives. Patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values even in those early years when the mother-child relationship might seem most individual and private; it has also assured through ritual and tradition that the mother shall cease, at a certain point, to hold the child—in particular the son—in her orbit. Certainly it has created images of the archetypal Mother which reinforce the conservatism of motherhood and convert it to an energy for the renewal of male power.

Of these images, and their implications for the whole spectrum of human relations, there is still much unsaid. Women have *been* both mothers and daughters, but have written little on the subject; the vast majority of literary and visual images of motherhood comes to us filtered through a collective or individual male consciousness.* As soon as a woman knows that a child is growing in her body, she falls under the power of the

* 1986: A bibliography of writings on motherhood and daughterhood—fiction, poetry, memoirs, essays—by women, produced in the last eight years alone, would fill many pages.

ories, ideals, archetypes, descriptions of her new existence, almost none of which have come from other women (though other women may transmit them) and all of which have floated invisibly about her since she first perceived herself to be female and therefore potentially a mother. We need to know what, out of all that welter of image-making and thought-spinning, is worth salvaging, if only to understand better an idea so crucial in history, a condition which has been wrested from the mothers themselves to buttress the power of the fathers.

2

Women are beginning to ask certain questions which, as the feminist philosopher Mary Daly observes, patriarchal method has declared nonquestions. The dominant male culture, in separating man as knower from both woman and from nature as the objects of knowledge,⁹ evolved certain intellectual polarities which still have the power to blind our imaginations. Any deviance from a quality valued by that culture can be dismissed as negative: where "rationality" is posited as sanity, legitimate method, "real thinking," any alternative, intuitive, supersensory, or poetic knowledge is labeled "irrational." If we listen well to the connotations of "irrational" they are highly charged: we hear overtones of "hysteria" (that disease once supposed to arise in the womb), of "madness" (the *absence* of a certain type of thinking to which all "rational men" subscribe), and of randomness, chaotic *absence* of form. Thus no attempt need be made to discover a form or a language or a pattern foreign to those which technical reason has already recognized. Moreover, the term "rational" relegates to its opposite term all that it refuses to deal with, and thus ends by assuming itself to be purified of the nonrational, rather than searching to identify and assimilate its own surreal or nonlinear elements. This single error may have mutilated patriarchal thinking—especially scientific and philosophic thinking—more than we yet understand.

Perhaps an even more fundamental split is that which divides

the "inner" from the "outer." A concise description of this way of perceiving can be found in Freud's essay "On Negation":

Expressed in the language of the oldest, that is, of the oral instinctual impulses, the alternative runs thus: "I should like to eat that, or I should like to spit it out," or, carried a stage further, "I should like to take this into me and keep that outside of me." That is to say: it is to be either *inside* me or *outside* me. . . . From [the point of view of the original pleasure-ego] what is bad, what is alien to the ego, and what is external are, to begin with, identical.¹⁰

As the inhabitant of a female body, this description gives me pause. The boundaries of the ego seem to me much less crudely definable than the words "inner" and "outer" suggest. I do not perceive myself as a walled city into which certain emissaries are received and from which others are excluded. The question is much more various and complicated. A woman may be raped—penetrated vaginally against her will by the penis or forced to take it into her mouth, in which case it is certainly experienced as alien invader—or, in heterosexual love-making, she may accept the penis or take it in her hand and insert it in her vagina. In love-making which is not simply "fucking" there is, often, a strong sense of *interpenetration*, of feeling the melting of the walls of flesh, as physical and emotional longing deliver the one person into the other, blurring the boundary between body and body. The identification with another woman's orgasm as if it were one's own is one of the most intense interpersonal experiences: nothing is either "inside" me or "outside" at such moments. Even in autoeroticism, the clitoris which is more or less external delivers its throbbing signals to the vagina and all the way into the uterus which cannot be seen or touched.

Nor, in pregnancy, did I experience the embryo as decisively internal in Freud's terms, but rather, as something inside and of me, yet becoming hourly and daily more separate, on its way to becoming separate from me and of-itself. In early pregnancy the stirring of the fetus felt like ghostly tremors of my own body, later like the movements of a being imprisoned in me; but both sensations were *my* sensations, contributing to my own sense of physical and psychic space.

Without doubt, in certain situations the child in one's body can only feel like a foreign body introduced from without: an alien. (However, in her monograph, *Maternal Emotions*, Niles Newton cites studies of vomiting during pregnancy which suggest that it is related not to aversion to the pregnancy itself but to the conditions of conception—frequent undesired sex and the absence of orgasm.¹¹) Yet even women who have been raped seem often to assimilate that germ of being, created in violence, not as something introduced from without but as nascent from within. The embryo is, of course, both. We ovulate whether or not the ovum is to encounter a sperm. The child that I carry for nine months can be defined *neither* as me or as not-me. Far from existing in the mode of "inner space," women are powerfully and vulnerably attuned both to "inner" and "outer" because for us the two are continuous, not polar.

The rejection of the dualism, of the positive-negative polarities between which most of our intellectual training has taken place, has been an undercurrent of feminist thought.¹² And, rejecting them, we reaffirm the existence of all those who have through the centuries been negatively defined: not only women, but the "untouchable," the "unmanly," the "nonwhite," the "illiterate": the "invisible." Which forces us to confront the problem of the essential dichotomy: power/powerlessness.

Power is both a primal word and a primal relationship under patriarchy. Through control of the mother, the man assures himself of possession of his children; through control of his children he insures the disposition of his patrimony and the safe passage of his soul after death. It would seem therefore that from very ancient times the identity, the very personality, of the man depends on power, and on power in a certain, specific sense: that of *power over others*, beginning with a woman and her children. The ownership of human beings proliferates: from primitive or arranged marriage through contractual marriage-with-dowry through more recent marriage "for love" but involving the economic dependency of the wife, through the feudal system, through slavery and serfdom. The powerful (mostly male) make decisions for the powerless: the well for the sick, the middle-aged for the aging, the "sane" for the "mad," the educated for the illiterate, the influential for the marginal.

However the man may first have obtained *power over* the woman as mother, this power has become diffused through our society in terms of that first sexual enslavement. Each colonized people is defined by its conqueror as weak, feminine, incapable of self-government, ignorant, uncultured, effete, irrational, in need of civilizing. On the other hand it may also be savored as mystical, physical, in deep contact with the earth—all attributes of the primordial Mother. But to say that the conquered are seen in this way does not mean that they have been truly *seen*.

To hold power over others means that the powerful is permitted a kind of short-cut through the complexity of human personality. He does not have to enter intuitively into the souls of the powerless, or to hear what they are saying in their many languages, including the language of silence. Colonialism exists by virtue of this short-cut—how else could so few live among so many and understand so little?

Much has been written about the effect of this condition upon the psyche of the powerless, all of it applicable to women, though the writers have been male, and sexist.¹³ Powerlessness can lead to lassitude, self-negation, guilt, and depression; it can also generate a kind of psychological keenness, a shrewdness, an alert and practiced observation of the oppressor—"psyching-out" developed into a survival tool. Because the powerful can always depend on the short-cut of authority or force to effect his will, he has no apparent need for such insights, and, in fact, it can be dangerous for him to explore too closely into the mind of the powerless. Southern whites maintained well into the years of Black civil-rights struggle that "our Negroes" were really satisfied with their condition. In similar vein, a complacent husband will announce that his wife is a "liberated woman," while male psychoanalysts and philosophers weave fanciful and uncorroborated theories about women.¹⁴ The powerful person would seem to have a good deal at stake in suppressing or denying his awareness of the personal reality of others; power seems to engender a kind of willed ignorance, a moral stupidity, about the inwardness of others, hence of oneself. This quality has variously been described as "detachment," "objectivity," "sanity"—as if the recognition of another's being would open the floodgates to panic and hysteria. E. M. Forster

personifies this quality in his novel *Howards End* (1910), in the characters of the industrialist Mr. Wilcox and his son, for whom the personal is both trivial and dangerous:

. . . there was one quality in Henry for which [his wife] was never prepared, however much she reminded herself of it: his obtuseness. He simply did not notice things, and there was no more to be said . . . he never noticed the lights and shades that exist in the greyest conversation, the finger-posts, the mile-stones, the collisions, the illimitable views. Once . . . she scolded him about it. He was puzzled, but replied with a laugh: "My motto is Concentrate. I've no intention of frittering away my strength on that kind of thing." "It isn't frittering away the strength," she protested. "It's enlarging the space in which you may be strong." He answered, "You're a clever little woman, but my motto's Concentrate."¹⁵

Mr. Wilcox is powerful as one member of a moneyed, imperialist male establishment, the pre-World War I England already losing itself to urban sprawl, speculative capitalism, and a peculiarly abstract type of class relationship. The class oppression in the novel is inextricable from male contempt and condescension toward women, of which Wilcox and his son provide innumerable examples. He is also powerful as the head of household, the dictator of family principle, who is not above suppressing his first wife's deathbed letter in the name of keeping her property in the family. His son—also in the name of protecting family honor and property—commits manslaughter. Lies, force, but above all a profound disavowal of the claims of human personality, characterize the Wilcox world. Margaret, who becomes Mr. Wilcox's second wife, and her sister Helen, correctly perceive these men as hollow, as concealing an inner "chaos and emptiness." Yet this male power is derived from the power of an ideology: a structure internalized in the form of tradition and even of religion.

Monotheism posits a god whose essential attribute is that he (*sic*) is *all-powerful*: He can raze Babylon or Nineveh, bring plague and fire to Egypt, and part the sea. But his power is most devastatingly that of an *idea* in people's minds, which leads them to obey him out of fear of punishment, and to reject other (often female) deities because they are convinced that in

any contest *he* will be victorious. He calls himself "Father"—but we must remember that a father is simply a male who has possession and control of a female (or more than one) and her offspring. It is not from God the Father that we derive the idea of paternal authority; it is out of the struggle for paternal control of the family that God the Father is created. His word is law and the idea of his power becomes more important than any demonstration of it; it becomes internalized as "conscience," "tradition," "the moral law within."^{*}

The idea of power thus becomes the power of an idea, which saturates all other notions of power. In both East and West, sexual love is imagined as power *over* someone, or the falling *under* someone else's power. Arabic tradition has it that to fall in love is to have fallen under the power of witchcraft.¹⁸ The Occidental lover is similarly "bewitched" or "fascinated"—i.e., *bound*: powerless. Once more, responsibility toward the other, genuine knowledge of the other as person, is unnecessary. The language of patriarchal power insists on a dichotomy: for one person to have power, others—or another—must be powerless.

Thus, as women begin to claim full humanity, a primary question concerns the meaning of power. In the move from powerlessness, toward what are we moving? The one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense—authority over and control of another—has been motherhood; and even this aspect, as we shall see, has been wrenched and manipulated to male control.

Ancient motherhood was filled with a *mana* (supernatural force) which has been explored in the work of such writers as Joseph Campbell and Erich Neumann. Yet the helplessness of the child confers a certain narrow kind of power on the mother everywhere—a power she may not desire, but also often a power which may compensate to her for her powerlessness

* 1986: The Jewish feminist poet and scholar Marcia Falk asserts that "traditional Jewish prayer . . . in its dogmatic naming of an exclusively male God . . . who may be allowed to have feminine attributes or aspects but whose primary reality is male . . . has turned the monotheistic promise into a lie" ("What about God?" *Moment* [March 1985], pp. 32-36). For a Christian feminist perspective, see Nelle Morton, "Beloved Image," in *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), pp. 140-46.

everywhere else. The power of the mother is, first of all, to give or withhold nourishment and warmth, to give or withhold survival itself.* Nowhere else (except in rare and exceptional cases, e.g., an absolute ruler like Catherine de' Medici, or a woman guard in a concentration camp) does a woman possess such literal power over life and death.† And it is at this moment that her life is most closely bound to the child's, for better or worse, and when the child, for better or worse, is receiving its earliest impressions. In de Beauvoir's words, "It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved."¹⁷ The idea of maternal power has been domesticated. In transfiguring and enslaving woman, the womb—the ultimate source of this power—has historically been turned against us and itself made into a source of powerlessness.

3

Outside of the mother's brief power over the child—subject to male interference—women have experienced "power over" in two forms, both of them negative. The first is men's power over us—whether physical, economic, or institutional—along with the spectacle of their bloody struggles for power over other men, their implicit sacrifice of human relationships and emotional values in the quest for dominance. Like other dominated people, we have learned to manipulate and seduce, or to internalize men's will and make it ours, and men have sometimes characterized this as "power" in us; but it is nothing more than the child's or courtesan's "power" to wheedle and the dependent's "power" to disguise her feelings—even from herself—in

* I have never read a child-rearing manual that made this point, or that raised the question of infanticide.

† Anton Chekov describes in his story, "Sleepy," the process by which a young nursemaid who has not slept for days is driven to strangle the child she is nursing. It is a story of human torture; the crying of the baby is akin to the sleep-deprivation techniques of brainwashing. Yet even Chekov, whose human honesty was great, makes the infanticide not the child's mother but a serf. It is probable that in his medical practice in early nineteenth-century Russia he encountered many instances of maternal infanticide.

order to obtain favors, or literally to survive.

The possibility of "power" for women has historically been befogged by sentimentality and mystification. When the Grimké sisters began to speak before antislavery societies in the 1830s, they were breaking with a convention that forbade women to appear on public platforms. A pastoral letter from the Congregational Church was issued against them, saying:

The appropriate duties and influence of women are clearly stated in the New Testament. Those duties and that influence are unobtrusive and private, but *the sources of mighty power*. When the mild, dependent, softening influence upon the sternness of man's opinion is fully exercised, society feels the effect of it in a thousand forms. *The power of woman is her dependence*, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection. But when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer . . . she yields *the power which God has given her for her protection*, and her character becomes unnatural . . . (Emphasis mine.)¹⁸

It was as if in answer to such sentiments that Olive Schreiner, in her novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), made her heroine Lyndall burst forth in response to her friend Waldo's remark that "some women have power":

"Power! Did you ever hear of men being asked whether other souls should have power or not? It is born in them. You may dam up the fountain of water and make it a stagnant marsh, or you may let it run free and do its work; but *you cannot say whether or not it shall be there; it is there*. And it will act, if not openly for good, then covertly for evil; but it will act. . . . Power!" she said suddenly, smiting her little hand upon the rail. "Yes, we have power; and since we are not to expend it in tunnelling mountains, nor healing diseases, nor making laws, nor money, nor on any extraneous object, we expend it on *you*. You are our goods, our merchandise, our material for operating on. . . . We are not to study law, nor science, nor art; so we study you. There is never a nerve or fibre in your man's nature but we know it . . ." ¹⁹

For a moment, in this passage, Olive Schreiner brushes against a somewhat different definition of power—but only for a moment. Her Lyndall is a woman of intense energy, longing for

education and for "extraneous objects" in the form of ideas into which to pour that energy. And she experiences herself as potentially malign, if that energy is to be denied any outlet except the "appropriate duties and influence of women." For centuries women have felt their active, creative impulses as a kind of demonic possession. But no less have men identified and punished such impulses as demonic: the case of Anne Hutchinson being merely one example.²⁰

Besides men's power over us, and our own discernment of something denied and aborted in us, women have also felt man's *powerfulness* in the root sense of the word (*posse, potere, or pouvoir*—to be able, to be capable)—expressed in the creations of his mind. In the torsion of a piece of music or the spatial harmony of a building, in the drenching light of a painting, the unity and force of an intellectual structure, we have experienced that *powerfulness* as the expressive energy of an ego which, unlike ours, was licensed to direct itself outward upon the world. If we have experienced man's brute battle for power as a terror, often visited directly on ourselves and our children, we have also known this other *powerfulness*, not our own, set before us as a measure of human aspiration. And we have often longed to ally ourselves with that kind of power. (In a high-school yearbook of my generation one of the most brilliant students listed as her ambition: "To be married to a great man.") To have some link with male power has been the closest that most of us could come to sharing in power directly; to have no link with any form of male power, however petty and corrupt, has meant that we lived unprotected and vulnerable indeed. The idea of power has, for most women, been inextricably linked with maleness, or the use of force; most often with both.

But we have also experienced, more intuitively and unconsciously, men's fantasies of our power, fantasies rooted far back in infancy, and in some mythogenetic zone of history. Whatever their origins, for most women these male fantasies, because so obliquely expressed, have been obscured from view. What we did see, for centuries, was the hatred of overt strength in women, the definition of strong independent women as freaks of nature, as unsexed, frigid, castrating, perverted, dangerous; the fear of the maternal woman as "controlling," the preference

for dependent, malleable, "feminine" women.* But that *all* women might at some profound level be the objects of men's fear and hatred has only slowly begun to melt into our awareness through the writings of some post-Freudians,²¹ and it is still an insight which women resist. As Karen Horney remarks:

Is it not really remarkable (we ask ourselves in amazement) when one considers the overwhelming mass of this transparent material, that so little recognition and attention are paid to the fact of men's secret dread of women? It is almost more remarkable that women themselves have so long been able to overlook it . . .²²

She suggests that behind women's obliviousness of this male dread lie "anxiety and the impairment of self-respect." Anxiety there certainly is; the anxiety of the objectified who realizes that however much she may *wish* to render herself pleasing and non-threatening, she will still to some degree partake of the feared aspect of Woman, an abstraction which she feels has nothing to do with her. Since politically and socially men do wield immense power over women, it is unnerving to realize that your mate or employer may also fear you. And if a woman hopes to find, not a master but a brother, a lover, an equal, how is she to meet this dread? If it brings to her intimations of a power inherent in her sex, that power is perceived as hostile, destructive, controlling, malign; and the very idea of power is poisoned for her. We shall have return to this fear of women; for the present it must be repeated that women's primary experience of power till now has been triply negative: we have experienced men's power as oppression; we have experienced our own vitality and independence as somehow threatening to men; and, even when behaving with "feminine" passivity, we have been made

* Margaret Mead suggests that the opening of the American frontier required that a different kind of valuation be placed on female qualities and that "strong women, women with character and determination, in fact women with guts, became more and more acceptable" (*Male and Female* [New York: Morrow, 1975], p. 225). However, she acknowledges that women were still expected to be capable of "pleasing men"; and as the West was opened and a new leisure class began to establish itself in the cities, the "strong" female of the frontier declined in value, as Thorstein Veblen and Emily James Putnam (*The Lady*, 1910) make abundantly clear.

aware of masculine fantasies of our potential destructiveness.

The resurgence of interest in the work of J. J. Bachofen, Robert Briffault, Joseph Campbell, Robert Graves, Helen Diner, Jane Harrison, the response generated by E. G. Davis's *The First Sex*, essays in feminist theory such as Jane Alpert's "Mother-Right," have been in part a search for vindication of the belief that patriarchy is in some ways a degeneration, that women exerting power would use it differently from men: non-possessively, nonviolently, nondestructively. A "matriarchal controversy" has arisen directly from this quest, and has served as a catalyst for reexamining the reaction against "biology" which was necessarily an early stage in feminist thought.

Two widely read women theorists, Helen Diner (first published in Germany in the late 1920s) and Elizabeth Gould Davis (writing in the 1970s) both drew heavily on earlier writers, notably J. J. Bachofen and Robert Briffault, to argue that woman's physiology was the original source of her prepatriarchal power, both in making her the source of life itself, and in associating her more deeply than man with natural cycles and processes. All these writers envisioned a prehistoric civilization centered around the female, both as mother and head of family, and as deity—the Great Goddess who appears throughout early mythology, as Tiamat, Rhea, Isis, Ishtar, Astarte, Cybele, Demeter, Diana of Ephesus, and by many other names: the eternal giver of life and embodiment of the natural order, including death.

For Diner and Davis, Woman as Mother naturally led to gynarchy: to societies headed by and marked with profound reverence for women. Other writers, including Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, deny that either a "matriarchal" or "gynocratic" order ever existed, and perceive women's maternal function as, quite simply and precisely, the root of our oppression. Whatever the conclusion drawn, there is an inescapable correlation between the idea of motherhood and the idea of power.

The sociologist Philip Slater, for example, sees real evidence for an early matriarchal culture in Greece, supplanted by patriarchy in later times, although he hesitates to assume a like transition from matriarchal to patriarchal power in other cultures, since "the *ontogenetic* experience of primeval matriarchy is uni-

versal, and may provide the source of much of this tradition" in mythology and folklore. In other words (and this was Freud's view) each woman and each man has once, in earliest infancy, lived under the power of the mother, and this fact alone could account for the recurrence of dreams, legends, myths, of an archetypal powerful Woman, or of a golden age ruled by women.²³ Whether such an age, even if less than golden, ever existed anywhere, or whether we all carry in our earliest imprintings the memory of, or the longing for, an individual past relationship to a female body, larger and stronger than our own, and to female warmth, nurture, and tenderness, there is a new concern for the *possibilities* inherent in beneficent female power, as a mode which is absent from the society at large, and which, even in the private sphere, women have exercised under terrible constraints.²⁴

4

The history of patriarchy is yet to be written—I do not mean the history of men, but of an idea which arose, prospered, had its particular type of expression, and which has proven self-destructive. But there are four or five movements of recent history which seem to intersect here. One is the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties—briefly believed to be congruent with the liberation of women. The "pill," it was believed by some, would release women from the fear of pregnancy, hence from the double standard, and would make us sexually coequal with men. For many reasons, this proved a myth; it did not mean that we were free to discover our own sexuality, but rather that we were expected to behave according to male notions of female sexuality, as surely as any Victorian wife, though the notions themselves had changed. And the "pill" itself is a mechanistic and patriarchal device, recently proven to have deadly side-effects.²⁵ But the liberalization of sexual attitudes, the increase in pre- and extramarital sex, the growing divorce rate, and the acknowledgedly threadbare texture of the nuclear family, did lead toward a new recognition of the contradictions between patriarchal theory and practice.*

* A classic contradiction is the prevalence of rape, which is estimated to be the most frequently committed violent crime in America today. As one

Also relevant are the movements for ecology and zero population growth. These have arisen, to be sure, not from any primary concern for women, but from pressures generated by the wastefulness of technological society and the misallocation and monopoly of resources on the planet, which are usually referred to as the problems of famine and overpopulation. In the ecological analysis there has been some fresh examination of the values of technologically oriented society, recognition not only of its capricious unthrift and short-sighted profiteering, but of the increasing disappearance of certain values such as intimacy, protectiveness toward the living, respect for variety and variation, and for natural processes. To some extent this analysis might be seen as a reassertion of prepatriarchal values. However, these movements do aim, among other things, at a reduction of the birth rate; and they are presumably prepared to achieve this, if expedient, by propaganda aimed at evoking guilt in women who wish to become biological mothers.

Moreover, the control by women of our bodies has never been recognized as a primary issue in these movements. A report by a British feminist on the International World Population Conference at Bucharest in 1974 notes that:

Despite lip-service to the idea that couples and families (*never* women) should have the right to determine the number and spacing of their children, in no case is this right seen as more important than the requirements of the economy. A brief look at the history of the developed countries—both capitalist and socialist—over the past 50 years will confirm that it is always

writer points out, rape illuminates the sexual schizophrenia of the society in which "the masculine man is . . . expected to prove his mettle as a protector of women," while rape is also a measure of virility (Susan Griffin, "Rape: The All-American Crime," in Jo Freeman, ed., *Women: A Feminist Perspective* [Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield, 1975]). But it is more than simply an all-American crime. From the Book of Numbers (31: 14-36), which describes the rape of 32,000 Midianite women by order of Moses, to the recent rape by Pakistani soldiers of 200,000 women of Bangladesh, rape remains the great unpunished war crime in every culture. As a crime of violence committed by a man against his wife, it is not even legally recognized.

1986: In twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia, a husband may be prosecuted for a rape committed on his wife when he was living with her; in twenty-one states, marital rape is still not a crime (National Clearinghouse on Marital Rape, 2325 Oak Street, Berkeley, CA 94708).

women who are expected to adjust their fertility to the need for labor or cannon-fodder, never the economy which must adapt to an increasing or decreasing birthrate.²⁶

In contrast, the Black nationalist movement has declared that birth control and abortion are "genocidal" and that Black women should feel guilty if they do *not* provide children to carry on the Black struggle for survival. Black women have increasingly rejected this rhetoric, however, and have criticized "the irresponsible, poorly thought-out call to young girls, on-the-margin scufflers, every Sister at large to abandon the pill that gives her certain decisive power, a power that for a great many of us is all we know, given the setup in this country and in our culture."²⁷ (This was of course written before the lethal side-effects of the pill were publicly acknowledged.) Janis Morris, community organizer and mother, states that "the Black woman has got to consider what is best for the child during pregnancy and after birth, and too often she has to bear all the responsibility alone. So frankly, when the sister tells a brother 'I'm not going to have this baby,' it ain't nobody's business but her own."²⁸

None of these movements, for or against the limitation of births, has the condition of women at heart as a root of insight; all are prepared to dictate to women—as patriarchy has always dictated—whether or not and under what circumstances to "produce" children.* As the sociologist Jessie Bernard puts it:

It was not until the late 1960's that motherhood became a serious political issue in our country. Like so many other issues, it came not in clear-cut, carefully thought-through form but in a murky conglomerate of ecology, environmental protection, and a "welfare mess". It took an "antinatalist" slant. The problem posed was how to stop women from having so many babies.

* And more than dictate. The involuntary sterilization of poor women on welfare in federally financed clinics was publicized widely when the Southern Poverty Law Center brought suit on behalf of the Relf sisters, aged twelve and fourteen, sterilized under a federal program, in Montgomery, Alabama. Neither of the young women had ever been pregnant. Barbara Segal reports that "In China . . . women are not given birth control information until after they are married. It has also been reported that in certain areas women are offered incentives such as clothing and so-called 'transportation costs' if they will be sterilized" (*off our backs*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 11). See also Carl Djerassi, "Some Observations on Current Fertility Control in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 57 (January-March 1974), pp. 40-60.

Ecologists frightened us with images of millions suffocating for lack of oxygen and hostile reformers with images of women—especially black women—having babies in order to remain on welfare rolls. The first group directed their attack against middle-class women, the second, against welfare women.²⁹

A third strand in this historical pattern is technological; the genetic revolution, now in progress in laboratories, which has already developed the "sperm bank" and artificial insemination, and is now at work on "cloning" or the controlled reproduction of selected types through the growing, in a matrix, of cell nuclei transplants from a single "parent," to create a series of genetically identical offspring. Shulamith Firestone, an enthusiastic believer in replacing biological with artificial motherhood, has observed that the possibilities are terrifying if we envision the choice of human types, gender, and capacities being controlled by patriarchy.³⁰ On the other hand, if biological motherhood can become a real choice (as distinct from being forcibly prescribed or rendered obsolete by fiat) then the concept of woman as womb, and of "biological destiny" becomes harder to defend. And these concepts have buttressed the structure of patriarchy from the first.

5

In the mid-fifties, a few scattered male writers such as Denis de Rougemont and Erich Neumann had begun to identify the denial of what Neumann called "the feminine" in civilization with the roots of inhumanity and self-destructiveness, and to call for a renewal of "the feminine principle."³¹ In *The Flight from Woman*, Karl Stern, a Jewish Freudian analyst turned Catholic, sees the scientific mode of knowledge beginning with Descartes as a rejection of the "feminine" mode of knowledge associated with intuition, spirituality, and poetry; and announces "the mystery of Androgyny . . . manifest in the historical crisis" of the present.^{32*} More recently writers ranging from the

* "Androgyny" has recently become a "good" word (like "motherhood" itself) implying many things to many people, from bisexuality to a vague freedom from imposed sexual roles. Rarely has the use of the term been accompanied by any political critique. Carolyn Heilbrun argues in her *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* that an "androgynous" undercurrent runs throughout Western humanism, which if recognized would help us

philosopher Herbert Marcuse to the poet Robert Bly, have suggested that a return to the "feminine" (Marcuse calls it "the femalization of man") is the next stage in the development of the species.³³ This "feminine principle," however, like "androgyny," remains for such writers elusive and abstract and seems to have, for them, little connection with the rising expectations and consciousness of actual women. In fact, Marcuse and Bly might be likened to the Saint-Simonians and Shelley, who likewise insisted theoretically on the importance of the feminine, yet who betrayed much of the time their unconscious patriarchal parochialism.³⁴

Philip Slater perceives women as the peripheral members of the society, therefore "in a better position to liberate [it] emotionally"—whatever this may mean, since he discounts the likelihood that women will actually rise up against patriarchal values. In his discussion of the "concept of the tyrannical father" in the American unconscious—displaced, as he notes, from the actual father onto some abstract authority, fantasy-father, or technology itself—he implies that patriarchy is the real name of the system he is describing, and which is ultimately dangerous to human existence—a conclusion he would be reluctant to draw.³⁵

None of these writers mention the possibility that a "return to the feminine" may actually involve pain and dread, and hence active resistance, on the part of men. We do not find in their work any such powerful analysis of the nature and extent of patriarchy as in Firestone, Millett, and Daly; but we do

to free ourselves and society from the role-playing and division of labor required under patriarchy. Other writers have criticized the reactionary associations of "androgyny"; as Catherine Stimpson points out, "the androgyne still fundamentally thinks in terms of 'feminine' and 'masculine.' It fails to conceptualize the world and to organize phenomena in a new way that leaves 'feminine' and 'masculine' behind" (Catherine R. Stimpson, "The Androgyne and the Homosexual," *Women's Studies*, Vol. 2 [1974], pp. 237-48). See also Cynthia Secor, "Androgyny: An Early Reappraisal"; Daniel A. Harris, "Androgyny: The Sexist Myth in Disguise"; Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, "The Politics of Androgyny," in the same issue; and Janice Raymond, "The Illusion of Androgyny," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer 1975). Finally, the very structure of the word replicates the sexual dichotomy and the priority of *andros* (male) over *gyne* (female). In a truly postandrogynous society the term "androgyne" would have no meaning.

find corroboration of a sense that patriarchy, in degrading and oppressing its daughters, has also at some less overt level failed its sons.

Such a sense—though unperceived as such—fluttered, at least, in the “Movement” of the 1960s, despite the profound sexism underlying its apparent rejection of racist violence and the Vietnam war. Men who refused to serve in the armed forces, and who underwent imprisonment or exile as the penalty for their decisions, demonstrated a revulsion against the patriarchal stereotypes of authoritarianism, militarism, nationalism, “being a man.” (The “counter-culture” style of unisex clothing, male self-adornment, gentler manners, long hair, was a more superficial token. Much might be written on the various costumes in which male privilege and male supremacism have masked, as well as advertised, themselves in our time.) The peace movement, sexist as it was (“CHICKS SAY YES TO MEN WHO SAY NO”), expressed disenchantment with the values of violence, super-technology, and imperialism. The student radicalism of the sixties commonly met with the charge that these young people were in revolt against their fathers, “acting-out” their Oedipal rage; in fact the “counter-culture” (most of it, to be sure, soon absorbed into the omnivorous Culture) did for awhile constitute an unconscious critique of the authority-through-role or through force which has characterized patriarchy. There was a fleeting revolt against authoritarian education; the teacher was for the first time asked to justify himself as a human being rather than a role; obedience was seen as the reverse of learning. This questioning of the power-relationship in education often took on an aggressive, anti-intellectual, and destructive style, thoroughly masculinist in its dehumanization of the individual teacher facing the classroom. Yet it, too, sprang from some kind of instinctual resistance to the dehumanization of the student in the learning process, the sense of being “merely a number” or a bank in which information is deposited.

But these tendrils of antimasculinism straggled forth quite innocent of any antimasculinist theory, and easily submerged under the macho ethic of SDS and Weathermen, with their sexual exploitation of women and their inherited theories of patriarchal revolution; or under the male homophile movement.

In the mid-1970s a reaction has made itself felt in the form of what Susan Sontag has perceived as an eroticization of Nazism, a cult of fascist aesthetics.* It is no accident, I think, that this fascination with the regalia of stormtroopers has arisen along with a pervasively changing consciousness and a new self-definition on the part of women. Nazism had a clear and unmistakable political formula for women and where they belonged: mothers of men, *kinder, kirche, kuche*. It glorified as no other twentieth-century system has done, the healthy body of the racially “pure” woman as an incubator of sons and heroes.

6

The mid-twentieth-century wave of feminism has gone further and asked more than its predecessors. Like patriarchy itself, the extent and influence of the antipatriarchal women's movement is difficult to grasp. It is not defined by specific organizations, groupings, or factions, though these exist in abundance. It exists in many stages of development throughout the world, at the most local, pragmatic levels, as a network of formal and informal communications, as a growing body of analysis and theory, and as a profound moral, psychic, and philosophic reevaluation of what it means to be “human.” For a movement which has existed in its present form less than a decade, it has already brought forth decisive shifts of value, relation, and identity among women of all ages and economic levels, many of whom would not call themselves feminists. It has opened a new range of choices to women, many of which seem private and inconsequential yet each of which, multiplied by the thousands, has helped create a new climate of perception. Elizabeth Oakes-Smith, an early-nineteenth-century suffragist, writer, and preacher, had demanded in 1852: “Do we really understand that we aim at nothing less than an entire subversion of the present

* “Much of the imagery of far-out sex has been placed under the sign of Nazism. More or less Nazi costumes with boots, leather, chains, Iron Crosses on gleaming torsos, swastikas, have become, along with meat hooks and heavy motorcycles, the secret and most lucrative paraphernalia of eroticism” (“Fascinating Fascism,” *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975, p. 29).

state of society, a dissolution of the whole existing social compact?" By 1970, Shulamith Firestone was responding: "Rather than concentrating the female principle into a 'private' retreat . . . we want to rediffuse it—for the first time creating society from the bottom up." And Mary Daly continued, in 1973: "Only radical feminism can act as the 'final cause', because of all revolutionary causes it alone opens up human consciousness adequately to the desire for non-hierarchical, nonoppressive society revealing sexism as the basic model and source of oppression."*

Where the two powerful shapers of contemporary Western thought, Marx and Freud, had completed—as if by some tacit collaboration—the centuries' process of dichotomizing "man" into mind/body, psychological/political, Simone de Beauvoir, in 1949, was bringing a phenomenological approach to bear on "discovering woman":

So . . . we reject for the same reasons both the sexual monism of Freud and the economic monism of Engels. A psychoanalyst will interpret all social claims of women as phenomena of the "masculine protest"; for the Marxist, on the contrary, her sexuality only expresses her economic situation in more or less complex, roundabout fashion. But the categories of "clitorid" and "vaginal", like the categories of "bourgeois" or "proletar-

* "I hope my use of 'final cause' is clear: In 'tradition' the final cause is 'first', it is motivating purpose, an insight which elicits seeking, movement. It is 'first in the order of intention', opening the subject to action. She may not know all of the directions and implications of the action. . . . So to say the Women's Movement is the final cause is to mean it sets many-dimensional movements in motion, e.g. liberation of children, of the aged, of the racially oppressed. To say this is to see a priority for the women's movement as catalyst, as *the* necessary catalyst—hardly to see it as a self-enclosed system" (Personal communication, Spring 1974).

1986: In historical fact, the women's movement in the United States, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has, like other liberation movements, been "opened to action" or unlatched by the three hundred years of the Black liberation struggle, in which Black women have always been leaders and builders of resistance. Many of the emerging white feminists of the late 1960s first encountered female political leadership while participating in the Black Civil Rights movement, where sexism was also debated. See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), pp. 299–324.

ian" are equally inadequate to encompass a concrete woman. Underlying all individual drama, as it underlies the economic history of mankind, there is an existential foundation that alone enables us to understand in its unity that particular form of being which we call a human life.³⁶

Masculine intellectual systems are inadequate because they lack the wholeness that female consciousness, excluded from contributing to them, could provide. In taking the "otherness" of the "second" sex for granted, these systems are erected on an essential intellectual fault. Truly to liberate women, then, means to change thinking itself: to reintegrate what has been named the unconscious, the subjective, the emotional with the structural, the rational, the intellectual; to "connect the prose and the passion" in E. M. Forster's phrase; and finally to annihilate those dichotomies. In the being of a woman sold as a bride, or rejected because she is "barren" and cannot produce sons to enhance a man's status, economics and sexuality, legalism and magic, caste structure and individual fear, barter and desire, coexist inextricably; only in the outer world of patriarchal categories and patriarchal denial can they be conceived as separate.

De Beauvoir in 1949 still saw the liberation of women as but one of many liberations which would come about as the result of socialist revolution, insofar as socialism promised to do away with private property and the patriarchal family and to release women into economic equality with men. Her experience and her analysis have since taken her further.³⁷ But radical feminism is now speaking in terms of "feminist revolution," of a "post-androgynous" society, of creating a new kind of human being.

7

Imagine a spectrum, at one end of which is a tar-paper shack in Appalachia or rural New Hampshire, in which an eighteen-year-old mother of four is expecting her fifth child, her first menstrual period having been her last. Her legs are discolored with varicose veins, her abdominal wall permanently distended, her breasts already sagging, her teeth decaying from calcium loss: functionally illiterate, she lives from hour to hour and day

to day, her nights splintered by the crying of infants, her energy drained into the survival of lives which suck on her like mouths. To get to a birth-control or prenatal clinic would be to command herself into a control of her existence which she has never had, and of which, as one of eleven children herself, she has seen no example. She has not been physically away from her children since the conception of the first child, when she was thirteen years of age. When her husband rapes her, she does not call it rape, but somewhere in her memory lingers a distant past of twelve-year-old restlessness, curiosity, physical energy, and germinating desire—even, perhaps, some vague imagination that her life might be different from her mother's. Her sense of time is vague; impossible to imagine herself as a being separate from all these lives. Once in a while she looks into the glass and sees that she is becoming her mother.

At the other end of the spectrum let us imagine a laboratory in which men—the most powerful men in history, it is said—are engaged in work of extreme delicacy and precision, preparing a new series of multiple, identical embryos from cells derived from selected human tissue. The embryos will come into consciousness with their identity already prepared, for they will have been selected to provide the patriarchy of a new generation, selected by the patriarchy of the current generation, to perpetuate its own characteristics—especially those of rational genius, the gift of abstraction, and the ability to dissociate “work” from “personal” problems and disturbances. Females are also being bred, for specific physical characteristics, and they fall into two categories. One is a body-type, or range of body-types, capable of producing erections in a range of males, not for procreation but because impotence is an increasing problem since the end of physical paternity. The other is a body-type matched with mental qualities suited for special purposes, such as “manned” space flights requiring smallness of build, adaptiveness, physical endurance, and a low level of emotive intensity or desire for interhuman relation. The new males will be free from the disturbing effects of mother-love and mother-dominance; and the new females will not suffer from sex-role frustration, since no Joan of Arc, no Elizabeth I, no Mary Woll-

stonecraft, no Anne Hutchinson, no Sojourner Truth, no George Eliot, no Emma Goldman, no Margaret Sanger, no Gertude Stein or Emily Dickinson has been or will be chosen for the reproduction of her “type” in quantity. Elite women, chosen by and working with men, are used not only as intellectual contributors to social engineering but also as donors of cell nuclei to insure that a token quantity of women can be produced as required. Thus, it is demonstrated that females with the proper endowment—though quantitatively much fewer—are valued as highly as males.

Neither of these two visions is fantastic. A revolution based on patriarchal socialism might abolish the tar-paper shack, but who could claim that it would abolish the engineering of society by men? For, however theoretically men may call for “women's liberation” in any social order they may devise, however much they consciously may wish for an end to sexual caste, they still live in the unacknowledged cave of their own subjectivity, their denied fears and longings; and few men can bear to confront that shadow-world. For patriarchy, however much it has failed them, however much it divides them from themselves, is still *their* order, confirming them in privilege. They are protected from seriously addressing the issues of sexual caste and institutionalized misogyny, in large part by the central ambiguity at the heart of patriarchy: the ideas of the sacredness of motherhood and the redemptive power of woman as means, contrasted with the degradation of women in the order created by men.

IV THE PRIMACY OF THE MOTHER

Woman to primitive man is . . . at once weak and magical, oppressed, yet feared. She is charged with powers of childbearing denied to man, powers only half-understood . . . forces that all over the world seem to fill him with terror. The attitude of man to woman, and, though perhaps in a lesser degree, of woman to man, is still today essentially magical.

—Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*

As women our relationship to the past has been problematical. We have been every culture's core obsession (and repression); we have always constituted at least one-half, and are now a majority, of the species; yet in the written records we can barely find ourselves. Confronted with this "Great Silence," we have apparently had two paths to follow: the path of anatomizing our oppression, detailing the laws and sanctions ranged against us; and the path of searching out those women who broke through the silence, who, though often penalized, misconstrued, their work neglected or banned, or though tokenized in lonely and precarious acceptance, still embodied strength, daring, self-determination; who were, in short, exemplary.

When we survey the lost, undocumented lives of the majority of women, the waste of women's brains and talents throughout history, the idea of a prehistoric period, when not a handful,

but most women were using their capacities to the utmost, becomes extremely seductive. And anthropology, more than history, has given license to that desire. Once it began to be recognized that human society embodies diversity as much as conformity, once non-Western societies began to be examined, not as heathen, retarded, or infantile versions of Western culture, but for their own values, it began to be possible to imagine that the patriarchal, patrilineal family of Western culture was neither as essential nor as inevitable as it had seemed. It began to be possible to imagine some universal earlier civilization in which mother-right, not father-right, prevailed; in which matrilineality and matrifocality played a part; in which women were active and admired participants in all of culture; and so to imagine a wholly different way for women to exist in the world. If we were not simply bound "by nature" to the "passive," "docile," "irrational" aspects of human personality, if it was in fact institutions and culture that determined our "nature," the victimization and abnegation demanded of "motherhood" could be seen as the inversion of a period of mother-power—of matriarchy.*

The desire for a clearly confirmed past, the search for a tradition of female power, also springs from an intense need for validation. If women were powerful once, a precedent exists; if female biology was ever once a source of power, it need not remain what it has since become: a root of powerlessness. For many women, the inconclusiveness of any historical argument, the fact that history has been written by and for men, and the belief that we need not turn to the past in order to justify the future, are reasons enough to discount past theories of matriarchy and to concentrate on the present and the future. For

* Along with the idea of matriarchy goes an ideal of "Amazonism"—as early as the 1920s Helen Diner called her "first feminine history of culture" *Mothers and Amazons*. Feminists have sometimes become polarized between the "matriarchal" and an "Amazonian" ideal, neither of which has, so far, much historical verification, but both of which have been potent as myths. "Matriarchal" and "Amazonian" culture are seen as opposed—not merely in Diner, or in the earlier German writer, J. J. Bachofen, on whom she bases much of her theory, but in the minds of some contemporary writers like Jill Johnston, who wants no part of "matriarchy" (seeing it as patriarchy with a different set of genitals) but who believes all women should be daughters.

others, a belief in the necessity to create ourselves anew still allows for curiosity about the artifacts of written history—not as verifiable evidence of things done, but as something like the notebooks of a dreamer, which incompletely yet often compellingly depict the obsessions, the denials, the imaginative processes, out of which s/he is still working. Believing in continuity, I myself am hard put to know where the “past” ends and the “present” begins; and far from assuming that what we call the past must teach us to be conservative, I think that for women a critical exploration backward in time can be profoundly radicalizing. But we need to be critically aware of the limitations of our sources.

Certain writers, like Elizabeth Gould Davis, have taken the existence of an ancient, Arcadian matriarchal world as a given. The source of such theory, apart from Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, is largely the work of two men, J. J. Bachofen and Robert Briffault.* Bachofen's work had earlier been used by Helen Diner in her *Mothers and Amazons*, published in Germany in 1929, and first translated into English in 1965.† Perhaps Diner had read Bachofen in its entirety, but since she provides no notes, we must bear in mind that she may simply have used the 1926 German abridged edition. She does pay tribute, in her preface, both to Bachofen and to Briffault.

The reader of Diner or Davis is likely to receive the impression that Bachofen was a celebrant of female power, and that he perceived the “matriarchal” age not simply as a universal stage through which all cultures once passed, but as a golden age, a lost utopia, to which if the species were fortunate we might yet return. To look closely at the fragments of Bachofen translated by Manheim, however, is to receive a different impression. Like many other Victorians, Bachofen is given to sen-

* Bachofen's *Das Mütterrecht*, first published in Germany in 1861, exists in a partial and unsatisfactory edition in English—Ralph Manheim's 1967 translation of a German edition of selections from Bachofen's work published in 1926. The chapter on Crete, which might be expected to contain especially interesting materials, is omitted, and a fragment of Bachofen's essay, “Gräbersymbolik,” is grafted onto the section on Egypt.

† This first American edition, with a somewhat patronizing foreword by Joseph Campbell, has now been superseded by the 1973 Anchor edition, with a critical introduction by Brigitte Berger.

timental generalizations about women. The feminine principle, for him, is “distinguished less by sharpness and freedom of outline than by prophetic feeling; governed more by sentiment than by thought; subject always to division of mind and the *strange, aimless striving peculiar to women . . .* hovering between frenzy and reflection, between voluptuousness and virtue.” (Emphasis mine.)^{1*} In the conflict between the sexes, whose cycles he attempts to trace in myth, “the realm of the idea belongs to the man, the realm of material life to the woman.” “The transience of material life goes hand in hand with mother right. Father right is bound up with the immortality of a supramaterial life belonging to the regions of light.”² The matriarchal phase is identified with agriculture, with an advance out of the tellurian (earth-derived) swamp life (which Bachofen identifies with sexual promiscuity). As such, it is a superior phase; but it is essentially a stepping-stone toward the higher phase of father-right:

In this respect the establishment of matriarchy represents a step forward toward civilization. . . . Woman counters man's abuse of his superior strength by the dignity of her enthroned motherhood. . . . The more savage the men of this first period, the more necessary becomes the restraining force of women. . . . Matriarchy is necessary to the education of mankind *and particularly of men*. Just as the child is first disciplined by his mother, so the races of men are first disciplined by woman. The male must serve before he can govern. It is the woman's vocation to tame man's primordial strength, to guide it into benign channels. (Emphasis mine.)³

The idealization of Amazonism also gets short shrift from Bachofen. According to his view of the historical process, there were two phases of Amazonism in ancient times, alternating

* Cf. Briffault: “Women are constitutionally deficient in the qualities that mark the masculine intellect. . . . Feminine differs from masculine intelligence in kind: it is concrete, not abstract; particularizing, not generalizing.” (Note that this is phrased in terms of female, not male, “deficiency.”) “Women are more precocious than men, their maturity is reached earlier. There is in their growth the arrest of development, physical and mental, which goes with relative precocity. It has been said that a man learns nothing after forty; it can be said in the same broad sense that a woman learns nothing after twenty-five” (*The Mothers* [New York: Johnson Reprint, 1969], III: 507–8).

with two phases of matriarchy. The period of promiscuous sexuality and hetaerism is linked with an Amazon phase in which women revolt against their sexual exploitation, take arms, and resist the physical abuses of men. But these earlier Amazons, according to the myth cited in Plutarch and interpreted by Bachofen, are in turn defeated by the Mothers in a kind of spiritual victory. Matriarchy is seen as the acceptance by woman of her "natural vocation," and it is indissoluble from monogamous marriage. It is "*conjugal* matriarchy," against which Bachofen sees Amazonism as a perversion of womanhood, an "unnatural intensification of women's power."⁴

Demetrian matriarchy, says Bachofen, is "chaste . . . grounded in strict order . . . a source of lofty virtues and of an existence which, though limited in its ideas, was nevertheless secure and well-ordered." This phase gives way to Dionysian, or Aphroditean matriarchy, a decadent phase in which "one extreme followed the other, showing how hard it is, at all times, for women to observe moderation."⁵ However, for all its lofty virtues, Demetrian matriarchy is still bound up with the tellurian swamp-grass, the material and physical, as distinct from (and even opposed to) the "liberation" and "sublimation" of father-right and the victory of patriarchy. For Bachofen these opposites are always in dialectical struggle; and this struggle is seen from a purely masculine point of view: "Maternity pertains to the physical side of man, *the only thing he shares with the animals*; the paternal-spiritual principle belongs to him alone. Here he breaks through the bonds of tellurism and lifts his eyes to *the higher regions of the cosmos*." (Emphasis mine.)⁶ In breaking the matriarchal bonds, however, man degrades and debases woman, giving rise to a new wave of Amazonism, the offspring of Dionysian excesses, which in turn is vanquished, creating the patriarchy which, in this author's view, has since enlightened the world.

In Bachofen we are dealing with several layers of expression: the actual myths reported or embodied in sources such as Plutarch, Strabo, Herodotus, Ovid, the Greek dramatists; the ancient consciousness which produced such myths; and the nineteenth-century German masculine consciousness of Bachofen

himself, which frequently contradicts itself.* It is a little as if we were looking at the reflection of a painting in a windowpane at night. At times Bachofen's lack of clarity and precision is so frustrating that one is tempted to attribute the problem to the fragmentary nature of the excerpts in Manheim's translation.

It can at best be charitably assumed that sometimes Bachofen is expressing, not his own opinions, but the climate of opinion crystallized in the myth—for example, when he announces that woman is possessed of "an insatiable blood-thirst," as demonstrated in the story (related in Aeschylus and Apollodorus) of how the women of Lemnos massacre all but one of their men for cohabiting with Thracian women. As a support for this characterization of women (whom he sees elsewhere as chaste, the bringers of order and harmony, etc.) he cites Euripides's *Ion* and *Medea*. It is difficult to be sure when Bachofen is accepting the mythology and poetry of males as an objective description of women, and when he may be suggesting simply that this is how women have been perceived at certain times by certain males. One thing is clear: in Bachofen's own mind there is no yearning for a matriarchy of the future, and there is great ambivalence toward the idea of past matriarchy, and indeed toward the female presence.

2

Robert Briffault's three-volume work, *The Mothers*, first published in 1927, is the work of a lonely, furious, and obsessive mind. He set out to show in this book that the socializing element in human history has been "traceable to the operation of instincts that are related to the functions of the female and not to those of the male."⁷ He saw the patriarchal family as essentially antisocial: "a euphemism for the individualistic male with his subordinate dependents. As a social unit the family means the individual, actuated by his most aggressively individualistic instincts; it is not the foundation, but the negation of

* Bachofen, trans. Ralph Manheim, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967); compare, for example, the texts on facing pages 100 and 101.

society." The real social bonds grew out of "the natural and biological dominance of the primitive mother over the group which she created, the awe attaching to her magical nature and powers." Such a social bonding emerged from "the primitive mystery of generation and the primitive sacrament of common blood and common food, bestowed upon the ideal tribe of its followers."⁸

In tracing the aspects of this natural dominance and bonding, Briffault consumed a bibliography of nearly 200 close-printed pages; his three volumes are copiously footnoted and his practice was, with scholarly compendiousness, to make no statement that should rest on merely one or two examples. The unabridged Briffault (there are two abridged editions, one edited by him, the other by G. Rattray Taylor) is a mine of lore for anyone interested in what history, legend, and anthropology were saying about women up to the time of Briffault's authorship. Whatever his conclusions, however we may wish to quarrel with them, it is difficult not to feel gratitude to a man so committed to unearthing the details and the patterns of female influence in civilization. Admittedly, when he strays far from the realm of his special genius—assimilating and condensing vast amounts of material and seeing relationships between them—he veers toward the moralistic, expounding freely at the end of his book on marriage, female intellect as it differs from male, and the necessity for women to save civilization (though without, as he puts it, "provoking" antagonism between the sexes). Yet one senses in his final chapter a profound weariness with patriarchy: "We live in a patriarchal society in which patriarchal principles have ceased to be valid. . . . Power, energy, ambition, intellect, the interests of the combative male, no more achieve the fulfillment of his being than they can of themselves build up a human society." What Briffault longs for is a movement, not back to matriarchy (a term which he used rather loosely in the end of his book, though he had defined it quite precisely in the beginning), but to "new forms of marriage" and a condition where, "in the love of the mother, in the mutual devotion of man and woman, the achievements of the organizing and constructive intellect fade into the mist."

Into the mist, perhaps, of Briffault's own vision; certainly not

into the clarity of a vision which can see both intellect and maternal altruism as coexistent, because it affirms the natural capacity of women to think, to analyze, to construct, and to create and nurture more than our individual children.

3

If Bachofen was a mid-nineteenth-century German patriarchal mythographer, drawing on earlier myths and fragments of historical record, Elizabeth Gould Davis was the first contemporary feminist myth-maker. *The First Sex*, published one hundred and ten years after *Das Mütterrecht*, is at times inaccurate, biased, unprofessional—all these charges do not really dismiss it. Furthermore, Davis fails to mention or examine Oriental or precolonial African and American myths and traditions of female power, thereby limiting the scope of her work to Western Civilization with a seemingly unconscious parochialism. Her book has undoubtedly been an embarrassment to academic feminists intent on working within strictly traditional and orthodox definitions of what constitutes serious knowledge. Yet its impact has been great, beginning with the arresting implications of its title. Its scholarly deficiencies can be and have been easily enumerated;⁹ Davis had, for one thing, a frustrating tendency to quote without indicating omissions, and to rearrange sentences in a quoted paragraph. "Professional" history, on the other hand, has been blindingly unscholarly where women are concerned. What Davis did was to exhume a wealth of materials—some mythic, some historical, some archeological or literary—like someone stirring a fire and rousing showers of sparks sleeping in the ashes. She assumed the role of the tribal story-teller of a conquered people, reciting legends of their past, reminding them that their mothers once were queens and goddesses, strong and courageous leaders. Out of a blend of fact and guesswork, fragments of rumor, memory, and desire, she tried to do in prose what the poet of earlier times did in epic or ballad—to call up before women a different condition than the one we have known, to prime the imagination of women living today to conceive of other modes of existence.

Davis, unlike Simone de Beauvoir or Helen Diner, exhaus-

tively footnoted her book, creating the impression that it can be read—and criticized—like a doctoral thesis. Thus, the academic scholar finds it wanting as a piece of “professional” research, while the awakening feminist may be lured into taking its claims as Scripture was once taken—for a literal rendition of the past. (Her bibliography, however, is a document of immense value in itself.) If we approach Davis as a catalyst of memory and imagination, rather than as a documenter of unshakable fact, or a failed pedant, we can better appreciate the achievement of her book.

The myth of matriarchy pieced together by Davis will perhaps never be completely disproven or verified. But against all the works detailing woman’s oppressed condition, Davis’s book stands out as the first to create a counter-image—and, let it be added, one which can by no means be lightly dismissed by academic historians and anthropologists*

It is notable that while some feminist anthropologists may deny that any actual “matriarchal” period ever existed, as a universal phase of culture, they do not necessarily dismiss the *idea* of matriarchy as “crazy” or absurd. As the classical anthropologist Jane Harrison once expressed it, a myth is not something that springs “clean and clear” out of the imagination (if anything can be said to do that) but is rather a response to the environment, an interaction between the mind and its external world.¹⁰ It expresses a need, a longing. And myth has always accumulated, accreted; the profile of the goddess or the hero is always changing, weathered by changes in external conditions. If Davis’s book depicts women finally as the sole possessors of practical and spiritual vision, if she previsions a world where

* 1986: Today, I note a certain defensiveness about these paragraphs. Davis’s appeal was that she presented a “power” rather than a “victim” perspective on female origins. But her book was not simply Eurocentric or “unconsciously parochial”; it was antipolitical and biological-determinist. (“The ages of masculism are now drawing to a close. . . . Men of good-will turn in every direction seeking cures for their perishing society, but to no avail. Any and all social reforms [are useless]. . . . Only the overthrow of the three-thousand-year old beast of masculist materialism will save the race. In the new science of the twenty-first century, not physical force but spiritual force will lead the way. . . . And in this sphere woman will again predominate” (*The First Sex* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1972], p. 339). Since reforms are pointless, this is an invitation to drift into the future on the current of woman’s presumed spiritual superiority.

men are left to tinker with gadgetry of a toylike inconsequentiality while the spiritual and political order is created by women, this is a powerful and an imaginative response to the faces we see aggrandized on our TV screens, the faces of male leaders, the pure products of patriarchy, who appear less and less credible, less and less informed by any responsible vision, less and less capable of governing any community, and more and more technologically capable of degrading and destroying human life. For many women, Davis provided a genesis, though not a resting place, for speculations about the possibility and nature of female power: a springboard into feminist desire.

4

The question, “Was there ever true universal matriarchy?” seems to me to blot out, in its inconclusiveness, other and perhaps more catalytic questions about the past. I therefore use the term *gynocentric* in speaking of periods of human culture which have shared certain kinds of woman-centered beliefs and woman-centered social organization. Throughout most of the world, there is archeological evidence of a period when Woman was venerated in several aspects, the primal one being maternal; when Goddess-worship prevailed, and when myths depicted strong and revered female figures. In the earliest artifacts we know, we encounter the female as primal power.

Leave aside for the moment whether those images were made by women’s or men’s hands: they express an attitude toward the female charged with awareness of her intrinsic importance, her depth of meaning, her existence at the very center of what is necessary and sacred.* She is beautiful in ways we have almost forgotten, or which have become defined as ugliness. Her body possesses mass, interior depth, inner rest, and balance. She is not smiling; her expression is inward-looking or ecstatic, and sometimes her eyeballs seem to burn through the air. If, as very often, there is a child at her breast, or on her lap, she is not ab-

* Some illustrative photographs of such images may be found in the early sections of the *Larousse World Mythology*, edited by Paul Grimal; in Paul Radin’s *African Folktales and Sculpture*; in Reynold Higgins, *Minoan and Mycenaean Art*. See also (for descriptive text) E. O. James, *The Cult of the Mother-Goddess* (New York: Praeger, 1959).

sorbed in contemplation of him (the "Adoration of the Virgin" with the Son as center of the world, will come later). She is not particularly young, or rather, she is absolutely without age. She is *for-herself* even when suckling an infant, even when, like the image of the Ephesian Diana, she appears as a cone of many breasts. Sometimes she is fanged, wielding a club, sometimes she is girdled by serpents; but even in her most benign aspect the ancient Goddess is not beckoning to her worshipers. She exists, not to cajole or reassure man, but to assert herself.

Let us try to imagine for a moment what sense of herself it gave a woman to be in the presence of such images. If they did nothing else for her, they must have validated her spiritually (as our contemporary images do not), giving her back aspects of herself neither insipid nor trivial, investing her with a sense of participation in essential mysteries. No *Pietà* could do this, nor even the elegant queen of the Amarnan divine family of Egypt, in which the Sun-King stands with his hand patriarchally on his son's head, while his consort—regal as she is—remains clearly a consort. The images of the prepatriarchal goddess-cults did one thing; they told women that power, awesomeness, and centrality were theirs by nature, not by privilege or miracle; the female was primary. The male appears in earliest art, if at all, in the aspect of a child, often tiny and helpless, carried horizontally in arms, or seated in the lap of the goddess, or suckling at her breast.*

Now it can be argued that these figures—Neolithic, pre-Columbian, Cypriot, Cycladic, Minoan, predynastic Egyptian—

* In her suggestive and closely documented book *Religious Conceptions of the Stone Age*, G. Rachel Levy discusses the types of tracings found in Neolithic caves from Siberia to southern France. She sees the female symbolism and images in many of these paintings—some linear, some fully painted and gloriously immanent with power—along with the female statuettes found in the caves, as suggesting not just a "cult of the Mother Goddess" but a later identification of the caverns with the body of a Mother of Rebirth. She points out that the cave was not simply a shelter in the secular sense, but a religious sanctuary; that its most exquisite and mysterious images are found, not in the general domestic dwelling area, but in labyrinthine corridors, difficult to reach, and clearly sacred zones. The cave itself as a whole was perceived as the body of the Mother, but within it there is also an abundance of vaginal imagery, a triangular symbol in particular, which is found at the entrance to enclosed spaces, and which seems to demarcate profane from sacred areas. Although figures of male hunters occasionally appear, they are not cult-objects; "the underlying principle [of the Aurignacian culture] was feminine."

can tell us nothing of woman's early perception of *herself*; that they are the work of men, the casting into symbolic form of man's sense of *his* relation to earth and nature. Erich Neumann, a Jungian analyst (1905–1960), inclines to this view. First of all, he sets up a triad of relationships characterized by (1) "the child's relationship to its mother, who provides nourishment . . ."; (2) "an historical period in which man's dependence on the earth and nature is at its greatest"; and (3) "the dependence of the ego and consciousness on the unconscious."¹¹* Then, according to Neumann, "the Feminine, the giver of nourishment, becomes everywhere a revered principle of nature, on which man is dependent in pleasure and pain. *It is from this eternal experience of man, who is as helpless in his dependence on nature as the infant in his dependence on his mother, that the mother-child figure is inspired forever anew.*" (Emphasis mine.)¹² In other words, we again have woman reduced to bearer and nourisher, while man depicts his vision of her, and himself in relation to her, in a different kind of creation—the images of art.†

* Unfortunately, this triad depends on a too-familiar dualism, between man/culture/consciousness, and woman/nature/unconsciousness. As a woman thinking, I experience no such division in my own being between nature and culture, between my female body and my conscious thought. In bringing the light of critical thinking to bear on her subject, in the very act of *becoming more conscious* of her situation in the world, a woman may feel herself coming deeper than ever into touch with her unconscious and with her body. Woman-reading-Neumann, woman-reading-Freud, woman-reading-Engels or Lévi-Strauss, has to draw on her own deep experience for strength and clarity in discrimination, analysis, criticism. She has to ask herself, not merely, "What does my own prior intellectual training tell me?" but "What do my own brain, my own body, tell me—my memories, my sexuality, my dreams, my powers and energies?"

† Neumann, though a Jungian, has gone much further than Jung in trying to understand and bring into focus the role of the feminine in culture and to acknowledge the force of misogyny. However, like Jung, he is primarily concerned with integrating the feminine into the masculine psyche (again, as in Marcuse's coinage, "the femalizing of the male") and his bias is clearly masculine. Nevertheless, I find Neumann's interleaving of several aspects of experience useful as a way of keeping in mind that we are talking at one and the same time about the physical realm of human biological reproduction and nurture, the cultural/historical realm of what human beings have invented, prescribed, designed in their efforts to live together, and the realm that exists within the individual psyche. Like Briffault, Neumann has brought together an enormous mass of material relating to woman, specifically as mother, and many of their materials reinforce each other in suggesting certain aspects of prepatriarchal life.

Neumann, was, however, writing before an event which changed accepted ideas about the age of the earliest cultures. Recent archeological excavations in the Near East, at such sites as Jericho in Israel and Anatolia in Turkey, revealed cultures existing in Asia Minor two thousand or more years before the presumed Neolithic cultures of Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Palestine, and producing evidence of a "proto-Neolithic" cult of worship, including figurines and "symbolically ornamented chapels—revealing, in superb display, practically all the basic motifs of the great mother-goddess mythologies of later ages."¹³ James Mellaart, an archeologist active in the unearthing of the town of Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia, believes that the goddess-figurines, as well as the other art discovered there, were the work of women:

What is particularly noteworthy . . . is the complete absence of sex [he means sexuality] in any of the figurines, statuettes, plaster reliefs or wall-paintings. The reproductive organs are never shown, representations of phallus and vulva are unknown, and this is the more remarkable as they were frequently portrayed both in the Upper Paleolithic and in the Neolithic and post-Neolithic cultures outside Anatolia. It seems that there is a very simple answer to this seemingly puzzling question, for emphasis on sex in art is invariably connected with male impulse and desire. If Neolithic woman was the creator of Neolithic religion, its absence is easily explained and a different symbolism was created in which breast, navel and pregnancy stand for the female principle, horns and horned animal heads for the male.^{14*}

We can find some support for this hypothesis indirectly in both Briffault and Neumann, who cite numerous examples to show that the deeply revered art of pottery-making was invented by women, was taboo to men, was regarded as a sacred process and 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. . . . In pottery making the woman experiences . . . primordial creative force . . . we know how great a role

* It is tempting to ask why sexuality in art—Neolithic or otherwise—should "invariably (be) connected with male impulse and desire." But this is not the place in which to follow up that query. I quote from Mellaart to suggest that there is some documentation for the idea that the early images of women were created by women.

the sacred vessel played in the primordial era, particularly as a vehicle of magical action. In this magical implication the essential features of the feminine transformation character are bound up with the vessel as a symbol of transformation."¹⁵ Briffault describes the actual molding of pots by Zuni women in the shape of a breast; he further states that "the manufacture of pots, like most operations in primitive society . . . partakes of a ritual or religious character" and that "the pot's identity with the Great Mother is deeply rooted in ancient belief through the greater part of the world."¹⁶

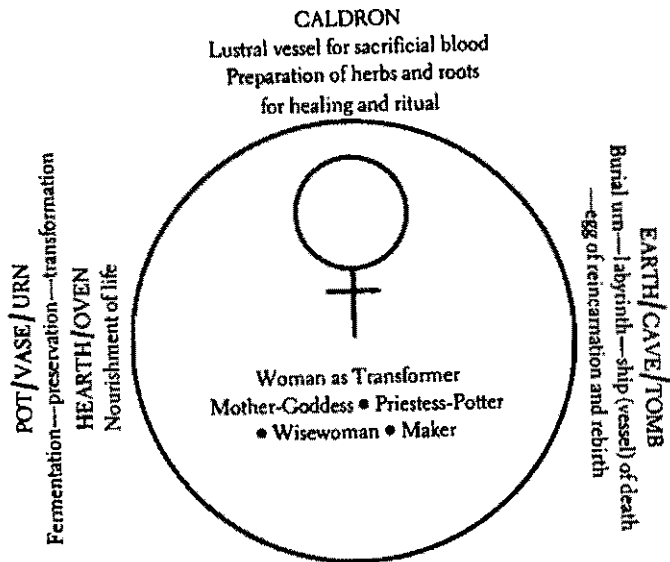
It does not seem unlikely that the woman potter molded, not simply vessels, but images of herself, the vessel of life, the transformer of blood into life and milk—that in so doing she was expressing, celebrating, and giving concrete form to her experience as a creative being possessed of indispensable powers. Without her biological endowment the child—the future and sustainer of the tribe—could not be born; without her invention and skill the pot or vessel—the most sacred of handmade objects—would not exist.

And the pot, vessel, urn, pitcher, 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; it was also sometimes used to store the bones or ashes of the dead. The potential improvement and stabilization of life inherent in the development and elaboration of pottery-making could be likened to the most complex innovations of a technological age—the refining of crude petroleum, the adaptation of nuclear energy—which invest their controllers with immense power. And yet this analogy, even, fails us, because the relationship of the potter to the pot, invested with both an intimate and a communal spirit, is unknown in present-day technology.

Because of speculations like Erik Erikson's (wittily dissected by Kate Millett) as to the meaning and value of woman's "inner space," it is difficult to talk about women in connection with "containers" without evoking a negative if not derisive response.¹⁷ The old associations start pouring in: woman is "receptive," a "receptacle"; little girls "instinctively" want to play with dollhouses while boys do not; woman's place is the "inner space" of the home; woman's anatomy lays on her an ethical imperative to be maternal in the sense of maso-

chistic, patient, pacific; women without children are "unfulfilled," "barren," and "empty" women. My own negative associations with male derivations from female anatomy were so strong that for a long time I felt distaste, or profound ambivalence, when I looked at some of the early mother-goddess figures emphasizing breasts and belly. It took me a long time to get beyond patriarchally acquired responses and to connect with the power and integrity, the absolute nonfemininity, of posture and expression in those images. Bearing in mind, then, that we are talking not about "inner space" as some determinant of woman's proper social function, but about primordial clusters of association, we can see the extension of the woman/vessel association. (It must be also borne in mind that in primordial terms the vessel is anything but a "passive" receptacle: it is *transformative*—active, powerful.)

A diagram may be useful here:



The transformations necessary for the continuation of life are thus, in terms of this early imagery, exercises of female power. According to Neumann, "the magical caldron or pot is always in the hands of the female mana figures, the priestess, or

later, the witch."¹⁸ The earliest religious activity had as its impulse not the contemplation of eternity but the struggle for survival; it was "practical, not speculative," as Briffault says, having to do with daily needs. And women were the people who filled those needs. He suggests further that sex inequality in our terms was unknown in prepatriarchal society; the kinds of administrative and bureaucratic power-relationships which developed in patriarchy simply did not exist.¹⁹ Thus, not power *over others*, but *transforming* power, was the truly significant and essential power, and this, in prepatriarchal society, women knew for their own.

5

For a long time, the relationship between the sexual act and pregnancy went unrecognized. Sigmund Freud, in *Totem and Taboo*, Otto Rank, in *Beyond Psychology*, and Bronislaw Malinowski, in *The Sexual Life of Savages*, all noted this fact and suggested that here was not mere ignorance but active denial of the paternal role. This denial permitted men to believe that women were impregnated by spirits of the dead, symbolized in the totem animal of the clan. Rank suggested that two impulses could be at work here: the desire for personal immortality (i.e., in the form of rebirth in a later generation) and the desire for a system which would place responsibility for the survival of the tribe on someone other than the individual male—that is, on the totem animal.²⁰ Malinowski found that the Trobriand Islanders were aware that a virgin could not conceive and that a woman's vagina must be opened before she could become pregnant. They insisted, however, that pregnancy occurred when the spirit of a fully formed child was introduced into the woman's body by being placed on her head by another spirit of the clan.²¹ Finally, of course, the visible, physical relationship of mother to child cannot help but seem more authentic than the indistinct paternal relationship, which depends so tangibly on the mother for its realization.

In prepatriarchal life the phallus (*herm*) had a quite different significance from the one it has acquired in androcentric (or phallogocentric) culture. It was not worshiped on its own account or regarded as autonomously powerful; it existed as an adjunct

to the Goddess, along with other figures such as the bull, the cow, the pig, the crescent moon, the serpent, the lunar axe or *labrys*, the small child in her lap. The tree in leaf is not phallic; it is a female symbol; "it bears, transforms, nourishes; its leaves, branches, twigs are 'contained' in it and dependent on it"; it is inhabited by its own spirit, which it also contains. The sacred grove is sacred to the Goddess. Neumann sees the distortion of the tree into a phallic-patriarchal symbol—as post or pillar, without leaves or natural roots—or into the world-tree whose roots are in the sky, an "unnatural symbol" (a patriarchal reversal of natural fact).²² Prepatriarchal phallus-cults were the celebration by women of the fertilizing instrument, not the celebration by men of their "manhood" or of individual paternity. The Great Mother acknowledged no individual husband, only sons who become consorts.

Prepatriarchal, gynocentric motherhood preceded wifhood; the mother relation and status were far more important than the wife-status. The act of birth, as Barbara Seaman suggests, must have been perceived as profoundly awesome by primitives—even more so than today, when it is still accompanied, for many onlookers and participants, by intense feelings of transcendence.²³ Out of her body the woman created man, created woman, created continuing existence. Spiritualized into a divine being, she was the source of vegetation, fruition, fertility of every kind. Whether she bore children or not, as potter and weaver she created the first objects which were more than objects, were works of art, thus of magic, and which were also the products of the earliest scientific activity, including the lore of herbs and roots, the art of healing and that of nurturing the young.*

* "It was in neolithic times that man's [*sic*] mastery of the great arts of civilization—of pottery, weaving, agriculture, and the domestication of animals—became firmly established. No one today would any longer think of attributing these enormous advances to the fortuitous accumulation of a series of chance discoveries or believe them to have been revealed by the passive perception of certain natural phenomena. Each of these techniques assumes centuries of active and methodical observation, of bold hypotheses tested by means of endlessly repeated experiments" (Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Science of the Concrete," in Vernon Gras, ed., *European Literary Theory and Practice: From Existential Phenomenology to Structuralism* [New York: Delta Books, 1973], pp. 138–39).

In biological motherhood, as in these other activities, woman was not merely a producer and stabilizer of life: there, too, she was a *transformer*. Menstrual blood was believed to be transformed into the infant (an idea which still persists—I recall my own mother, an intellectually curious and well-read woman, the wife of a physician, telling me that menstrual blood was "wasted baby") and into the milk which flowed from the mother's breasts. What to many women today may be experienced as a passive function, occurring beyond volition, once was felt to be *transformative power* and was associated, as we have seen, with other kinds of transformation, including reincarnation. If the pot, or vessel, was associated with the woman's body, the conversion of raw fibers into thread was connected with power over life and death; the spider who spins thread out of her own body, Ariadne providing the clue to the labyrinth, the figures of the Fates or Norns or old spinning-women who cut the thread of life or spin it further, are all associated with this process.

Woman did not simply give birth; she made it possible for the child to go on living. Her breasts furnished the first food, but her concern for the child led her beyond that one-to-one relationship. Briffault sees the primitive division of labor as created by the development of hunting. He cites many examples of women in preliterate societies who show great proficiency in hunting, and concludes that the more prevalent pattern of the all-male hunt arose, not from "the respective powers or aptitudes of the sexes or . . . any physical inferiority in woman, but by the functional necessity which bound her to the care of the off-spring and prevented her from undertaking pursuits entailing absence."²⁴ The human species is dependent on maternal (or adult) care in infancy much longer than any other animal species, and in creating a situation in which they could nurture and rear infants safely and effectively, women became the civilizers, the inventors of agriculture, of community, some maintain of language itself.*

* A recent study uses "implicational analysis" to show that the sexual division of labor in a standard cross-cultural sample derives from the basic fact that "because men cannot nurse infants, the women of any preindustrial society, taken as a group, have primary responsibility for the care of small

6

The woman's body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil; a hoard of ambivalences, most of which have worked to disqualify women from the collective act of defining culture. This matrix of life has been fundamental to the earliest division of labor; but also, as Bruno Bettelheim has shown, males have everywhere tried to imitate, annex, and magically share in the physical powers of the female.²⁵ The highly developed (and highly dubious) technology of modern obstetrics is merely a late stage in what Suzanne Arms has called "the gradual attempt by man to extricate the process of birth from women and call it his own." "Overpopulation" is today regarded as a global problem; yet there is far more concern with sterilizing (chiefly Black and Third-World) women, and limiting births, than with finding new ways to produce and distribute food throughout the globe. Not simply Western capitalism, but a male need to feel in control of female reproductive power, is at issue here.

In his study of primitive mythology Joseph Campbell compares the energy-releasing response to myth (and poetry) with the innate biological response to certain signs that have been identified by students of animal behavior. (The wooden model

children" and that "women will not undertake activities which would require large numbers of women to work simultaneously in situations which are dangerous to children," whether this means activities such as hunting or plowing, or activities near the home involving heavy materials or implements. The authors suggest that these constraints on women's roles proliferate throughout role behavior through the sequences of production (clearing land, tilling, sowing, harvesting) and that they derive from a need for "efficient utilization of human resources" (D. White, M. Burton, L. Brudner, J. Gunn, "Implicational Structures in the Sexual Division of Labor," unpublished, 1974). The avoidance of dangerous or physically taxing work by women for the protection of unweaned children has, of course, no implications whatsoever for the innate capacity of women to engage in such activities. It tells us nothing whatsoever about necessary constraints in the role of a nonnursing, or childless female; the only "innate constraint" would seem to be upon men who are incapable of breast-feeding.

or the actual shadow of a hawk, drawn over a cage of newly hatched chicks, will cause them to dart for shelter; the model or shadow of a gull or other bird will not. The human infant will respond to masks resembling a human face, but the mask must embody certain specific features or it will evoke no response.) He identifies certain early imprints of the human mind—the paradisaical bliss of the infant still floating weightlessly in amniotic waters, the struggle and fear of suffocation on drawing the first breath, the suckling at the mother's breast and the sense of abandonment at her absence—which are endlessly relived, sought, or evaded, and which myth, poetry, and art cause us to experience again as powerful reverberations. He goes on to acknowledge that "The fear of menstrual blood and isolation of women during their periods, the rites of birth, and all the lore of magic associated with human fecundity make it evident that we are here in the field of one of the major centers of interest of the human imagination. . . . The fear of woman and the mystery of her motherhood have been for the male no less impressive imprinting forces than the fears and mysteries of the world of nature itself."²⁶

Obviously there was a very ancient and powerful tangle of relationships between a cycle in woman associated with fertility, the cycle of the moon to which it so mysteriously corresponds, the need for women to protect themselves at times from men's unwanted sexual aggression, and the reaction of men to that curb on their sexuality. Into these play still other relationships—between the remission of menstruation during pregnancy, the end of menstruation which marks the end of fertility, the kinds of knowledge about herself that even primitive woman has through her menses—whether she is pregnant, whether she can become so.

Generally it seems to be assumed that the menstrual taboo (withdrawal of the woman from her usual activities, including sex) is the original taboo; where authorities differ is on whether it was first imposed by women or men. Briffault sees it as "the veto originally laid by women on the exercise of the sexual instincts of the male. . . . These prohibitions represent the repulse of the men by the women. . . ." According to his studies, both of menstrual taboos and those of childbirth, the

woman is author of the prohibition, and her self-segregation is felt by men to suggest that at such times she is emitting "dangerous influences."²⁷ C. G. Hartley claims that the egoistic, nonsocial tyranny of the early male group forced the female group to establish laws of social conduct.²⁸ Neumann says that woman "domesticated the male through the taboos that she imposed on him, and so created the first human culture."²⁹ According to his view, sexual initiation originates, not with male puberty rites but with the ritual surrounding the first menstrual period; taboo with the menstrual taboos imposed on men by women; and exogamy (marriage outside the kinship group) as an incest taboo aimed at preventing the sexual exploitation of women by the men living closest to them. What a contemporary woman experiences as her "uncleanness," prepatriarchal women may well have understood as one of their sacred mysteries.

According to the Jungian psychologist Esther Harding:

In primitive communities a woman's whole life is focused around the regular changes of her physiological cycle. Periods of work at home and in the community of social life with her neighbors and of marital relationship with her husband, alternate with periods of seclusion. At regular intervals she is obliged to go away alone; she may not cook, nor tend the cultivated patch, nor walk abroad; she is precluded from performing any of her customary tasks; she is compelled to be alone, to go down into herself, to introvert. Anthropologists, who, as a rule, are more interested in the customs of a tribe than in the psychology of individuals, have not asked what effects these customs have on the women themselves. Yet, this periodic seclusion must inevitably have had a profound effect on the woman's relation to life.³⁰

Both Harding and Bettelheim suggest that the puberty initiation rites practiced by men—which include seclusion, purification, fasting, and the "seeking of a vision"—are attempts to achieve the power inherent in the kind of inwardness which women have come by organically in their periodic menstrual and puerperal withdrawals. Harding suggests that the contemporary woman may still need to use her period as a time for reaching into her subjectivity, living closer to the rhythms

of her deepest being—not because the menses are a time of neurotic illness or demonic possession, but because they can be, if used, a source of insight.

Mary Douglas, in her study of pollution and taboo, *Purity and Danger*, points out that where male dominance is unquestioned, and women are totally and violently subjugated (as among the Walbiri, a desert people of central Australia) no menstrual taboo exists; it is, in her opinion, a male-imposed taboo calculated to protect men from the dangers felt to emanate from women.³¹ Various other writers, including Margaret Mead, have assumed that the menstrual taboo was created by men out of a primitive fear of blood. But, as Paula Weideger notes in *Menstruation and Menopause*, "if all blood is a source of mana, why is it that men and *only* men consider menstrual blood identical in spiritual substance with other blood? What makes women's attitude toward blood so very different? . . . Primitive peoples are not victims of arrested development who are incapable of learning about the existence of natural events with repeated exposure. . . . Every woman learns the lesson of menstrual blood quite early in life and so might every man."³²

Whether or not woman was actually the originator of taboo, the mere existence of a menstrual taboo signifies, for better or for worse, *powers only half-understood; the fear of woman and the mystery of her motherhood*. I would suggest that if women first created a menstrual taboo, whether from a sense of their own sacred mysteries or out of a need to control and socialize the male, this taboo itself must have added to their apparent powers, investing them with the charisma of ritual. The deliberate withdrawal of women from men has almost always been seen as a potentially dangerous or hostile act, a conspiracy, a subversion, a needless and grotesque thing, while the exclusion of women from men's groups is rationalized by arguments familiar to us all, whether the group is a priesthood, a dining club, a fishing expedition, an academic committee, or a Mafia rendezvous. The *self-segregation* of women (most of all in lesbian relationships, but also as in the group which formed around Anne Hutchinson, or as in the women's political clubs in the French revolution of 1848, or in present-day women's

classes or consciousness-raising groups) is to this day seen as threatening to men; presumably in a culture attuned to magic it would have terrifying overtones.

Certainly, the menstrual cycle is yet another aspect of female experience which patriarchal thinking has turned inside out, rendering it sinister or disadvantageous. Internalizing this attitude, we actually perceive ourselves as polluted. Our tendency to flesh-loathing (the aversion to the female body passed on to us by men) is underscored; religious taboos are laid on us even in "advanced" societies.* A man whose unconscious is saturated with the fear of menstrual blood will make a woman feel that her period is a time of pollution, the visitation of an evil spirit, physically repulsive. Men often exalt and romanticize the spermal fluid (one man I knew compared its smell to the scent of chestnut-blossom) while degrading menstrual blood as unnatural and distasteful (another man assured me that intercourse with a menstruating woman did not appall *him*, but that it resulted in irritation of "the" penis).

It is recognized today that the menstrual and premenstrual periods can be characterized by depression, anxiety, flashes of anger. Water retention and hormonal fluctuation may contribute their share, but there are also deep psychic and cultural factors. An ambivalence of pride and shame (and fear) have marked, under patriarchy, the onset of the menses; sometimes a young woman will experience outright denial and revulsion. A similar ambivalence of fear and relief often marks the beginning of menopause. For woman-defined-as-mother, the event may mean, at last, an end to unwanted pregnancies, but also her death as a woman (thus defined), as a sexual being, and as someone with a function.

* In order to be legally married in contemporary Israel, a woman must present herself at the Chief Rabbinate and declare the date of her last period; her wedding-date will be set thereby so that she does not go "unclean" to her husband. It is still believed that a Jewish woman having intercourse with her husband during her period may cause him to be killed in war. There is, of course, an ancient background. The *Mishnah* compares a menstruating woman's "uncleanliness" to that of males with gonorrhoea, of lepers, of human corpses, animal carrion, dead reptiles, and incestuous sexual relations (Personal communication, Dr. Myra Schotz, Ben-Gurion University, Israel; Emily Culpeper, "Niddah: Unclean or Sacred Sign?" unpublished paper, Harvard Divinity School, 1973).

Male attitudes toward menstrual blood aside, the years of menstruation are the years when a woman is potentially, if not actually, a mother. Under patriarchy, until very recently (and still only with immense difficulty) a childbearing woman *could not* be unto-herself, a *virgin* in the ancient, authoritative, sense of the word. The unmarried mother has borne the most savage excoriations of church and society, and still carries a heavy burden of economic and social pressures which penalize her for her choice. Somewhere in the feelings, latent and overt, that women carry through menstruation, there is an association of the menstrual period with a profound ambivalence toward our pregnability, and toward institutionalized motherhood.

8

Prepatriarchal religion acknowledged the female presence in every part of the cosmos. The moon is generally held to have been the first object of nature-worship, and the moon, to whose phases the menstrual cycle corresponds, is anciently associated with women. The Moon Mothers, according to Harding, were virgins, in the great primal sense of the word—not the undeflorated girl, but the woman who belongs to herself, or, in the Eskimo phrase, "She-who-will-not-have-a-husband." She has many lovers, and many sons, and the son often grows up to be a lover. Sometimes the moon is herself female, represented by a goddess like Selene, Artemis, Luna; sometimes the moon is the impregnator, the male source of the Great Mother's fertility (and that of all women); but even so, still associated primarily with what Harding terms "Woman's Mysteries." In other words, whether female or male, the lunar deity has been first and foremost related to the Virgin-Mother-Goddess, who is "for-herself" and whose power radiates out from her maternal aspect to the fertilization of the whole earth, the planting and harvesting of crops, the cycle of seasons, the dialogue of human-kind and nature.⁸³

But the moon is merely one aspect of the female presence once felt to dominate the universe. Prepatriarchal thought gynomorphized everything. Out of the earth-womb vegetation and nourishment emerged, as the human child out of the

woman's body. The words for mother and mud (earth, slime, the *matter* of which the planet is composed, the dust or clay of which "man" is built) are extremely close in many languages: *mutter, madre, mater, materia, moeder, modder*. The name "Mother Earth" still has currency, although, significantly, in our time, it has acquired a quaint, archaic, sentimental ring.

In winter, vegetation retreats back into the earth-womb; and in death the human body, too, returns into that womb, to await rebirth. Ancient Mid-Eastern tombs were deliberately designed to resemble the body of the mother—with labyrinths and spirals intended to represent her internal anatomy—so that the spirit could be reborn there. G. Rachel Levy suggests that this design originated in the caves of Neolithic culture, which were natural symbols of the Mother. Here we see one of many connections between the idea of the Mother and the idea of death—an association which remains powerful in patriarchal thought.³⁴

The ocean whose tides respond, like woman's menses, to the pull of the moon, the ocean which corresponds to the amniotic fluid in which human life begins, the ocean on whose surface vessels (personified as female) can ride but in whose depth sailors meet their death and monsters conceal themselves—this ocean lies somewhere between the earth and moon in the gynomorphizing of nature. From human eye-level the ocean is approachable as the moon is not; it is unstable and threatening as the earth is not; it spawns new life daily, yet swallows up lives; it is changeable like the moon, unregulated, yet indestructible and eternal. The ocean cannot be planted or plowed; it is a sterile, salty field, yet it produces, spontaneously, its own life, rich, nourishing, yet very different from the life of vegetation and animals onshore. The Great Goddess is found in all water: "the sea of heaven on which sail the barks of the gods of light, the circular, life-generating ocean above and below the earth. To her belong all waters, streams, fountains, ponds and springs, as well as the rain."³⁵

The moon was sometimes perceived as a male deity which impregnated both women and the earth. But gynocentric pantheism imagined the sky itself to be female, with the sun and moon as her sons. "The female sky is the fixed and enduring

element," in a number of cultures and myths cited by Neumann: Egyptian, Aztec, Vedic, Babylonian. The Great Mother, the female principle, was originally personified both in darkness and in light, in the depths of the water and the heights of the sky. Only with the development of a patriarchal cosmogony do we find her restricted to a purely "chthonic" or tellurian presence, represented by darkness, unconsciousness, and sleep.

V THE DOMESTICATION OF MOTHERHOOD

. . . there is a Persian myth of the creation of the World which precedes the biblical one. In that myth a woman creates the world, and she creates it by the act of natural creativity which is hers and which cannot be duplicated by men. She gives birth to a great number of sons. The sons, greatly puzzled by this act which they cannot duplicate, become frightened. They think, "Who can tell us, that if she can give life, she cannot also *take life*." And so, because of their fear of this mysterious ability of woman, and of its reversible possibility, they kill her.

—Frieda Fromm-Reichmann,
"On the Denial of Woman's Sexual Pleasure."

Frederick Engels identified father-right and the end of the matrilineal clan with the beginnings of private ownership and slavery. He saw women as forced into marriage and prostitution through economic dependency, and predicted that sexual emancipation would come with the abolition of private property and the end of male economic supremacy. For Engels (as for succeeding generations of Marxists) the oppression of women has, simply, an economic cause, and an economic solution. He actually discourages our trying to speculate on *how* the transition to sexual equality would come about:

What we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up: a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money or any other social instrument of power, a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love, or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences. When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual—and there will be the end of it.¹

This is an excellent illustration of what Karen Horney means when she says that "it is in the interest of men to obscure [the fact that there is a struggle between the sexes]; and the emphasis they place on their ideologies has caused women, also, to adopt these theories." In her delicately worded essay, "The Distrust Between the Sexes," Horney speaks of the resentment and anxiety harbored by all men toward women—even, she says, by "men who consciously have a very positive relationship with women and hold them in high esteem as human beings."^{2*} Materialist analysis and masculine bias allow Engels to assume that an economic solution will cleanse false consciousness, create a new concept of gender, purge the future of the pathologies of

* Erich Neumann goes much further. In an essay called "Psychological Stages of Feminine Development" (translated by Rebecca Jacobson and revised for *Spring* by Hildegard Nagel and Jane Pratt), he discusses the myth of feminine evil and the use of woman as scapegoat "which . . . means that the feminine is 'recognized' as evil by the patriarchally stamped cultures, the Judeo-Christian, Mohammedan and Hindu. Therefore, it is suppressed, enslaved, and outwardly eliminated from life, or else—which is what happens in witch trials—persecuted and done to death as the carrier of evil. *Only the fact that man cannot exist without woman has prevented the extirpation . . . of this group of 'evil' humans upon whom the dangerousness of the unconscious has been projected.*" (Emphasis mine.) This raises the question of how extrauterine reproduction and cloning techniques could be applied toward a gynocidal future, if they remain under male control.

the past. But he fails to understand that it is the mother-son and mother-daughter relationship, as much as, perhaps more than, that between man the buyer and woman the bought, which creates the sexual politics of male supremacism. Even under the pressures of a growing, worldwide, women's consciousness, the overwhelming bias of socialist and revolutionary movements is male, and reflects a wish to have a social revolution which would leave male leadership and control essentially untouched.* Eli Zaretsky has at least attempted to respond to the challenge directed by radical feminism at socialism, acknowledging that in the Bolshevik Revolution,

Revolution through economic development left intact a major part of women's oppression. The psychosocial heritage of male supremacy was scarcely challenged by the entry of women into industry; while the strengthening of the family encouraged a resurgence of traditional patriarchal ideals, such as the exaltation of motherhood . . .

and that Marxism has assumed the traditional division of labor within the family along with heterosexuality as a "natural" condition.³ But the effort to marry psychoanalysis and Marxism—two creations of the nineteenth-century masculine intellect—seems unavailing, since we find that it is "the family" which is seen as the problem, rather than the attitudes—acknowledged and hidden—held toward women by men. A woman is for a man both more and less than a person: she is something terribly necessary and necessarily terrible. She is not simply "more than an exploited worker";⁴ she is not simply the "other"; she is first of all the Mother who has to be possessed, reduced, controlled, lest she swallow him back into her dark caves, or stare him into stone.

* Horney notes that to confess dread of women is far more threatening to masculine self-regard than to acknowledge dread of a man. Since the notion of class assumes that women are merely subsumed under either the dominant males of the ruling class, or the oppressed males of the working class, it has perhaps been only natural that class analysis, male-created, has taken precedence over a sexual analysis.

1986: There has been a feminist temptation to replace a "primary contradiction" of class with a "primary contradiction" of sex. A majority of women in the world, however, experience their lives as the intersection of class, sex, and race, and must contend with all three both in theory and action.

Rationalizations of patriarchy which deny this fact exist, of course, outside the Left. In a little book on kinship systems, the anthropologist Robin Fox describes, in several bland sentences, the "basic female function." After acknowledging that the essential human bond, the foundation of all social bonds, is that between mother and child, he goes on to explain how the longer extrauterine gestation required by the upright, bipedal human has resulted in woman's necessary preoccupation with bearing and nurturing for long periods, "probably getting pregnant again while doing so." This necessitated, according to Fox, a system whereby the mothers, thus incapacitated, had to be "protected." Where Engels sees male dominance as evolving from the possession of private property, Fox sees it as naturally evolving from this "protective" role: "it was the men who hunted the game, fought the enemies, and *made the decisions*." (Emphasis mine.)⁵ Apart from the question of how far decisions must be made by a protective group, we have already seen that, in fact, decision-making—in whatever sense that concept would have had meaning in elementary society—was probably originally inseparable from the maternal role. Fox creates a somewhat Victorian image of the early male (and, incidentally of himself), implying that "protection" rather than power and force, is at issue—a familiar rhetoric. If, however, we are to assume that from woman's original child-nurturing function flowed a "natural" division of all labor, generally accepted as natural by women and men, how do we account for the fact that laws, legends, and prohibitions relating to women have, from the early patriarchal myths (e.g., Eve) through the medieval witch-massacres and the gynocide of female infants down to the modern rape laws, mother-in-law jokes, and sadistic pornography of our time, been hostile and defensive, rather than "protective"?

One of the themes of post-Freudian psychology is that man's contributions to culture are his way of compensating for the lack of the one, elemental, creative power of motherhood. Bruno Bettelheim has analyzed male initiation rituals as outgrowths of deep male envy of this female power.⁶ Horney suggests that, despite male dominance in every other sphere, a residual envy and resentment has remained which has expressed itself in phallogocentric thinking (including such concepts as

"penis envy"), in the devaluation (I would call it *reduction*) of motherhood, and in a generally misogynist civilization.*

She finds that besides the very ancient resentment of woman's power to create new life, there is fear of her apparent power to affect the male genitals. Woman as elemental force, and as sexual temptress and consumer of his sexual energies, thus becomes, for man, a figure generating anxiety: "Woman is a mysterious being who communicates with spirits and thus has magic powers that she can use to hurt the male. He must therefore protect himself against her powers by keeping her subjugated." (It is possible that the more "rational" and antisubjective the male, the greater his unconscious servitude to these magical ideas.) "Motherliness" is split off from both sexual attractiveness (the temptress) and "motherhood" (the power-

* Misogyny is not a projection of women who resent men. That it exists, and has been validated by patriarchal culture at all times, is clearly documented. There are a number of recent works—all by men—on this subject, most of them quite interestingly misogynist in their leanings and conclusions. R. E. L. Masters and Eduard Lea, in an anthology called *The Anti-Sex* (1964), assert at regular intervals that "true misogyny is an unwarranted generalization" and suggest that despite the evidence to the contrary they have accumulated, misogyny is really an aberrant strain in human culture. At the same time they admit that misogyny is "cultural and ideological" rather than individual. Both Masters and Lea, and Wolfgang Lederer (*The Fear of Women* [1968]) deny in the dedications of their books that they are misogynists. Lederer accumulates vast research on male fear of the female, but his conclusion is that it is justified because women's drive to reproduce ("Some women are excessively—one is tempted to say, pathologically—fertile") is a genuine threat to civilization. What man really fears is not woman, but an overcrowded planet on which *she* is determined to go on breeding. A similar case of denial is found in the classical scholar H. F. Kitto, who, after amassing evidence of the repression of Athenian women, writes: "What is wrong is the picture it gives of the Athenian man. The Athenian had his faults, but pre-eminent among his qualities were lively intelligence, humanity and curiosity. To say that he habitually treated one-half of his own race with indifference, even contempt, does not, to my mind, make sense" (*The Greeks* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1960], p. 222).

H. R. Hays, who nowhere in his book presents credentials of gynophilia, has written the least misogynist treatment of the subject. His *The Dangerous Sex* (New York: Putnam, 1964) is an attempt "to make men aware of the shameful burden of fantasy and rationalization which they have been trailing down the ages . . . By using this symbolic magic he has either imprisoned [woman], made her an outcast or treated her as a scapegoat" (p. 295). Hays's book is unhysterical and straightforward and should be basic reading for men who want to think seriously about sexual politics.

ful Goddess) and is acceptable in its "nurturing, selfless, self-sacrificing" form: thus, in the fourteenth century, the Virgin Mary could be worshipped while living women were brutalized and burnt as witches.

2

Joseph Campbell, tracing the universality of the Great Goddess or Great Mother image from prehistory onward, asserts that "there can be no doubt that in the very earliest ages of human history the magical force and wonder of the female was no less a marvel than the universe itself; and this gave to woman a prodigious power, which it has been one of the chief concerns of the masculine part of the population to break, control and employ to its own ends."⁷ He associates the glorification of hunting over agriculture, and the disappearance of female figurines at the end of the Aurignacian period (c. 30,000 B.C.), with the rise of this male self-assertion against the elemental power of woman. Female figurines were, he finds, "the first objects of worship by the species *Homo sapiens*. But there is a shift in the magic, ritual and imagery of *Homo sapiens* from the vagina to the phallus, and from an essentially plant-oriented to a purely animal-oriented mythology."

G. Rachel Levy offers a convincing and beautifully concrete recreation of Neolithic consciousness. She bases her conclusions, which are never dogmatic, on her actual explorations of Aurignacian caves, on a great variety of artifacts and wall-tracings, on the architecture of post-Neolithic cultures, and on studies of the prehistoric movements of wild herds and the distribution of wild grasses throughout Eastern and Western Europe. She suggests that a unified life-giving principle—the female principle embodied in the caves themselves and the goddess-cult figurines found within them—informed the existence of the hunting peoples. The beginnings of animal domestication and grazing, the development of agriculture, led, she feels, to the first consciousness of "movement in time"—i.e., the seasons' cycles, the rotation of the stars, the gestation, birth, and death of animals and crops. This earliest sense of "movement in time" generated

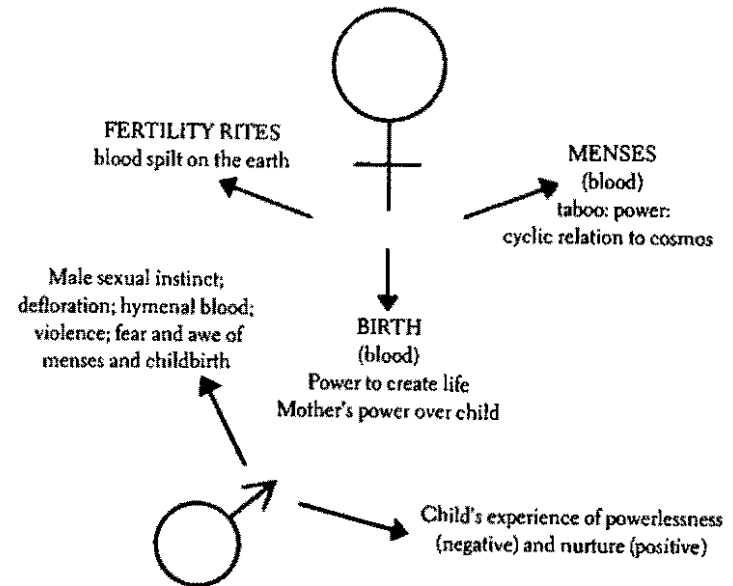
a sense of numerical relation, balance, cyclic symmetry which in turn made possible such advances as the development of pottery.⁸ But one essential by-product of this "mental revolution" was a growing consciousness of *duality*—a way of perceiving which, carried to its extreme and bifurcated, was later to become fundamental to patriarchal consciousness.

To acknowledge a cyclic change of aspects (that birth is followed by death, death by reincarnation; that tides ebb and flow, winter alternates with summer, the full moon with the dark of the moon) is to acknowledge that process and continuity embrace both positive and negative events—although, as parts of a process, events are less likely to become stamped as purely "positive" or "negative." Prepatriarchal consciousness, according to Levy, begins with an elemental unity which is sensed as female; and proceeds to an awareness of dynamics still presided over by a female presence: "In the growing consciousness of duality, the Mother retained her former abiding and fundamental status as the earth into which men return and out of which all birth emanates . . . no cult of a male divinity is discoverable in Neolithic archaeology. . . . Female potency [was] the great subject of Aurignacian sculpture."⁹

Even death was part of a movement in time, part of the cycle leading to reincarnation and rebirth. A "dark" or "negative" aspect of the Great Mother was thus already present from the beginning, inseparable from her benign, life-giving aspect. And, like death, violence, bloodshed, destructive power, were always there, the potentially "evil" half of the Mother's profile, which, once completely split off, would become separately personified as the fanged blood-goddess Kali, the killer-mother Medea, the lewd and malign witch, the "castrating" wife or mother. (As I was writing this, one of my sons showed me the cover of the current *National Geographic*—the photograph of a Peruvian Indian rowing a pure white llama to the annual ceremony on Titicaca Island where it would be sacrificed to the Earth Mother in exchange for a good harvest. This ceremony is performed by sorceresses and the llama's blood sprinkled onto "Pacha Mama" [Mother Earth].¹⁰ Thus the bringing of life—i.e., food—is associated, as in ancient times, with bloodshed and

killing, and both are associated with the Great Mother. Such customs, if rare today, were once legion.)

Women's blood is different from the blood of men or animals. It is associated not only with the "curse" and mysteries of the menstrual taboo, but with the *mana* of deforation, the transformation mystery of birth, and with fertility itself. There is thus a complex fusion of associations derived from the several aspects of the female, which might be visualized as a cluster like the one below:



As Joseph Campbell acknowledges: "the natural mysteries of childbirth and menstruation are as directly convincing as death itself, and remain to this day what they must also have been in the beginning, primary sources of a religious awe."¹¹

In the recurrent hero myth, the male infant grows up into the son/lover, who later undergoes *violence* (murder or castration) at his mother's hands. The myth of killing the dragon (another violence/blood myth) recounts the test by which the

young man tries to surmount his dread of the Terrible Mother—his elemental fear of women. According to Mycenaean myth, Apollo had to battle a female dragon before he could enter Delphi, which became his shrine.¹²

The Neolithic triangle or the *yonis*—female genital symbols anciently inscribed at the entrance to a sacred area—become, in this struggle against female power, fanged Kali, or Medusa's face with its snarl of snaky hair. The beneficent "Cow Goddess beyond the grave" who "suckled the souls of the newly dead" is transformed into the pregnant monster, "hippopotamus and crocodile, lioness and woman in one."¹³

Neumann sees an *adult* male ego as one which is able to enter into a creative connection with the Great Mother—presumably both in her dark and her benign aspects, since full adulthood requires eventually entering into some creative relationship with death itself. It is the adolescent ego that is still so uncertain of itself that it perceives the female as threatening; as "the unconscious and the non-ego . . . darkness, nothingness, the void, the bottomless pit." Of course the issue here is not one of a chronological phase ending at, say, twenty, or even of a more primitive stage of human consciousness, but of an aspect of male sexuality, which in a great many, probably a majority of men, continues into middle life and beyond. In fact, patriarchy is by nature always trying to "kill the dragon," in its negation of women; and the fully adult woman in patriarchal society may still often find only an adolescent son/lover, who wants her for his emotional sustenance even while somewhere within him he fears castration and death at her hands. This fear is the real dragon that has to be destroyed.

3

Woman has always known herself both as daughter and as potential mother, while in his dissociation from the process of conception man first experiences himself as son, and only much later as father. When he began to assert his paternity and to make certain claims to power over women and children on that basis, we begin to see emerging the process through which he

compensated for—one could say, took revenge for—his previous condition as son-of-the-mother.

Patriarchal monotheism did not simply change the sex of the divine presence; it stripped the universe of female divinity, and permitted woman to be sanctified, as if by an unholy irony, only and exclusively as mother (without the extended *mana* that she possessed prepatriarchally)—or as the daughter of a divine father. She becomes the property of the husband-father, and must come to him *virgo intacta*, not as "second-hand goods"; or she must be ritually deflorated. If he is to know "his" children, he must have control over their reproduction, which means he must possess their mother exclusively. The question of "legitimacy" probably goes deeper than even the desire to hand on one's possessions to one's own blood-line; it cuts back to the male need to say: "I, too, have the power of procreation—these are *my* seed, *my* own begotten children, *my* proof of elemental power." In addition, of course, the children are the future receivers of the patrimony; by their prayers and sacrifices, they will ensure the father's spirit a safe passage after death; but they are also present assets, able bodies to work fields, fish, hunt, fight against hostile tribes. A wife's "barrenness" (until very recently it was the woman who was declared "barren" rather than the husband infertile) was a curse because she was, finally, the means of reproduction. A man needed children to enhance his position in the world, and especially, a man needed sons. The command of Yahweh: "Be fruitful and multiply,"* is an entirely patriarchal one; he is not invoking the Great Mother but bidding his sons beget still more sons. Thus, Engels is correct in his famous statement that in the patriarchal family the husband is the bourgeois and the wife and children the proletariat. But each is something more to each, something which both cements and can outlast economic bondage.

In the Middle East to this day, God is believed to strike a woman barren as punishment for some impiety (the woman is

* That imperative in Genesis is of course preceded by the myth of Adam, in which woman's procreative power is denied and *she* is taken out of the man's body. When Adam and Eve are cursed, Eve is told that "in sorrow [she] will bring forth children."

assumed to be the sinner, not her husband) and the production of daughters is a disaster, not simply for the mother, but for the daughters. The Hebrew scholar Raphael Patai says that "we know from historical documents relating to the Arab world from pre-historic times down to the 19th century that often a father decided to put to death a daughter either immediately upon her birth or at a later date. The usual method of putting a newborn daughter to death was to bury her in the sands of the desert." He quotes from the Koran the words of a father who asks himself, of his newborn daughter: "Shall he keep it in contempt, or bury it in the dust?"¹⁴ The earlier background of female primacy I have described needs to be held in mind against the violence of this question—along with the fact that the Yahwists savagely repressed the cults of Astarte (originally Tanit, Asherah, or Ishtar) and denounced all worship of the Goddess as "an abomination."¹⁵

The Mother Goddess is gradually devalued and rejected; the human woman finds her scope and dignity increasingly reduced. Patriarchal man impregnates "his" wife and expects her to deliver "his" child; her elemental power is perceived more and more as a service she renders, a function she performs. In the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, the Erinyes, representing mother-right, claim vengeance on Orestes for the crime of matricide. But Apollo declares that Orestes's murder of his mother was a just act because it avenged the death of his father Agamemnon; and he continues:

The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the newplanted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts.

Athena, also a representative of father-right, denies having had any mother; she sprang from her father Zeus's brain and she acts like a true token woman, loyal only to "the man" as she does not hesitate to announce.¹⁶ And the medieval church held that a minuscule, fully formed *homunculus*, complete with soul, was deposited by the male in the female body, which simply acted as incubator.^{17*}

* Margaret Mead notes that it has always been more difficult to obscure the woman's role in procreation than the man's—yet she gives contemporary examples—the Rossel Islanders, the Montenegrins—of cultures in which

The image of the divine family also changes. The Goddess, whether in Sumer, Minos, Mycenae, Phrygia, Knossos, or Syria, had often been represented with a young god, her son, servant, or consort, but always subsidiary to her. E. O. James perceives these young male images as the first sign of recognition of the male's part in fertilization. But for a long time the young god remained more son than husband, more consort than equal. Mellaart finds the role of the son of the goddess "strictly subordinate to hers"; of a male figure found in one of the Çatal Hüyük shrines, he says: "Presumably he represents an aspect of hunting, which alone was responsible for the presence of an independent male deity in the neolithic of Çatal Hüyük."¹⁸ But in his earliest appearance he is a vegetation god, who must die and be reborn for the vegetative cycle to continue. In a sense, he is thus still annexed to the Mother of grains, fruits, and growing things. Later, the virgin-mother with her youthful child-mate is replaced by a father, his wife, and his children. In contrast to the "Divine Triad" of Mycenae cited by Leonard Palmer, which consists of two queens and a king, we find such images as the Egyptian Amarnan family, consisting of a father, his son, and his small grandson.¹⁹ The mother is no longer virgin, "she-unto-herself"; she is "unto-the-husband," his unequal consort or his possession and subordinate, to be reckoned up with his cattle.*

Devaluations of the Goddess are legion. Patai describes the struggle of Jewish patriarchal monotheism with the goddess-cults, of which the golden calf was one remnant (the horned bull or cow having been sacred to the Goddess throughout the world.)† He tells of women weaving "houses"—possibly gar-

the mother's role is held to be purely passive or is denied outright (*Male and Female* [New York: Morrow, 1975], pp. 59–60).

* In Judaism there is no divine family. Christianity's Holy Family—really the human family of Jesus—is distinct from the Trinity, or three-part Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Daly notes the ambiguity surrounding the Holy Spirit, which is invested with stereotypically "feminine" qualities but referred to by a masculine pronoun and supposed to have impregnated the Virgin Mary. As for the human family of Jesus, his words spoken to the Virgin Mary in the Gospels are suggestive: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" The Virgin is, of course, *virgo intacta*, not *virgo* in the sense associated with the cult of Artemis.

† In his *Ancient Judaism*, Max Weber hints at the rejection of "chthonic and vegetative" cults by the Hebrews; he is, of course, talking about cults

ments—for Asherah in the temple at Jerusalem, and the baking of cakes for Astarte or Anath. Some remnant of female presence—heavily laden with what Jung would call anima-projection—survived in the concept of the Shekhina, “the loving, rejoicing, motherly, suffering, mourning and in general emotion-charged aspect of deity” (with what implications for centuries of Jewish mothers?). A female deity also reemerged in the Kabbalistic renaissance of the thirteenth century, under the name Matronit, who, according to Patai is a distinct and often independent presence, but who seems to have left few ripples in the mainstream of Judaism.²⁰ The pig, declared an unclean animal in the Koran and the Old Testament, was a reiterative figure in goddess-religion; the sow was sacred in Crete, sometimes appeared as an embodiment of Isis, was sacrificed at the feast of Aphrodite, and was a symbol of the Eleusinian cult of Demeter. “Wherever the eating of pork is forbidden and the pig is held to be unclean, we can be sure of its originally sacred character.”²¹

Jane Harrison describes the descent (in every sense) of the Hellenic figure of Pandora from the Cretan Earth-Mother, her conversion from the All-Giver to merely a beautiful girl dowered with gifts by all the Olympians and then sent as a temptress to man. Pandora’s famous “box” which when opened released every kind of grief and trouble among men, was originally a *pithos* or *jar* in which the Earth-Mother stored all the goods of wine, grain, and fruits. Jane Harrison was struck by the “ugly and malicious theological animus” in Hesiod’s telling of this tale: “he is all for the *Father* and the Father will have no great Earth-Goddess in his man-made Olympus.”²²

Slater sees the entire Olympian mythology as saturated with fear of the mature, maternal woman; the much-admired goddess, Athena, is born from her father Zeus’s brain, is virginal, childless, and, as has been seen, affirms her loyalty to the male. Hera is a jealous, competitive consort, and destructive mothers like Gaea, Rhea, Medea, and Clytemnestra abound. He theorizes that this fear of the maternal woman derived from the sexual politics of fifth-century Greece, where women were ill-educated, were sold into marriage, and had no role except as

of the Mother-Goddess. Another example of the method Daly has named “The Great Silence.”

producers of children, the sexual interest of men was homoerotic, and for intellectual friendships a man sought out hetæras (usually foreign-born women) or other men. He assumes the mother to have been filled with resentment and envy of her sons, and, in her own frustration, excessively controlling of her male children in their earliest years. Her feelings would have been experienced by her sons as a potentially destructive hostility which is later embodied in mythology and classical drama.^{23*}

4

Sun-worship, which always postdates worship of a lunar deity (whether feminine or masculine) is another feature of patriarchal thought. The ancients saw the moon not as a reflector of solar light, but as independently glowing in the darkness of night; the sun was the inhabitant, rather than the source of daylight.

It is extraordinary to see concretely, as in Egyptian art of the Amarna period, the coming-into-dominance of the sun. Although a solar deity had long been central in Egyptian religion, there was still a strong goddess-cult embodied in the figures of Isis, Hathor, Nut, Nephthys. The fourteenth-century B.C. pharaoh Akhenaton revolutionized Egyptian cosmology in setting up the Aten, or sun-disk, as the sole embodiment of a new religion. In his capital, the seat of the Aten at Tell-el-Amarna, he encouraged an art which over and over, in the sun-disk with its spreading rays, asserts the message of a monotheistic, heliocentric, and patriarchal universe.

When we think of Amarnan art we tend to think of the fa-

* Slater is another writer who comes close to a denunciation of patriarchy yet gets deflected. His thesis is that maternal overinvolvement with the son, deriving from the inferior and reduced status of women, results—in America as in fifth-century Greece—in a narcissistic male consciousness, given to “proving” itself through war, often through meaningless achievement and acquisitiveness, and through competition. He does not, like some writers, leave the problem at the mother’s door; he is refreshingly aware that her relationship to her son occurs in a social context, the *reductio-ad-matrem* which gives no other opportunity for action, makes motherhood the definition of womanhood, and child-care (in the middle classes) a full-time, exclusively female occupation. Though many of Slater’s observations are useful, his failure to connect the psychic pattern with the patriarchal context leaves his insights regrettably incomplete.

mous portrait bust of Nefertite. But her popularity in our times should not make us exaggerate her importance in her own. Amarnan art, in fact, reiterates images of woman and of the family which do not seem very different from contemporary stereotypes. In these incised or carven images, Akhenaton is already both patriarch and deity (Incarnation of the Aten). With him is his queen, Nefertite, of extraordinary bearing and elegance, who comes far closer to contemporary ideals of feminine, aristocratic beauty than do most prepatriarchal female images. But she is unmistakably second; a consort, even a royal deity, depicted with dignity and pride, but essentially a token woman. In one *stele*, the royal family (Akhenaton, Nefertite, and three of their daughters) are represented in an informal, even intimate family scene showing a good deal of physical affection. But above them the Aten holds forth its rays, and it is the real center and keystone of the composition.

In establishing the worship of the Aten, Akhenaton not only ordered the destruction of many images of the earlier gods, and removed their names from monuments, but prohibited the plural form of the word "god." A reference in Cyril Aldred to the fact that "the words for 'mother' and 'truth' were cleansed of their old associations" is tantalizing, since the hieroglyph for "house" or "town" also symbolizes "mother," emphasizing the principle of collective as well as individual nurture.²⁴

In the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, Apollo, the Hellenic sun-god, becomes the spokesman for father-right, upheld by Athena, the goddess who denies her mother. Apollo is god of poetry and the lyre, twin brother of an independent sister, associated with light, with trees, with the art of healing. Jane Harrison notes that Apollo is derived from the god Paean, of the land where the styptic peony grows, and that this herb, which could stanch blood, was held in reverence throughout the East. But Artemis, his sister, is likewise associated with healing herbs, in her diminished state as goddess. Apollo's relationship to trees is interesting: The nymph Daphne, to escape rape by him, had herself turned into a laurel tree. This tree Apollo made his personal symbol; and it was with a laurel branch in his hand that he came to take over the oracular shrine of the earth-goddess,

Themis, at Delphi²⁵—killing, as we have seen, a female dragon on the way.

Thus Apollo assimilated a number of attractive aspects of the Great Mother—even to being paired with the moon. The Mother of Trees, of healing herbs and the preservation of life, becomes a male god; the lunar goddess becomes his sister. Slater calls him "the personification of anti-matriarchy, the epitome of the sky-god, a crusader against Earth-deities. He is all sunlight, Olympian, manifest, rational."²⁶ Now this of course is an extreme case of patriarchal "splitting"—in Jane Harrison's words, Greek orthodoxy would allow "no deed or dream of darkness" about Apollo. All was to be lucidity, radiant masculinity. Harding suggests that the worship of the moon embodies respect for the wisdom of instinct and natural law, and that sun-worship has to do with the idea of control of natural forces.²⁷ Indeed, Apollo is personified as driving the steeds of the sun. The "Apollonian" rational control of nature, as opposed to the instinctual excesses of the cult of Dionysus, the power of consciousness as opposed to the unconscious, the celebration of father-right over mother-right, come together in this mythology.

Why the sun should have come to embody a split consciousness, while the worship of the moon allowed for coexistent opposites, a holistic process, is an interesting question. The fact that the moon is itself continually changing, and is visible in so many forms, while the sun presents itself in one, single, unvarying form, may account for the kinds of human perceptions which would be powerfully drawn to one or the other. At all events, with the advent of solar religion, the Great Mother, in her manifold persons and expressions, begins to suffer reduction; parts of her are split off, some undergo a gender change, and henceforth woman herself will be living on patriarchal terms, under the laws of male divinities and in the light of male judgments.

5

There are really two modes in which man has related to woman-as-mother: the practical and the magical. He has, at one time,

been utterly dependent on her. Predominantly, in all cultures, it is from women that both women and men have learned about caresses, about affectionate play, about the comfort of a need satisfied—and also about the anxiety and wretchedness of a need deferred.

Briffault was convinced that maternal sentiment far predated the mating instinct; the first love being the love of mother and child. He perceived tender feelings as a secondary female sexual characteristic, derived in the course of female evolution from the biological nature of the female organism. It was the desire for that tenderness, which the male experienced from his mother, that originally induced him to modify his own sexual instinct in accordance with the mating, or stabilizing, impulse of woman.²⁸ According to Margaret Mead,

The relationship in the male between his innate sexual impulses and reproduction seems to be a learned response. . . . Male sexuality seems originally focussed to no goal beyond immediate discharge; it is society that provides the male with a desire for children, for patterned interpersonal relationships that order, control, and elaborate his original impulses.²⁹

Thus in prepatriarchal life the male child early perceived that the female power of procreation was charged with *mana*. The sacred, the potent, the creative were symbolized as female. When not absorbed in fending for existence, or ritually acknowledging the (female) powers ruling life and death, prepatriarchal man must have felt something of an outsider. As Mead remarks: "His equipment for love [sex] is manifest to the very small boy—but what is it to be a father? This is something that goes on outside one's own body, in the body of another."³⁰ The anthropologist Leo Frobenius gives us the words of an Abyssinian woman commenting on the richness and complexity of a woman's biological endowment as contrasted with a man's: "His life and body are always the same. . . . He knows nothing."³¹

Patriarchal man created—out of a mixture of sexual and affective frustration, blind need, physical force, ignorance, and intelligence split from its emotional grounding, a system which turned against woman her own organic nature, the source of

her awe and her original powers. In a sense, female evolution was mutilated, and we have no way now of imagining what its development hitherto might have been; we can only try, at last, to take it into female hands.

The mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship. In the creation of the patriarchal family, violence is done to this fundamental human unit. It is not simply that woman in her full meaning and capacity is domesticated and confined within strictly defined limits. Even safely caged in a single aspect of her being—the maternal—she remains an object of mistrust, suspicion, misogyny in both overt and insidious forms. And the female generative organs, the matrix of human life, have become a prime target of patriarchal technology.

VI

HANDS OF FLESH, HANDS OF IRON

How have women given birth, who has helped them, and how, and why? These are not simply questions of the history of midwifery and obstetrics: they are political questions. The woman awaiting her period, or the onset of labor, the woman lying on a table undergoing abortion or pushing her baby out, the woman inserting a diaphragm or swallowing her daily pill, is doing these things under the influence of centuries of imprinting. Her choices—when she has any—are made, or outlawed, within the context of laws and professional codes, religious sanctions and ethnic traditions, from whose creation women have been historically excluded.

In Judeo-Christian theology, woman's pain in childbirth is punishment from God. (The notion of birth-pain as punitive is found, as well, in other cultures.) Since the curse laid on Eve in Genesis was taken literally well into the nineteenth century, the mother in labor had to expect to suffer; but what was even more significant, it was assumed until the last three decades that she must suffer *passively*. In 1591 a midwife, Agnes Simpson, was burned at the stake for having attempted to relieve birth pangs with opium or laudanum.¹ In the nineteenth century, chloroform was finally allowed to blot the laboring woman from consciousness, rendering her so totally passive that she awoke unaware that she had delivered. Others would *do* to her what had to be done. "Nature" is often referred to in manuals of early midwifery as wiser than the "art" of the surgeon with

his hooks and forceps; but that a woman might learn to understand the process herself, and bring to it her own character and intelligence, her own instinctive and physical equipment, is never hinted. The "courage" of passive suffering is the highest praise accorded the lying-in mother.

I began thinking about childbirth with the hypothesis that men had gradually annexed the role of birth-attendant and thus assumed authority over the very sphere which had originally been one source of female power and charisma. But for many reasons—the advent of the male midwife and obstetrician being one—passive suffering and the archetypal female experience of childbirth have been seen as identical. Passive suffering has thus been seen as a universal, "natural," female destiny, carried into every sphere of our experience; and until we understand this fully, we will not have the self-knowledge to move from a centuries-old "endurance" of suffering to a new active being.

A surprising number of women—not simply poor and illiterate but educated and middle-class—approach labor insisting that they want to know as little about it as possible: "Just put me out and let the doctor handle it." I was one of these women myself, in the fifties: literate, intellectual, an artist curious about the psyche, yet convinced that the knowledge of my body was a matter for "experts" and that birth was the specialty of the obstetrician. A part of me, even then, could not tolerate passivity, but I identified that part with the "unwomanly" and in becoming a mother I was trying to affirm myself as a "womanly woman." If passivity was required, I would conform myself to the expectation. I was also, of course, mistrustful of and alienated from my body. Later, in the mid-sixties, I underwent a series of operations for arthritis which demanded my active engagement in painful physiotherapy if I was to walk freely again. "Womanliness" was not in question then; but also, I brought with me into that experience certain political ideas about resistance, about the conversion of suffering into activism, and about the need to analyze what was happening to me. I kept a notebook in which I tried to explore the efforts of the hospital system to reduce the patient to a child or an object and to induce passive reactions, even though immense will and determination were needed to go through the postoperative exer-

cises. I understood then, as I had not in bearing my three children, that I could not afford to become an object; and I knew, later, that I could probably have given birth with the same active engagement in whatever pain there was.

In reading the history of childbirth, we have to "read between the lines" of histories of obstetrics by contemporary medical men; we can also examine the passionate debate-by-pamphlet that went on between those who opposed and those who argued for the female midwife. But it is important to remember that the writers were by no means disinterested, that they were engaged in both a rhetorical and a political battle—and that the one group whose opinions and documentation we long to have—the mothers—are, as usual, almost entirely unheard-from.

2

Benjamin Rush, the eighteenth-century physician, reported of Native-American mothers that

Nature is their only midwife. Their labors are short, accompanied with little pain. Each woman is delivered in a private cabin, without so much as one of her own sex to attend her. After washing herself in cold water, she returns in a few days to her usual employment.²

Of course, a great deal of glib romanticizing surrounds the notion of the "primitive" woman giving birth without pain or fuss and then getting on with the day's work. However, certain physical facts do suggest that women in a homogeneous elementary culture might have shorter and easier *normal* labors than women of a heterogeneous and urbanized culture.

First, in the earliest human groups, all human beings were smaller; and a small fetus is easier to deliver. Moreover, the fetus and the mother were of the same body-type. A small-boned woman from the Mediterranean did not meet or mate with a tall, heavy-boned man from the north; consequently she did not have to deliver a large-boned, large-skulled child through a narrow pelvis. She began bearing her children in the second decade of life, soon after first menstruation; she did not wait till some age of consent to mate, and youth gave her a mus-

cular tone and flexibility already diminished in a woman of thirty.³ She was not likely to have a pelvis misshapen by rickets—this, too, came later, along with urbanization and a more indoor life. She was not likely to contract infection, since she gave birth alone and no one touched her internally. Moreover, she gave birth in an instinctively natural, squatting position, which allowed the force of gravity to aid her in expelling the child. All this was true for normal labors; however, complications—a breech presentation, twins, prematurity—would be almost necessarily fatal to mother or child, since a woman laboring alone cannot manipulate her own body and the body of the child to facilitate a difficult birth.

Throughout the literature of childbirth runs the theme that the majority of births, even today, *are* "normal," and that the chief work of the birth-attendant is to be with the mother prenatally and during labor, to help expel the placenta, cut the umbilical cord, and attend to the newborn. So we can assume that the majority of births before recorded history were also normal ones.

When the father recognized his fatherhood, some men probably attended at births. There are accounts of women in elementary societies giving birth on the father's knees, as on an obstetrical stool, assisted by a woman relative. Before paternity was acknowledged or understood, it seems improbable that the father assisted at births, as one contemporary obstetrician asserts.⁴ In fact, in many cultures a pregnant or laboring woman is still today taboo to all but her female relatives, and men are excluded from the birth-chamber.⁵ Most commonly, a woman would give birth with the help and moral support of the grandmother, a woman friend or relative, or a group of women who had been through the experience. Finally certain of these would become known as "experienced" or "wise" women.⁶

No one disputes that within recorded history, until the eighteenth century, childbirth was overwhelmingly the province of women. This seems utterly natural, if only because women were experienced firsthand in the process; but even in early times there were male rationalizations as to why it should be so. For instance: we are told on the one hand that the Athenian midwife knew far more about the female reproduc-

tive organs than the Hippocratic physician (which seems highly likely); on the other, that the practice of midwifery was "beneath the dignity" of the male physician. The latter view of course corresponds with the low opinion held of women—in particular mothers, as Slater has shown—by the Athenian male.

Athenian midwives were more than birth-assistants; they prescribed aphrodisiacs and contraceptives, gave advice on sexual problems, and induced abortions. They were often accompanied by priestesses who chanted and recited spells to ease labor. The physician was forbidden to perform abortions; but only he was permitted to perform podalic version;⁷ and this type of specialization was to give the male practitioner a kind of power which, though it hovers for many centuries in the background, can be traced throughout the history of midwifery.

The technique of podalic version, or the turning of the child in its descent through the birth-canal from an upside-down head position to a breech presentation, for better traction, was practiced as early as 1500 B.C. in Egypt—not by midwives or physicians, but by priests.* Greek physicians were called in only when labor became acutely difficult; we are told that podalic version was practiced by them with skill.⁸ Throughout the historical literature on midwifery runs the assertion that midwives took care of normal births but that in emergency a male physician (or priest) had to be summoned.† (Women, of course, could not be physicians in fifth-century Greece.) But podalic version is not a surgical operation, nor part of the treatment of disease. It is a technique relevant *only* to obstetrics, and it necessitates a good deal of knowledge about the normal birth-process and the inner organs of women. It is hard to see how podalic version could have been mysteriously at the command of Hippocrates, unless he had learnt it originally from the midwives.

* The oldest existing medical treatise, the Ebers Papyrus of Egypt, mentions childbirth only once, according to R. P. Finney (*The Story of Motherhood* [New York: Liveright, 1937], p. 23).

† One exception is that of high-caste Hindu women of the early centuries A.D., who were apparently delivered by a priest-physician even in normal labors, while lower-caste women had midwives. (See Harvey Graham, *Eternal Eve* [London: Hutchinson, 1960], p. 23; Finney, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-38.)

Caesarean section—removal of the child from the mother's abdomen through an incision—was apparently performed by the Hindus and by Hippocrates, but usually at the expense of the mother's life. (It was reinvented in Western Europe in 1500, having been a lost art for centuries, not by a physician but by a sow-gelder.) But before version and Caesarean section, the efforts to deliver a child in a difficult labor were probably more excruciating than the labor itself. There are accounts, from many cultures, of birth-attendants "stripping" the abdomen (squeezing it downward like a cow's udder to force the child's descent), trampling on the abdomen directly above the fetus, or tying tight clothes around the mother's body to force expulsion. If her contractions were weak she might be "shaken" in a sheet or hung from a tree.* Repeatedly and for centuries, hooks were used to extract the fetus in pieces—a practice appropriately known as "destructive obstetrics," with subdivisions including craniotomy, embryotomy, hook extraction, and amputation of limbs. This was the specialty of the male physician as taught by Hippocrates and Galen; Galen specifically declared it a male domain.⁹

Whatever the frequency of such labors, they can only have left their mark on the consciousness of any woman who witnessed them, underwent them, or heard them described. Very early, the process of labor—the most natural process in the world—becomes tinged with cultural reverberations of terror, and a peculiar resonance of punishment. In some cultures an infant who did not get born easily was assumed to be evil, or possessed of demons; it was condemned to death, and the mother sometimes shared in the penalty, since to be pregnant with such a child was surely a judgment on her.

Three types of midwives practiced in Rome: the obstetrical midwife, her assistant, and the female priest who chanted pray-

* "Sometimes it worked. . . . And each time it did seem to work, those who had conceived the idea became convinced of their power to influence and control nature. That the midwife would have waited for the natural process to move at its own pace, and that her quiet assistance would have been enough to see the process through to a safe conclusion, were often forgotten in the face of such dramatic evidence that man's power to reason could shape and control nature" (Suzanne Arms, *Immaculate Deception* [Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1975], p. 10).

ers for a successful delivery. Soranus of Ephesus, a physician of the second century A.D., produced an obstetrical treatise giving instructions for midwives;¹⁰ again, it is difficult to know where he could have obtained his knowledge unless from the midwives themselves, since the male birth-attendant did not attend at normal births. But women did not write books; and the real history of the development of birthing as an art, the expertise accumulated and passed on by the actual practitioners, is blotted out in the history of male obstetrics. Only after the Middle Ages, when male influence and the struggle for male control of midwifery were well underway, do we begin to hear of the "heroes" of this branch of medicine. And indeed, there were some heroes, men who fought to save the lives of women in labor; but the names of the great midwives are mostly lost.

3

The establishment of Christianity in the West had its own effect on childbirth. Of the two great classical sources of medical learning, Hippocrates and Galen, the Church preferred Galen, not on the basis of his science but for his monotheism. Galen taught that surgery was unrelated to medicine, so that surgery remained for centuries a technique rather than a science, requiring at best a strong stomach and a certain brutal self-confidence. Where obstetrical surgery was called for, it was performed "by barbers and sow-gelders."¹¹ During the Middle Ages and beyond, midwifery was in any case seen as an unclean profession. The misogyny of the Church Fathers, which saw woman—especially her reproductive organs—as evil incarnate, attached itself to the birth-process, so that males were forbidden to attend at births, and the midwife was exhorted to make her primary concern not the comfort and welfare of the mother, but the baptism of the infant—in *utero*, with a syringe of holy water if necessary.¹² With convenient double think, the midwife was classified with the sow-gelder as performing a necessary but degraded function; however, she, and she alone, except for the priest, could baptize—because an infant might die in damnation if it failed to survive until a priest could be called.

The male physician, in any case, would have a fairly limited

notion of the female organs, since the Church also forbade the dissection of corpses, thus arresting and retarding the study of anatomy in general. So for several centuries, the knowledge of pregnancy, of the birth-process, of female anatomy, and of methods for facilitating labor, was being accumulated entirely by women. As late as the fifteenth century, only women birth-attendants are depicted in paintings and engravings.¹³ Only by the seventeenth century do we find the man-midwife appearing on the scene, and he appears at the moment when the male medical profession is beginning to control the practice of healing, refusing "professional" status to women and to those who had for centuries worked among the poor. He appears first in the Court, attending upper-class women; rapidly he begins to assert the inferiority of the midwife and to make her name synonymous with dirt, ignorance, and superstition.

In their classic pamphlet, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English trace the rise of this elitist male medical profession, which emerged out of the suppression of women healers during the centuries of witch-hunting, persecution, and murder. Eighty-five percent of the many millions executed as witches were women. They were charged with an imaginative variety of crimes, from causing a man's genitals to disappear to bringing about the death of a neighbor's cow; but wisewomen, healers, and midwives were especially singled out by the witch-hunters. I have already cited one English midwife who was executed for prescribing a pain-reliever during labor; and many more were charged with using "heathen" charms and spells, under the direction of the devil. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony in America, midwives were often viewed with suspicion and charged with witchcraft.

The case of Anne Hutchinson is instructive because it illuminates the many levels on which the American Puritan midwife was seen as threatening and subversive. The doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" and the Puritan emphasis on the individual conscience as the primary mediator with God, had seemed to encourage freedom of thought for women and men alike. But in practice, a male theology and a male magistracy stood between the individual woman's conscience and intellect,

and God. To men was assigned the task of interpreting God's "unknowable omnipotence"—specifically, his power of damnation or salvation; and in order for men to be free to wrestle with the problems of covenant theology, women must devote themselves to the management of "Secular Cares"; in short, stay in the home and keep off the masculine turf of theology. God was to be revealed to women by men. Ben Barker-Benfield suggests that the anxiety, frustration, and impotence experienced by the seventeenth-century New England woman, living under the double pressure of God's unknowable will and man's exclusion of her from active participation in interpreting that will, drove some women to infanticide, attempted murder, suicide, and "utter desperation." Others, more vocally aggressive, were whipped for challenging the male hierarchy.

Anne Hutchinson was a midwife and a thinking woman, "of haughty and fierce carriage, of a nimble wit and very active spirit, and a very voluble tongue, more bold than a man," as Governor Winthrop, no admirer, described her. She held classes in Boston of sixty to eighty women, meeting weekly, to discuss issues of doctrine and interpret scripture. As Barker-Benfield sees,

It was through this virtually exclusive female province—obstetrical care—that Hutchinson reached out to address the need which the size and composition of her classes demonstrated was there, and intensely enough to drive some women to murder their children. Women's turning to a midwife, an assistant at the springing forth of life, starkly contrasts with their dumb stifling of self and child where the spiritual assistants were exclusively male . . . [Governor] Winthrop saw an intimate connection between Hutchinson's claim to invade male mysteries and her role in childbearing.

Childbearing was, of course, intimately associated with sexuality; and the Puritan midwife was believed to administer aphrodisiacs, to empower women to get control of their men's sexuality (another variant of the witch's supposed power to take away the penis). John Cotton saw that "filthie Sinne of the Communitie of Women"—i.e., the coming-together of Hutchinson with other women to discuss doctrine—as leading to total sexual promiscuity. If the male-dominated hierarchy of

Puritan society were to change, that is, if women were to become thinkers and formulators of the relationship between human beings and God, pure anarchy and bestiality would result. Thus, the midwife, with her already formidable expertise and power in the matter of life itself, became completely threatening when she challenged religious doctrine. She became a witch. Anne Hutchinson was not alone. The first person executed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony was Margaret Jones, a midwife convicted of witchcraft. And a Mistress Hawkins, a colleague of Hutchinson's in midwifery, was charged with "familiarity with the devill."¹⁴

It seems obvious that throughout history, as one of the few professions open to women, midwifery must have attracted women of unusual intelligence, competence, and self-respect.* While acknowledging that many remedies used by the witches were "purely magical" and worked, if at all, by suggestion, Ehrenreich and English point out an important distinction between the witch-healer and the medical man of the late Middle Ages:

. . . the witch was an empiricist; She relied on her senses rather than on faith or doctrine, she believed in trial and error, cause and effect. Her attitude was not religiously passive, but actively inquiring. She trusted her ability to find ways to deal with disease, pregnancy and childbirth—whether through medication or charms. In short, her magic was the science of her time.

* The term "midwife" has been so downgraded and so associated with ignorance and dirt, that we can easily lose sight of that fact. Kathleen Barry suggests a connection between the idea of the "filthy" midwife and the male physician's view of women's bodies, and the doctoring of women, as "dirty." If woman's flesh is intrinsically foul and evil, these qualities become attributed to those who have to do with her, particularly at a time as charged with fear and mystery for men as the moment of giving birth. (See "The Cutting Edge: A Look at Male Motivation in Obstetrics and Gynecology," unpublished, copyright, 1972, by Kathleen Barry.) This is not simply a Western male cultural bias. "Since God, who made disease, had conveniently decreed that women were inferior, unclean and blood-producing creatures, and Chinese physicians had diagnosed pregnancy as a disease of the blood, religious tenets held that the gravid female was unclean. If menstruating or pregnant, a woman could not walk through the torii, or arches, of shrines" (M. W. Standlee, *The Great Pulse: Japanese Midwifery and Obstetrics Through the Ages* [Rutland, Vt.: Chas. E. Tuttle, 1959], p. 26).

By contrast:

There was nothing in late mediaeval medical training that conflicted with church doctrine, and little that we would recognize as "science". Medical students . . . spent years studying Plato, Aristotle and Christian theology. . . . While a student, a doctor rarely saw any patients at all, and no experimentation of any kind was taught. . . . Confronted with a sick person, the university-trained physician had little to go on but superstition. . . . Such was the state of medical "science" at the time when witch-healers were persecuted for being practitioners of "magic".¹⁵

Since asepsis and the transmission of disease through bacteria and unwashed hands was utterly unknown until the latter part of the nineteenth century, dirt was a presence in any medical situation—real dirt, not the misogynistic dirt associated by males with the female body. The midwife, who attended only women in labor, carried fewer disease bacteria with her than the physician.

But the climate of misogyny surrounding the woman in child-birth took many forms. There was much opposition to *The Byrthe of Mankynde*, a translation into English in 1540 of a Latin text on midwifery, *De Partu Hominis*—possibly because it would then be available to the common people who knew no Latin. But this was the argument against it:

it is not meete ne fitting that such matters to be intreated of so plainly in our mother and vulgar language to the dishonour . . . of womanhood . . . whereof men it reading or hearing shall be moved thereby the more to *abhor and loathe the company of women*, every boy and knave reading them as openly as the tales of Robin Hood. (Emphasis mine.)¹⁶

In short, the facts of woman's physicality could only be repulsive; and flesh-loathing toward woman—especially in her role as mother—was taken for granted as a fact of the male character.

The ancient physician held midwifery beneath his dignity; the male practitioner of the Christian Era was forbidden to degrade his manhood in the birth-chamber. Over and over, the historians of medicine declare that obstetrics could only move

forward once the male midwife or physician took the place of the female midwife. Rongy states that "the backward state of obstetrical knowledge was the direct result of this complete monopoly by women."¹⁷ Another obstetric historian makes the unconsciously revealing observation that "perhaps even today the medical practice of midwifery seems less distinguished than some of the other specialities because it was originally *wrested from the hands of women*, and for centuries was considered an inappropriate occupation for men." (Emphasis mine.)¹⁸ Yet, as Ehrenreich and English point out, the women were in many ways, relative to their time, more scientific than the men; they knew female anatomy as men did not, and they were more often than not dealing with a physical process which they themselves had experienced. The unacknowledged assumption in the quotations above is, of course, that only men could be physicians.

4

The beginning of the transformation of obstetrics into a male province is usually dated from the attendance of a court physician named Boucher on Louise de la Vallière, the favorite mistress of Louis XIV, in 1663. The fad of employing a man-midwife, or *accoucheur*, soon spread within the French upper classes. As one historian bluntly expresses it: "The few physicians who were known to be qualified in this art soon found themselves besieged by royalty and the well-to-do, and amazed at this sudden turn in their fortunes, they promptly limited their practice to obstetrics."¹⁹ They also, of course, limited it to those who could pay well.

The male physicians had for at least fifty years been using their privileged situation to discover skills unknown to their profession since classical times or known only to witches and wisewomen. In 1551 the physician Ambroise Paré wrote an obstetrical treatise in which he revived the technique of podalic version. We will probably never know whether podalic version had actually been practiced all along by midwives while it remained a lost art to physicians; at all events, Paré made it again available to anyone who could read vernacular French.²⁰ In the

last decade of the sixteenth century the medical faculty at Marburg stumbled on the effects of ergot, a fungus found in blighted grain, which had been used for centuries by witches and midwives to induce labor and strengthen weak contractions.* The female healers had long observed the effects of mild ergot poisoning in pregnant women in their care, and deduced that, in minute quantities, the substance could be effective in childbirth. Now the physicians of Marburg recognized the value of this "witches'" remedy.

The books written by male *accoucheurs* generally seem to conform to what Rongy says of Eucharius Rösslin: "His book consists in the main of a collection of standard authorities and scraps of information conveyed to the author by midwives with whom he was in contact. So limited was his own knowledge that the woodcuts he used as illustration of the foetus within the uterus convey a fantastic, altogether false picture."²¹† It was not until the seventeenth century that William Harvey, celebrated for his discovery of the circulation of the blood, was able to describe the female reproductive organs from his own dissections and observations.

The first great woman practitioner of obstetrics—"great" in the sense that she both practiced and trained other women (and men) and wrote three books on midwifery—was Louise Bourgeois, herself a mother and married to a barber-surgeon. Her husband had been trained by Ambroise Paré, and when, after her first child was born, Bourgeois became interested in midwifery, she took instruction both from her husband and from his famous teacher. She was licensed as a midwife and practiced both at Court and at the Hôtel Dieu, the public hospital of Paris, where she directed the training of midwives and taught obstetrics to surgeons. Her midwifery text, *Observations*

* The mild form of ergot poisoning caused abortion in pregnant women; the severe form was a disease called "St. Anthony's Fire" which caused the limbs of the afflicted to become blackened and gangrenous and to fall off—one of those peculiarly horrible and mysterious diseases of the Middle Ages which must have lent credence to the idea of Hell.

† In 1522, a Dr. Wortt of Hamburg had the temerity to dress in women's clothes in order to be present at a delivery. For this indecency and degradation of his profession he was burned at the stake. Yet the majority of books on midwifery were written by men—Rösslin, Damian Carbon in Spain, Paré in France, among many others.

Diverses, first published in 1609, was widely translated.²² She also published an account of the lyings-in of Marie de Médicis, whom she had attended. In the latter book, written as a series of letters to "ma fille"—a daughter or younger midwife—she urges that the midwife attending in poor households accept as little as possible in the way of fee ("for little may seem much to them") and give her services to those who can afford nothing. Her sense of the ethics and dignity of her profession is high:

Undertake, till the last day of your life, to learn; which to do readily requires a great humbleness, for the proud do not win the hearts of those who know secrets. Never in your life venture to employ any medicine in which you have been instructed, neither on the poor nor on the rich, unless you are certain of its virtue and that it can do no harm, whether taken within the body or applied upon it. Nor hide the medicines you know of from physicians or midwives, lest these be as little regarded as the charlatans who employ their medicines alike on every occasion, and yet claim to know wonders and, in all they do, hide their practice.²³

The waste of female lives through these centuries was partly unavoidable; mortality of both sexes, and from all causes, was high before the discovery of asepsis and the refinement of anatomical knowledge with dissection. But much of it was avoidable, if we remember that a pregnant woman, a woman in labor, is not usually suffering from disease. The midwives' ignorance of progress in medicine and surgery, on the one hand, and the physician's ignorance of female anatomy and techniques relating to childbirth, on the other, were not inevitable; they were the consequences of institutionalized misogyny. The midwives' work was either stolen and reproduced in the form of treatises by "learned" scientists, or treated as "heathen charms," "old wives' tales," and derogated as the pretensions of "high and lofty conceited midwives, that will leave nothing unattempted to save their credits and cloak their ignorances," as Percival Willughby (1596–1685), a friend of Harvey, wrote in his *Observations on Midwifery*.²⁴

The effectiveness of the midwife who for centuries practiced her "degraded" craft among her sisters, was reduced and dimin-

ished with the growth of an élite medical profession from which women were barred. The female hands of flesh that had delivered millions of children and soothed the labor of millions of mothers were denied the possibility of working with the tools later developed to facilitate the practice of obstetrics in difficult labor. The masculine "hands of iron"—the forceps—were, and still are, often used with mechanistic brutality and unconcern to hasten a normal labor, causing brain damage to the infant and perforation of delicate tissues in the mother, both totally unnecessary. The wasteful and disastrous split in the profession must be laid at the door of male prejudice and the power of a male-dominated establishment to discredit and drive out even the most talented women practitioners.*

5

"The obstetric forceps, more than any other instrument, symbolizes the art of the obstetrician."²⁵ The history of the forceps is a peculiar one, involving three male generations of a family, the commercial exploitation of a scientific invention, and the effective displacement of the midwife through a male monopoly of that invention.

It begins in the late sixteenth century with William Chamberlen, a Huguenot who emigrated to England to avoid religious persecution under the Catholic Church in France. This Chamberlen had numerous children and two of them, both male midwives, bore the same name, Peter. (Like royalty, they have become known as Peter I and Peter II.) These two Peters became known for their pushiness, "impudence," and antiestablishment ideas; they were known to all the midwives, and Peter II

* One of the less covert misogynists, Augustus K. Gardner, M.D., used to deliver an introductory lecture to his course in midwifery at the Philadelphia College of Physicians and Surgeons "showing the Past Inefficiency and Present Natural Incapacity of Females in the Practise of Obstetrics." He inveighs against "a proposition mooted—springing from the same high source which advocates women's rights, the Bloomer costume, and other similar nonsensical theories—to give again the portion of the healing art of which I am treating, if not the whole domain of medicine, to the females." Gardner was also opposed to birth control and to higher education for women (*A History of the Art of Midwifery* [New York: 1852], pp. 26-27, 30-31).

was formally rebuked by the College of Physicians for trying to organize the midwives into a society with credentials and corporate status. It is difficult to know whether the midwives thus organized could have become an independent body or whether, as is more likely, they were intended to become part of Peter II's entourage. But clearly the two Peters and the son of Peter II (also, to further confuse matters, a Peter) were in running conflict with the College of Physicians, and were much sought after, practicing at Court. Peter III actually acquired his M.D. after studying at Heidelberg, Padua, and Oxford, thus bringing unimpeachable status to the family name.

The Chamberlens were not simply flashy and fashionable; they had their Secret. A mystique grew up around them: two of them attended at each difficult birth, arriving in a carriage and carrying between them a massive carved chest whose contents were revealed to no one. Even the women they delivered were blindfolded. And they were dramatically successful at delivering in difficult labors.

This family Secret, kept for nearly a century, consisted of a kit of three instruments: a pair of obstetric forceps, a vectis or lever to be used in grasping the back of the head of the fetus, and a fillet or cord used to help in drawing the fetus, once disengaged from an abnormal position, out through the birth-canal. Ironically, although these instruments ensured the success of the Chamberlens for many years, they failed in the test when Hugh Chamberlen, son of Peter III, and also a man-midwife in the family tradition, tried to sell the Secret to the celebrated French obstetrician, François Mariceau. Mariceau challenged him to deliver successfully a case which appeared to be beyond hope. The patient was a dwarfed woman with inflammation of the spine and a deformed pelvis, in labor with her first child.* Chamberlen failed, and Mariceau declined to purchase the Secret at the exotic price demanded.

* In all accounts of this case I have read, the woman is referred to as a "rachitic dwarf primapara." It took me some time to understand that the creature thus described was a woman, presumably terrified, probably a victim of rape, whose entire existence must have been psychically and physically painful, and who died in torture. (Hugh Chamberlen "worked over" her for three hours with his forceps in the unsuccessful attempt to prove his method; she had been similarly "worked over" earlier by other

Arrogant to the core, Chamberlen did not fail, in writing his introduction to the English translation of Mariceau's midwifery text, to remind readers that the famous Frenchman did not possess "the Secret":

My Father, Brothers, and myself (tho none other else in Europe as I know) have, by God's Blessing and our Industry, attained to, and long practised a way to deliver women in this case, without any prejudice to them or their infants; tho all others . . . do and must endanger, if not destroy, one or both with hooks.²⁶

In Chamberlen's words we hear the readiness to sacrifice thousands of women's and children's lives, smugly and complacently, knowing how easily they could be saved, and to justify the withholding of that information in terms of "God's Blessing and our Industry." The men who developed the forceps, symbol of the art of the obstetrician, were profiteers.

True to their principled tradition, the Chamberlens finally sold their Secret to a Dutch practitioner. When they had received their money and the Secret was handed over, they proved to have tricked him and to have supplied him with—one-half of a forceps. A Belgian barber-surgeon, Jean Palfyne, guessed at the whole instrument, either from seeing the part sold to the Dutchman, or from putting together rumors of the Chamberlen apparatus, and presented his recreation entire to the Paris Academy of Science in 1721. In the words of Harvey Graham, it consisted of:

. . . two large spoons set in round wooden handles. These were known as the *mains de fer* [hands of iron], and were of course crude artificial hands designed to grasp the infant's head. They derived from the large spoon-shaped *cuillers* which had been used for many years to remove parts of the foetus piecemeal after operations intended to destroy the child. The most important difference was in the curve of the blades and their shanks. The long axis of all earlier instruments was straight. Since the birth passage from the womb to the vulva is deeply

methods.) Possibly before the advent of asepsis, analgesia, and safe Caesarean section, she could not have been saved. But beneath the medical jargon we can easily forget that here, too, lived a victim of obstetrical indifference, nameless and deprived even of her humanity.

curved, a correspondingly curved instrument will obviously penetrate much farther and more effectively than any straight instrument.²⁷

The actual design of the Chamberlen forceps—perfected over three generations of secretive monopolization—was finally revealed by the surgeon and man-midwife Edward Chapman, in his *Essay for the Improvement of Midwifery* in 1773. From then on, the forceps was available to all male—and to almost no female—practitioners of the obstetric art.²⁸

6

With the public knowledge of the Chamberlen device, a public struggle broke out between the midwives and the surgeons. In scanning the rhetorical and theoretical arguments on both sides, it is important to bear several facts in mind. The practice of surgery was considered a lower craft than that of medicine and the barber-surgeon was not a fully trained physician. Moreover, we have to rid ourselves of the opposite stereotypes of the highly trained, spotlessly aseptic male obstetrician, clad in sterile gown, masked and gloved, and the filthy peasant crone muttering over her bag of charms. Contagion and asepsis were unknown to physician, surgeon, and midwife alike. John Leake, M.D., in his late-eighteenth-century treatise on midwifery, argues for the examination and certification of obstetrical attendants "as is usual in other branches of physic and surgery. We should not then find the town and country overrun with ignorant and half-instructed practitioners of *both sexes*." (Emphasis mine.)²⁹ The male physician's standards of cleanliness were not, by contemporary standards, high; there is no evidence that the average doctor was more scrupulous than the average midwife. The midwife was far more experienced in the pragmatic conduct of normal births than the surgeon or physician; and, perhaps as important, she felt by tradition and gender-sympathy at home in the birth-chamber, while the male practitioner was still emotionally, if not practically, under the cloud of a tradition of misogyny which made it a sin and a crime for him to be there except in extreme emergencies. Finally, it

was the male practitioners, such as Julien Clement in France and John Leake in England, who established the lithotomy (lying down, therefore passive) position as the preferred one for women in labor. The midwife used the obstetrical chair or the upright position, which is still universal outside Western culture and cultures in which Western medical influence prevails,³⁰ and which is now just beginning to be revived, against the resistance of the profession, in North and South America.*

The forceps was the masculine weapon in this struggle; but it was not maneuvered with equal enthusiasm by all men. Leake warned that "the safety of the patient more immediately depends on the operator's skill in this, than in any other brand of physic or surgery." In his instructions on the use of forceps he points out that a too forceful application of this lever can cause dangerous bruising to vagina and bladder, and even tear apart the two bones forming the pubis.³¹ The midwives were even more outspokenly opposed to the forceps, and soon many were writing pamphlets and handbooks in defense of their own methods. Justine Siegmundin in Germany, Sarah Stone in England, among others, warned against the overuse and abuse of instruments. Stone also demanded regulation of the profession of midwifery, with requirements of several years apprenticeship and training.³² Meanwhile, the Chamberlen forceps were being modified and developed by others, in particular André Levret in France and William Smellie in England, both surgeons. Smellie became the target for one of the most detailed and passionate attacks on male midwifery, published in 1760 by Elizabeth Nihell, a graduate of the Hôtel Dieu midwife school.

Nihell's *Treatise on the Art of Midwifery* deserves a place in the history of feminist polemics. It is an exhaustive argument against the use of instruments, and on behalf of the patience,

* "Use of the lithotomy (supine) position has two purposes: It makes maintenance of asepsis easier and it contributes greatly to the convenience of the obstetrician. These advantages more than compensate for the somewhat unphysiologic posture and the discomfort of the position itself" (emphasis mine) (Bryand, Danforth, Davis, "The Conduct of Normal Labor" in D. N. Danforth, ed., *Textbook of Obstetrics and Gynecology* [New York: Harper and Row, 1966] pp. 532-33. This text was written by forty-two men and one woman.)

expertise, and natural capability of women for assisting at births. She accuses the surgeons of using forceps to force labor prematurely and to shorten the time of normal deliveries, for their own convenience or for experimental purposes. She acknowledges her own lack of experience with instruments, but has read Levret and others who describe their use. She maintains that during her apprenticeship at the Hôtel Dieu she never saw a birth where instruments were necessary, although five to six hundred women were delivered there monthly. She sees the hand as the proper "instrument" for facilitating labor, guided by a knowledge of female anatomy, and the forceps, reserved to male surgeons, as a means of preempting the practice of women.

I own however there are but too few midwives who are sufficiently mistresses in their professions. In this they are . . . but too near a level with the men-midwives, with this difference . . . that they are incapable of doing so much actual mischief as the male ones, . . . who with less tenderness and more rashness go to work with their instruments, where the skill and management of a good midwife would . . . prove more efficacious toward saving both mother and child; *always with due preference however to the mother.* (Emphasis mine.)³³

Her three major arguments run as follows:

1. There is no "plea of superior safety" in the entrance of men into midwifery; consequently it is not worth the "sacrifice . . . of decency and modesty." Here she is probably playing on the puritan sentiments of her public.

2. Men have justified their intrusion into the profession by "forging the phantom of incapacity in women" and by "the necessity of murderous instruments." (It is likely that all instruments bore a certain taint by association with the hooks and blades used for destructive obstetrics in the past. But we also know that the forceps itself was often used unnecessarily and could become destructive in awkward or unpracticed hands.*)

* "The forceps was to afford men-midwives with the means by which they could expedite a laborious labor, without any serious consequences either to mother or child. At first far too many of them used this new weapon blindly and roughly . . . Smellie only used his forceps on rare occasions. . . . Some of Smellie's pupils were even more cautious in their use for the forceps, and in particular William Hunter . . . who is reputed to

3. The surgeons themselves disagree as to which instruments are preferable, in spite of having used "the lives and limbs of so many women and children" as subjects for experimentation.

Nihell is not above shifting her ground in order to create an argument which bristles in all directions. She asserts that some occupations are "naturally" more proper for women than for men: spinning, bed-making, pickling, and preserving—at the end of which list she casually slips in midwifery. Women, she maintains, would of course not be encouraged to set up fencing academies. On the other hand, she takes considerable pride in the professionalism of the Hôtel Dieu school for midwives, which had a woman at its head, and where women taught surgeons—not the other way around. She is thoroughly cynical about the sudden enthusiasm of men for midwifery:

. . . the nobility of this art is only begun to be sounded so high by the men, till they discovered the possibility of making it a lucrative one to themselves. . . . The art with all its nobility was for so many ages thought beneath the exercise of the noble sex; it was held unmanly, indecent, and they might safely have added impracticable for them.

She is most eloquent and convincing when she describes the surgeon's style of birthing, as contrasted with the midwife's:

In the men, with all their boasted crudition, you may observe a certain clumsy untoward stiffness, an *unaffectionate perfunctory air*, an ungainly management, that plainly prove it to be an acquisition of art, or rather the rickety production of interest begot upon art . . . (Emphasis mine; the portrait certainly rings true.)

In women, with all their supposed ignorance, you may observe a certain shrewd vivacity, a grace of ease, a hardness of performance, and especially a kind of unction of the heart . . . there is something that would be prodigious, if anything natural could properly be termed prodigious, in that supremely tender

have told his class that it was 'a thousand pities that it was ever invented'. There is no doubt that instruments were resorted to far too readily by brash and enthusiastic man-midwives, and it was necessary for the leading men in the profession to teach some measure of restraint, especially with the forceps" (Walter Radcliffe, *Milestones in Midwifery* [Bristol: Wright, 1967], pp. 48-49).

sensibility with which women in general are so strongly impressed toward one another in the case of lying-in.³⁴

She also reiterates the midwife's constant and intimate experience with the female body and with normal birth, which left male students of midwifery at a severe disadvantage. According to her, Smellie instructed his students of midwifery on a machine, invented by himself, which consisted of

. . . a wooden statue, representing a woman with child, whose belly was of leather, in which a bladder full, perhaps, of small beer, represented the uterus. This bladder was stopped with a cork . . . in the middle of the bladder was a wax doll, to which were given various positions.

On the other hand, she says that a physician should absolutely be called in the event of complications. She sees women as less prideful than men, readier to admit their ignorance and ask for help. But "lying-in women principally require an early assistance" and *patience*. She makes a convincing argument that the forceps became a quick-delivery trick, rather than a device to be used with great care and caution in manifestly difficult cases. She constantly reiterates that labor must not be rushed, that nature must be allowed to take its course, though the midwife can alleviate pain manually and through "a thousand little tender attentions suggested by nature and improved by experience." Her trust in process, and her sense that women are more capable of understanding and moving with process, makes us trust her, finally; her sarcasm and anger at the sudden descent of men upon a field formerly left to women as degraded, we can well understand.

Why did not more of the midwives make an effort to learn the use of the forceps and retain control of the profession? After all, the leading professional midwives must have been exceptionally strong, self-confident women. But strong, self-confident women of the twentieth century are still battling uphill against prejudice and institutional obstacles, particularly in the field of health and science. And the centuries of witchcraft trials, during which midwives were a particular target, were not far behind in the eighteenth-century memory. Presumably a midwife still would have been cautious about "going too far" and arousing

the hostility of an entire society. Moreover, the midwives had seen the horrors of "destructive surgery" in obstetrics—the child dragged from the mother's body piecemeal, the mother's pubic bone and vagina used as a fulcrum and often permanently mutilated. Many of them must sincerely have felt that the forceps could only be a refinement of these tools of force. Nihell herself notes:

A few, and very few indeed of the midwives, dazzled with that vogue into which the instruments brought the men . . . attempted to employ them, and though certainly they could handle them at least as dexterously as the men, they soon discovered that they were at once insignificant and dangerous substitutes to their own hands, with which they were sure of conducting their operations both more safely, more effectually, and with less pain to the patient.³⁵

Had the forceps been freely permitted to women, would Nihell have condemned their use so sweepingly? Perhaps not; like Sarah Stone, she would probably have taught that they should be used as a last resort, and with great judiciousness and care.* Her pride in the midwife's multiplicity of skills, "small hands" with their feminine dexterity, and "tenderness" of heart toward the women in her care, suggests that for Nihell and others like her, the forceps would never have become the major symbol of the obstetrical profession.†

Finally, one major difference distinguished the midwife and the male obstetrician. The midwife not only gave prenatal care and advice, but came to the woman at the beginning of her labor and stayed with her till after delivery. She gave not only physical assistance but psychological support. The male birth-attendant was historically called in only to perform the functions (podalic version, Caesarean, forceps delivery) which were forbidden to the midwife. He was a technician rather than a counselor, guide, and source of morale; he worked "on" rather than "with" the mother. And this difference has persisted into

* Stone, in her *Complete Practice of Midwifery* (1737) asserts that out of three hundred cases she delivered in one year, she used instruments in only four.

† The pride of contemporary midwives, from California to Denmark, in the use of their hands, bears this out, as documented by Suzanne Arms, *op. cit.*

the present, where the obstetrician, though he may see the mother during her pregnancy, often does not appear until the late stage of labor and sometimes arrives too late for the delivery; while the midwife (literally, "with-woman") stays with the mother throughout her labor, as a friend and teacher in the birth-chamber.³⁶

7

In the seventeenth century began a two centuries' plague of puerperal fever which was directly related to the increase in obstetric practice by men. (Again, we must remember that antiseptics, asepsis, contagion, and bacterial infection were still unheard-of; the hands of the physician or surgeon and those of the midwife were both potential carriers of bacteria. But the hands of the physician or of the surgeon, unlike those of the midwife, often came directly from cases of disease to cases of childbirth, and the chance for communication of infection was much higher. Moreover, the man-midwife attended many cases of labor, arriving in time to perform a forceps delivery and then going his way; the midwife stayed with one woman in labor from the beginning of her pains till after delivery, often for several days in difficult birth.) With the growth of lying-in hospitals in the cities of Europe, the disease—rarely known in earlier times—reached epidemic proportions. In the French province of Lombardy in one year no single woman survived childbirth; in the month of February 1866 a quarter of the women who gave birth in the Maternité Hospital in Paris died.³⁷

Puerperal fever was thought to be an epidemic, and "epidemic influences" were "hitherto inexplicable, atmospheric, cosmic, telluric changes, which sometimes disseminate themselves over whole countrysides."³⁸ The conditions of all hospitals were unsanitary enough—hospitals were for the poor, who could not pay a doctor to attend them at home. Even the dubious standards of sanitation in an average middle-class home were superior to those of the hospitals, with their overcrowding, unwashed linens, open barrels of organic waste and used bandages, lack of ventilation, and the visible presence of death.

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries the lying-in clinics were as bad or worse than other wards, and often adjoined them. One observer of a new hospital in Budapest in 1860 reported that

. . . there poor lying-in women are to be found, some of them partly on straw, spread on the floor, some of them on wooden benches, others crouching in any corner of the room, weary and worn-out . . . everywhere you find dirty bed linen, with bedclothes old and worn and almost in rags.³⁹

Oliver Wendell Holmes says that in the 1840s, in the Vienna Lying-In Hospital, the mortality from "childbed fever" was so high that women were buried two in a coffin to disguise the actual rate of death.⁴⁰

Childbed or puerperal fever was a misnomer for a deadly kind of blood-poisoning. In the seventeenth century, William Harvey, the first physician to dissect a female body and observe the reproductive organs at firsthand, had described the post-partum uterus as resembling "an open wound"—highly absorptive and extremely vulnerable to contamination. Any decomposing organic substances carried on the hands of a birth-attendant became fatal when introduced into the vagina of a woman in labor or one who had just given birth. But for centuries the disease was regarded as a mysterious epidemic, part of the curse of Eve. Women knew that delivery in the hospitals meant a far greater likelihood of death than deliveries at home. However, the majority of poor women seeking obstetric help were required to have their babies in public hospitals, probably in part because they were material for teaching and experimentation, just as today. Many ran from the hospitals, others committed suicide rather than enter.

Meanwhile, the potential sources of the disease went unexplored, and women continued to die—not from giving birth but from acute streptococcal infection of the uterus, in no way inevitably linked with the birth-process. It killed one Mary Wollstonecraft, of whom we know, and thousands of women of whom we know nothing, whose potential genius and influence we can only try to imagine. And the specter of death, larger than ever before in the history of maternity, darkened the

spirit in which any woman came to term. Anxiety, depression, the sense of being a sacrificial victim, all familiar components of female experience, became more than ever the invisible attendants at pregnancy and labor.

A certain indifference and fatalism toward the diseases of women, which persists to this day in the male gynecological and surgical professions, was reflected in the indifference and outright hostility encountered by the three men who, over two hundred years, did choose to look further. As early as 1795, Alexander Gordon, a Scottish physician, published his observations that childbed fever "seized such women only as were visited or delivered by a practitioner, or taken care of by a nurse, who had previously attended patients affected with the disease." In other words, the disease was not a mysterious epidemic, but was contagious—that is, communicated on contact from one body to another. Others corroborated Gordon's experience, yet the possible contagiousness of puerperal fever continued to go unmentioned in the texts and handbooks of gynecology and midwifery.

Nearly fifty years later, the young American doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes followed up Gordon's observations with his own detailed studies of contagion in cases he had seen or which were reported to him. He demonstrated even more solidly that the disease was carried by the physician from patient to patient.⁴¹ The response of his profession was outrage at the implication that the hands of the physician could be unclean; uncleanliness was the very charge the doctors had long been leveling at the midwives. Holmes was abused and attacked as an irresponsible and sensation-seeking young upstart. His essay on "The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever" was to become a medical classic, but not until many years later.

In 1861 Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, a Viennese physician, published a passionate and obsessive book: *The Etiology, the Concept and the Prophylaxis of Childbed Fever*. Semmelweis had observed births and deaths over five years in two sections of the Vienna Lying-In Hospital. (The First Clinic was staffed entirely by physicians and medical students, the Second Clinic entirely by midwives.) He found that poor women who literally gave birth in the streets of Vienna had a lower mortality rate

than those giving birth in the First Clinic. He became convinced that puerperal fever was not an epidemic raging in the community at large; it was somehow connected with the hospital, and in particular with the clinic staffed by physicians. Even the poor women of Vienna knew that they were likelier to survive in the midwives' than in the physicians' section. "That they really dread the First Division can readily be demonstrated, because one must endure heart-rending scenes, when women, wringing their hands, beg on bended knee for their release, in order to seek admission to the Second Division after having hit upon the First Division because of the unfamiliarity of the place, which the presence of many men made clear to them."⁴²

Semmelweis was possessed by the spectacle of this suffering and these deaths. Yet he was unable to grasp the source of them, until a crevice broke open in his personal life. He had gone on holiday to Venice to look at the paintings there, and while he was away a close friend and colleague died of a wound in his finger acquired during a post-mortem dissection. Semmelweis returned to the news of this fresh death. By his own account,

Professor Kolletschka . . . became ill with lymphangitis and phlebitis . . . and died, during my absence in Venice, of a bilateral pleuritis, pericarditis, peritonitis, and meningitis, and some days before his death a metastasis formed in one eye. Still animated by my visit to the Venetian treasure houses, still much agitated by the report of Kolletschka's death, there was forced on my mind with irresistible clarity in this excited state the identity of this disease, of which Kolletschka died, with that from which I had seen so many hundred puerpera die.⁴³

What Semmelweis recognized was that cadaveric particles, which could not be removed by ordinary washing, were being carried from the dissecting rooms to the women in childbirth. Just as the cut in Kolletschka's hand had absorbed these particles from the cadaver into his bloodstream as deadly poisons, so a hand retaining these particles could introduce them into the uterus, with fatal results. Semmelweis mounted a campaign to compel all physicians and medical students to wash their hands

in chlorinated lime on entering a labor room. The death rate in the First Clinic soon fell to that of the Second Clinic.⁴⁴

Semmelweis's findings, and his polemics against other doctors and clinics, met with such antagonism that he was professionally discredited by politically powerful physicians, who saw to it that he was not promoted at Vienna. Yet he arraigned no one more harshly than himself.

Because of my convictions, I must here confess that God only knows the number of patients that have gone prematurely to their graves by my fault. I have handled cadavers extensively, more than most accoucheurs. If I say the same of another physician, it is only to bring to light a truth, which was unknown for many centuries, with direful results for the human race.⁴⁵

He was forced to leave Vienna for Budapest, taking a post in a lying-in clinic where "directly under the windows of the obstetrical department is found the open sewer, into which all the liquid refuse of the . . . pathological anatomy is thrown."⁴⁶ To work under these destructive conditions, and to see his laboriously amassed findings rejected in one country after another, affected the mind of this emotionally vulnerable man, and in 1865 he was committed to the Vienna Insane Asylum. A few days before his commitment he had wounded his hand while operating, and he died soon after—the same death as Kolletschka, and the thousands of women whose fate had obsessed him. Twenty years later, following Lister's presentation of the principle of asepsis in surgery, and Pasteur's demonstration of the reality of bacterial infection, Semmelweis's plea for doctors to wash their hands finally became accepted practice, and a statue was erected to him in Budapest.⁴⁷ The two hundred years of puerperal fever were coming to an end. The age of anesthetized, technologized childbirth was simultaneously beginning.

VII ALIENATED LABOR

Metaphors of midwifery and childbirth recur in the literature of the contemporary women's movement: a feminist poster bears the inscription, *I am a woman giving birth to myself*.^{*} Such an image implies a process which is painful, chosen, purposive: the creation of the new. But for most women actual childbirth has involved no choice whatever, and very little consciousness. Since prehistoric times, the anticipation of labor has been associated with fear, physical anguish or death, a stream of superstitions, misinformation, theological and medical theories—in short, all we have been taught we should feel, from willing victimization to ecstatic fulfillment.

The Hebrews saw in women's travail the working of Eve's curse for tempting Adam to the Fall. The Romans called it *poena magna*—the "great pain." But *poena* also means punishment, penalty. We are told over and over by ancient writers that childbirth is the most terrible pain endured in human life. In a 1950 study of the myth of "painless childbirth" in primitive societies, Lawrence Freedman and Vera Ferguson conclude that the expectation of agony in childbirth is as common in elementary as in postindustrial societies. Margaret Mead suggests that "whether they are allowed to see births or not, men contribute their share to the way in which child-birth is viewed, and I have seen male informants writhe on the floor, in magnificent pantomime of a painful delivery, who have never themselves seen or heard a woman in labour."¹ Nancy Fuller and Brigitte Jordan report that in their field work with Mayan

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Indian women, they have observed both difficult and easy births, but that pain is expected and is taken for granted by the midwife and birth-attendants, and the husband is expected to be present, not only to help but "to see how women suffer."²

A woman preparing to swim the English Channel, or to climb in high altitudes, is aware that her system will undergo stress, her courage will be tested, and her life may even be in danger; but despite the demands to be expected on her heart, her lungs, her muscular coordination, her nerves, during such an effort, she thinks of it primarily in terms not of pain but of *challenge*. The majority of women, literate or illiterate, come to childbirth as a charged, discrete happening: mysterious, sometimes polluted, often magical, as torture rack or as "peak experience." Rarely has it been viewed as one way of knowing and coming to terms with our bodies, of discovering our physical and psychic resources.

It is as difficult to think about pain as about love; both are charged with associations going back to early life, and with cultural attitudes wrought into language itself. Yet pain, like love, is embedded in the ideology of motherhood, and it has so much depth of allusion for all women, mothers or not, that we need to examine its meaning more closely. The attempt is sometimes made to divide pain into the categories of sensory perception—a response to a measurable stimulus—and psychological experience.³ To separate sense from emotion, body from mind, is hardly useful when we are trying to understand the whole of female experience, and in particular a function—childbirth—so charged with unconscious and subjective power, and so dramatic in its physical sensations.

The experience of pain is historical—framed by memory and anticipation—and it is relative. Thresholds of what we call pain vary greatly among individuals, and the conditions under which pain is experienced can alter the sufferer's definition of pain. Pain is also expressed differently in different cultures. Briffault cites examples of Maori and African women in labor for whom it was traditional not to utter a groan.⁴ Emotional display is more acceptable in some cultures than in others, and behavior during childbirth may reflect an overall style of expressiveness.

But the pains of labor have a peculiar centrality for women, and for women's relationship—both as mothers and simply as female beings—to other kinds of painful experience. What, anyway, is this primal idea which seems to take women—not only in childbirth—in its grasp and press the self out of us, or, even worse, to *become* our selfhood? Can we distinguish physical pain from alienation and fear? Is there creative pain and destructive pain? And who or what determines the causes and nature and duration of our suffering? In different cultures there are different answers; but women live, bear children, and suffer in all cultures.

The remarkable philosopher-mystic Simone Weil makes the distinction between suffering—characterized by pain yet leading to growth and enlightenment—and affliction—the condition of the oppressed, the slave, the concentration-camp victim forced to haul heavy stones back and forth across a yard, endlessly and to no purpose. She reiterates that pain is not to be sought, and she objects to putting oneself in the way of unnecessary affliction. But where it is unavoidable, pain can be transformed into something usable, something which takes us beyond the limits of the experience itself into a further grasp of the essentials of life and the possibilities within us. However, over and over she equates pure affliction with powerlessness, with waiting, disconnectedness, inertia, the “fragmented time” of one who is at others' disposal.⁵ This insight illuminates much of the female condition, but in particular the experience of giving birth.

Weil's image of the prison camp is also an image of forced labor—labor as contrasted with work, which has a real goal and a meaning. The labor of childbirth has been a form of forced labor. For centuries, most women had no means of preventing conception, and they carried the scriptural penalty of Eve's curse with them into the birth-chamber. Then, in the nineteenth century, the possibility of eliminating “pain and travail” created a new kind of prison for women—the prison of unconsciousness, of numbed sensations, of amnesia, and complete passivity. Women could choose anesthesia, and for many of the women who first did so it was a conscious, even a daring choice. But the avoidance of pain—psychic or physical—is a dangerous

mechanism, which can cause us to lose touch not just with our painful sensations but with ourselves. And, in the case of childbirth, pain has been a label indiscriminately applied to the range of sensations during labor, a label which appropriates and denies the complexity of the individual woman's physical experience.

2

Patriarchy has told the woman in labor that her suffering was purposive—was *the* purpose of her existence; that the new life she was bringing forth (especially if male) was of value and that her own value depended on bringing it forth. As the means of reproduction without which cities and colonies could not expand, without which a family would die out and its prosperity pass into the hands of strangers, she has found herself at the center of purposes, not hers, which she has often incorporated and made into her own. The woman in labor might perceive herself as bringing forth a new soldier to fight for the tribe or nation-state, a new head of the rising yeoman or bourgeois family, a new priest or rabbi for her fathers' faith, or a new mother to take up the renewal of life. Given this patriarchal purpose she could obliterate herself in fertility as her body swelled year after year, and pain and suffering might well become associated, for her, with her ultimate value in the world. She might equally know that her pregnancy and labor would result in a life without a future, a child who could not be fed, or who would be strangled at birth; a wasted human life.

In the twelfth century, with the beginnings of the romantic love-cult in the West, still another element enters the tangle of feelings and attitudes surrounding childbirth. The courtly love tradition perceived marriage quite correctly for what it was—a property settlement—and located the real springs of feeling, intensity, vital energy as dwelling in passion-love, a secret and usually doomed relationship. To bear the child of a man with whom one was entangled in passion-love became an assertion of the seeming uniqueness of that love; to bear *this man's child* was to bring this love to a tangible consummation. Bastards were believed to be exceptionally vital and dynamic beings, begotten

in the intensity of passion rather than between the dull, obligatory sheets of marriage. The child thus becomes not only the expression of a forbidden love, but an incorporation of the lover into the woman's body. He may desert her, they may be parted by fate, but she continues to possess him in "his" child—especially if a son. To bear an "illegitimate" child proudly and by choice in the face of societal judgment has, paradoxically, been one way in which women have defied patriarchy. Hester Prynne's needlework in which she splendidly dresses her daughter Pearl and decorates her own label of "adulteress" in *The Scarlet Letter* is a gesture of such defiance. Childbirth, then, may be painful, dangerous, and unchosen; but it has also been converted into a purpose, an act of self-assertion by a woman forced to assert herself primarily through her biology.

From the sense of producing a necessary person, or persons, and of carrying out one's destiny as a woman, to the ambivalence toward, or rejection of motherhood by many twentieth-century women, there is a continuing thread of unexamined emotions. The twentieth-century, educated young woman, looking perhaps at her mother's life, or trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reason felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom. Doris Lessing's heroine, Martha Quest,

. . . saw it all so very clearly. That phrase, "having a baby," which was every girl's way of thinking of a first child, was nothing but a mask to conceal the truth. One saw a fluttering image of a madonna-like woman with a helpless infant in her arms; nothing could be more attractive. What one did not see, what everyone conspired to prevent one seeing, was the middle-aged woman who had done nothing but produce two or three commonplace and tedious citizens in a world that was already too full of them.⁶

Not only is the world already "too full," but Martha resists the notion of the child as an end-in-itself; she sees, with bitter clarity, beyond the sentimental image of "motherhood" to the life-span of the woman defined as mother; instead of a "peak

experience" she perceives a continuing condition. For a creative woman, as for a woman living in poverty, the child can be perceived as a disaster, as an "enemy within." In Cora Sandel's *Alberta and Freedom*, Alberta, an impoverished young woman writer, has become pregnant by her lover; she confesses to her friend Liesel, also an artist:

"Only today I thought I could see some way in my work," she said half to herself. "I had such a desire to write, but in quite a different form from before."

"Oh—." Liesel gestured away from herself with her hand. "That's precisely when it happens, when we think we're beginning to achieve something. Then it comes and interrupts it all . . ."

But there is a need—whether instinctual or psychogenic or acculturated, to come to terms with the disaster. Alberta begins to notice the mothers with their children in the streets.

They had nobody to look after them, they were tied by them from morning to night, forced to forget everything else for sake of the white bundle, sacrifice everything for it. And Alberta felt mutinous. She thought: I'm not ready with myself yet, I haven't achieved anything, must I start thinking only about someone else, unable even to look in any other direction? At the same time she surprised herself noticing how such bundles were carried and dressed, and attempted instinctively to catch glimpses of the tiny, well-wrapped faces . . .

Finally, she sees an African woman with her child in the tent of a traveling exhibition; the mother, noticing that Alberta is pregnant, smiles and nods wordlessly to her.

For the first time she felt without defiance and coldness that she was to become a mother. The approaching enemy was a little naked child, with only herself to turn to and trust. Boundless sympathy for it streamed towards her heart and eyes . . .⁷

The depths of this conflict, between self-preservation and maternal feelings, can be experienced—I have experienced it—as a primal agony. And this is not the least of the pains of childbirth.

Finally, a woman who has experienced her own mother as a

destructive force—however justified or unjustified the charge—may dread the possibility that in becoming a mother she too will become somehow destructive. The mother of the laboring woman is, in any case, for better or worse, living or dead, a powerful ghost in the birth-chamber.

3

Throughout the world, certain powerful attitudes surround pregnancy and childbirth.⁸ Nowhere is the pregnant woman taken for granted; she may be viewed as proof of her husband's sexual adequacy; as dangerous to crops or to men; as especially vulnerable to the evil eye or other maleficent influences; as an embarrassment; as possessed of curative powers.⁹ These attitudes culminate in the birth itself. The lack of material on the conduct of normal births and on the actual behavior of mothers in normal labors in different cultures is due to the scarcity, until recently, of women observing women's behavior, and the fact that male anthropologists have usually been excluded from births unless the delivery was abnormal, when males (as medicine man, witch doctor, or priest) would be admitted.⁹ However, there are emotional responses shared by laboring women of all cultures.

Grantly Dick-Read, the early crusader for "natural" childbirth, identified a dynamic, in labor, between fear, tension, and pain. Fear stands high on the list. In the woman bearing her first child there is first of all fear of the unknown. She has heard all her life tales of "how women suffer"; she may have attended births and witnessed for herself; above all, there is the sense of her body going into powerful, involuntary contractions, almost a sense of becoming possessed. In most of our history, women have not been told to identify these as "contractions"; they have been described by midwives, surgeons, priests, mothers alike as "pains," and even as punishment. Instead of visualizing a functional physical process the woman may perceive herself simply

* During my own first pregnancy, I was invited to give a poetry reading at an old and famous boys' preparatory school in New England. When the master responsible for inviting me realized that I was seven months pregnant he canceled the invitation, saying that the fact of my pregnancy would make it impossible for the boys to listen to my poetry. This was in 1955.

as invaded by pain.* Not only has she been socialized to expect suffering, but the mysteriousness of the process generates fear. Freedman and Ferguson's study of childbirth, cited above, concludes that the fear of suffering derives from "empirically derived knowledge of mutilations and deaths" or of the births of monstrosities. The fear of death is inextricable from fear of the unknown.

In many cultures the woman in labor is believed to be particularly vulnerable to malign occult influences, just as during pregnancy. Closely related to this is the notion of childbirth as illness. Niles Newton cites the Cuna Indians of Panama, who "regard childbirth as so abnormal that the mother goes to the medicine man daily throughout pregnancy for medicine to help her and is under constant medication during labor." In the American hospital delivery, similarly, birth is frequently treated as an operation, and always as a medical event.

The idea of birth as defilement is widespread. Indian village midwives are usually of the "untouchable" caste, and in some parts of India the mother is supposedly "untouchable" during birth and for ten days after. Similarly, Vietnamese women were reported (in 1951) to be secluded for a lengthy time after giving birth in order not to bring bad luck upon others. Arapesh women give birth in an area "reserved for excretion, menstrual huts, and foraging pigs." The ritual purification of women after childbirth is found among Jews, Christians, and Arabs, and from the Caucasus to southern Africa. Newton observes that (as with menstrual taboos) post-partum "defilement" may at least procure for the mother some relief from her daily tasks and an opportunity for uninterrupted and peaceful concentration on the new relationship with her baby. But even where this is so, the cost exacted is still female flesh-loathing; and physical self-hatred and suspicion of one's own body is scarcely a favorable emotion with which to enter an intense physical experience.¹⁰

Finally, there is the pain of sexual guilt. In some cultures,

* K. D. Keele points out that "in primitive thought, pain is closely associated with the intrusion of an object or of a spirit into the body; painful disease is often thought to be caused by the spirit of another person, dead or living, which seeks a new body. Pregnancy has widely been thought to result from the entrance of a spirit seeking rebirth into the woman's body" (*Anatomies of Pain* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1957], p. 2).

confessions of adultery are extorted from women in labor.¹¹ The sexual connotations of pregnancy and birth can give rise, not only to shame and embarrassment during pregnancy, but feelings of guilt in the intimate exposure of the birth-chamber. The dread of giving birth to monsters, as Sheila Kitzinger observes, has to do with "the crystallization of deep-seated feelings of guilt. The girl wants to punish herself, to wipe away her guilt by atonement—by producing this monstrosity from within her own body, the living embodiment of her own evil."¹² Again, sexual guilt and physical defilement in women are inextricably associated, and throughout the world are sources of enormous tension.

Such negative attitudes, found in nonliterate as well as literate cultures, make childbirth an ordeal both psychically and physically. There is a deep and prevalent sense of the woman's body as magical, as either vulnerable to or emanating evil—as unclean, and as the embodiment of guilt. These beliefs, internalized in her, affect her relationship to the birth-process as much as do ignorance, or the actual, verifiable reality of risk and danger. But contemporary Western culture shares many of these attitudes, and has made its own special contributions to the alienation of women from the birth-process.

4

The fear of pain of childbirth in literate as in nonliterate societies may come (and often does) from verbal tales, phrases, anecdotes; it is further reinforced by literature. As a girl of twelve or thirteen, I read and reread passages in novels which recounted births, trying to imagine what actually happened. I had no films, no photographs of childbirth to enlighten me; but in my favorite novel, *Anna Karenina*, I found the account of Kitty Levin's labor, as perceived by her husband.

Kitty's flushed, agonized face, a lock of hair clinging to her clammy forehead, was turned to him, seeking his eyes. . . .

She spoke fast, and tried to smile, but suddenly her face distorted with pain and she pushed him away.

"Oh, this is terrible! I am dying . . . I shall die! Go away,

go away!" she cried, and the same unearthly shriek echoed through the house. . . .

Leaning his head against the doorpost, he stood in the next room and heard someone shrieking and moaning in a way he had never heard before, and knew that these sounds came from what had once been Kitty. . . .

Beside himself, he rushed into the bedroom again. The first thing he saw was the midwife's face looking more frowning and stern than ever. Kitty's face was not there. In its place was something fearful—fearful in its strained distortion and the sounds that issued from it. . . . The terrible screams followed each other quickly until they seemed to reach the utmost limit of horror, when they suddenly ceased . . . and he heard a soft stir, a bustle, and the sound of hurried breathing, and her voice, faltering, vibrant, tender and blissful as she whispered, "It's over!"¹³

The outcome for Princess Lise, in *War and Peace*, was less blissful:

The screaming ceased, and a few more seconds went by. Then suddenly a terrible shriek—it could not be hers, she could not scream like that—came from the bedroom. Prince Andrew ran to the door; the scream ceased and he heard the wail of an infant.

. . . A woman rushed out and seeing Prince Andrew stopped, hesitating on the threshold. He went into his wife's room. She was lying dead, in the same position he had seen her in five minutes before. . . .¹⁴

Both these passages, of course, were composed by a man, and written through the consciousness of the father.

I considered myself a young woman enlightened in "the facts of life"; my mother, unlike the mothers of many of my friends, had described sexual intercourse and conception in general terms, quite unhysterically. But the process of labor was mysterious to me. I imagined that the pains could only be caused by the squeezing of an infant's head through the tiny opening of the vagina—how could that be anything but painful? I had heard of "forceps" deliveries and imagined a huge instrument which would lacerate the mother while grasping the child's body. But how was it possible that the pain could end immedi-

ately after the child was born? And how could Lise simply have died there, "in the same position he had seen her in five minutes before?" *What killed her?* How could it all happen so suddenly? And there was something terrifying in the metamorphosis which Tolstoy implied women underwent in the sufferings of labor: "these sounds came from what had once been Kitty" . . . "a terrible shriek—it could not be hers, she could not scream like that—." One became, then, possessed or dehumanized, with pain.

Beyond the accounts of childbirth—few and far between—in novels (Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* was another source), I knew that my own birth had been long and slow, that my mother had been accounted "a heroine" for enduring my coming. In my father's library I stole glances at a thick, dark red volume, Williams's *Obstetrics*, a textbook written by the obstetrician who had delivered me. Nowhere was the *face* of a laboring mother visible in its photographs; all was perineum, episiotomy, the nether parts I recognized as like and unlike my own, stretched beyond belief by the crowning infant head. Like many a young girl, I simply could not imagine that my body was built to withstand the cataclysm.

Dick-Read says that he was told by many women that they cried out, not from pain but the fear of pain, and demanded to be put to sleep in order to escape from the terrors of the unknown. For centuries, notably the centuries of puerperal fever, death-fantasies had a literal, unassailable basis in statistical fact. Yet, even in a place and time where maternal mortality is low, a woman's fantasies of her own death in childbirth have the accuracy of metaphor. Typically, under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother (linked implicitly with suffering and with the repression of anger) will spell the "death" of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies *for herself*—especially when those hopes and fantasies have never been acted-on. For a poor woman, or one who has only herself to depend on economically, the birth of an infant can imply another kind of death—a new liability in the struggle merely to survive.

There is another kind of fear which does seem elemental; the fear of change, of transformation, of the unfamiliar. Pregnancy may be experienced as the extinguishing of an earlier self, as the diary notes of a European woman suggest:

My face in the mirror looked alien to me. My character blurred. Childish violent desires, unknown to me, came over me, and childish violent dislikes. I am a coldly logical thinker, but at that time, my reasoning blurred and dissolved, impotent, into tears, another helpless, childish creature's tears, not mine. I was one and the other at once. It stirred inside of me. Could I control its movements with my will? Sometimes I thought I could, at other times I realized it was beyond my control. I couldn't control anything. I was not myself. And not for a brief, passing moment of rapture, which men, too, experience, but for nine watchful quiet months. . . . Then it was born. I heard it scream with a voice that was no longer mine.¹⁶

Not every woman, of course, feels pregnancy as "imposing" "alien traits" on her, as did this woman with her "coldly logical" self-image. It could be said of her that what appeared most alien and unfamiliar were really buried, denied aspects of her own nature. But pregnancy and birth do herald enormous changes in the life of any mother. Even a woman who gives up her child for adoption at birth has undergone irreversible physiological and psychic changes in the process of carrying it to term and bearing it. And the woman who continues to mother will find the rhythms and priorities of her life changed in the most profound and also the most trivial ways. The woman who has long wanted and awaited a child can anticipate becoming a mother with imaginative eagerness; but she too must move from the familiar to the strange, and this is never a simple process.

5

The forceps and its monopoly by male practitioners were decisive in annexing childbirth to the new male medical establishment. In 1842 a Georgia physician discovered that pain could be annulled by ether-inhalation; both ether and nitrous oxide were rapidly introduced in dentistry; and the term *anesthesia*, suggested by Oliver Wendell Holmes, soon became current. In

1847, using ether in a case of childbirth, James Simpson in Scotland showed that contractions of the uterus would continue even if the woman was unconscious, and proceeded to experiment with and to use chloroform to relieve the pains of labor. A fierce theological opposition arose; the clergy attacked anesthesia as "a decay of Satan, apparently offering itself to bless women; but in the end it will harden society and rob God of the deep earnest cries which arise in time of trouble for help."¹⁶ The lifting of Eve's curse seemed to threaten the foundations of patriarchal religion; the cries of women in childbirth were for the glory of God the Father. An alleviation of female suffering was seen as "hardening" society, as if the sole alternative to the *mater dolorosa*—the eternally suffering and suppliant mother as epitomized by the Virgin—must be the Medusa whose look turns men to stone.

This view still finds expression in antiabortion rhetoric, and extends beyond any single issue to feminism in general. After the horrible and lingering death of Mary Wollstonecraft from septicemia, the Rev. Richard Polwhele complacently observed that "she had died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women, and the diseases to which they were peculiarly liable."¹⁷

The identification of womanhood with suffering—by women* as well as men—has been tied to the concept of woman-as-mother. The idea that woman's passive suffering is inevitable has worn many guises in history; not only those of Eve or the Virgin Mary but also later ones such as Helene Deutsch's association of passivity and masochism with "normal" femininity. If the medieval woman saw herself as paying by each childbirth for Eve's transgression, the nineteenth-century middle-class woman could play the Angel in the House, the martyr, her womanhood

* Olive Schreiner wrote in 1888 to Havelock Ellis: "Once God Almighty said: 'I will produce a self-working, automatic machine for enduring suffering, which shall be capable of the largest amount of suffering in a given space,' and he made woman. But he wasn't satisfied that he had reached the highest point of perfection; so he made a man of genius. He was not satisfied yet. So he combined the two and made a woman of genius—and he was satisfied. That's the real theory—but in the end he defeated himself because the machine he'd constructed to endure suffering could enjoy bliss too . . ." (*Letters of Olive Schreiner, 1826-1920*, S. C. Cronwright-Schreiner, ed. [London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924]).

affirmed by her agonies suffered in travail. Oliver Wendell Holmes supplies us with one version of the rhetoric:

The woman about to become a mother, or with her newborn infant upon her bosom, should be the object of trembling care and sympathy wherever she bears her tender burden or stretches her aching limbs. The very outcast of the streets has pity upon her sister in degradation when the seal of promised maternity is impressed upon her. The remorseless vengeance of the law . . . is arrested in its fall at a word which reveals her transient claim for mercy. The solemn prayer of the liturgy singles out her sorrows from the multiplied trials of life, to plead for her in her hour of peril.^{18*}

The value of a woman's life would appear to be contingent on her being pregnant or newly delivered. Women who refuse to become mothers are not merely emotionally suspect, but are dangerous. Not only do they refuse to continue the species; they also deprive society of its emotional heaven—the suffering of the mother. As late as the 1920s, it was assumed that "the suffering which a woman undergoes in labor is one of the strongest elements in the love she bears her offspring."¹⁹

It was therefore a radical act—the truly radical act of her entire reign—when Queen Victoria accepted anesthesia by chloroform for the birth of her seventh child in 1853. In so doing she opposed clerical and patriarchal tradition and its entire view of women; but her influence and prestige were strong enough that her decision opened the way for anesthesia as an accepted obstetrical practice.

It was also in the Victorian period that the female body became more taboo, more mysterious, more suspected of "complaints and disorders," and the focus of more ignorant speculation, than ever before. The male gynecological establishment viewed female sexual responsiveness of any kind as pathological, and the "myth of female frailty" haunted the existence of middle- and upper-class women. If education was supposed to

* This of course was purely sentimental. In the nineteenth century, as before and since, women gave birth in prisons and workhouses. See, for example, Emmeline Pankhurst's account of listening to the cries of a woman in childbirth in the prison cell next to hers (Midge MacKenzie, ed., *Shoulder to Shoulder* [New York: Knopf, 1975], pp. 72, 91).

atrophy the female reproductive organs, women's suffrage was seen as creating "insane asylums in every county, and . . . a divorce court in every town." Clitoridectomies and ovariectomies were performed on women as a form of behavior modification for "troublesomeness," "attempted suicide," and "erotic tendencies." The much professed "reverence" for women (of the upper classes) in Victorian England and America consisted largely in an exaggerated prudery.²⁰ At the onset of labor, the woman was placed in the lithotomy (supine) position, chloroformed, and turned into the completely passive body on which the obstetrician could perform as on a mannequin. The labor room became an operating theatre, and childbirth a medical drama with the physician as its hero.

In the early twentieth century various forms of anesthesia were developed specifically for labor: "Twilight Sleep," a compound of morphine and scopolamine, was widely used until it was discovered to have a highly toxic effect on the infant. Sodium amytal and nembutal were found to produce after-amnesia (while only partly blunting pain); of nembutal Sylvia Plath's heroine in *The Bell Jar* bitterly remarks, "I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent."²¹ The development of caudal or saddle-block anesthesia meant that a woman could remain conscious and see her baby born, though she was paralyzed from the waist down. Speert and Guttmacher, in their textbook *Obstetric Practice*, admit that the use of caudal or saddle-block anesthesia can prolong the second stage of labor, by producing "uterine inertia . . . [and] the absence of voluntary expulsive efforts by the mother," thus rendering a forceps delivery "necessary" where the child might otherwise have been born more swiftly and without instruments. (Not to mention the fact that in inexperienced hands the possibility of permanent damage has to be considered.)

There are certain valid indications for the prevention of exertion by the mother—such as heart disease, tuberculosis, or a previous Caesarean,²² but women are now asking what psychic effect a state of semihelplessness has on a healthy mother, awake during the birth, yet prevented from participating actively in delivery. No more devastating image could be invented for the bondage of woman: sheeted, supine, drugged, her wrists strapped

down and her legs in stirrups, at the very moment when she is bringing new life into the world. This "freedom from pain," like "sexual liberation," places a woman physically at men's disposal, though still estranged from the potentialities of her own body. While in no way altering her subjection, it can be advertised as a progressive development.*

6

In the 1940s, Dick-Read observed that pain sensations arose out of fear and tension and began to train prospective mothers to relax, to breathe correctly, to understand the stages of the labor process, and to develop muscular control through exercises. Dick-Read also placed great emphasis on the presence of calm, supportive birth-attendants throughout labor, especially the obstetrician, who was to act as a source of confidence and security rather than as a surgeon needlessly interfering with or accelerating the birth process. He held that anesthesia should always be available but never involuntarily imposed on the woman or administered routinely. Dick-Read's work was path-breaking, and many of his observations are still valuable. However, his attitude to women is essentially patriarchal: While in genuine awe of

* A physician of the 1930s offers us this description of the perfections of American obstetrical technology:

Arriving (at the hospital) . . . she is immediately given the benefit of one of the modern analgesics or pain-killers. Soon she is in a dreamy, half-conscious state at the height of a pain, sound asleep between spasms. Though hours must elapse before the infant appears, her conscious self is through; the rest is up to the doctor and her own reflexes.

She knows nothing about being taken to a spotlessly clean delivery room, placed on a sterile table, draped with sterile sheets; neither does she see . . . the doctor and nurses, garbed for her protection in sterile white gowns and gloves; nor the shiny boiled instruments and anti-septic solutions. She does not hear the cry of her baby when first he feels the chill of this cold world, nor see the care with which the doctor repairs such lacerations as may have occurred. She is, as most of us want to be when severe pain has us in its grasp—asleep—Finally she awakes in smiles, a mother with no recollection of having become one.

(R. P. Finney, *The Story of Motherhood* [New York: Liveright, 1937], pp. 6-7.)

the female capacity to produce new life, he writes of "the in-born dependence of woman" which finds its natural outlet in her dependence on the doctor. He perceives the birth process as naturally "ecstatic": "Biologically, motherhood is her desire," he remarks; and at one point: "*Varium et mutabile semper femina*, but never more so than in childbirth." For him, childbirth is a woman's glory, her purpose in life, her peak experience. Remove fear, reinforce ecstasy, and childbirth can be "natural"—that is, virtually without pain. But the male obstetrician is still in control of the situation.²³

During the thirties and forties, several Soviet obstetricians began applying Pavlov's theories of the conditioned reflex to childbirth. Successful deliveries in Russia under hypnosis and in posthypnotic states led to increased emphasis on "suggestion," which was the basis for the first prenatal training: the creation, during pregnancy, of "complex chains of conditioned reflexes which will be applicable at the confinement. The pregnant woman learns to give birth as the child learns to read or swim." The conditioning towards pain was to be altered and new reflexes set up; the method is described as "verbal analgesia."²⁴ Pavlov had observed that

. . . for man speech provides conditioned stimuli which are just as real as any other stimuli. . . . Speech, an account of the whole preceding life of the adult, is connected up with the internal and external stimuli which can reach the cortex, signalling all of them, and replacing all of them, and therefore it can call forth all those reactions of the organism which are normally determined by the actual stimuli themselves.²⁵

In 1951, Fernand Lamaze, a French physician, visited maternity clinics in the U.S.S.R. which used the "psychoprophylactic method," and introduced the method in the West, at the maternity hospital under his direction, serving the members of the Metallurgists' Union. Lamaze, far more than Dick-Read, emphasized the active participation of the mother in every stage of labor, and developed a precise and controlled breathing drill to be used during each stage. Where Dick-Read encourages a level of "dulled consciousness" in the second stage, Lamaze would have the mother aware and conscious, responding to a

series of verbal cues from the birth-attendant by panting, pushing, and blowing. Suzanne Arms suggests, however, that the Lamaze method "has the unfortunate side-effect of greatly altering a woman's natural experience of birth from one of deep involvement inside her body to a controlled distraction." In her "militant control over her body," she is "separate and detached from the sensations, smells and sights of her body giving birth. She is too involved in . . . control . . ."²⁶

The "psychosexual" method of Sheila Kitzinger, in England, involves a much broader concept of childbearing as part of the context of a woman's entire existence. She stresses that a woman must learn to "trust her body and her instincts" and to understand the complex emotional network in which she comes to parturition. Kitzinger insists on both physical and psychic education for childbirth if the mother is to retain "the power of self-direction, of self-control, of choice, of voluntary decision and active cooperation with doctor and nurse" and she strongly favors giving birth at home, usually with a midwife.

The mother of five children herself, she unequivocally states that "pain in labour is real enough." But she also describes the sensuous experience of the opening of the vagina during expulsion—not as painless, but as powerful and often exhilarating. Her grasp of female reality is much broader than that of Dick-Read or Lamaze, but she, like other writers on prepared childbirth, assumes that babies are born only to married couples, and that the husband—present and emotionally dependable—will be a primary figure in the birth-chamber; and she unhesitatingly states that "the experience of bearing a child is central to a woman's life."²⁷

More recently, in the United States, there has been widespread interest in various combinations of the Dick-Read, Lamaze, and Kitzinger approaches. The move toward midwife deliveries and away from the male obstetrician and the depersonalization of the hospital has been a crucial aspect of "taking our bodies back" and of the women's health-care movement. In the late sixties there began to appear a sprinkling of volumes celebrating home births, glamorized with photographs of very young and lovely pregnant women, naked or in flowered dresses, in rural communes, romanticized as hippie earth-mothers. The

conditions which affect the majority of women in labor—poverty, malnutrition, desertion by the father of the child, inadequate prenatal care—are ignored in these books (where, again, an eager young father is usually present at the birth). “Prepared” or “natural” childbirth in the United States has been a middle-class phenomenon; but even its crusaders acknowledge that the context of a woman’s life may have something to do with her experience of labor. A French obstetrician Pierre Vellay says that in “normal” cases (normal pelvis, good presentation, *good physical and psychological conditions*) “the woman can expect childbirth without any pain, provided that no family, money or social worries upset her just before the birth. . . . A light, pleasant house with plenty of room, enough money and no fear for the future are the best conditions in which a woman can bear a baby.”²⁸ Lamaze admits that “the addition of a child to a family may be a real source of anxiety when the house is too small or the father’s income inadequate . . . it is natural for a mother to feel depressed about her child’s future when her own is overcast.” Shulamith Firestone, as an early theorist of the contemporary women’s movement, was understandably skeptical of “natural” childbirth as part of a reactionary counter-culture having little to do with the liberation of women as a whole.

Firestone sees childbearing, however, as purely and simply the victimizing experience it has often been under patriarchy. “Pregnancy is barbaric,” she declares; “Childbirth *hurts*.” She discards biological motherhood from this shallow and unexamined point of view, without taking full account of what the experience of biological pregnancy and birth might be in a wholly different political and emotional context. Her attitudes toward pregnancy (“the husband’s guilty waning of sexual desire; the woman’s tears in front of the mirror at eight months”) are male-derived.²⁹ Finally, Firestone is so eager to move on to technology that she fails to explore the relationship between maternity and sensuality, pain and female alienation.

Ideally, of course, women would choose not only whether, when, and where to bear children, and the circumstances of labor, but also between biological and artificial reproduction. Ideally, the process of creating another life would be freely and

intelligently undertaken, much as a woman might prepare herself physically and mentally for a trip across country by jeep, or an archeological “dig”; or might choose to do something else altogether. But I do not think we can project any such idea onto the future—and hope to realize it—without examining the shadow-images we carry out of the magical thinking of Eve’s curse and the social victimization of women-as-mothers. To do so is to deny aspects of ourselves which will rise up sooner or later to claim recognition.

7

In 1955, 1957, and 1959, I gave birth to my three children—all essentially normal births—under general anesthesia. In my first labor, an allergic reaction to pregnancy, which was assumed to be measles, may have justified medical intervention. But in each subsequent pregnancy I used the same obstetrician, and was “put out” as completely as I had been for the first. During my first pregnancy I and many of the women I knew were reading Grantly Dick-Read’s *Natural Childbirth*. I found myself suspicious of his claims that giving birth was *the* ecstatic and exhilarating experience for women. I was only beginning a long process of reunion with the body I had been split from at puberty; my mind lived on one plane, my body on another, and physical pleasure, even in sex, was problematic to me. I had known exhilaration in language, in music, in ideas, in landscape, in talk, in painting; even in Dick-Read’s book I could identify more with the obstetrician’s exhilaration at a “natural” labor than with what he believed his patients experienced. I was vaguely interested in his theories, but did not consider trying them for myself. Labor seemed to me something to be gotten through, the child—and the state of motherhood—being the mysterious and desired goal.

During and after those years, I often felt apologetic in talking with women who had delivered by some variant of the Dick-Read method, or had attempted it. I was told: “It hurt like hell, but it was worth it”; or, “It was the most painful, ecstatic experience of my entire life.” Some women asserted that the promised ecstasy had been, in fact, agony, and that they had

ended crying for anesthesia. Others had been, on the delivery table, anesthetized against their will. At that time, even more than now, the "choice" a woman made as to the mode of delivery was likely to be her obstetrician's choice. However, among those who were awake at delivery, a premium seemed to be placed on the *pain endured* rather than on an active physical experience. Sometimes I felt that my three unconscious deliveries were yet another sign of my half-suspected inadequacy as a woman; the "real" mothers were those who had been "awake through it all." I think now that my refusal of consciousness (approved and implemented by my physician) and my friends' exhilaration at having experienced and surmounted pain (approved and implemented by their physicians) had a common source: we were trying in our several ways to contain the expected female fate of passive suffering. None of us, I think, had much sense of being in any real command of the experience. Ignorant of our bodies, we were essentially nineteenth-century women as far as childbirth (and much else) was concerned. (But, unlike our European sisters, none of us dreamed of having our babies at home, with a midwife. In the United States, that was a fate reserved for the rural poor.)

We were, above all, in the hands of male medical technology. The hierarchal atmosphere of the hospital, the definition of childbirth as a medical emergency, the fragmentation of body from mind, were the environment in which we gave birth, with or without analgesia. The only female presences were nurses, whose training and schedules precluded much female tenderness. (I remember the gratitude and amazement I felt waking in the "recovery room" after my third delivery to find a young student nurse holding my hand.) The experience of lying half-awake in a barred crib, in a labor room with other women moaning in a drugged condition, where "no one comes" except to do a pelvic examination or give an injection, is a classic experience of alienated childbirth. The loneliness, the sense of abandonment, of being imprisoned, powerless, and depersonalized is the chief collective memory of women who have given birth in American hospitals.

But not just American hospitals. Cora Sandel describes the

sensations of her heroine Alberta, giving birth to her illegitimate child in a Paris hospital at the turn of the century:

She was sitting up to her neck in water in a bath tub, forsaken by God and man. They had closed the door and gone away, as if she were quite capable of looking after herself. Suppose they forgot her? Suppose the pain came back before she was safe in bed? With sinking heart she stared at the door.

There they were! She breathed again.

But it was only a hand which snatched her clothes from the chair on which they were lying, placed some kind of white linen robe there instead, and closed the door again. She called. Nobody answered. She was a prisoner, with no chance of flight.

What was happening was inevitable. Outside night lay over the city. . . . Far, far away, in another world, lived people she knew who were close to her . . . shades, left behind in an earlier life, incapable of helping her. Nor had they any suspicion of how bitterly forsaken she was in this machine composed of curt, white-clad persons and shining tiled walls, which had her in its clutches and would not release her again until she was transformed, one became two, or until—³⁰

Brigitte Jordan, an anthropologist studying childbirth cross-culturally, describes routine hospital delivery in the United States as

. . . a complex of practices which are justified, on medical grounds, as being in the best interest of mother and child . . . induction and stimulation of labor with drugs, the routine administration of sedatives and of medication for pain relief, the separation of the laboring woman from any sources of psychological support, surgical rupturing of the membranes, routine episiotomy, routine forceps delivery, and the lithotomy position for delivery, to name just a few.

Jordan is saying that childbirth is a "culturally produced event," and that in the United States the same relentless consistency of method is pursued without regard to individual aspects of a particular labor. Yes, episiotomies are done to avoid tearing of the perineum, but tearing is much *more* likely when the lithotomy position is used than when a woman gives birth squatting,

on a birth-stool, or (as in the Yucatan) supported in a hammock. Forceps deliveries are also more often necessary in the lithotomy position, where the pull of gravity cannot aid in the expulsion of the child.³¹

Tucho Perussi, an Argentine doctor, urges a return to the obstetrical stool, pointing out that in the lithotomy position a contraction which has pushed the fetus downward can be compensated against by the sliding-back of the fetus, lengthening the labor unnecessarily. In the vertical position gravity naturally works with the contractions. Roberto Caldeyro-Barcia of Argentina puts it succinctly: "Except for being hanged by the feet . . . the supine position is the worst conceivable position for labor and delivery." Moreover, vertical delivery seems to minimize the loss of oxygen to the fetus which results when the uterus is lying on the largest vein in the body (the vena cava). The chief objection to the use of the obstetrical stool or chair seems to be the obstetricians' belief that it would inconvenience them.^{32*}

The artificial induction and stimulation of labor, widely resorted to in the United States, produces longer, stronger contractions with less relaxation-span between them than the contractions of normal labor. This in turn leads to the use of pain-relieving drugs; as so often, medical technology creates its own artificial problem for which an artificial remedy must be found. These unnaturally strong and lengthy contractions can deprive the fetus of oxygen, while the analgesic drugs interfere with its respiration.† If labor in the United States were induced

* Brigitte Jordan reports, however, that contemporary European delivery tables allow for greater diversity of position, having "a moveable backrest (which can be cranked up to support the woman in a semi-sitting position, where that isn't possible either the husband or midwife will hold the pushing woman up); secondly, the middle part; thirdly, the footend which can be inclined, left flat, or wheeled away or pushed under the middle part in case it becomes desirable to put the woman in the lithotomy position (for repair of episiotomies, for example). Routinely, then, pushing is done with the woman in a semi-upright position, hooking her hands under her thighs. Some delivery tables have hand holds (nowhere are a woman's hands tied down), some have foot supports, but nowhere is the lithotomy position used for routine delivery" (Personal communication, October 1974).

† A study of over 50,000 infants from birth to one year of age, prepared by the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Stroke, revealed the

only in cases of medical necessity, only about 3 percent of births would be induced. In fact, at least one in five births are drug-induced or drug-stimulated, for the physician's convenience and with no physiologic justification whatever.³³

In cultures as different as Sweden and the Yucatan, women have a part in the decision-making process during their deliveries. The Yucatan midwife emphasizes that "every woman has to 'buscar la forma,' find her own way, and that it is the midwife's task to assist with whatever decision is made."³⁴ This does not mean that births are painless, but that needless pain is prevented, birth is not treated as a "medical event," and the woman's individual temperament and physique are trusted and respected.

Thirty years ago, in *Male and Female*, Margaret Mead wrote of the violence done by American hospital obstetrics to both infant and mother in the first hours of life.³⁵ In 1972 Doris Haire, of the International Childbirth Education Association, published a report on "The Cultural Warping of Childbirth." In it she pointed out that of sixteen developed countries in 1971 and 1972, the United States had the highest infant mortality rate (number of infant deaths per 1000 live births, in the first year of life). She surveyed the routine methods used in American hospital obstetrics, researched the literature on each, and compared them with practices found in countries where infant mortality is especially low. Among practices routinely followed in this country, which she found to be damaging both to mother and child, she lists the following:

- Withholding information on the disadvantages of obstetrical medication
- Requiring all normal women to give birth in the hospital
- Elective induction of labor (without clear medical indication)

ironic fact that there was a greater incidence of neurologic damage among white than among Black children of one year old, and that "in one New York hospital during 1970 there was twice the incidence of depressed babies among private patients as among clinic patients." "Although the incidence of low birth weight, prematurity and undernutrition is decidedly greater among our black population, black patients, who are more often clinic patients, traditionally receive less medication during labor and birth" (Doris Haire, "The Cultural Warping of Childbirth," International Childbirth Education Association, 1972, 1974).

- Separating the mother from familial support during labor and birth
- Confining the normal laboring woman to bed
- Shaving the birth area
- Professional dependence on technology and pharmacological methods of pain relief
- Chemical stimulation of labor
- Delaying birth until the physician arrives
- Requiring the mother to assume the lithotomy position for birth
- Routine use of regional or general anesthesia for delivery
- Routine episiotomy
- Separating the mother from her newborn infant
- Delaying the first breast-feeding³⁶

Writers like Haire, Sheila Kitzinger, and Suzanne Arms have stressed the process of childbirth as a continuum, interwoven inextricably with the entire spectrum of a woman's life. It is not a drama torn from its context, a sudden crisis to be handled by others because the mother is out of control of her body. Of course actual medical crises occur during childbirth; but birth itself is neither a disease nor a surgical operation. Nor should infant and mother, immediately after parturition, be treated as two separate creatures, to be cared for in separate parts of a building by separate nursing staffs. They are still a continuum, and sensitive treatment of the one is incomplete without closeness to the other. The very nature of the mother-child bond may depend on the degree of contact in the first hours and days of the child's life.

Placed directly upon the mother's belly, while still connected to her placenta (by the unsevered umbilical cord) the baby finds the nipple and begins its first suckling activity. The mere licking of the mother's nipple triggers the nerves in her breast to alert the uterus that the baby is out and safe. In immediate response, the uterus clamps down to begin to expel the placenta. Meanwhile, the suckling action of the baby stimulates its breathing and heat productivity. Most important, the newborn finds peace and calm in direct contact with its mother's warm body. This moment of security is the first it has known since the onset of labor.^{37*}

* Suzanne Arms reports that even as women in the United States are be-

Suzanne Arms both demystifies and pleads for a rehumanization, a rewomanization, of the entire pregnancy, birth, and post-partum process. She does not, of course, claim that the hospital alone is the creator of pain in childbirth, although she does point out that hospitals are associated with "disease and disorder," an atmosphere of medical emergency which can only increase the tension of the laboring woman. All labor, however, has to pass through the "transition" between the first stage in which the cervix becomes fully dilated, and the expulsion of the child. Arms's description of the psychic and physical stress of this part of labor is astute and revealing:

At this point the woman, nearly sapped of energy, must rally her reserves to begin pushing the baby out, yet she is now confronted with contractions even more violent than before, coming so hard and fast that they seem to meld together in successive waves, culminating in a shattering explosion that overwhelms her entire body. . . . Suddenly nauseous and chilled to the bone, the woman turns to the nearest figure of authority with beseeching eyes and a look on her face that no one who has ever attended a delivery will forget. It is a look of shock and disbelief, a statement all its own that woman is never so completely and totally alone than at this moment. A beseechingly, pleading, imploring cry for help, which looks like terror to the uninitiated, it is often articulated as "Do something!" "I can't go on!" "Help me!" or words of similar dramatic power. The response of early Christian man might have been to read his wife the passages from the Scriptures telling her it was her lot to suffer so; the response of modern doctors's to inject drugs to end the suffering. Yet neither reaction is responsible. When primitive woman turned to the midwife with that same look of desperation, the midwife rightfully interpreted the plea to mean "Assist me," "Support me," "Tell

ginning to demand home births, American obstetrical superhardware is selling itself in countries like England, Holland, and Denmark which have a long tradition of midwifery, maternity clinics, and home births, with a complete back-up system of emergency medical care. Despite the much lower infant mortality rate in Western Europe, the promise of "quick and easy" technologized obstetrics is making inroads. Meanwhile, in the United States, "doctors resist any move to take birth out of the hospital or make it a woman's event" (Suzanne Arms, *Immaculate Deception* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975], p. 160).

me this is supposed to happen." The obstetrician reads it as a cry to "Stop it," "Intervene," "Do it for me."³⁸

She rightly observes that "after centuries of ingrained fear, expectations of pain, and obeisance to male domination, the mother cannot easily come to childbirth a 'changed woman' after a few classes in natural childbirth or a heavy dose of Women's Liberation."³⁹ What we bring to childbirth is nothing less than our entire socialization as women.

The question is one of power and powerlessness, of the exercise of choice, whether a woman can choose to give birth at home, attended by a woman, or at least in a maternity clinic which is not a hospital. It is a question of the mother's right to decide what *she* wants, to "buscar la forma." At this time in America it is extremely difficult and usually illegal for a woman to give birth to her child at home with the aid of a professional midwife. The medical establishment continues to claim pregnancy and parturition to be a form of disease. The real issue, underlying the economic profit of the medical profession, is the mother's relation to childbirth, an experience in which women have historically felt out of control, at the mercy of biology, fate, or chance. To change the experience of childbirth means to change women's relationship to fear and powerlessness, to our bodies, to our children; it has far-reaching psychic and political implications.

8

Childbirth is (or may be) one aspect of the entire process of a woman's life, beginning with her own expulsion from her mother's body, her own sensual suckling or being held by a woman, through her earliest sensations of clitoral eroticism and of the vulva as a source of pleasure, her growing sense of her own body and its strengths, her masturbation, her menses, her physical relationship to nature and to other human beings, her first and subsequent orgasmic experiences with another's body, her conception, pregnancy, to the moment of first holding her child. But that moment is still only a point in the process if we conceive it not according to patriarchal ideas of childbirth as a kind of production, but as part of female experience.

Beyond birth comes nursing and physical relationship with an infant, and these are enmeshed with sexuality, with the ebb and flow of ovulation and menses, of sexual desire. During pregnancy the entire pelvic area increases in its vascularity (the production of arteries and veins) thus increasing the capacity for sexual tension and greatly increasing the frequency and intensity of the orgasm.⁴⁰ During pregnancy, the system is flooded with hormones which not only induce the growth of new blood vessels but increase clitoral responsiveness and strengthen the muscles effective in orgasm. A woman who has given birth has a biologically increased capacity for genital pleasure, unless her pelvic organs have been damaged obstetrically, as frequently happens. Many women experience orgasm for the first time after childbirth, or become erotically aroused while nursing. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Niles Newton, Masters and Johnson, and others have documented the erotic sensations experienced by women in actually giving birth. Since there are strong cultural forces which desexualize women as mothers, the orgasmic sensations felt in childbirth or while suckling infants have probably until recently been denied even by the women feeling them, or have evoked feelings of guilt. Yet, as Newton reminds us, "Women . . . have a more varied heritage of sexual enjoyment than men";⁴¹ and the sociologist Alice Rossi observes,

I suspect that the more male dominance characterizes a Western society, the greater is the dissociation between sexuality and maternalism. It is to men's sexual advantage to restrict women's sexual gratification to heterosexual coitus, though the price for the woman and a child may be a less psychologically and physically rewarding relationship.⁴²

The divisions of labor and allocations of power in patriarchy demand not merely a suffering Mother, but one divested of sexuality: the Virgin Mary, *virgo intacta*, perfectly chaste. Women are permitted to be sexual only at a certain time of life, and the sensuality of mature—and certainly of aging—women has been perceived as grotesque, threatening, and inappropriate.

If motherhood and sexuality were not wedged resolutely

apart by male culture, if we could *choose* both the forms of our sexuality and the terms of our motherhood or nonmotherhood freely, women might achieve genuine sexual autonomy (as opposed to "sexual liberation"). The mother should be able to choose the means of conception (biological, artificial, or parthenogenetic), the place of birth, her own style of giving birth, and her birth-attendants: midwife or doctor as she wishes, a man she loves and trusts, women and men friends or kin, her other children. There is no reason why it should not be an "Amazon expedition" if she so desires, in which she is supported by women only, the midwife with whom she has worked throughout pregnancy, and women who simply love her. (At present, the father is the only nonmedical person legally admitted to the labor and delivery room in American hospitals, and even the biological father can be legally excluded over the mother's decision to have him there.)⁴³

But taking birth out of the hospital does not mean simply shifting it into the home or into maternity clinics. Birth is not an isolated event. If there were local centers to which all women could go for contraceptive and abortion counseling, pregnancy testing, prenatal care, labor classes, films about pregnancy and birth, routine gynecological examinations, therapeutic and counseling groups through and after pregnancy, including a well-baby clinic, women could begin to think, read about, and discuss the entire process of conceiving, gestating, bearing, nursing their children, about the alternatives to motherhood, and about the wholeness of their lives. Birth might then become one event in the unfolding of our diverse and polymorphous sexuality: not a necessary consequence of sex, but one experience of liberating ourselves from fear, passivity, and alienation from our bodies.

9

I am a woman giving birth to myself. In that psychic process, too, there is a "transition period" when energy flags, the effort seems endless, and we feel spiritually and even physically "nauseous and chilled to the bone." In such periods, turning to doctors for help and support, thousands of women have been

made into consumers of pain-numbing medication, which may quell anxiety or desperation at the price of cutting the woman off from her own necessary process. Unfortunately, there are too few trained, experienced psychic midwives for this kind of parturition; and the psycho-obstetricians, the pill-pushers, those who would keep us in a psychological lithotomy position, still dominate the psychotherapeutic profession.

There is a difference between crying out for help and asking to be "put under"; and women—both in psychic and physical labor—need to understand the extremity and the meaning of the "transition stage," to learn to demand active care and support, not "Twilight Sleep" or numbing. As long as birth—metaphorically or literally—remains an experience of passively handing over our minds and our bodies to male authority and technology, other kinds of social change can only minimally change our relationship to ourselves, to power, and to the world outside our bodies.

VIII

MOTHER AND SON, WOMAN AND MAN

As her sons have seen her: the Mother in patriarchy: controlling, erotic, castrating, heart-suffering, guilt-ridden, and guilt-provoking; a marble brow, a huge breast, an avid cave; between her legs snakes, swamp-grass, or teeth; on her lap a helpless infant or a martyred son. She exists for one purpose: to bear and nourish the son. "I could never really take it in that there had been a time, even in *der heym*, when she had been simply a woman alone, with a life in which I had no part."¹ She finds in him her reason for existence: "A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by . . . a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships." "The relationship between . . . mother and son . . . furnishes the purest examples of unchanging tenderness, undisturbed by any egoistic consideration."² The mother as seducer, with whom the son longs to sleep, against whom the incest taboo is strongest: Jocasta, Gertrude.* Despite the very high incidence of actual father-daughter and brother-sister rape, it is mother-son incest which has been most consistently taboo in every culture³ and which has received the most obsessive attention in the literature men have written.

The mother-in-law, also cross-culturally tabooed; the potentially deadly surrogate for both wife and mother. The Banks

* Louis Malle's film, *Murmur of the Heart*, suggests another attitude toward the story; far from being a "dark legend," the mutual seduction of son and mother is merely a lighthearted family incident.

Islander son-in-law waits till the tide has erased her footprints before he can follow her down the beach; the Navaho calls her "doyshini," meaning "She whom I may not see"; in the Yucatan an encounter with her is enough to sterilize a man.⁴ The mother unmanning the son, holding him back from life: "It always starts with Mama, mine loved me. As testimony of her love, and her fear of the fate of the man-child all slave mothers hold, she attempted to press, hide, push, capture me in the womb. The conflicts and contradictions that will follow me to the tomb started right there in the womb . . . I pushed out against my mother's strength September 23, 1941—I felt free."⁵ She who ought to have helped the son defy the father's tyranny, handing him over instead to the male realm of judgment and force. "Mother unconsciously played the part of a beater during a hunt. Even if your [his father's] method of upbringing might in some unlikely case have set me on my own feet by means of promoting defiance, dislike, or even hate in me, Mother canceled that out again by kindness, by talking sensibly . . . by pleading for me, and I was again driven back into your orbit, which I might otherwise have broken out of, to your advantage and to my own."⁶ She tries to prevent the child from being born; she is the birth trauma. "It is *she* who is the enemy. She who stands between the child and life. Only one of them can prevail; it is mortal combat. . . . The monster bears down one more time . . ." She lurks in the past of the criminal:

"Oh mother, mother," he did cry!
"You're to blame because I die;
I was trained when I was young,
For which this day I'm to be hung."⁷

* More recently, when the "Boston Strangler" was terrorizing that city with the sexual mutilation and strangling of a series of women,

[a] Medical-Psychiatric Committee, upon invitation of the stymied police, had put together an imaginative, detailed profile of the phantom Strangler. Or, to be more precise, they put together an imaginative profile of the Strangler's mother. Struck by the advanced age of the first victims, one of whom was 75, the committee postulated . . . that the elusive killer was a neat, punctual, conservatively dressed, possibly middle-aged, probably impotent, probably homosexual fellow who was consumed by raging hatred for his "sweet, orderly, neat, compulsive, seductive, punitive, overwhelming" mother. . . . Con-

She remains powerful and vampiristic after death: "What is the use of a mother's sacrificing herself for her children if after death her unappeased soul shall perforce return upon the child and exact from it all the fulfillment that should have been attained in the living flesh, and was not?"⁹ And, at the two ends of a spectrum which is really a continuum, she is Kali, the "black mother" of Hindu religion, fangs ecstatically bared, a necklace of skulls round her neck, dancing on her dead husband's body; while in Michelangelo's white-satin-marble *Pietà* she bends her virginal mannequin's face above the icy, dandiacal corpse of the son on her lap.

Somehow her relationship to him is connected with death. Is it simply that in looking at his mother (or any mature woman) he is reminded, somewhere beyond repression, of his existence as a mere speck, a weak, blind, clot of flesh growing inside her body? Remembering a time when he was nothing, is he forced to acknowledge a time when he will no longer exist? Certainly we know that he has chosen, for burial, caves, and tombs and labyrinths imitating caves which represent the female body; or the hollowed-out ship of death, which in the hero myths is also a cradle.¹⁰ He may fear—and long for—being lost again in a female body, reincorporated, pulled back into a preconscious state; to penetrate a woman can be an act filled with anxiety, in which he must ignore or deny the human breathing person,

sumed by mother hatred, the psychiatrists divined, the Strangler had chosen to murder and mutilate old women in a manner "both sadistic and loving. . . ."

Albert DeSalvo, as he revealed himself and as his juvenile records bore out, was genuinely attached to his mother. Moreover, she was still alive and not particularly sweet, neat or overwhelming. The consuming rage DeSalvo bore was uncompromisingly directed against his drunken, brutalizing father, who had regularly beaten him, his mother and the other children during a wretched youth . . . engaged in sex acts with prostitutes in front of his children, had taught his sons to shoplift, had broken every finger on his wife's hand and knocked out her teeth, and had . . . abandoned the family when Albert was eight.

(Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975], pp. 203-4.)

* Daughters may also dread being "redevoured" by their mothers; but the daughter also knows herself potentially her mother's inheritor: she, also, may bring life out of her body.

must conquer or possess her body like a territory, and even so that body remains threatening to him.¹¹ (Before leaving the Earth, astronauts, like warriors of the past, abstain from intercourse with women.) He must make a separation between the sexual woman and the "motherly" woman;¹² and even so, romantic sexual love is prevailingly associated with death.¹³

Denial of this anxiety toward the mother can take many forms: the need to view her as Angel of the Home, unambivalently loving, is merely one. A recently divorced mother of a young child told me that a man she was seeing had assured her: "Mothers turn me on—they are more real than other women. They have a foothold in the future. Childless women are already dead." Here the objectification of the woman to whom he was speaking is mingled with some, no doubt buried, need to outface, to exploit, even, her maternity. (This man's first act in entering her apartment was always to open the refrigerator.) I think it would be simplistic to say that he was "looking for a mother"; rather, he was attempting to assert his sexuality in the face of the mother who was already there.

But the mother is there, it seems, for better or worse, in childless women as well; the mother looms in each woman for the grown-up boy. Perhaps nowhere in literature has this been so clarifyingly revealed as in the "Third Duino Elegy" of Rilke. Here he addresses the "Mädchen" or young woman, the "beloved," trying to describe to her all that preceded her in his consciousness, all that she represents for him. In so doing he creates a landscape of the male psyche in its "prehistoric" apprehension of the mother (with whom the young girl becomes almost immediately confused):

But did he ever begin himself?

Mother, you created him small, it was you who started him;
he was new for you, you bent over his new eyes
the friendly world, and warded off the unfriendly.
O where are those years when with your delicate figure
you simply stood between him and surging chaos?
You hid much from him thus; you rendered harmless
the eerie room at night; from your full heart's sanctuary
you mixed a more humane space into his space of night.
You placed the night-light, not in the darkness, no.
but in your closer being, and it shone with friendship.

There was nowhere a creak you couldn't explain away, smiling,
as though you'd long known when the floor would act that way.
And he listened, and calmed down . . .

He, the new, retreating one, how he was entangled
in the ever-growing vines of inner events
already twisted in patterns, into choking growth,
into beastlike stalking forms. How he gave himself—loved.
Loved his inner self, the wilderness inside him,
that jungle on whose quiet deadfall
his heart stood up, lightgreen. Loved. Left it, went
with his own roots, into a vast new beginning
where his insignificant birth was already forgotten. Loving
he went down into the older blood, the canyons
where lay the monstrous, still gorged with the fathers . . .
. . . this, woman, came before you . . .

So the young woman is to mediate for him in his "monstrous"
inner life, just as the mother mediated in his childhood with the
strange world and his own night-fears:

. . . Oh, slowly, slowly
do something kind for him each day, a task he can rely on
—bring him
close to the garden, give him the extra weight
of nights
Keep him with you

The woman, yet again, as healer, helper, bringer of tenderness
and security. The roles (or rules) are clear: nowhere in the
Elegies is it suggested that a man might do this for a woman, or
that the woman has her own inner complexity. Rilke grappled
at least once with the possibility of a change in roles. In *The
Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, he asks whether, since
women have done the work of "loving" for centuries, it might
not be time for men to take on their share of this work. "We
have been spoiled by easy enjoyment like all dilettanti and
stand in the odor of mastery. But what if we were to despise our
successes, what if we were to start from the very outset to learn
the work of love, which has always been done for us? What if
we were to go ahead and become beginners, now that much is
changing?"¹⁴

But nowhere in his musings does Rilke acknowledge even
faintly what the cost of doing this "work of love" for men—in
a word, mothering—has been for women. Depending for en-
couragement and protectiveness on a series of women, soul-
mates and patronesses, he remained essentially a son. In 1902
he writes of his recent marriage to the sculptor Clara Westhoff:

Since December we have a dear little daughter, Ruth, and life
has become much richer with her.—For the woman—accord-
ing to my conviction—a child is a completion and a liberation
from all strangeness and insecurity: it is, spiritually too, the
mark of maturity; and I am filled with the conviction that the
woman artist, who has had and has and loves a child, is, no less
than the mature man, capable of reaching all the artistic
heights the man can reach under the same conditions, that is,
if he is an artist . . .

In the past year I have had a little household with my wife (in
a little village near Worpswede); but the household consumed
too much, and so we have promised each other to live for our
work, each as a bachelor of limited means, as before.¹⁵

But of course for Clara Westhoff, as the mother of a child, it
could never again be "as before." Eventually she was to en-
trust Ruth to her own mother in order to go on with her work.
But the meaning of what it is to have a child, for the woman
artist or for any woman—the unending details of care, of fore-
thought, of having to learn all that women are assumed simply
to know "by nature," the actual physical, emotional work in
one day of mothering, the night-risings which he remembers
from a child's point of view, oblivious of the inroads of broken
sleep on a woman's life and work—all this Rilke, childlike, takes
for granted, as men have usually taken it.

We read Rilke in part because he often seems on the verge of
saying—or seeing—further than other male writers, in the sense
of knowing, at least, that the relationship of man to woman is
more dubious, more obscure, than literature has assumed. By
far the majority of men have written of women out of the
unexplored depths of their fears, guilt, centered on our relation-
ship to them, that is, to women perceived as either mothers or
antimothers.

It is these grown-up male children who have told us and each

other: in Mesopotamia that we were "a pitfall, a hole, a ditch" (a grave?);¹⁶ under Hindu law, that we were by nature seductive and impure and required to live under male control, whatever our caste;¹⁷ in the Christian Era, that we were "the head of sin, a weapon of the devil, expulsion from Paradise, mother of guilt";¹⁸ that as Eternal Woman we wore the word "mystery" inscribed on our brows and that self-sacrifice was our privilege;¹⁹ that our wombs were "unbridled" breeding-places of "brackish, nitrous, voracious humours";²⁰ by the Victorian medical experts, both that we had no sensuality and that "voluptuous spasms" would make us barren, also that "the real woman regards all men . . . as a sort of stepson, towards whom her heart goes out in motherly tenderness";²¹ in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, that we were victims of our own "biological tragedy" which no legal and social changes could undo;²² by the neo-Freudians, that "the syndrome of decay, the evil tendency in man, is basically rooted in the mother-child relationship";²³ in the People's Republic of China that the love of women for women is a bourgeois aberration, a function of capitalism.

But before we were mothers, we have been, first of all, women, with actual bodies and actual minds.

2

The first thing I remember hearing about mothers and sons, at the age of about six, was the story of the "brave Spartan mothers" who sent their sons forth to battle with the adjuration: *With your shield or on it*, meaning that the young man was to return victorious, or dead. Over and over a picture played itself out in my mind: the young man, wounded, without his shield, finds his way back to his mother's door. Would she really refuse to open it?

Vous travaillez pour l'armée, madame?

I still have a children's book, much-read in my early years, which quotes the following letter:

Dear Madam:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the

field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,
Abraham Lincoln²⁴

Despite these early impressions, when I first became pregnant I set my heart on a son. (In our childish "acting-out" games I had always preferred the masculine roles and persuaded or forced my younger sister to act the feminine ones.) I still identified more with men than with women; the men I knew seemed less held back by self-doubt and ambivalence, more choices seemed open to them. I wanted to give birth, at twenty-five, to my unborn self, the self that our father-centered family had suppressed in me, someone independent, actively willing, original—those possibilities I had felt in myself in flashes as a young student and writer, and from which, during pregnancy, I was to close myself off. If I wanted to give birth to myself as a male, it was because males seemed to inherit those qualities by right of gender. And I wanted a son because my husband spoke hopefully of "a little boy." Probably he, too, wanted to give birth to himself, to start afresh. A man, he wanted a male child. A Jew, and a first-born, he wanted a first-born son. An adult male, he wanted "a little boy."

I wanted a son, also, in order to do what my mother had not done: bring forth a man-child. I wanted him as a defiance to my father, who had begotten "only" daughters. My eldest son was born, as it happened, on my father's birthday.

Vous travaillez pour l'armée, madame? For generations, we have entered our sons in some kind of combat: not always so direct and bloody as those of Sparta or the Civil War. Giving birth to sons has been one means through which a woman could leave "her" mark on the world. After my youngest son was born, six years later, a woman friend, intelligent and tal-

ented herself, wrote to me: "This one . . . will be the genius. That's so obviously why it had to be born with a penis instead of a vagina."

But, having borne three sons, I found myself living, at the deepest levels of passion and confusion, with three small bodies, soon three persons, whose care I often felt was eating away at my life, but whose beauty, humor, and physical affection were amazing to me. I saw them, not as "sons" and potential inheritors of patriarchy, but as the sweet flesh of infants, the delicate insistency of exploring bodies, the purity of concentration, grief, or joy which exists undiluted in young children, dipping into which connected me with long-forgotten zones in myself. I was a restless, impatient, tired, inconsistent mother, the shock of motherhood had left me reeling; but I knew I passionately loved those three young beings.

I remember one summer, living in a friend's house in Vermont. My husband was working abroad for several weeks, and my three sons—nine, seven, and five years old—and I dwelt for most of that time by ourselves. Without a male adult in the house, without any reason for schedules, naps, regular meal-times, or early bedtimes so the two parents could talk, we fell into what I felt to be a delicious and sinful rhythm. It was a spell of unusually hot, clear weather, and we ate nearly all our meals outdoors, hand-to-mouth; we lived half-naked, stayed up to watch bats and stars and fireflies, read and told stories, slept late. I watched their slender little-boys' bodies grow brown, we washed in water warm from the garden hose lying in the sun, we lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children. At night they fell asleep without murmur and I stayed up reading and writing as I had when a student, till the early morning hours. I remember thinking: This is what living with children could be—without school hours, fixed routines, naps, the conflict of being both mother and wife with no room for being, simply, myself. Driving home once after midnight from a late drive-in movie, through the foxfire and stillness of a winding Vermont road, with three sleeping children in the back of the car, I felt wide awake, elated; we had broken together all the rules of bedtime, the night rules, rules I myself thought I had to observe in the city or become a "bad mother." We were con-

spirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood; I felt enormously in charge of my life. Of course the institution closed down on us again, and my own mistrust of myself as a "good mother" returned, along with my resentment of the archetype. But I knew even then that I did not want my sons to act for me in the world, any more than I wished for them to kill or die for their country. I wanted to act, to live, in myself and to love them for their separate selves.

3

Does this sense of personal worth, this enthusiasm for one's own personality [as in Whitman and Richard Jefferies] belong only to great self-expressive souls? or to a mature period of life I have not yet attained? or may I perhaps be shut off from it by eternal law because I am a woman, and lonely? It seems to me the one priceless gift of this life:—of all blessings on earth I would choose to have a man-child who possessed it.²⁶

The fathers have of course demanded sons; as heirs, field-hands, cannon-fodder, feeders of machinery, images and extensions of themselves; their immortality. In societies systematically practicing female infanticide, women might understandably wish for boys rather than face the prospect of nine months of pregnancy whose outcome would be treated as a waste product. Yet, under the realities of organized male territoriality and aggression, when women produce sons, they are literally working for the army. It may be easier to repress this knowledge, or to believe that one's own child will escape death at war, than to face the routine murder of a female infant. In a society riddled with sanctions against women, a mother may instinctively place more value—let us say more hope—on a son, just as some Afro-Americans, before the growth of "Black pride," felt constrained to value the child with the lightest skin and most Caucasoid features. The sense of the un-lived, the unachieved in a woman's own life, may unconsciously express itself, as in the passage quoted above from the youthful notebooks of Ruth Benedict (who was later to marry, hope for children she never had, finally leave her marriage and become a distinguished anthropologist and a feminist of a kind).

"To have a man-child who possessed it." And so we come upon ground still lying in the shadow of Freud. Within the last forty years, Freud's work has been both revised and vulgarized, so that acceptance or rejection of "Freudianism" is frequently based on selected aspects of his work, filtered through other minds. (We should not underestimate the power of films, plays, jokes.) No one aspect of his theory has been more influential than the so-called Oedipus complex. Women who have never read Freud are raising their sons in the belief that to show them physical affection is to be "seductive," that to influence their sons against forms of masculine behavior they as women abhor, is to "castrate" them or to become "the 'devouring,' 'domineering' creature that their sons will have to reject in order to grow up mentally healthy," or that they, and they alone, are responsible if their sons become "unnecessarily [sic] homosexual."²⁶

Freud was unquestionably a pioneer along certain lines: for example, in positing the idea that the emotionally afflicted are not simply moral criminals, and that unconscious impulses contribute to ordinary human actions. Primitive as his dream-analysis may seem to us today, he did reestablish recognition of the dream as a significant event, to which attention must be paid, after several centuries of a "science" of medicine which had denied its validity. But Freud was also a man, terribly limited both by his culture and his gender. Karen Horney, one of his most searching early critics, pointed out the narrowly biological and mechanistic foundations of his thought, his reduction of psychological qualities to anatomical causes, and his inherently dualistic thinking, in which instinct and "ego," feminine and masculine, passivity and activity, are seen as polar opposites. In particular she assailed his view that we go on throughout life repeating or regressing backward into events of childhood; a view which she rightly felt to deny the organic development of a person, the qualitative changes we go through in the process of a life.

Horney accepted the Oedipus complex, though with serious qualifications: unlike Freud she did not believe that a child's intense sexual feelings toward parents are biologically determined, therefore universal; she saw them as the result of con-

crete situations experienced by some, but not all, children.²⁷ Her critique was extremely daring and courageous at a time when the ubiquitous Oedipus complex, repressed or active, was believed to be at the center of psychic life. Her divergences from Freud caused her to be excommunicated two years later from the powerful New York Psychoanalytic Institute. But for us, her views do not press far enough.

For the male child, Freud believed the Oedipus complex to consist of the process whereby a little boy first experiences strong sexual feelings for his mother, then learns to detach and differentiate himself from her, to identify as a male with his father instead of perceiving him as a rival, and finally to go on to a point where his erotic instincts can be turned toward a woman other than his mother. Freud thought that the boy's infantile sexual feelings for his mother create anxiety in him that his jealous father will punish him by castration. The ideal resolution of the Oedipus complex is for the boy to give up his attachment to his mother, and to internalize and identify with his father, whom he recognizes as superior in power. The price of keeping his penis, then, is to adopt his father, in Freudian terminology, as "super-ego"—in short, to acknowledge the supremacy of patriarchal law, the discipline of the instincts, exogamy, and the incest taboo.

Freud suggested a range of possibilities in this early crisis: the boy might actually be threatened with castration as punishment for masturbation; jealous fathers might actually use circumcision (symbolic castration) against pubescent sons; but also, these events might simply take place in fantasy.²⁸

The fundamental assumption here is that the two-person mother-child relationship is by nature regressive, circular, unproductive, and that culture depends on the son-father relationship. All that the mother can do for the child is perpetuate a dependency which prevents further development. Through the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the boy makes his way into the male world, the world of patriarchal law and order. Civilization—meaning, of course, patriarchal civilization—requires the introduction of the father (whose presence has so far not been essential since nine months before birth) as a third figure in the interrelationship of mother and child. The

Oedipus complex thus becomes, in Juliet Mitchell's phrase, "the entry into human culture." But it is distinctively the father who represents not just authority but culture itself, the super-ego which controls the blind thrashings of the "id." Civilization means identification, not with the mother but with the father.

Freud also held that the little girl experiences her lack of a penis as "castration"; that, to become a woman, she must substitute pregnancy and a baby for the missing male organ. Given this assumption, it is not surprising that he should have invested the mother-son relationship with this "libidinal," unconscious quality: the son is not only a baby, he possesses the penis the mother has craved. (It is, however, difficult to understand how Freud also imagined the relationship of mother and son to be free from ambivalence and "egoistic considerations.")

Over and over, this view of the impulse to motherhood has been challenged by women analysts. Not only Horney, but Clara Thompson and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann urged that if the small girl wishes for a penis at all, it is only because she sees privilege and favor bestowed on people who have this single distinguishing feature. They perceived the penis as a metaphor, the wish for a child as a wholly different kind of impulse.

But even as we challenge or refute Freud's structure, the questions arise: How *does* the male child differentiate himself from his mother, and does this mean inevitably that he must "join the army," that is, internalize patriarchal values? Can the mother, in patriarchy, represent culture, and if so, what does this require of her? Above all, what does separation from the mother mean for the son?

It means, of course, in the first place, physical birth, leaving the warm, weightless dream of the amniotic sac. It means the gradual process through which the baby discovers that the mother's breast, her face, her body's warmth, belong to another person, do not exist purely for him, can disappear and return, will respond to his crying, his smiles, his physical needs, but increasingly, not always in perfect rhythm with his desires and pangs. It means a dual process, in which the mother first absents herself—momentarily or longer—from the child, then later he experiments with games of hide-and-seek, and finally,

on his own legs, is able to wander away from her for short distances. It means weaning, learning that others beside his mother can take care of him, that he is safe in his mother's absence. Undoubtedly the child feels anxiety and desolation at each of these stages, the fear that security, tenderness, reliability may have departed forever. A third person, other persons, are obviously necessary to relieve this anxiety, to dry his tears of abandonment, to reassure him that all care and love are not embodied solely in one person, his mother, and to make it possible for him to accept her separateness and his own. But more often than not that third person has also been a woman: a grandmother, aunt, older sister, nurse. She may, in fact, give more care and cherishing than the mother has been able to give; she may become, emotionally, the mother. As for male figures, the child's experience is that they are less physical, less cherishing, more intermittent in their presence, more remote, more judgmental, more for-themselves, than the women who are around him. Male or female, the child learns early that gender has something to do with emotional attunement to others.

Yet finally he must be taken over by these male figures. Tribal societies have always required a "second birth" of the young boy at puberty into the male group. "In the initiation rites . . . the young men are as it were swallowed up by the tutelary spirit of this masculine world and are reborn as children of the spirit rather than of the mother; they are sons of heaven, not just sons of earth. This spiritual rebirth signifies the birth of the 'higher man' who, even on the primitive level, is associated with consciousness, the ego, and will power. . . . The man's world, representing 'heaven,' stands for law and tradition, for the gods of aforetime, so far as they were masculine gods."²⁹ The event is often attended by animal castration and sacrifice, symbolic wounds, ordeal. It may also be attended by an overt ritualized rejection of the mother: striking her, as with the Fiji, wounding her with arrows, as with the Apache and Iroquois. But whatever the ritual to be enacted, the child-with-a-penis is expected to bond himself with others who have penises. It hardly matters, then, if the son grows up in a so-called matriarchal family of strong women, or one in which the mother is

head of the household. He must still—according to this view—come to terms with the Fathers, the representatives of law and tradition, the wagers of aggression, the creators and purveyors of the dominant culture.

And his mother, whatever her deepest instincts tell her, is expected to facilitate this. My grandmother often described, and still with pain, how my father—an undersized, slender Jewish boy—was sent off to military school at the age of about ten. "The uniform was too big for him . . . I can see him to this day, the smallest of all the boys, looking so scared on that platform waiting for that train." But she sent him off, for a "better education" and to become a man; what choice did she have, in Birmingham, Alabama, in the early twentieth century?

The third term in the so-called Oedipal triangle is, in fact, patriarchal power. Any attempt to salvage the Oedipus complex as a theory of human development must begin here. The anthropologist Sherry Ortner offers the possibility that, even though Freud assumed that the "Oedipal process" takes place in a biological family, there is a more basic underlying theory of socialization which is independent of any specific society or gender-roles. "It is a powerful and . . . ultimately dialectical theory; the person evolves through a process of struggle with and . . . integration . . . of symbolic figures of love, desire and authority." Ortner suggests that this structure would exist even if a child were reared equally by two or more parents, male and female or of the same sex, who shared in nurturance and authority; although, as she points out, "even where the nuclear family has been experimentally broken up, as in the Kibbutz for example, the nursery attendants have always been wholly or predominantly female."^{80*}

Rereading Freud, and some Freudians (notably Juliet Mitchell, who is more a Freudian than either a Marxist or a feminist), wending through such concepts as *penis envy*, *cas-*

* And state authority has been wholly or predominantly male: for example, Israel, the Soviet Union, Cuba, the Republic of China. That Golda Meir or Indira Gandhi are women does not alter the maleness of that authority, which emanates, finally, from and through male institutions.

tration, the child (especially the son) as *penis-substitute*, what finally leaves the strongest impression is a tone-deafness in the language. This may well result from the psychoanalysts' desire to feel that they are dealing with memory, dream, fantasy, on a "scientific" level; that is, in the false sense of science as the opposite of poetry.* A penis, a breast, obviously have imaginative implications beyond their biological existence (just as an eye, an ear, the lungs, the vulva, or any other part of the body which we inhabit intellectually and sensually). Yet these implications go unexplored; the density and resonance of the physical image gets lost in the abstract reductiveness of the jargon. Even the much-evoked penis, in Freudian theory, seems a poor thing, divested of the dimensionality it possessed as a symbol of generative power, the *herm*, the Great Mother's appurtenance in prepatriarchal cults. This limitation—which comes, as Karen Horney suggests, from Freud's rigidly biological and dualistic approach—is particularly notable where the figure of the mother (and hence of woman) is involved, in the dreams and fantasies of men.

Juliet Mitchell reiterates that we should not fault Freud for what he did not attempt: an analysis of the social conditions which, as he himself acknowledged, contribute to feminine psychology.⁸¹ Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist, has been quoted as saying that "every great thinker has at least one blind spot: Freud's was women."⁸² But in fact there is no such thing as an intellectual "blind spot" surrounded by an outlook of piercing lucidity—least of all when that spot happens to cover the immense and complex dimensions in which women exist, both for ourselves and in the minds of men. Freud need not have been a feminist in order to have had a deeper sense of the resonance and chargedness of the figure of the woman—especially as mother—in patriarchal thinking. But, even in terms of his own proclaimed methods and goals, he, as it were, lost his nerve and drew back where women were concerned. And this

* I do not mean that science and poetry are the same thing; only that they need be in no way opposed.

affected not simply his attitudes toward women but, of necessity, his speculations and observations about men, and about the significance of the penis for both sexes. The Freudian view of the son is saturated with the Freudian hostility—and sentimentality—toward the mother.

It was Freud himself, of course, who emphasized the extent to which, in "everyday life," the double meaning, the loss of memory, the slip of the tongue, express what we do not consciously take responsibility for meaning. Elizabeth Janeway calls attention to his repeated use of the phrase, "the *fact* of castration," referring to the little girl. "We must assume that this slip is meaningful, and indeed I believe that it leads us to the heart of Freud's dilemma about the female sex."⁸³ Janeway suggests that although "little girls have not 'in fact' been castrated," Freud was well aware—though he never chose to investigate it—that women have suffered intense thwarting and deprivation as social beings. In short, Freud meant female castration as a metaphor. But precisely because he did not pursue the psychic meaning of this *social* mutilation of women (which would have forced him to go deeper into male psychology, also) his work, both on women and on men, lacks a kind of truth which has been called political and which I would call poetic and scientific as well.

4

Every culture invents its special version of the mother-son relationship. The mockery (and sentimentalization, its obverse) leveled at the Jewish-American mother by her sons, in fiction, theatre, film, and anecdote, has its roots both in Yahwist misogynist tradition and in the situation of the Jewish woman and man in assimilationist America. The immigrant Jewish woman suffered extreme reduction in the process of becoming "American"; she rapidly lost her role as mediator with the outside world, woman of business, entrepreneur, manager of the family and its fortunes, strategist of survival, to become an "American" wife to her "American" husband. Since his prestige

now depended on being the aggressive breadwinner and achiever instead of the other-worldly Talmudic student, his assertion of masculinity in transatlantic terms demanded (or seemed to demand) her dwindling into home-enclosed motherhood.⁸⁴

It is interesting to compare Freud's idyll of the "perfect" and "unambivalent" mother-son relationship with the resentment and contempt for the mother reflected in such novels as Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, or in popular nonbooks such as Dan Greenburg's *How To Be a Jewish Mother*. Yet, the idyll and the actuality have been held in a strange kind of double vision in Jewish-American culture; the mother is either sentimentalized, or ruthlessly caricatured; she is too loud, too pushy, too full of vitality (sexuality?), or asexual to the point of repressiveness; she suffers, in Freud's phrase, from "housewife psychosis"; she bullies her children with guilt and unwanted food; at intervals she is dignified by mourning or the lighting of Sabbath candles.

Pauline Bart has depicted some of the human damages inflicted on these women in her study of depression in middle-aged women.⁸⁵ And depression there is in plenty, revealed in forms ranging from the high-pitched voice and nervous laugh of self-derogation to the year-after-year reliance on sleeping-pills and tranquilizers. But there is also a smoldering energy and resilience in the domesticated Jewish woman which—from a woman's point of view—commands respect, however it has been abused or derogated by this particular subculture.* She is a survivor-woman, a fighter with tooth and claw and her own nervous system, who, like her Black sisters, has borne the weight of a people on her back. Yet she has lived between her sons' dependency and denigration on the one hand, and her own guilt-feelings and repressed rage, on the other.

The Black mother has been charged by both white and Black

* "Traits that enabled Jewish women to keep their families together in the *shtetl* and to ease their transition to the New World are the very same ones the processes of assimilation . . . were bent on exorcising. . . . Their bowls of chicken soup have become philters of hemlock" (Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* [New York: Dial Press, 1975], pp. 244-51).

males with the "castration" of her sons through her so-called matriarchal domination of the family, as breadwinner, decision-maker, and rearer of children in one. Needless to say, her "power" as "matriarch" is drastically limited by the bonds of racism, sexism, and poverty. What is misread as power here is really survival-strength, guts, the determination that her children's lives shall come to something even if it means driving them, or sacrificing her own pride in order to feed and clothe them. In attributing to the Black mother a figurative castration of her sons, white male racism, which has literally castrated thousands of Black men, reveals yet again its inextricable linkage with sexism.

5

"If you want to know more about femininity, enquire from your own experience of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information." Thus, in an edgy yet candid acknowledgment of his own limitations, Freud ended his essay, "On Femininity."

In the forty-odd years since he wrote those words, a great deal has happened. We have begun to accumulate, through the work of scientists like Mary Jane Sherfey, Masters and Johnson, Niles Newton, Alice Rossi, new information about female biology and sexuality and their relation to psychology;⁸⁶ the women's movement has unearthed and stimulated new descriptions of female experience by women; and women poets, certainly, have spoken.

One aspect of female experience which is changing—albeit gradually—is the expressed desire for sons. Undoubtedly there are and will long continue to be women who, for all the reasons given earlier, will still prefer sons, and still have higher expectations for their male children. But as some women come closer to shaping their own lives, there are signs that the overvaluation of the son *as a male* is undergoing changes as well.

Many women are expressing the sense that at this moment in human history it is simply better to be a woman; that the

broadening and deepening of the demand for women's self-determination has created a largeness of possibility, a scope for original thought and activism, above all a new sense of mutual aims and sharing among women; that we are living on the edge of immense changes which we ourselves are creating. In addition, many women have felt that the first outburst of anger they experienced in coming to feminism, the bursting of the floodgates of years, involved them in painful contradictions with their male children as part of the male caste. "You cannot alienate the child from his culture. My sons are developing many features that are most distasteful to me. They have contempt for women . . . I love them [her sons]. I cannot get myself to look at them as my enemy."⁸⁷ Whatever this woman's confusions, she is expressing a conflict which is not unique.

The fear of alienating a male child from "his" culture seems to go deep, even among women who reject that culture for themselves every day of their lives. In the early sixties I recall a similar uneasiness, among some mothers who called themselves pacifists, that to forbid toy machine guns and hand grenades was to "alienate" their sons from playmates, even perhaps to "emasculate" them. (Perhaps those mothers, too, instinctively knew the gun was phallic, that it stood for more than simple killing; perhaps they simply feared being accused, as mothers so often are accused, of castrating their children.) But the feminist mothers' fear of alienating a son from "his" culture goes even deeper.

What do we fear? That our sons will accuse us of making them into misfits and outsiders? That they will suffer as we have suffered from patriarchal reprisals? Do we fear they will somehow lose their male status and privilege, even as we are seeking to abolish that inequality? Must a woman see her child as "the enemy" in order to teach him that he need not imitate a "macho" style of maleness? How does even a mother genuinely love a son who has contempt for women—or is this that bondage, misnamed love, that so often exists between women and men? It is indeed a painful contradiction when a mother who has herself begun to break female stereotypes sees her young sons apparently caught in patterns of TV violence, foot-

ball, what Robert Reid has described as "the world of male-animal posturing, from which one male can emerge as dominant."²⁸ It is all too easy to accept unconsciously the guilt so readily thrust upon any woman who is seeking to broaden and deepen her own existence, on the grounds that this must somehow damage her children. That guilt is one of the most powerful forms of social control of women; none of us can be entirely immune to it.

A woman whose rage is under wraps may well foster a masculine aggressiveness in her son; she has experienced no other form of assertiveness. She may allow him literally to strike her, to domineer over her, in his small maleness, out of a kind of double identification: this young, posturing male animal is one with the entire male realm that has victimized her; but also, he is a piece of *her*, a piece that can express itself unchecked; and for this he is forgiven his *khamstvo* (a Russian word which combines "coarseness, truculence, bestiality and brutality" and which Soviet women have used about their men).²⁹

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leader of the nineteenth-century American women's suffrage movement and the mother of five sons,* acknowledged the burdens of mothering her sons, and the essential ironies:

I have so much care with all these boys on my hands. . . .
How much I do long to be free from housekeeping and children
. . . but it may be well for me to understand all the trials of
woman's lot, that I may more eloquently proclaim them when
the time comes . . .

. . . tomorrow the sun will shine and my blessed baby will
open his sweet blue eyes, crow and look so lovingly on me that
I shall live again joyfully . . .

When I think of all the wrongs that have been heaped upon
womankind, I am ashamed that I am not forever in a condition
of chronic wrath, stark mad, skin and bone, my eyes a fountain
of tears, my lips overflowing with curses, and my hand against
every man and brother! Ah, how I do repent me of the male

* One son, Theodore, collaborated with a sister in editing the two volumes of Stanton's writings. He also wrote his own book on *The Woman Question in Europe*.

faces I have washed, the mittens I have knit, the trousers mended, the cut fingers and broken toes I have bound up!⁴⁰

But it is absurd to think that women on the path of feminism wish to abandon their sons, emotionally or otherwise. Rather, the mother-son relationship—like all relationships—is undergoing reevaluation, both in the light of the mother's changing relationship to male ideology, and in terms of her hopes and fears for her sons. If we wish for our sons—as for our daughters—that they may grow up un mutilated by gender-roles, sensitized to misogyny in all its forms, we also have to face the fact that in the present stage of history our sons may feel profoundly alone in the masculine world, with few if any close relationships with other men (as distinct from male "bonding" in defense of male privilege). When the son ceases to be the mother's outreach into the world, because she is reaching out into it herself, he ceases to be instrumental for her and has the chance to become a person.

I have been asked, sometimes with genuine curiosity, sometimes with veiled hostility, "What do your sons think about all this?" ("All this" being feminism in general, my own commitment to women in particular.) When asked with hostility the implication is that a feminist must be man-hating, castrating; that "all this" must of course be damaging to my children; it is a question meant to provoke guilt. (My only answer, obviously, is, "You'll have to ask them.") But the less our energy and power, as women, is expended on making our sons into our instruments, our agents in a system which has tried to keep us powerless, the less our sons need live under the burden of their mother's un-lived lives.

The poet Sue Silvermarie writes of her young son, not as a compensation for male power and privilege, but as a source of unexpected revelation of the depth of what she calls "the motherbond":

My deep preference for women made mothering a male seem contradictory. But it is my very preference which now generates insight into the motherbond. The bond so easily blurred by everyday role-tasks. . . . What comes clear is the passion—the series of love-poems that poured from me while I carried him

. . . the strength that let me defy all those who called him illegitimate . . . the moment of holding him to my breast in the hospital room and looking up to see my own mother at the foot of the bed with tears in her eyes . . . the feeling that when I am right with him, my life is lucid, but when our relationship is muddled, clouds cover my days. It is when I use this kind of perspective that his gender pales into insignificance. . . . Resentment gone, I can love him freely. I am more important to myself than is anyone else, I need not sacrifice my integrity, but neither must I sacrifice my son's. The passion of the motherbond demands whole persons.

But this mother also acknowledges, in her poem, "To a Boy-Child," the possibility of a time of confusion and separation:

i tremble to see your temptations.
 how clear for me what losing you would mean.
 how confusing for you
 little man. already
 you're lured by what passes for power,
 and is, by half.
 what do I do with your guns?
 outlaws, you're playing, and I think
 it is i who am out of the law,
 it is you within it,
 approved,
 who grows blind to its bars . . .⁴¹

Surely here the "penis" becomes the obverse of the mother's fulfillment. Passionately loving her child as a small human being, she has nothing to gain from the mere fact of his maleness. She fears the *price* of the penis for him—the boy's acceptance of (and within) patriarchal law. But neither does she wish her son were a girl; she affirms both the complexity and the pain of the world of gender.

In a different vein, Robin Morgan addresses her son:

Little heart, little heart,
 You have sung in me like the spiral alder-bud.
 You, who gave birth to this mother
 comprehend, for how much longer? my mysteries. . . .

You have clung to me like a spiderling
 to the back of the *Lycosa lenta*; wolf-spider mother,
 I have waited, wherever you fell off,
 for you to scramble on before proceeding.

But you have come five-fold years
 and what I know now is nothing
 can abduct you fully from the land where you were born . . .

I have set my seal upon you.

I say:
 you shall be a child of the mother
 as of old, and your face will not be turned from me . . .⁴²

It may be objected that these mothers, too, want to make their sons instrumental, in the sense of rearing them in anti-masculinist values. But there is a distinction between heaping our thwarted energies on our sons, and hoping to unlock possibilities for them even as we are doing it for ourselves. I sense in Morgan's poem a hope and longing, expressed—perhaps optimistically—as conviction; in Silvermarie's a greater diffidence as to the outcome, but in both a recognition that the son will have to make choices between "the male group" and his own humanity.

We come back to the question of separation. For the son to remain a "child of the mother" in Morgan's sense is not for him to remain childish, dependent, the receiver rather than the giver of nurture, an eternal boy. In a seeming paradox, it is the "sons of the fathers" who persist in searching everywhere for the woman with whom they can be infantile, the embodiment of demand, the primitive child, Stanley Kowalski howling for his wife. The world of the fathers, the male group, is too obsessed with aggression and defense to sanction and give solace to fear, self-doubt, ordinary mortal weakness, and tears. The son of the fathers learns contempt for himself in states of suffering, and can reveal them only to women, whom he must then also hold in contempt, or resent for their knowledge of his weakness. The "son of the mother" (the mother who first loves herself) has a greater chance of realizing that strength and vulnerability, toughness and expressiveness, nurturance and au-

thority, are not opposites, not the sole inheritance of one sex or the other. But this implies a new understanding of the love between mother and son.

Vulgar psychoanalytic opinion has it that the "son of the mother" becomes homosexual, either in flight from the power of women, or in protest against the traditional male role. In fact, we know next to nothing about the influences and accidents which lead to erotic love for one's own sex. And of heterosexuality, we know only that it has had a biological function, and that enormous social pressure has appeared to be necessary to maintain it, an institutionalized compulsion far beyond the present biological needs of the species. Why men choose men instead of women for sexual gratification, or as life-partners, is a question which cannot be answered simplistically in terms of fifth-century Athens; nor in terms of the "effeminizing" of sons by mothers who want to "hold on" to them. (Goethe and Freud, neither of them famous as homosexuals, were both sons of the mother in the sense of being preferred and cherished.) A man may well seek the love of other men in reaction to his father's *khamstvo*, his gross abuse of women as sexual objects; or he may try to replace a father who was chiefly absent. The spectrum of male homosexuality—ranging from the homosexual who genuinely likes and cares about women to the drag queen's contemptuous parody of female oppression, is known as yet only in its superficial aspects.* I believe that all men to some degree dread strong women, but I have had no experience which suggests that dread to be greater in homosexuals than in men who call themselves "straight." The systems men have created are homogeneous systems, which exclude and degrade women or deny our existence; and the most frequent rationalization for our exclusion from those systems is that we are or ought to be mothers. Both straight and homosexual men take refuge

* 1986: For a much more considered view of the drag queen, see Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), pp. 95-96: "One dilemma of the modern Gay drag queen is that he is impersonating a female God and female characteristics that people around him may despise, and he may be seen only as a mocker of women, sometimes most of all by his Lesbian sisters."

in those systems. Yet the fear that our strength, or our influence, will "make our sons into homosexuals" still haunts even women who do not condemn homosexuality as such, perhaps because the power of patriarchal ideology still makes it seem a better fate for the boy to grow into a "real man."

6

What do we want for our sons? Women who have begun to challenge the values of patriarchy are haunted by this question. We want them to remain, in the deepest sense, sons of the mother, yet also to grow into themselves, to discover new ways of being men even as we are discovering new ways of being women. We could wish that there were more fathers—not one, but many—to whom they could also be sons, fathers with the sensitivity and commitment to help them into a manhood in which they would not perceive women as the sole sources of nourishment and solace. These fathers barely exist as yet; one exceptional individual here and there is a sign of hope, but still only a personal solution. Nor, as Jane Lazarre has pointed out, is the tokenly "involved" father even an individual solution. Until men are ready to share the responsibilities of full-time, universal child-care as a social priority, their sons and ours will be without any coherent vision of what nonpatriarchal manhood might be.⁴⁸ The pain, floundering, and ambivalence our male children experience is not to be laid at the doors of mothers who are strong, nontraditional women; it is the traditional fathers who—even when they live under the same roof—have deserted their children hourly and daily. We have to recognize, at this moment of history, as through centuries past, that most of our sons are—in the most profound sense—virtually fatherless.

Even if contraception were perfected to infallibility, so that no woman need ever again bear an unwanted child; even if laws and customs change—as long as women and women only are the nurturers of children, our sons will grow up looking only to women for compassion, resenting strength in women as "control," clinging to women when we try to move into a new mode

of relationship. As long as society itself is patriarchal—which means antimaternal—there can never be enough mothering for sons who have to grow up under the rule of the Fathers, in a public “male” world separate from the private “female” world of the affections.

We need to understand that there is a difference between handing our sons over to patriarchy, on its terms, “travaillant pour l’armée,” figuratively or literally allowing them to victimize us as tokens of their manhood; and helping them to separate from us, to become themselves. Esther Harding cites the recurrent myth of “the sacrifice of the son”: Attis, Adonis, Horus, Osiris. In these myths, the son on reaching manhood is sacrificed “by the edict and consent of his mother.” She observes that this myth has always been treated from the son’s point of view, as “the need . . . to sacrifice his own childishness and dependence.” She examines it from the point of view of the mother: “She loves him, and, in the myths, must always sacrifice him.” A decisive “no” must be said where all was “yes” before: indulgence, protectiveness, compliance, pure motherliness.

For the mother as much as for the son, lifelong mothering is a denial of her own wholeness. Harding suggests that a continuing maternal protectiveness is an unwillingness to face the harshness of life, for herself as much as for her child. She further sees the “sacrifice of the son” as needing to take place, by extension, between women and men in general:

It is no accident that the sacrifice . . . is represented by castration, for the most fundamental demand for satisfaction that man makes upon woman is the demand for satisfaction of his sexuality. It is in this realm that he feels . . . most helpless to cope with his own need, except by demanding that the woman serve him. This childish demand on his part and the equally undeveloped maternal wish to give on hers, may serve on a low level . . . to produce an alliance between a man and a woman which passes for relationship. But when a necessity arises for something more mature in the situation between them . . . the man may be compelled to recognize that the woman is something more than the reciprocal of his need. . . . When she refuses any longer to mother him, no longer repressing her

own needs in her determination to fulfill his, he will find himself faced with the necessity of meeting the reality of the situation. . . . The loss of the phallus refers to the necessity for the man to give up his demand that the woman satisfy his sexual and emotional needs as if she were his mother.⁴⁴

Harding is saying that the maternal emotions can hold the mother in arrest as much as the son. But maternal altruism is the one quality universally approved and supported in women. The son may be ritually passed over into manhood, or his later difficulties may be blamed on his mother’s excessive love and protectiveness, but *she* gets little support in her efforts to achieve a separation.

Harding, like other Jungians, fails to give full weight to the pressure on all women—not only mothers—to remain in a “giving,” assenting, maternalistic relationship to men. The cost of refusing to do so, even in casual relationships or conversations, is often to be labeled “hostile,” a “ball-breaker,” a “castrating bitch.” A plain fact cleanly spoken by a woman’s tongue is not infrequently perceived as a cutting blade directed at a man’s genitals.

And women too reinforce in each other a “mothering” attitude toward men. Often one woman’s advice to another on relationships with men will be worded in terms of the treatment of children. “[Our] attitude can influence men’s perception of themselves, so that they conform to it. In other words—as in dealing with children—if you say to a child ‘You’re mean!’ he or she will agree, internalize your judgment, and get mean!” a sensitive and learned woman writes to me. In fact, one of the most insidious patterns between the sexes is the common equation, by women, of man with child. It is infantilizing to men, and it has meant a trapping of female energy which can hardly be calculated.

Mary Daly has noted that men perceive the new presence of women to each other as an absence.⁴⁵ This is the real separation they dread—that women should not be waiting there for them when they return from the male group, the hierarchies, the phallic world. This fear of women communing with each other, when not expressed as ridicule or contempt, often takes the overt forms of “Don’t leave me!”—the man beseeching the

woman who is finding her spiritual and political community with other women. "Any really creative vision of new ways, of a new society, ought to and will have to include men," a troubled friend writes to me, on the letterhead of one of the most sexist institutions in the United States. He fears a loss of "humanity" when women speak and listen to women. I suspect that what he really fears is the absence of humanity among men, the cerebral divisions of the male group, the undeveloped affections between man and man, the ruthless pursuit of goals, the defensive male bonding which goes only skin-deep. Underneath it all I hear the cry of the man-child: "Mother! Don't leave me!"

And, men fear the loss of privilege. It is all too evident that the majority of "concerned" or "profeminist" men secretly hope that "liberation" will give them the right to shed tears while still exercising their old prerogatives. Frantz Fanon describes the case of a European police inspector engaged in torturing Algerian revolutionaries, who suffered from mental disorder and pain so serious that his family life became gravely disturbed, and who came for psychiatric treatment.

This man knew perfectly well that his disorders were directly caused by the kind of activity that went on inside the rooms where interrogations were carried out. . . . As he could not see his way to stopping torturing people (that made nonsense to him for in that case he would have to resign) he asked me without beating about the bush to help him go on torturing Algerian patriots without any prickings of conscience, without any behavior problems, and with complete equanimity.⁴⁶

Men are increasingly aware that their disorders may have something to do with patriarchy. But few of them wish to resign from it. The women's movement is still seen in terms of the mother-child relationship: either as a punishment and abandonment of men for past bad behavior, or as a potential healing of men's pain by women, a new form of maternalism, in which little by little, through gentle suasion, women with a new vision will ease men into a more humane and sensitive life. In short, that women will go on doing for men what men cannot or will not do for each other or themselves.

The question, "What do we want for our sons?" ultimately

does become, what do we want for men and what will we demand of them? (As I write these words, most women in the world are far too preoccupied with the immediate effects of patriarchy on their lives—too-large families, inadequate or non-existent child-care, malnutrition, enforced seclusion, lack of education, inadequate wages due to sex discrimination—to demand anything, or to ask this question; but that fact does not render the question either reactionary or trivial.) The question of first priority is, of course, what do we want for ourselves? But, whether we are chided or childless, married, divorced, lesbian, celibate, token women, feminists, or separatists, the other question is still with us.

If I could have one wish for my own sons, it is that they should have the courage of women. I mean by this something very concrete and precise: the courage I have seen in women who, in their private and public lives, both in the interior world of their dreaming, thinking, and creating, and the outer world of patriarchy, are taking greater and greater risks, both psychic and physical, in the evolution of a new vision. Sometimes this involves tiny acts of immense courage; sometimes public acts which can cost a woman her job or her life; often it involves moments, or long periods, of thinking the unthinkable, being labeled, or feeling, crazy; always a loss of traditional securities. Every woman who takes her life into her own hands does so knowing that she must expect enormous pain, inflicted both from within and without. I would like my sons not to shrink from this kind of pain, not to settle for the old male defenses, including that of a fatalistic self-hatred. And I would wish them to do this not for me, or for other women, but for themselves, and for the sake of life on the planet Earth.

In 1890 Olive Schreiner related a parable in which a woman is trying to cross a deep, fordless river into the land of freedom. She wants to carry with her the male infant suckling at her breast, but she is told, No, you will lose your life trying to save him; he must grow into a man and save himself, and then you will meet him on the other side.⁴⁷ We infantilize men and deceive ourselves when we try to make these changes easy and unthreatening for them. We are going to have to put down the grown-up male children we have carried in our arms, against

our breasts, and move on, trusting ourselves and them enough to do so. And, yes, we will have to expect their anger, their cries of "Don't leave me!", their reprisals.

This is not the place, nor am I the person, to draw blueprints for the assimilation of men in large numbers into a comprehensive system of child-care, although I believe that would be the most revolutionary priority that any male group could set itself. It would not only change the expectations children—and therefore men—have of women and men; nor would it simply break down gender-roles and diversify the work-patterns of both sexes; it would change the entire community's relationship to childhood. In learning to give care to children, men would have to cease being children; the privileges of fatherhood could not be toyed with, as they now are, without an equal share in the full experience of nurture. I can see many difficulties and dangers in integrating men into the full child-rearing process; looming first is the old notion that child-care, because it has been women's work, is passive, low-level, nonwork; or that it is simply "fun." Close behind this comes the undeveloped capacity for sympathetic identification in men. I also believe that many women would prefer that even in a comprehensive day-care system, women remain the prime carers for children—for a variety of reasons, not all of them short-sighted or traditional. Women, at all events, must and will take the leadership in demanding, drafting, and implementing such a profound structural and human change. In order to do so we will have to possess more consciously our own realms of unconscious, preverbal knowledge as mothers, biological or not. Perhaps for a long time men will need a kind of compensatory education in the things about which their education as males has left them illiterate.

Meanwhile, in the realm of personal relationships, if men are to begin to share in the "work of love" we will have to change our ways of loving them. This means, among other things, that we cease praising and being grateful to the fathers of our children when they take some partial share in their care and nurture. (No woman is considered "special" because she carries out her responsibilities as a parent; not to do so is considered a social crime.) It also means that we cease treating men as if

their egos were of eggshell, or as if the preservation of a masculine ego at the expense of an equal relationship were even desirable. It means that we begin to expect of men, as we do of women, that they can behave like our equals without being applauded for it or singled out as "exceptional"; and that we refuse them the traditional separation between "love" and "work."

They will not, for a long time, see this as a new form of love. We will be told we are acting and speaking out of hatred; that we are becoming "like them"; that they will perish emotionally without our constant care and attention. But through centuries of suckling men emotionally at our breasts we have also been told that we were polluted, devouring, domineering, masochistic, harpies, bitches, dykes, and whores.

We are slowly learning to discredit these recitals, including the one that begins, "Mothers are more real than other women."

IX MOTHERHOOD AND DAUGHTERHOOD

Mother
I write home
I am alone and
give me my body back.
—Susan Griffin

A folder lies open beside me as I start to write, spilling out references and quotations, all relevant probably, but none of which can help me to begin. This is the core of my book, and I enter it as a woman who, born between her mother's legs, has time after time and in different ways tried to return to her mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her, to find the mutual confirmation from and with another woman that daughters and mothers alike hunger for, pull away from, make possible or impossible for each other.

The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. That earliest enwrapping of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world. Of course, the male infant also first knows tenderness, nourishment, mutuality from a female body. But institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a man, if she is to become what is defined as a "normal" woman

—that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards men.*

I saw my own mother's menstrual blood before I saw my own. Hers was the first female body I ever looked at, to know what women were, what I was to be. I remember taking baths with her in the hot summers of early childhood, playing with her in the cool water. As a young child I thought how beautiful she was; a print of Botticelli's Venus on the wall, half-smiling, hair flowing, associated itself in my mind with her. In early adolescence I still glanced slyly at my mother's body, vaguely imagining: I too shall have breasts, full hips, hair between my thighs—whatever that meant to me then, and with all the ambivalence of such a thought. And there were other thoughts: I too shall marry, have children—but *not like her*. I shall find a way of doing it all differently.

My father's tense, narrow body did not seize my imagination, though authority and control ran through it like electric filaments. I used to glimpse his penis dangling behind a loosely tied bathrobe. But I had understood very early that he and my mother were different. It was his voice, presence, style, that seemed to pervade the household. I don't remember when it was that my mother's feminine sensuousness, the reality of her body, began to give way for me to the charisma of my father's assertive mind and temperament; perhaps when my sister was just born, and he began teaching me to read.

My mother's very name had a kind of magic for me as a child: Helen. I still think it one of the most beautiful of names. Reading Greek mythology, while very young, I somehow identified Helen my mother with Helen of Troy; or perhaps even more with Poe's "Helen," which my father liked to quote:

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,

* At the risk of seeming repetitious, I will note here, again, that the institution of heterosexuality, with its social rewards and punishments, its role-playing, and its sanctions against "deviance," is not the same thing as a human experience freely chosen and lived.

1986: See my essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986).

The weary, wayworn wanderer bore
To his own native shore . . .

She was, Helen my mother, my native shore of course; I think that in that poem I first heard my own longings, the longings of the female child, expressed by a male poet, in the voice of a man—my father.

My father talked a great deal of beauty and the need for perfection. He felt the female body to be impure; he did not like its natural smells. His incorporeality was a way of disengaging himself from that lower realm where women sweated, excreted, grew bloody every month, became pregnant. (My mother became aware, in the last months of pregnancy, that he always looked away from her body.) He was perhaps very Jewish in this, but also very southern: the "pure" and therefore bloodless white woman was supposed to be a kind of gardenia, blanched by the moonlight, staining around the edges when touched.

But the early pleasure and reassurance I found in my mother's body was, I believe, an imprinting never to be wholly erased, even in those years when, as my father's daughter, I suffered the obscure bodily self-hatred peculiar to women who view themselves through the eyes of men. I trusted the pleasures I could get from my own body even at a time when masturbation was an unspeakable word. Doubtless my mother would have actively discouraged such pleasures had she known about them. Yet I cannot help but feel that I finally came to love my own body through first having loved hers, that this was a profound matrilineal bequest. I knew I was not an incorporeal intellect. My mind and body might be divided, as if between father and mother; but *I had both*.

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other. The experience of giving birth stirs deep reverberations of her mother in a daughter; women often dream of their mothers during pregnancy and labor. Alice Rossi suggests that in first breast-feeding her own child a woman may be stirred by the remembered smell of her

own mother's milk. About menstruation, some daughters feel a womanly closeness with their mothers even where the relationship is generally painful and conflicted.¹

2

It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed. But in my landscape or hers, there would be old, smoldering patches of deep-burning anger. Before her marriage, she had trained seriously for years both as a concert pianist and a composer. Born in a southern town, mothered by a strong, frustrated woman, she had won a scholarship to study with the director at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, and by teaching at girls' schools had earned her way to further study in New York, Paris, and Vienna. From the age of sixteen, she had been a young belle, who could have married at any time, but she also possessed unusual talent, determination, and independence for her time and place. She read—and reads—widely and wrote—as her journals from my childhood and her letters of today reveal—with grace and pungency.

She married my father after a ten years' engagement during which he finished his medical training and began to establish himself in academic medicine. Once married, she gave up the possibility of a concert career, though for some years she went on composing, and she is still a skilled and dedicated pianist. My father, brilliant, ambitious, possessed by his own drive, assumed that she would give her life over to the enhancement of his. She would manage his household with the formality and grace becoming to a medical professor's wife, though on a limited budget; she would "keep up" her music, though there was no question of letting her composing and practice conflict with her duties as a wife and mother. She was supposed to bear him two children, a boy and a girl. She had to keep her household books to the last penny—I still can see the big blue gray ledgers, inscribed in her clear, strong hand; she marketed by streetcar, and later, when they could afford a car, she drove my father to and from his laboratory or lectures, often awaiting

him for hours. She raised two children, and taught us all our lessons, including music. (Neither of us was sent to school until the fourth grade.) I am sure that she was made to feel responsible for all our imperfections.

My father, like the transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, believed that he (or rather, his wife) could raise children according to his unique moral and intellectual plan, thus proving to the world the values of enlightened, unorthodox child-rearing. I believe that my mother, like Abigail Alcott, at first genuinely and enthusiastically embraced the experiment, and only later found that in carrying out my father's intense, perfectionist program, she was in conflict with her deep instincts as a mother. Like Abigail Alcott, too, she must have found that while ideas might be unfolded by her husband, their daily, hourly practice was going to be up to her. ("Mr. A. aids me in general principles, but nobody can aid me in the detail," she mourned. . . . Moreover her husband's views kept her constantly wondering if she were doing a good job. "Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much?" The appearance of "temper" and "will" in Louisa, the second Alcott daughter, was blamed by her father on her inheritance from her mother.²) Under the institution of motherhood, the mother is the first to blame if theory proves unworkable in practice, or if anything whatsoever goes wrong. But even earlier, my mother had failed at one part of the plan: she had not produced a son.

For years, I felt my mother had chosen my father over me, had sacrificed me to his needs and theories. When my first child was born, I was barely in communication with my parents. I had been fighting my father for my right to an emotional life and a selfhood beyond his needs and theories. We were all at a draw. Emerging from the fear, exhaustion, and alienation of my first childbirth, I could not admit even to myself that I wanted my mother, let alone tell her how much I wanted her. When she visited me in the hospital neither of us could uncoil the obscure lashings of feeling that darkened the room, the tangled thread running backward to where she had labored for three days to give birth to me, and I was not a son. Now, twenty-six years later, I lay in a contagious hospital with my allergy, my skin covered with a mysterious rash, my lips and

eyelids swollen, my body bruised and sutured, and, in a cot beside my bed, slept the perfect, golden, male child I had brought forth. How could I have interpreted her feelings when I could not begin to decipher my own? My body had spoken all too eloquently, but it was, medically, just my body. I wanted her to mother me again, to hold my baby in her arms as she had once held me; but that baby was also a gauntlet flung down: *my son*. Part of me longed to offer him for her blessing; part of me wanted to hold him up as a badge of victory in our tragic, unnecessary rivalry as women.

But I was only at the beginning. I know now as I could not possibly know then, that among the tangle of feelings between us, in that crucial yet unreal meeting, was her guilt. Soon I would begin to understand the full weight and burden of maternal guilt, that daily, nightly, hourly, *Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much?* The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children; and my mother, in particular, had been expected to help create, according to my father's plan, a perfect daughter. This "perfect" daughter, though gratifyingly precocious, had early been given to tics and tantrums, had become permanently lame from arthritis at twenty-two; she had finally resisted her father's Victorian paternalism, his seductive charm and controlling cruelty, had married a divorced graduate student, had begun to write "modern," "obscure," "pessimistic" poetry, lacking the fluent sweetness of Tennyson, had had the final temerity to get pregnant and bring a living baby into the world. She had ceased to be the demure and precocious child or the poetic, seducible adolescent. Something, in my father's view, had gone terribly wrong. I can imagine that whatever else my mother felt (and I know that part of her *was* mutely on my side) she also was made to feel blame. Beneath the "numbness" that she has since told me she experienced at that time, I can imagine the guilt of Everymother, because I have known it myself.

But I did not know it yet. And it is difficult for me to write of my mother now, because I have known it too well. I struggle to describe what it felt like to be her daughter, but I find myself divided, slipping under her skin; a part of me identifies too

much with her. I know deep reservoirs of anger toward her still exist: the anger of a four-year-old locked in the closet (my father's orders, but my mother carried them out) for childish misbehavior; the anger of a six-year-old kept too long at piano practice (again, at his insistence, but it was she who gave the lessons) till I developed a series of facial tics. (As a mother I know what a child's facial tic is—a lancet of guilt and pain running through one's own body.) And I still feel the anger of a daughter, pregnant, wanting my mother desperately and feeling she had gone over to the enemy.

And I know there must be deep reservoirs of anger in her; every mother has known overwhelming, unacceptable anger at her children. When I think of the conditions under which my mother became a mother, the impossible expectations, my father's distaste for pregnant women, his hatred of all that he could not control, my anger at her dissolves into grief and anger *for* her, and then dissolves back again into anger at her: the ancient, unpurged anger of the child.

My mother lives today as an independent woman, which she was always meant to be. She is a much-loved, much-admired grandmother, an explorer in new realms; she lives in the present and future, not the past. I no longer have fantasies—they are the unhealed child's fantasies, I think—of some infinitely healing conversation with her, in which we could show all our wounds, transcend the pain we have shared as mother and daughter, say everything at last. But in writing these pages, I am admitting, at least, how important her existence is and has been for me.

For it was too simple, early in the new twentieth-century wave of feminism, for us to analyze our mothers' oppression, to understand "rationally"—and correctly—why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons, why they bound our feet or simply left us. It was accurate and even radical, that analysis; and yet, like all politics narrowly interpreted, it assumed that consciousness knows everything. There was, is, in most of us, a girl-child still longing for a woman's nurture, tenderness, and approval, a woman's power exerted in our defense, a woman's smell and touch and voice, a woman's strong arms around us in moments of fear and pain. Any of us would have longed for a mother who

had chosen, in Christabel Pankhurst's words, that "reckoning the cost [of her suffragist activism] in advance, Mother prepared to pay it, for women's sake."³ It was not enough to *understand* our mothers; more than ever, in the effort to touch our own strength as women, we *needed* them. The cry of that female child in us need not be shameful or regressive; it is the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course.

We need to understand this double vision or we shall never understand ourselves. Many of us were mothered in ways we cannot yet even perceive; we only know that our mothers were in some incalculable way on our side. But if a mother had deserted us, by dying, or putting us up for adoption, or because life had driven her into alcohol or drugs, chronic depression or madness, if she had been forced to leave us with indifferent, uncaring strangers in order to earn our food money, because institutional motherhood makes no provision for the wage-earning mother; if she had tried to be a "good mother" according to the demands of the institution and had thereby turned into an anxious, worrying, puritanical keeper of our virginity; or if she had simply left us because she needed to live without a child—whatever our rational forgiveness, whatever the individual mother's love and strength, the child in us, the small female who grew up in a male-controlled world, still feels, at moments, wildly unmothered. When we can confront and unravel this paradox, this contradiction, face to the utmost in ourselves the groping passion of that little girl lost, we can begin to transmute it, and the blind anger and bitterness that have repetitiously erupted among women trying to build a movement together can be alchemized. Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge—transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial—of mother-and-daughterhood.

3

This cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of

which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement. Margaret Mead offers the possibility of "deep biochemical affinities between the mother and the female child, and contrasts between the mother and the male child, of which we now know nothing."⁴ Yet this relationship has been minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy. Whether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad. Small wonder, since theology, art, and social theory have been produced by sons. Like intense relationships between women in general, the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men.

A glance at ancient texts would suggest that daughters barely existed. What the son means to the father is abundantly expressed, in the Upanishads:

[The woman] nourishes her husband's self, the son, within her. . . . The father elevates the child even before the birth, and immediately after, by nourishing the mother and by performing ceremonies. When he thus elevates the child . . . he really elevates his second self, for the continuation of these worlds. . . . This is his second birth.

Aten, or Atum, is hailed in the Egyptian hymn:

Creator of seed in women,
Thou who makes fluid into man,
Who maintainest the son in the womb of the mother. . . .

And Jewish traditional lore has it that a female soul is united with a male sperm, resulting in, of course, a "man-child."⁵

Daughters have been nullified by silence, but also by infanticide, of which they have everywhere been the primary victims. "Even a rich man always exposes a daughter." Lloyd deMause suggests that the statistical imbalance of males over females from antiquity into the Middle Ages resulted from the routine practice of killing off female infants. Daughters were destroyed not only by their fathers, but by their mothers. A husband of the first century B.C. writes to his wife as a matter of course: "If,

as well may happen, you give birth to a child, if it is a boy let it live; if it is a girl, expose it."^{6*} Given the long prevalence of this practice, it is no wonder if a mother dreaded giving birth to a female like herself. While the father might see himself as "twice-born" in his son, such a "second birth" was denied the mothers of daughters.

In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf created what is still the most complex and passionate vision of mother-daughter schism in modern literature. It is significantly, one of the very few literary documents in which a woman has portrayed her mother as a central figure. Mrs. Ramsay is a kaleidoscopic character, and in successive readings of the novel, she changes, almost as our own mothers alter in perspective as we ourselves are changing. The feminist scholar Jane Lilienfeld has pointed out that during Virginia's early years her mother, Julia Stephen, expended almost all her maternal energies in caring for her husband and his lifework, the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Both Virginia and her sister Vanessa were later to seek each other for mothering, and Lilienfeld suggests that Leonard Woolf was to provide Virginia with the kind of care and vigilance that her mother had given her father.⁷ In any case, Mrs. Ramsay, with her "strange severity, her extreme courtesy" her attentiveness to others' needs (chiefly those of men), her charismatic attractiveness, even as a woman of fifty who had borne eight children—Mrs. Ramsay is no simple idealization. She is the "delicious fecundity . . . [the] fountain and spray of life [into which] the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself"; at the same time that "she felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance."

She perceives "without hostility, the sterility of men," yet as Lilienfeld notes, she doesn't like women very much, and her life is spent in attunement to male needs. The young painter Lily Briscoe, sitting with her arms clasped around Mrs. Ramsay's knees, her head on her lap, longs to become one with her, in

* It can be argued that, just as infanticide in general was a form of population control and even of eugenics (twins, infants who were undersized, malformed, or otherwise abnormal were destroyed, whatever their sex), female infanticide was a way of limiting births, since females were seen primarily as breeders. Still, the implicit devaluation of the female was hardly a message to be lost on women.

"the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her. . . . Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself. . . ."

Yet nothing happens. Mrs. Ramsay is not available to her. And since Woolf has clearly transcribed herself into Lily Briscoe, the scene has a double charge: the daughter seeking intimacy with her own mother, the woman seeking intimacy with another woman, not her mother but toward whom she turns those passionate longings. Much later she understands that it is only in her work that she can "stand up to Mrs. Ramsay" and her "extraordinary power." In her work, she can reject the grouping of Mrs. Ramsay and James, "mother and son," as a pictorial subject. Through her work, Lily is independent of men, as Mrs. Ramsay is not. In the most acute, unembittered ways, Woolf pierces the shimmer of Mrs. Ramsay's personality; she needs men as much as they need her, her power and strength are founded on the dependency, the "sterility" of others.

It is clear that Virginia the daughter had pondered Julia her mother for years before depicting her in *To the Lighthouse*. Again, that fascinated attention is ascribed to Lily Briscoe:

Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get around that one woman with, she thought. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. One wanted some most secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke?⁸

And this, precisely, is what Virginia the artist achieved; but the achievement is testimony not merely to the power of her art but to the passion of the daughter for the mother, her need above all to understand this woman, so adored and so unavailable to her; to understand, in all complexity, the differences that separated her mother from herself.

The woman activist or artist born of a family-centered mother may in any case feel that her mother cannot understand or sympathize with the imperatives of her life; or that her mother has preferred and valued a more conventional daughter, or a son. In order to study nursing, Florence Nightingale was forced to battle, in the person of her mother, the restrictive conventions of upper-class Victorian womanhood, the destiny of a life in drawing rooms and country houses in which she saw women going mad "for want of something to do."⁹ The painter Paula Modersohn-Becker was, throughout her life, concerned—and fearful—that her mother might not accept the terms of her life. Writing in 1899 of her struggles with her work, she says: "I write this especially for mother. I think she feels that my life is one long continuous egoistic drunken joyousness." On leaving her husband she writes: "I was so fearful that you might have been angry. . . . And now you are so good to me. . . . You, my dearest mother, stay by me and bless my life." And, the year before her own death in childbirth:

. . . I am in continuous tumult, always . . . only sometimes resting, then moving again towards a goal . . . I beg of you to keep this in mind when at times I seem unloving. It means that all my strength is concentrated towards one thing only. I do not know whether this should be called egotism. If so, it is the most noble.

I put my head in the lap from which I came forth, and thank you for my life.¹⁰

Emily Dickinson's famous statement that "I never had a mother" has been variously interpreted; but surely she meant in part that she felt herself deviant, set apart, from the kind of life her mother lived; that what most concerned her, her mother could not understand. Yet when her mother suffered a paralytic stroke in 1875, both Dickinson sisters nursed her tenderly until her death in 1882, and in a letter of that year Emily Dickinson writes:

. . . the departure of our Mother is so bleak a surprise, we are both benumbed . . . only the night before she died, she was happy and hungry and ate a little Supper I made her with so much enthusiasm, I laughed with delight . . .

Wondering with sorrow, how we could spare our lost Neighbors [her correspondents] our first Neighbor, our Mother, quietly stole away.

Plundered of her dear face, we scarcely know each other, and feel as if wrestling with a Dream, waking would dispel . . .

And the daughter's letter ends with the poet's cry: "Oh, Vision of Language!"¹¹

"Between Sylvia and me existed—as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy." This is Aurelia Plath's description of the relationship between herself and her daughter Sylvia, from the other side. The intensity of the relationship seems to have disturbed some readers of Plath's *Letters Home*, an outpouring chiefly to her mother, written weekly or oftener, first from college and later from England. There is even a tendency to see this mother-daughter relationship as the source of Sylvia Plath's early suicide attempt, her relentless perfectionism and obsession with "greatness." Yet the preface to *Letters Home* reveals a remarkable woman, a true survivor; it was Plath's father who set the example of self-destructiveness. The letters are far from complete* and until many more materials are released, efforts to write Plath biography and criticism are questionable at best. But throughout runs her need to lay in her mother's lap, as it were, poems and prizes, books and babies, the longing for her mother when she is about to give birth, the effort to let Aurelia Plath know that her struggles and sacrifices to rear her daughter had been vindicated. In the last letters Sylvia seems to be trying to shield herself and Aurelia, an ocean away, from the pain of that "psychic osmosis." "I haven't the strength to see you for some time," she writes, explaining why she will not come to America after her divorce. "The horror of what you saw and what I saw you see last summer is between us and I cannot face you again until I have a new life . . ." (October 9, 1962). Three days later: "Do tear up my last one . . . I have [had] an incredible change of spirit. . . . Every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee,

* There are many elisions and omissions, since publication had to be approved by Ted Hughes, Sylvia's husband.

writing like mad—have managed a poem a day before breakfast. . . . Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me. . . . Nick [her son] has two teeth, stands, and is an *angel* . . ." (October 12, 1962).^{12*}

Psychic osmosis. Desperate defenses. The power of the bond often denied because it cracks consciousness, threatens at times to lead the daughter back into "those secret chambers . . . becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored . . ." Or, because there is no indifference or cruelty we can tolerate less, than the indifference or cruelty of our mothers.

In *The Well of Loneliness*, a novel by now notorious for its pathological-tragic view of lesbianism, Radclyffe Hall suggests an almost preternatural antipathy between Anna Gordon and her lesbian daughter Stephen. It is Stephen's father who—through having read Krafft-Ebbing—"understands" her, and treats her as he might a tragically maimed son. Her mother views her from the first as a stranger, an interloper, an alien creature. Radclyffe Hall's novel is painful as a revelation of the author's self-rejection, her internalizing of received opinions against her own instincts. The crux of her self-hatred lies in her imagining no possible relationship between Anna the mother and Stephen the daughter. Yet there is one passage in which she suggests the longing for and possibility of connection between mother and daughter—a connection founded on physical sensation:

The scents of the meadows would move those two strangely. . . . Sometimes Stephen must tug at her mother's sleeve sharply—intolerable to bear that thick fragrance alone!

One day she had said: "Stand still or you'll hurt it—it's all round us—it's a white smell, it reminds me of you!" And then she had flushed, and had glanced up quickly, rather frightened in case she should find Anna laughing.

But her mother had looked at her curiously, gravely, puzzled by this creature who seemed all contradictions. . . . Anna had been stirred, as her child had been stirred, by the breath of the meadowsweet under the hedges; for in this way they were one,

* 1986: See Alice Miller, "Sylvia Plath: An Example of Forbidden Suffering" in *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983).

the mother and daughter . . . could they only have divined it, such simple things might have formed a link between them . . .

They had gazed at each other as though asking for something . . . the one from the other; then the moment had passed—they had walked on in silence, no nearer in spirit than before.¹⁴

A woman who feels an unbridgeable gulf between her mother and herself may be forced to assume that her mother—like Stephen's—could never accept her sexuality. But, despite the realities of popular ignorance and bigotry about lesbians, and the fear that *she* has somehow “damaged” her daughter in the eyes of society, the mother may at some level—mute, indirect, oblique—want to confirm that daughter in her love for women. Mothers who have led perfectly traditional, heterosexual lives have welcomed their daughters' women lovers and supported their domestic arrangements, though often denying, if asked, the nature of the relationship. A woman who fully and gladly accepts her love for another woman is likely to create an atmosphere in which her mother will not reject her.* But that acceptance has first to be found in ourselves; it does not come as an act of will.

For those of us who had children, and later came to recognize and act upon the breadth and depth of our feelings for women, a complex new bond with our mothers is possible. The poet Sue Silvermarie writes:

I find now, instead of a contradiction between lesbian and mother, there is an overlapping. What is the same between my lover and me, my mother and me, and my son and me is the motherbond—primitive, all-encompassing, and paramount.

In loving another woman I discovered the deep urge to both be a mother to and find a mother in my lover. At first I feared the discovery. Everything around me told me it was evil. Popular Freudianism cursed it as a fixation, a sign of immaturity. But gradually I came to have faith in my own needs and desires. . . . Now I treasure and trust the drama between two loving women, in which each can become mother and each become child.

* 1986: This sentence seems facile to me in placing too much weight on the “self-acceptance” of the lesbian daughter and denying the mother's responsibility for her homophobia.

It is most clear during lovemaking, when the separation of everyday life lifts for awhile. When I kiss and stroke and enter my lover, I am also a child re-entering my mother. I want to return to the womb-state of harmony, and also to the ancient world. I enter my lover but it is she in her orgasm who returns. I see on her face for a long moment, the unconscious bliss that an infant carries the memory of behind its shut eyes. Then when it is she who makes love to me . . . the intensity is also a pushing out, a bombing! She comes in and is then identified with the ecstasy that is born. . . . So I too return to the mystery of my mother, and of the world as it must have been when the motherbond was exalted.

Now I am ready to go back and understand the one whose body actually carried me. Now I can begin to learn about her, forgive her for the rejection I felt, yearn for her, ache for her. I could never want her until I myself had been wanted. By a woman. Now I know what it is to feel exposed as a newborn, to be pared down to my innocence. To lie with a woman and give her the power of my utter fragility. To have that power be cherished. Now that I know, I can return to her who could not cherish me as I needed. I can return without blame, and I can hope that she is ready for me.¹⁵

In studying the diaries and letters of American women of thirty-five families, from the 1760s to the 1880s, the historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has traced a pattern—indeed, a network—of close, sometimes explicitly sensual, long-lasting female friendships characteristic of the period. Tender, devoted, these relationships persisted through separations caused by the marriage of one or both women, in the context of a “female world” distinctly separate from the larger world of male concerns, but in which women held a paramount importance in each others' lives.

Smith-Rosenberg finds

. . . an intimate mother-daughter relationship . . . at the heart of this female world. . . . Central to these relationships is what might be described as an apprenticeship system . . . mothers and other older women carefully trained daughters in the arts of housewifery and motherhood . . . adolescent girls temporarily took over the household . . . and helped in childbirth, nursing and weaning . . .

Daughters were born into a female world. . . . As long as the

mother's domestic role remained relatively stable and few viable alternatives competed with it, daughters tended to accept their mother's world and to turn automatically to other women for support and intimacy . . .

One could speculate at length concerning the absence of that mother-daughter hostility today considered almost inevitable to an adolescent's struggle for autonomy. . . . It is possible that taboos against female aggression . . . were sufficiently strong to repress even that between mothers and their adolescent daughters. Yet these letters seem so alive and the interest of daughters in their mothers' affairs so vital and genuine that it is difficult to interpret their closeness exclusively in terms of repression and denial.¹⁶

What the absence of such a female world meant on the newly opening frontier can be grasped from the expressions of loneliness and nostalgia of immigrant women from Europe, who had left such networks of friends, mothers, and sisters far behind. Many of these women remained year-in, year-out on the homesteads, waiting eagerly for letters from home, fighting a peculiarly female battle with loneliness. "If I only had a few good women friends, I would be entirely satisfied. Those I miss," writes a Wisconsin woman in 1846. Instead of giving birth and raising children near her mother or other female relatives, the frontier mother had no one close to her with whom to share her womanly experiences; if cholera or diphtheria carried off a child or children, she would have to face the rituals of death and mourning on her own. Loneliness, unshared grief, and guilt often led to prolonged melancholy or mental breakdown.¹⁷ If the frontier offered some women a greater equality and independence, and the chance to break out of more traditional roles, it also, ironically, deprived many of the emotional support and intimacy of a female community; it tore them from their mothers.

It may also seem ironic that the growth of nineteenth-century feminism, the false "liberation" (to smoke cigarettes and sleep around) of the twentieth-century flapper, the beginnings of new options for women as birth control gained in acceptance and use, may have had the initial effect of weakening the mother-daughter tie (and with it, the network of intense female

friendships based on a common life-pattern and common expectancies). By the 1920s, and with the increasing pervasiveness of Freudian thought, intense female friendships could be tolerated between schoolgirls as "crushes," but were regarded as regressive and neurotic if they persisted into later life.*

4

"Matrophobia" as the poet Lynn Sukenick has termed it¹⁸ is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*. Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely. An adolescent daughter may live at war with her mother yet borrow her clothes, her perfume. Her style of housekeeping when she leaves home may be a negative image of her mother's: beds never made, dishes unwashed, in unconscious reversal of the immaculately tended house of a woman from whose orbit she has to extricate herself.

While, in Grace Paley's words, "her son the doctor and her son the novelist" blame and ridicule the "Jewish mother," Jewish daughters are left with all the panic, guilt, ambivalence, and self-hatred of the woman from whom they came and the woman they may become. "Matrophobia" is a late-arrived strain in the life of the Jewish daughter. Jewish women of the *shtetl* and ghetto and of the early immigrant period supported their

* A woman of my mother's generation told me that her husband had effectively dampened her intimate friendship with another woman by telling her he was sure the woman was a lesbian. A hundred years before, their friendship would have been taken for granted, even to the husband's leaving the conjugal bed when a wife's woman friend came to visit, so that the two women could share as many hours, day and night, as possible.

Talmud-studying men, raised children, ran the family business, trafficked with the hostile gentile world, and in every practical and active way made possible the economic and cultural survival of the Jews. Only in the later immigrant generations, with a greater assimilationism and pressure for men to take over the economic sphere, were women expected to reduce themselves to perfecting the full-time mother-housewife role already invented by the gentile middle class.

"My mother would kill me if I didn't marry." "It would kill my mother if I didn't marry." In the absence of other absorbing and valued uses for her energy, the full-time "home-maker" has often sunk, yes, into the overinvolvement, the martyrdom, the possessive control, the chronic worry over her children, caricatured in fiction through the "Jewish mother." But the "Jewish mother" is only one creation of the enforced withdrawal of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women from all roles save one.*

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery.

When her mother had gone, Martha cupped her hands protestingly over her stomach, and murmured to the creature within it that nothing would deform it, freedom would be its gift. She, Martha, the free spirit, would protect the creature from her, Martha, the maternal force; the maternal Martha, that enemy, would not be allowed to enter the picture.¹⁹

Thus Doris Lessing's heroine, who has felt devoured by her own mother, splits herself—or tries to—when she realizes she, too, is to become a mother.

But even women with children, can exist in an uneasy wariness such as Kate Chopin depicts in *The Awakening* (1899):

. . . Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-

* 1986: Here is an obvious example of unstated class generalization. For large numbers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century freedwomen and immigrant women, no such withdrawal was mandated or possible.

women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.²⁰

Edna Pontellier, seeking her own pleasure and self-realization (though still entirely through men) is seen as "inadequate" as a mother, although her children are simply more independent than most. Cora Sandel sets her heroine, Alberta, against an archetypal mother-woman, Jeanne. Alberta is a writer, "haunted in recent years [by the fear] of not appearing sufficiently motherly and domesticated." She feels both reproached and wearied by the efficient, energetic Jeanne, who maintains an eye on everyone:

"Don't forget your strengthening medicine, Pierre. Then you must lie down for awhile. You'll work all the better for it. Marthe, you've scratched yourself; don't touch anything before I've put iodine on it. You ought to look in at Mme. Poulain, Alberta, before she sells the rest of those sandshoes. . . . I don't think Tot should be in the sun for such a long time, Alberta . . ."²¹

Thus, women who identify themselves primarily as mothers may seem both threatening and repellent to those who do not, or who feel unequal to the mother-role as defined by Chopin. Lily Briscoe, too, rejects this role: She does not want to be Mrs. Ramsay, and her discovery of this is crucial for her.

5

The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture.

There was such a recognition, but we have lost it. It was expressed in the religious mystery of Eleusis, which constituted the spiritual foundation of Greek life for two thousand years.

Based on the mother-daughter myth of Demeter and Korê, this rite was the most forbidden and secret of classical civilization, never acted on the stage, open only to initiates who underwent long purification beforehand. According to the Homeric hymn to Demeter of the seventh century B.C., the mysteries were established by the goddess herself, on her reunion with her daughter Korê, or Persephone, who had been raped and abducted, in one version of the myth by Poseidon as lord of the underworld, or, in a later version, by Hades or Pluto, king of death. Demeter revenges herself for the loss of her daughter by forbidding the grain—of which she is queen—to grow.

When her daughter is restored to her—for nine months of the year only—she restores fruitfulness and life to the land for those months. But the Homeric hymn tells us that Demeter's supreme gift to humanity, in her rejoicing at Korê's return, was not the return of vegetation, but the founding of the sacred ceremonies at Eleusis.

The Eleusinian mysteries, inaugurated somewhere between 1400 and 1100 B.C., were considered a keystone to human spiritual survival. The Homeric hymn says:

Blessed is he among men on earth who has beheld this. Never will he who has had no part in [the Mysteries] share in such things. He will be a dead man, in sultry darkness.*

Pindar and Sophocles also distinguish between the initiate and "all the rest," the nonbeatified. And the Roman Cicero is quoted as saying of the Mysteries: "We have been given a reason not only to live in joy but also to die with better hope." The role played by the Mysteries of Eleusis in ancient spirituality has been compared to that of the passion and resurrection of Christ. But in the resurrection celebrated by the Mysteries, it is a mother whose wrath catalyzes the miracle, a daughter who rises from the underworld.

The rites of Eleusis were imitated and plagiarized in many parts of the ancient world. But the unique and sacred place, the *only* place where the true vision might be experienced, was

* The above rendering is from C. Kerényi's book *Eleusis*. For a verse translation of the entire hymn to Demeter, see Thelma Sargent, *The Homeric Hymns* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 2-14.

the shrine at Eleusis itself. This was the site of the "Virgin's Well" or fountain where Demeter is supposed to have sat, grieving for the loss of Korê, and where she returned to establish the ceremonies. This sanctuary was destroyed, after two thousand years, when the Goths under Alaric invaded Greece in 396 A.D.

But for two thousand years, once a year in September, the *mystai* or initiands underwent purification by sea bathing, then walked in procession, carrying torches and bundles of myrtle, to Eleusis, where they finally had access to the "vision"—"the state of having seen." Pigs (animals sacred to the Great Mother) were slaughtered in sacrifice to Demeter, and eaten in her honor as a first stage in initiation. Only initiands and hierophants were allowed into the innermost shrine, where Korê appeared, called up by the voice of a thundering gong. There, in a great blaze of light, the queen of the dead, Persephone, appeared with her infant son, a sign to human beings that "birth in death is possible . . . if they had faith in the Goddess." The real meaning of the Mysteries was this reintegration of death and birth, at a time when patriarchal splitting may have seemed about to sever them entirely.

At the end of the ceremonies, according to C. Kerényi, whose study of Eleusis I have drawn on for most of the above, the hierophant turned to the initiates and showed them a cut-off ear of grain:

All who had "seen" turned, at the sight of this "concrete thing", as though turning back from the hereafter into this world, back to the world of tangible things, including grain. The grain was grain and not more, but it may well have summed up for the [initiates] everything that Demeter and Persephone had given to mankind: Demeter food and wealth, Persephone birth under the earth. To those who had seen Korê at Eleusis this was no mere metaphor.²²

A marble relief of the fifth century B.C., found at Eleusis, portrays the goddesses Demeter and Korê, and between them the figure of a boy, Triptolemus. Triptolemus is the "primordial man," who must come to Demeter for her gift of the grain. According to one myth, he is converted from a violent, warlike

way of life to a peaceful, agrarian one, through his initiation at Eleusis. He is supposed to have disseminated three commandments: "Honor your parents," "Honor the gods with fruits," and "Spare the animals." But Kerenyi makes clear that Triptolemus is not an essential figure at Eleusis.²³ Demeter as "tranquilly-enthroned" grain-goddess had existed in the archaic past, giver of fruits to man. But in her aspect as Goddess of the Mysteries she became much more: "she herself in grief and mourning entered upon the path of initiation and turned toward *the core of the Mysteries, namely, her quality as her daughter's mother.*" (Emphasis mine.)²⁴

The separation of Demeter and Korê is an unwilling one; it is neither a question of the daughter's rebellion against the mother, nor the mother's rejection of the daughter. Eleusis seems to have been a final resurgence of the multiple aspects of the Great Goddess in the classical-patriarchal world. Rhea, the mother of Demeter, also appears in some of the myths; but also, Korê herself becomes a mother in the underworld.²⁵ Jane Harrison considered the Mysteries to be founded on a much more ancient women's rite, from which men were excluded, a possibility which tells us how endangered and complex the mother-daughter cathexis was, even before recorded history. Each daughter, even in the millennia before Christ, must have longed for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death. And every mother must have longed for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self.

6

A strange and complex modern version of the Demeter-Korê myth resides in Margaret Atwood's novel, *Surfacing*. Her narrator—a woman without a name, who says of herself that she "can't love," "can't feel"—returns to the island in Canada where she and her family lived during World War II. She is searching for her father, who had been living there alone and has mysteriously disappeared. Her mother is dead. With her lover, and another couple, David and Anna—all more or less hippies in the American style, though professing hatred for all

things Yankee—she returns to the place where her childhood was spent. She searches for clues to her father's whereabouts, in the surrounding woods and the neglected cabin. She finds old albums and scrapbooks of her childhood, saved by her mother; her mother's old leather jacket still swings from a hanger. She also finds sketches of Indian pictographs, made by her father. Her hippie friends are restless and bored in the primitive setting of the island, although they constantly express disgust with American technological imperialism. But it's the men in the novel—Canadian as well as Yankee—who are destroying the natural world, who kill for the sake of killing, cut down the trees; David brutally dominates Anna, sex is exploitative. Finally the narrator learns that her father's body has been found in the lake, drowned, evidently, while attempting to photograph some Indian wall-paintings. The others in her party are picked up by boat to return to civilization; she remains, determined to get back into connection with the place and its powers. She crawls naked through the woods, eating berries and roots, seeking her vision. Finally she returns to the cabin and its overgrown, half-wild garden, and there

. . . I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders, in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she is turned half away from me. I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder.

I've stopped walking. At first I feel nothing except a lack of surprise: that is where she would be, she has been standing there all along. Then as I watch and it doesn't change I'm afraid, I'm cold with fear, I'm afraid it isn't real, paper doll cut by my eyes, burnt picture, if I blink she will vanish.

She must have sensed it, my fear. She turns her head quietly and looks at me, past me, as though she knows something is there but she can't quite see it . . .

I go up to where she was. The jays are there in the trees, cawing at me; there are a few scraps on the feeding-tray still, they've knocked some to the ground. I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is.

Later, she has a vision of her father in the same place:

He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love. He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation . . .

He turns toward me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone . . .

I see now that although it isn't my father, it is what my father has become. I knew he wasn't dead . . .

Atwood's last chapter begins:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. . . . The word games, the winning and losing games are finished, at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented. . . .²⁰

She is no "free woman," no feminist; her way of dealing with male-identification, the struggle with a male culture, has been to numb herself, to believe she "can't love." But *Surfacing* is not a programmatic novel. It is the work of a poet, filled with animistic and supernatural materials. The search for the father leads to reunion with the mother, who is at home in the wilderness, Mistress of the Animals. In some obscure, subconscious way, Atwood's narrator begins to recognize and accept her own power through her moment of vision, her brief, startling visitation from her mother. She has worked her way back—through fasting and sacrifice—beyond patriarchy. She cannot stay there: the primitive (her father's solution, the male—ultimately the fascist—solution) is not the answer; she has to go and live out her existence in this time. But she has had her illumination: she has seen her mother.

7

The woman who has felt "unmothered" may seek mothers all her life—may even seek them in men. In a women's group

recently, someone said: "I married looking for a mother"; and a number of others in the group began agreeing with her. I myself remember lying in bed next to my husband, half-dreaming, half-believing, that the body close against mine was my mother's.* Perhaps all sexual or intimate physical contact brings us back to that first body. But the "motherless" woman may also react by denying her own vulnerability, denying she has felt any loss or absence of mothering. She may spend her life proving her strength in the "mothering" of others—as with Mrs. Ramsay, mothering men, whose weakness makes her feel strong, or mothering in the role of teacher, doctor, political activist, psychotherapist. In a sense she is giving to others what she herself has lacked; but this will always mean that she needs the neediness of others in order to go on feeling her own strength. She may feel uneasy with equals—particularly women.

Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough; the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted. And it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations. The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed "mothering," even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive.

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, "whatever comes." A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter. As one psychologist has observed:

* Simone de Beauvoir says of her mother that: "Generally speaking, I thought of her with no particular feeling. Yet in my sleep (although my father only made very rare and then insignificant appearances) she often played a most important part: she blended with Sartre, and we were happy together. And then the dream would turn into a nightmare: why was I living with her once more? How had I come to be in her power again? So our former relationship lived on in me in its double aspect—a subjection that I loved and hated" (*A Very Easy Death* [New York: Warner Paperback, 1973], pp. 119–20).

When a female child is passed from lap to lap so that all the males in the room (father, brother, acquaintances) can get a hard-on, it is the helpless mother standing there and looking on that creates the sense of shame and guilt in the child. One woman at the recent rape conference in New York City testified that her father put a series of watermelon rinds in her vagina when she was a child to open it up to his liking, and beat her if she tried to remove them. Yet what that woman focuses her rage on today is that her mother told her, "Never say a word about it to anyone."

Another young girl was gang-raped in her freshman year of high school and her mother said to her, "You have brought disgrace on the family. You are no good anymore." . . . When she talks about these things now, the pain is as great as if it all happened yesterday.²⁷

It is not simply that such mothers feel both responsible and powerless. It is that they carry their own guilt and self-hatred over into their daughters' experiences. The mother knows that if raped *she* would *feel* guilty; hence she tells her daughter she is guilty. She identifies intensely with her daughter, but through weakness, not through strength. Freudian psychoanalysis has viewed the rage of daughters toward their mothers as resentment for not having been given a penis. Clara Thompson, however, remarked, in a suprisingly early political view of "penis envy" that "the penis is the sign of the person in power in one particular competitive set-up in this culture, that between man and woman. . . . So, the attitude called penis envy is similar to the attitude of any underprivileged group toward those in power."²⁸ A contemporary psychoanalyst points out that the daughter's rage at her mother is more likely to arise from her mother having relegated her to second-class status, while looking to the son (or father) for the fulfillment of her own thwarted needs.²⁹ But even where there is no preferred brother or father, a daughter can feel rage at her mother's powerlessness or lack of struggle—because of her intense identification and because in order to fight for herself she needs first to have been both loved and fought for.*

* Nancy Chodorow cites examples of communities—among the Rajput and Brahmins in India—where, although sons are considered more de-

The nurture of daughters in patriarchy calls for a strong sense of *self*-nurture in the mother. The psychic interplay between mother and daughter can be destructive, but there is no reason why it is doomed to be. A woman who has respect and affection for her own body, who does not view it as unclean or as a sex-object, will wordlessly transmit to her daughter that a woman's body is a good and healthy place to live. A woman who feels pride in being female will not visit her self-depreciation upon her female child. A woman who has used her anger creatively will not seek to suppress anger in her daughter in fear that it could become, merely, suicidal.

All this is extremely difficult in a system which has persistently stolen women's bodies and egos from us. And what can we say of mothers who have not simply been robbed of their egos but who—alcoholic, drugged, or suicidal—are unavailable to their daughters? What of a woman who has to toil so hard for survival that no maternal energy remains at the end of the day, as she numbly, wearily picks up her child after work? The child does not discern the social system or the institution of motherhood, only a harsh voice, a dulled pair of eyes, a mother who does not hold her, does not tell her how wonderful she is. And what can we say of families in which the daughter feels that it was her father, not her mother, who gave her affection and support in becoming herself? It is a painful fact that a nurturing father, who replaces rather than complements a mother, *must be loved at the mother's expense*, whatever the reasons for the mother's absence. He may be doing his best, giving everything that a man can give, but the mother is twice-lost, if love for him takes the place of love for her.

"I have always gotten more support from men than from

sirable, mothers show a special attachment to their daughters, and she comments that "people in both groups say that this is out of sympathy for the future plight of their daughters, who will have to leave their natal family for a strange and usually oppressive postmarital household" ("Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphère, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974], p. 47). But this kind of female bonding, though far preferable to rejection or indifference, arises from identification with the daughter's future victimization. There is no attempt on the mothers' part to change the cycle of repetitions into which the daughters' lives are being woven.

women": a cliché of token women, and an understandable one, since we do identify gratefully with anyone who seems to have strengthened us. But who has been *in a position* to strengthen us? A man often lends his daughter the ego-support he denies his wife; he may use his daughter as stalking-horse against his wife; he may simply feel less threatened by a daughter's power, especially if she adores him. A male teacher may confirm a woman student while throttling his wife and daughters. Men have been able to give us power, support, and certain forms of nurture, as individuals, when they chose; but the power is always stolen power, withheld from the mass of women in patriarchy. And, finally, I am talking here about a kind of strength which can only be one woman's gift to another, the bloodstream of our inheritance. Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness.

8

What do we mean by the nurture of daughters? What is it we wish we had, or could have, as daughters; could give, as mothers? Deeply and primally we need trust and tenderness; surely this will always be true of every human being, but women growing into a world so hostile to us need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves. But this loving is not simply the old, institutionalized, sacrificial, "mother-love" which men have demanded: we want courageous mothering. The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children's books, movies, television, the schoolroom. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. *To refuse to be a victim*: and then to go on from there.

Only when we can wish imaginatively and courageously for ourselves can we wish unfetteredly for our daughters. But finally, a child is not a wish, nor a product of wishing. Women's

lives—in all levels of society—have been lived too long in both depression and fantasy, while our active energies have been trained and absorbed into caring for others. It is essential, now, to begin breaking that cycle. Anyone who has read the literature in the obstetrician's waiting-room knows the child-care booklets which, at some point, confess that "you may get a fit of the blues" and suggest "having your husband take you to dinner in a French restaurant, or going shopping for a new dress." (The fiction that most women have both husbands and money is forever with us.) But the depressive mother who now and then allows herself a "vacation" or a "reward" is merely showing her daughters both that the female condition is depressing, and that there is no real way out.

As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be the vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration. The quality of the mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist. Because the conditions of life for many poor women demand a fighting spirit for sheer physical survival, such mothers have sometimes been able to give their daughters something to be valued far more highly than full-time mothering. But the toll is taken by the sheer weight of adversity, the irony that to fight for her child's physical survival the mother may have to be almost always absent from the child, as in Tillie Olsen's story, "I Stand Here Ironing."⁸⁰ For a child needs, as that mother despairingly knew, the care of someone for whom she is "a miracle."

Many women have been caught—have split themselves—between two mothers: one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations, and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing figure. Often this "counter-mother" is an athletics teacher who exemplifies strength and pride in her body, a freer way of being in the world; or an unmarried woman professor, alive with ideas, who represents the choice of a vigorous work life, of "living alone

and liking it." This splitting may allow the young woman to fantasize alternately living as one or the other "mother," to test out two different identifications. But it can also lead to a life in which she never consciously resolves the choices, in which she alternately tries to play the hostess and please her husband as her mother did, and to write her novel or doctoral thesis. She has tried to break through the existing models, but she has not gone far enough, usually because nobody has told her how far there is to go.

The double messages need to be disentangled. "You can be anything you really want to be" is a half-truth, whatever a woman's class or economic advantages. We need to be very clear about the missing portion, rather than whisper the fearful subliminal message: "Don't go too far." A female child needs to be told, very early, the practical difficulties females have to face in even trying to imagine "what they want to be." Mothers who can talk freely with their daughters about sex, even teaching them to use contraception in adolescence, still leave them in the dark as to the expectations and stereotypes, false promises and ill-faith, awaiting them in the world. "You can be anything you really want to be"—if you are prepared to fight, to create priorities for yourself against the grain of cultural expectations, to persist in the face of misogynist hostility. Interpreting to a little girl, or to an adolescent woman, the kinds of treatment she encounters because she is female, is as necessary as explaining to a nonwhite child reactions based on the color of her skin.*

It is one thing to adjure a daughter, along Victorian lines, that her lot is to "suffer and be still," that woman's fate is determined. It is wholly something else to acquaint her honestly with the jeopardy all women live under in patriarchy, to let her know by word and deed that she has her mother's support, and moreover, that while it *can* be dangerous to move, to speak, to act, each time she suffers rape—physical or psychic—in silence, she is putting another stitch in her own shroud.

* A woman recently described in my hearing how her friend's daughter had been on the verge of dropping out of architecture school because of the harassment she encountered there as a woman. It was her mother who

9

I talk with a brilliant and radical thinker, a woman scholar of my generation. She describes her early feelings when she used to find herself at conferences or parties among faculty wives, most of whom had or would have children, she the only unmarried woman in the room. She felt, then, that her passionate investigations, the recognition accorded her work, still left her the "barren" woman, the human failure, among so many women who were mothers. I ask her, "But can you imagine how some of them were envying you your freedom, to work, to think, to travel, to enter a room as yourself, not as some child's mother or some man's wife?" Yet even as I speak, I know: the gulf between "mothers" and "nonmothers" (even the term is pure negation, like "widow," meaning *without*) will be closed only as we come to understand how *both* childbearing and childlessness have been manipulated to make women into negative quantities, or bearers of evil.

In the interstices of language lie powerful secrets of the culture. Throughout this book I have been thrown back on terms like "unchilded," "childless," or "child-free"; we have no familiar, ready-made name for a woman who defines herself, by choice, neither in relation to children nor to men, who is self-identified, who has chosen herself. "Unchilded," "childless," simply define her in terms of a lack; even "child-free" suggests only that she has refused motherhood, not what she is about *in and of herself*. The notion of the "free woman" is strongly tinged with the suggestion of sexual promiscuity, of "free love," of being "free" of man's ownership; it still defines the woman by her relationships with men. The ancient meaning of the word "virgin" (she-who-is-unto-herself) is obscured by connotations of the "undeflorated" or intact hymen, or of the Roman Catholic Virgin Mother, defined entirely by her relationship to God the Son. "Amazon" suggests too narrowly the warrior-maiden who has renounced all ties with men except for procreation: again, definition through relatedness. Neither is "lesbian" a satisfactory term here; not all self-identified women would call

urged her to stay, to fight a political battle against sexism, and get the training she wanted.

themselves lesbians; moreover, numberless lesbians are mothers of children.

There can be no more simplistic formula for women than to escape into some polarization such as "Mothers or Amazons," "matriarchal clan or guerilleres." For one thing, in the original matriarchal clan *all* females, of whatever age, were called "mothers"—even little girls. Motherhood was a social rather than a physical function. "Women . . . were sisters to one another and mothers to all the children of the community without regard to which individual mother bore any child. . . . Aborigines describe themselves as . . . 'brotherhoods' from the standpoint of the male and 'motherhoods' from the standpoint of the female."³¹ And everywhere, girl-children as young as six have cared for younger siblings.

The "childless woman" and the "mother" are a false polarity, which has served the institutions both of motherhood and heterosexuality. There are no such simple categories. There are women (like Ruth Benedict) who have tried to have children and could not. The causes may range from a husband's unacknowledged infertility to signals of refusal sent out from her cerebral cortex. A woman may have looked at the lives of women with children and have felt that, given the circumstances of motherhood, she must remain childless if she is to pursue any other hopes or aims.* As the nineteenth-century feminist Margaret Fuller wrote in an undated fragment:

I have no child and the woman in me has so craved this experience, that it seems the want of it must paralyze me. But now as I look on these lovely children of a human birth, what slow and neutralizing cares they bring with them to the mother! The children of the muse come quicker, with less pain and disgust, rest more lightly on the bosom.†

A young girl may have lived in horror of her mother's child-worn existence and told herself, once and for all, *No, not for*

* There are enough single women now adopting children, enough unmarried mothers keeping their children, to suggest that if mothering were not an enterprise which so increases a woman's social vulnerability, many more "childless" women would choose to have children of their own.

† She was later to bear a child, in Italy, to a man ten years younger than herself, and to die in the wreck of the ship on which she, the child, and the father were returning to America.

me. A lesbian may have gone through abortions in early relationships with men, love children, yet still feel her life too insecure to take on the grilling of an adoption or the responsibility of an artificial pregnancy. A woman who has chosen celibacy may feel her decision entails a life without children. Ironically, it is precisely the institution of motherhood, which, in an era of birth control, has influenced women against becoming mothers. It is simply too hypocritical, too exploitative of mothers and children, too oppressive.

But is a woman who bore a baby she could not keep a "childless" woman? Am I, whose children are grown-up, who come and go as I will, unchilded as compared to younger women still pushing prams, hurrying home to feedings, waking at night to a child's cry? What makes us mothers? The care of small children? The physical changes of pregnancy and birth? The years of nurture? What of the woman who, never having been pregnant, begins lactating when she adopts an infant? What of the woman who stuffs her newborn into a bus-station locker and goes numbly back to her "child-free" life? What of the woman who, as the eldest girl in a large family, has practically raised her younger sisters and brothers, and then has entered a convent?

The woman struggling to cope with several young children, a job, and the unavailability of decent child-care and schooling, may feel pure envy (and rage) at the apparent freedom and mobility of the "child-free" woman (I have). The woman without children of her own may see, like Margaret Fuller, the "dull and neutralizing cares" of motherhood *as it is lived in the bondage of a patriarchal system* and congratulate herself on having stayed "free," not having been "brainwashed into motherhood." But these polarizations imply a failure of imagination.

Throughout recorded history the "childless" woman has been regarded (with certain specific exceptions, such as the cloistered nun or the temple virgin) as a failed woman, unable to speak for the rest of her sex,* and omitted from the hypocritical and palliative reverence accorded the mother. "Childless" women

* See for example Albert Memmi's criticism of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*: she is suspect because she did not exercise what Memmi glibly describes as her "woman's right" to bear children (*Dominated Man* [Boston: Beacon, 1968], pp. 150-51).

have been burned as witches, persecuted as lesbians, have been refused the right to adopt children because they were unmarried. They have been seen as embodiments of the great threat to male hegemony: the woman who is not tied to the family, who is disloyal to the law of heterosexual pairing and bearing. These women have nonetheless been expected to serve their term for society as missionaries, nuns, teachers, nurses, maiden aunts; to give, rather than sell their labor if they were middle-class; to speak softly, if at all, of women's condition. Yet ironically, precisely because they were not bound to the cycle of hourly existence with children, because they could reflect, observe, write, such women in the past have given us some of the few available strong insights into the experience of women in general. Without the unacclaimed research and scholarship of "childless" women, without Charlotte Brontë (who died in her first pregnancy), Margaret Fuller (whose major work was done before her child was born), without George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir—we would all today be suffering from spiritual malnutrition as women.

The "unchilded" woman, if such a term makes any sense, is still affected by centuries-long attitudes—on the part of both women and men—towards the birthing, child-rearing function of women. Any woman who believes that the institution of motherhood has nothing to do with *her* is closing her eyes to crucial aspects of her situation.

Many of the great mothers have not been biological. The novel *Jane Eyre*, as I have tried to show elsewhere, can be read as a woman-pilgrim's progress along a path of classic female temptation, in which the motherless Jane time after time finds women who protect, solace, teach, challenge, and nourish her in self-respect.³² For centuries, daughters have been strengthened and energized by nonbiological mothers, who have combined a care for the practical values of survival with an incitement toward further horizons, a compassion for vulnerability with an insistence on our buried strengths.* It is precisely this

* Mary Daly has suggested to me that the "nonbiological mother" is really a "spirit-sister" (a phrase which affirms her in terms of what she is rather than what she isn't).

that has allowed us to survive; not our occasional breakthroughs into tokendom, not our "special cases," although these have been beacons for us, illuminations of what ought to be.

We are, none of us, "either" mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both. Women, mothers or not, who feel committed to other women, are increasingly giving each other a quality of caring filled with the diffuse kinds of identification that exist between actual mothers and daughters. Into the mere notion of "mothering" we may carry, as daughters, negative echoes of our own mothers' martyrdom, the burden of their valiant, necessarily limited efforts on our behalf, the confusion of their double messages. But it is a timidity of the imagination which urges that we can be "daughters"—therefore free spirits—rather than "mothers"—defined as eternal givers. Mothering and nonmothering have been such charged concepts for us, precisely because *whichever we did has been turned against us*.

To accept and integrate and strengthen both the mother and the daughter in ourselves is no easy matter, because patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize, these images, and to project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the "other" woman. But any radical vision of sisterhood demands that we reintegrate them.

10

As a child raised in what was essentially the South, Baltimore in the segregated 1930s, I had from birth not only a white, but a Black mother. This relationship, so little explored, so unexpressed, still charges the relationships of Black and white women. We have not only been under slavery, lily white wife and dark, sensual concubine; victims of marital violation on the one hand and unpredictable, licensed rape on the other. We have been mothers and daughters to each other; and although, in the last few years, Black and white feminists have been moving toward a still-difficult sisterhood, there is little yet known, unearthed, of the time when we were mothers and daughters. Lillian Smith remembers:

I knew that my old nurse who had cared for me through long months of illness, who had given me refuge when a little sister took my place as the baby of the family, who soothed me, fed me, delighted me with her stories and games, let me fall asleep on her warm, deep breast, was not worthy of the passionate love I felt for her but must be given instead a half-smiled-at affection . . . I knew but I never believed it that the deep respect I felt for her, the tenderness, the love, was a childish thing which every normal child outgrows . . . and that somehow—though it seemed impossible to my agonized heart—I too must outgrow these feelings. . . . I learned to cheapen with tears and sentimental talk of “my old mammy” one of the profound relationships of my life.³³

My Black mother was “mine” only for four years, during which she fed me, dressed me, played with me, watched over me, sang to me, cared for me tenderly and intimately. “Childless” herself, she was a mother. She was slim, dignified, and very handsome, and from her I learned—nonverbally—a great deal about the possibilities of dignity in a degrading situation. After my sister’s birth, though she still worked from time to time in the house, she was no longer my care-giver. Another nurse came, but she was not the same to me; I felt she belonged to my sister. Twenty years later, when I left my parents’ house, expecting never to return, my Black mother told me: “Yes, I understand how you have to leave and do what you think is right. I once had to break somebody’s heart to go and live my life.” She died a few years later; I did not see her again.

And, yes: I know what Lillian Smith describes, the confusion of discovering that a woman one has loved and been cherished by is somehow “unworthy” of such love after a certain age. That sense of betrayal, of the violation of a relationship, was for years a nameless thing, for no one yet spoke of racism, and even the concept of “prejudice” had not yet filtered into my childhood world. It was simply “the way things were,” and we tried to repress the confusion and the shame.

When I began writing this chapter I began to remember my Black mother again: her calm, realistic vision of things, her physical grace and pride, her beautiful soft voice. For years, she had drifted out of reach, in my searches backward through time,

exactly as the double silence of sexism and racism intended her to do. She was meant to be utterly annihilated.*

But, at the edge of adolescence, we find ourselves drawing back from our natural mothers as if by a similar edict. It is toward men, henceforth, that our sensual and emotional energies are intended to flow. The culture makes it clear that neither the Black mother, nor the white mother, nor any of the other mothers, are “worthy” of our profoundest love and loyalty. Women are made taboo to women—not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators. In breaking this taboo, we are reuniting with our mothers; in reuniting with our mothers, we are breaking this taboo.

* 1986: The above passage overpersonalizes and does not, it seems to me now, give enough concrete sense of the actual position of the Black domestic worker caring for white children. Whatever the white child has received both in care and caring, the Black woman has given under enormous constraints. As Trudier Harris sums it up, “Control of time, wages and work was solely in the hands of the white woman.” Black women domestic workers were often statistically invisible in the labor market and were expected to behave invisibly in the white home, existing as a role and not a person: “She must maneuver . . . in order to salvage what portion of dignity she can, to resist depersonalization and dehumanization. . . . The mistress expects the maid to be a good mammy simply because, she believes, it’s in her blood.” (Trudier Harris, *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982], pp. 10, 13, 20. See also Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family . . . Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* [New York: Independence, 1956].)

X VIOLENCE: THE HEART OF MATERNAL DARKNESS

I know of streets of houses where there are large factories built, taking the whole of the daylight away from the kitchen, where the woman spends the best part of her life. On top of this you get the continual grinding of machinery all day. Knowing that it is mostly women and girls who are working in these factories gives you the feeling that their bodies are going round with the machinery. The mother wonders what she has to live for; if there is another baby coming she hopes it will be dead when it is born. The result is she begins to take drugs. I need hardly tell you the pain and suffering she goes through if the baby survives, or the shock it is to the mother when she is told there is something wrong with the baby. She feels she is to blame if she has done this without her husband knowing, and she is living in dread of him. All this tells on the woman physically and mentally; can you wonder at women turning to drink? If the child lives to grow up you find it hysterical and with very irritable, nasty ways. . . . When you see all this it is like a sting at your heart when you know the cause of it all and no remedy . . .

—*Maternity: Letters from Working-Women*,
Collected by the Women's Cooperative Guild, 1915

On June 11, 1974, "the first hot day of summer," Joanne Michulski, thirty-eight, the mother of eight children ranging

from eighteen years to two months of age, took a butcher knife, decapitated and chopped up the bodies of her two youngest on the neatly kept lawn of the suburban house where the family lived outside Chicago. This "bizarre incident," as her husband called it, created an enormous stir in the surrounding community. Full pages in the local press were devoted to "human interest" reporting of the background of Ms. Michulski's act. Columns headed "IT NEED NOT HAVE HAPPENED," "WHY DO MOTHERS KILL? THEY ARE KILLING THEMSELVES," "THE POLICE ROLE IN MENTAL CASES: STRICTLY LIMITED," "WALK-IN CLINIC CAN'T HELP EMERGENCIES" attempted to explain, exonerate, psychologize; the local newspapers ran an interview with Victor Michulski in which "HUSBAND TELLS OF TORTURED LIFE." Ms. Michulski was charged with voluntary manslaughter but found innocent by reason of insanity, and was committed to a state hospital. Her husband sued for divorce.

The history of Joanne Michulski, as described by her husband, her neighbors, by psychiatric caseworkers, by the clergy and police, had been as follows: None of her eight children were "wanted" children. After the birth of each child, she had gone into deep depression; after the third was born, she discussed using contraceptives with her husband. He "talked about a vasectomy, but just never had it done." She planned to take oral contraceptives, but according to him she never did so. In her depressions she lay on the couch, "saying and doing nothing" for long periods. Michulski, described as a "trim, dapper man," said that his wife had never been known to use violence toward her children, and that "she seemed to show extreme love to the smallest of the children at all times." He described her as "a fairly good wife and mother; not the best." The minister who lived next door said that she seemed "quietly desperate from the moment the family moved into the home" in 1959. Her women neighbors found her "withdrawn"; she did not drive and her husband was absent from home for long periods. The neighboring pastor also reported that while her husband kept the outside of the house neat, the inside was "a mess." She "rarely cooked. Her refrigerator was never cleaned." But the children always seemed "well cared-for." Her husband took the children out to eat several times a week; she had developed a

habit of standing up in the kitchen while the family sat in the dining room. She began to talk out loud to herself and had periods of screaming—not at the children, but at “imaginary people.” According to the pastor, “I never saw her lay a hand on her children. . . . She was like a mother bear where their safety or reputation was concerned. She did react violently, however.”*

Between 1961 and 1966 the county probation department was in contact with the family. Joanne Michulski was three times voluntarily admitted to mental hospitals: once for her “real blue spells” as her husband termed them; once because of her fear that “X-rays” or “laser beams” were being projected into her home; once for “heart pains” which were treated as psychosomatic. During one of these periods Michulski placed the children in foster homes. On later discovering that one of his daughters had been abused in a foster home, Michulski resolved never to break up the family again.

At home again, Joanne Michulski’s spells of disturbance lengthened, but in between she was “easy to get along with,” according to her husband. In general, it seemed that she was better when her husband was around, and that her bouts of rage, fear, and shouting took place when she was left alone with the children. Aware that the situation was deteriorating, Michulski stuck to his decision to “keep the family together”—that is, to leave his wife all day long responsible for eight children. At no point do news accounts or interviews suggest that there was any attempt to get household help, or to offer her any respite from her existence as “wife and mother.” And perhaps she would have refused.¹

Throughout history numberless women have killed children they knew they could not rear, whether economically or emotionally, children forced upon them by rape, ignorance, poverty, marriage, or by the absence of, or sanctions against, birth control and abortion. These terrible, prevalent acts have to be distinguished from infanticide as a deliberate social policy, prac-

* This pastor opened his interview with a reporter: “I am a Christian man.” The interview ends: “My wife and I respected her the same way we would a vicious dog.”

ticed by peoples everywhere, against female or malformed children, twins, or the first-born.

Legal, systematic infanticide was practiced in Sparta, in Rome, by the Arabs, in feudal Japan, in traditional China, and it has always been a form of population control in preliterate societies. “In the Old Testament are preserved clear traces of the parental sacrifice of the first fruit of the womb not only to Baal but to Yahweh.”² Males have been spared as warriors: “The old Vikings extended a spear to the newborn boy. If the child seized it, it was allowed to live.”³ Although sickly and malformed infants of both sexes were killed or exposed, and twins perceived as monsters or as the product of a double impregnation by two different fathers, female children (and their mothers) have borne the brunt of official infanticidal practice, for various reasons; chiefly the expense of “marrying off” daughters, and contempt for female life. Under Christianity, infanticide was forbidden as a policy, but it continued nonetheless to be practiced as an individual act, in which women, raped or seduced and then branded with their “sin,” and under pain of torture or execution, have in guilt, self-loathing, and blind desperation done away with the newborns they had carried in their bodies.

The Church had much to do with creating the crime of individual maternal infanticide, by pronouncing all children born out of wedlock “illegitimate.” Until the eighteenth century or later bastards were largely excluded from participation in trades and guilds, could not inherit property, and were essentially without the law. Since the “sin” of the child’s father was more difficult to prove, it was on the unmarried mother that the full penalty fell; as the eternally guilty party, she was considered by the Church to be “the root of the whole sex problem.”⁴

Maternal infanticide was “the most common crime in Western Europe from the Middle Ages down to the end of the eighteenth century.”^{5*} In the Middle Ages the punishments

* Rape, by the way, is almost unmentioned as a cause of illegitimate pregnancy; the term usually employed is “seduction,” implying that the father had promised marriage and then deserted the mother. Yet, as Susan Brownmiller has documented, rape has been taken for granted as a part of war. Outside wars, rape has gone on throughout history; as Brownmiller

were drastic: The woman found guilty of infanticide might be buried alive, impaled through the heart with a pointed stick, or burnt at the stake. "In Zittau . . . the infanticide was stuffed into a black sack together with a dog, a cat, a rooster or a viper. The sack had to remain under water for six hours, and the choir boys sang, *Aus tiefer Noth schrei ich zu Dir.*" (*Out of great trouble I cry to Thee.*) Since, in the minds of the clergy, women who followed the old pagan religion were believed to have intercourse with the devil, an unmarried mother was often assumed to be a witch.⁶

Toward the end of the eighteenth century infanticide began to obsess the minds of legislators, rulers, and writers. Oscar Werner says that the plight of Goethe's Gretchen in *Faust* was, far from being unusual, "the most popular literary theme" in Germany between 1770 and 1800.⁷ It now began to be recognized in Europe that the woman who murdered her infant was no callous criminal, but a desperate person. Maria Theresa of Austria and Catherine the Great of Russia both established foundling homes and maternity clinics to receive the children of illegitimate pregnancies, and Frederick the Great was concerned that the laws regulating infanticide should be made more consistent and humane. But it has to be emphasized that, historically, to bear a child out of wedlock has been to violate the property laws that say a woman and her child must legally belong to some man, and that, if they do not, they are at best marginal people, vulnerable to every kind of sanction. The rape victim has paid the cost at every level. And within wedlock,

points out, "*Thou shalt not rape* was conspicuously missing from the Ten Commandments" (*Against Our Will* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975], pp. 19, 30-113). Even Frederick the Great acknowledged an "unmarried soldiery" was responsible for the high rate of infanticide in Prussia in the eighteenth century, although he implied that rapes took place because of pent-up lust, a male theory that is slowly dying hard today. (See Oscar Werner, *The Unmarried Mother in German Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1917], pp. 36-37.) Werner does note (p. 32) that, in the Middle Ages, "in looking through the archives one seldom finds a case where the seducer is mentioned. When he was found out he was punished severely. The reason he was so seldom punished is to be found in the fact that the courts always accepted the man's denial in preference to the woman's accusation. It was a war against the unmarried mother and not against the unmarried father." This is of course a rationalization of the much deeper assumption of women's sexual guilt.

women have been legally powerless to prevent their husbands' use of their bodies, resulting in year-in, year-out pregnancies. In a tenement, or hovel already crowded with undernourished and ailing children, the new infant, whose fate was already almost certainly death, might be "accidentally" or unconsciously suffocated, lain upon in bed, allowed to drown, or simply left unfed.*

In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, at least two women, unnerved by the stress of living with a covenant theology which offered to men, but not to women, a direct relationship with God and knowledge of his will, chose the certainty of damnation over the anxiety and helplessness of their situation by attempting, or actually committing, infanticide. Though translated into theological terms (since theology was the language of Puritan life) their acts were statements of revolt against both a patriarchal religion (which promised the priesthood of all believers but extended it only to men) and a patriarchal family system. One woman, Dorothy Talbye, tried to kill not just her children but her husband, after announcing that "it was so revealed" to her by God.⁸

The administrators of the British Empire in India, in the early nineteenth century, were pained to discover that among several Hindu communities a woman who had given birth to a daughter was routinely instructed to kill her, because her dowry would prove too heavy a cost for the family to bear. Cultural variations aside, in England as in Gujarat a self-respecting family should be able to "marry off" its daughters, marriage being a woman's sole destiny. The unmarried woman, in Mayfair as in Kutch, was an object of suspicion and contempt; the difference was only that in a more complex society there would be subordinate niches for her in the extended family; in a small Brahmin village, she would be simply, a disgrace, and had to be killed at birth. The mother was instructed to starve her baby daughter, or to drown her in milk. Sometimes opium was placed

* "The sacrifice of the wage-earner's children was caused by the mother's starvation; vainly she gave her own food to the children, for then she was unable to suckle the baby and grew too feeble for her former work." In such circumstances, the baby might well be consciously sacrificed. (Alice Clark, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* [London: Routledge & Sons, 1919], p. 87.)

on the mother's nipple and the child was allowed to suckle herself to death. Such, evidently, was the pressure of social custom that the Brahmin religious injunction against killing so much as a fetus did not prevent the practice.⁹

The Victorian period abounds with cases of the seduction (read "rape") of servant girls by their employers; if they refused sex, they would be fired, and many were fired anyway for getting pregnant. Disraeli admitted in 1845 that "infanticide is practised as extensively and as legally in England as it is on the banks of the Ganges."¹⁰ Queen Victoria, however, supported the abolition of capital punishment for this crime.¹¹

In America, Elizabeth Cady Stanton rose to the defense of women charged with infanticide, and associated it with "the triple cord of a political, religious, and social serfdom—that have made [woman] a pliant, pitiable victim to the utter perversion of the highest and holiest sentiments of her nature."¹² She managed to obtain a governor's pardon for one woman, Hester Vaughan, who, at age twenty, deserted by her husband, had been "seduced" by her employer and fired when he found she was pregnant. She gave birth in an unheated garret in midwinter; later she was found in a critical condition and the baby was dead. She was imprisoned, without proof, for infanticide. Stanton, in addressing the New York legislature on this case, demanded that women should have the right to a jury of their peers—i.e., of women—and that equal moral standards should be enforced for men and women.¹³

In 1973 the *New York Times* headlined an epidemic of infanticide in Japan; according to reports, a newborn infant was found stuffed into a railway-station coin locker on an average of every ten days, sometimes with a note expressing contrition and guilt. In Tokyo alone during a single year 119 babies had been deserted. The *Times* failed to associate these deaths with the repeal of the liberal abortion laws and the limiting of available contraceptives to the diaphragm, measures which were reported in the same month (December 1973) by the newsletter of Boston Female Liberation.¹⁴

But Stanton's was the first feminist voice to be heard on behalf of women who, battered by patriarchal laws and practices, had taken the most desperate and emphatic way they knew to make a clear statement.

2

Joanne Michulski's statement was also clear and desperate. She spoke, after her arrest, of "a sacrifice." If we assume that any word of hers is simply the raving of a "paranoid-schizophrenic" we shall not hear what she was saying. A sacrifice is "the act of offering something to a deity in propitiation or homage; especially the ritual slaughter of an animal or person for this purpose"; it is also "the forfeiture of something highly valued." Joanne Michulski had endured the violence of the institution of motherhood for nineteen years, and it seems that the most precious thing in her life was, in fact, her children. ("There never was a question of her interest or love for her children," a case-worker observed. "She just couldn't handle the situation.") Particularly, her husband said, she always showed "extreme love toward the smallest ones." These were the two she killed and mutilated.

Much of the speculation in the newspapers had to do with whether the county mental health services and the laws surrounding commitment had failed this family. But what could traditional psychiatry have done for Joanne Michulski? It could have tried to "adjust" her to motherhood, or it could have incarcerated her. But, as a group of twelve women pointed out in a letter published in a local newspaper, the expectations laid on her and on millions of women with children are "insane expectations." Instead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological.

Here are a few statements by psychiatrists on the subject of women who in one way or another attempt to resist the demands of the institution:

The very fact that a woman cannot tolerate pregnancy, or is in intense conflict about it, or about giving birth to a child, is an indication that the pre-pregnant personality of this woman was immature and in that sense can be labelled as psychopathological. . . . The problem centers around unresolved oedipal situations. . . . Since pregnancy and birth are the overt proofs of femininity, the exaggerated castrative factors become overwhelmingly threatening. Identification with the mother is pre-

dominant and hostile. Receptivity in the feminine sexual role appears as debasing. Competition with the male is always at a high pitch. . . . Pregnancy as a challenge of femininity is unacceptable to them.¹⁵

With sterilization the woman voluntarily surrenders a portion of her femininity. . . . Some women with unresolved hostility for their mother thereby hope to appease that same hated and hating mother and to obtain forgiveness for their wish for Father and Father's child.¹⁶

[Vasectomy] frequently is requested as a contraceptive measure. It seldom, if ever, can be so considered. Some emotionally sick women would like to castrate their husbands, and manage for this reason to force their own equally emotionally sick mates to request vasectomies.¹⁷

I am not offering the naive proposition that existing methods of birth control, or a twice-weekly baby-sitter, could have "solved" Joanne Michulski's "problems." Why didn't she use the pill? it can be asked. For all we know, a few doses made her feel continually nauseated. And, as we now know, it could have killed her. Perhaps she felt the hopelessness of any control of her life which is indoctrinated into so many women. Motherhood without autonomy, without choice, is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control.* Because only her husband, her neighbors, psychiatric workers, the clergy, and the police have spoken for her, because her rage and despair communicated itself in metaphors, in violence turned first inward, then upon what she loved, we will never know the small details which built over the years toward her honorable, unendurable suffering.

A woman in depression does not usually welcome sex. We can assume that although Ms. Michulski accepted the violence of the institution of marriage, which guarantees a man his "conjugal rights" so that he cannot be considered the rapist of his wife, she did not wish to have sex at the cost of bearing children. *She knew* she had had enough children by the time the

* Some women express this by furiously and incessantly cleaning house, which they know will be immediately disorganized by small children; others, by letting the house go utterly to pieces since any kind of order seems hopeless.

third was born. Once she had children at all, she was faced with the double violence of marital rape (a woman regarded as her husband's physical property is a raped woman) and of institutionalized motherhood. Let us look at the aspects of that institution which converged in this woman's life.

There is no safe, infallible method of birth control. Had the Michulskis been Catholic (they were Lutheran) there would have been grave sanctions against using any method whatever. But non-Catholics are better off only to a degree. Christopher Tietze, a biostatistician involved in the movement for population control, has said that the hazards to a woman's health are far less with the diaphragm, condom, foam, or rhythm methods, but these methods require medically safe, legal, abortion as a back-up if they are to be regarded as genuinely effective. The pill and the IUD, though they have a higher rate of prevention, are physically dangerous and potentially lethal. The IUD causes exceptionally heavy menses, severe cramps (20 percent of IUD users request removal of the device within a year), irritation of pelvic infections, and perforation of the uterus. The pill is known to cause blood-clotting, heart attack, stroke, gall bladder and kidney disease, and cancer of the breast and possibly of other organs. Both it and the IUD have still-unexplored long-term hazards. Even some of the jellies used with the diaphragm contain a mercury compound known to cause birth defects if pregnancy does occur.^{18*} It is improbable that a problem which affected as many men in the sensitive genital area, as contraception affects women, would be considered solvable by methods so dangerous, even deadly, and so undependable.

We know the judgments from within the psychiatric establishment against women who do not wish to become mothers. We have to connect these voices with others reaching far back in history. Soranus of Ephesus, the Greek gynecologist, would have had abortion permitted for only three reasons: (1) "to maintain feminine beauty"; (2) to avoid danger to the mother's life if her uterus should be "too small" for the fetus; (3) to

* 1986: Mercury compounds are no longer used in spermicides sold in the United States. (See The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, "The New" *Our Bodies, Ourselves* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984], p. 233.)

control population as urged by Plato in the *Republic* and Aristotle in the *Politics*.¹⁹ St. Augustine regarded abortion as "the work of minds characterized by 'lustful cruelty' or 'cruel lust.'" ²⁰ Christian theologians through the ages have engaged in hair-splitting debates. If a pregnant woman is attacked by a bull, may she run for her life even though running may cause her to abort? Yes, said the sixteenth-century Jesuit Tomás Sanchez. If a woman conceives out of wedlock, and her male relatives would kill her if they found out, may she destroy the fetus to save her life? Yes, again, said Sanchez.²¹ Within the Catholic Church opinion has swayed back and forth as to when a fetus is "ensouled," a controversy which began with Tertullian, a self-confessed loather of female sexuality and also the first to say in effect that "abortion is murder." The early Christian theologians, still cleaving to Aristotle, believed that abortion was murder only if the fetus (if male) was within forty days of conception and (if female) within eighty to ninety days, the time when "ensoulment" was presumed to occur for each sex. (We can only guess at how the gender of the fetus was supposed to be determined.) By 1588, Pope Sixtus V, a fanatic Counter-Reformation cleanser of the Church, declared all abortion murder, with excommunication as its punishment. His successor, finding the sanctions unworkable, revoked them in 1591, except for abortions performed later than forty days from conception. By 1869, Pius IX decided the time was ripe to swing back to the decision of Sixtus V: All abortion was again declared murder.²² This is at present the official, majority Catholic position. In spite of it, Catholic women comprise over 20 percent of all abortion patients.²³

The arguments against and for abortion range from attempts to determine biologically or legally when the fetus becomes a "person" to exercises in the most abstract logic and ethics.²⁴ I shall not attempt here to enumerate the range of arguments; Mary Daly has already provided an overview from a feminist perspective. She notes that

. . . abortion is hardly the "final triumph" envisaged by all or the final stage of the revolution. There are deep questions beneath and beyond this, such as: Why should women be in situations of unwanted pregnancy at all? Some women see

abortion as a necessary measure for themselves but no one sees it as the fulfillment of her highest dreams. Many would see abortion as a humiliating procedure. Even the abortifacient pills, when perfected, can be seen as a protective measure, a means to an end, but hardly as the total embodiment of liberation. Few if any feminists are deceived in this matter, although male proponents of the repeal of abortion laws tend often to be short-sighted in this respect, confusing the feminist revolution with the sexual revolution.^{25*}

The demand for legalized abortion, like the demand for contraception, has been represented as a form of irresponsibility, a refusal by women to confront their moral destiny, a trivialization or evasion of great issues of life and death. The human facts, however, are hardly frivolous. Here are some of the methods resorted to by women who have been denied legal, safe, low-cost abortion: self-abortion by wire coat-hangers, knitting needles, goose quills dipped in turpentine, celery stalks, drenching the cervix with detergent, lye, soap, Ultra-Jel (a commercial preparation of castor oil, soap, and iodine), drinking purgatives or mercury, applying hot coals to the body. The underworld "cut-rate" abortionists, often alcoholic, disenfranchised members of the medical profession, besides operating in septic surroundings and performing unnecessary curettages on poor women who cannot afford a pregnancy test, frequently rape or sexually molest their patients; well-to-do women have been forced to travel thousands of miles to receive a medically safe abortion.²⁶

Clearly, the first violence done in abortion is on the body and mind of the pregnant woman herself. Most people, women and

* 1986: Beverly Wildung Harrison, writing more recently from a Christian feminist perspective, has this to say: "If we are ever to become genuinely serious about reducing the need for abortions in the United States, we must cut through the miasma of fear and suspicion about women's sexuality and confront, by concrete analysis of women's lives, the conditions that lead women to resort to frequent abortion. It should be clear that I do not imagine that all abortions can or should be eliminated. The availability of safe surgical, elective abortion in the early stages of pregnancy is considered an abomination only by those who value *potential* human life more than they value existing women's lives. But if those intent on reducing the number of abortions are serious, they will have to take with full and non-judgmental seriousness the conditions of women's lives and women's social reality" (Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* [Boston: Beacon, 1983], pp. 245-46).

men alike, find it difficult to perform even a minor operation upon themselves, from giving themselves an injection to lancing an infected finger or removing a splinter. It is nothing less than grim, driven desperation which can impel a woman to insert an unbent coat-hanger into her most sensitive parts, to place her body in the hands of a strange man with unverified credentials, or to lie down without anesthesia on a filthy kitchen table, knowing that in so doing she risks illness, grilling by the police, and death. Some women are able to speak later of such experiences in a measured, almost indifferent way; no one should be deceived by this attempt to distance or minimize the trauma. An illegal or self-induced abortion is no casual experience. It is painful, dangerous, and cloaked in the guilt of criminality.*

Even when performed in a hospital, under the law, abortion is often packaged with sterilization as a kind of punishment for the crime of wishing not to be pregnant, just as women who request simple tubal ligation as sterilization are frequently given only the option of hysterectomy.^{27†} The sadism of the underworld abortionist and that of the hospital to which a hemorrhaging woman turns herself in after an incomplete self-inflicted abortion are not so different after all.

To become pregnant with an unwanted child is itself no light experience. There have been efforts to show that abortion, legal or not, is harder psychically on women who have borne children than on a woman who has borne none. A recent Swedish study of nearly five hundred women concluded, however, that no such generalization was possible.²⁸ Each woman reacts to pregnancy, wanted or not, and to abortion, even the easiest and most legal, in her own way. Guilt about abortion can serve

* 1986: For accounts of illegal abortion in recent literature by women, see Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1982); and Marge Piercy, *Braided Lives* (New York: Summit, 1982).

† 1986: Helen Rodríguez-Trias, M.D., Connie Uri, M.D., and other feminists and medical activists have exposed and organized against sterilization abuse as it targets women of color and poor women—e.g., Indian women on reservations, women in Puerto Rico, Mexican-American women, poor Black women in the South. In 1979 federal sterilization regulations went into law but are still widely unenforced. See Rodríguez-Trias, "Sterilization Abuse," in Rita Arditti, Pat Brennan, and Steve Cavrak, eds., *Science and Liberation* (Boston: South End Press, 1980); see also The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *"The New" Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 256–57.

as the channel for other, older feelings of guilt, of needing to atone; it can also be the result of lifelong exposure to the idea that abortion is murder.* If a woman feels her guilt or depression as a kind of punishment, she may try to disavow such feelings. It is crucial, however, in abortion as in every other experience (especially in the realm of sexuality and reproduction) that women take seriously the enterprise of finding out what we *do* feel, instead of accepting what we have been told we must feel. One woman's depression may actually be anger at the man who got her pregnant; another woman may be angry at her treatment by the abortionist or the hospital; another may wish to have a child, know her situation renders it impossible, and genuinely mourn the loss.

No free woman, with 100 percent effective, nonharmful birth control readily available, would "choose" abortion. At present, it is certainly likely that a woman can—through many causes—become so demoralized as to use abortion as a form of violence against herself—a penance, an expiation. But this needs to be viewed against the ecology of guilt and victimization in which so many women grow up. In a society where women always entered heterosexual intercourse willingly,[†] where adequate contraception was a genuine social priority, there would be no "abortion issue." And in such a society there would be a vast diminishment of female self-hatred—a psychic source of many unwanted pregnancies.

Abortion is violence: a deep, desperate violence inflicted by a woman upon, first of all, herself. It is the offspring, and will continue to be the accuser, of a more pervasive and prevalent violence, the violence of rapism.

* A Boston women's group, COPE, originally begun as a support group for women in pregnancy or in postchildbirth depression, has started two post-abortion discussion groups to enable women to sort out their feelings rather than repress them. "The most important thing . . . is that the woman who's upset over her abortion shouldn't feel like she's crazy or 'sick'. She's been through an unpleasant experience and she has a right to support" (Karen Lindsay, "COPE-ing with the Aftermath of Abortion," *Boston Phoenix*, January 14, 1975).

† The pressure on women to "fulfill their conjugal duties" deserves a chapter of its own in the history of rape. As the wives of working-men quoted in Chapter II make clear, husbands have used many kinds of pressure besides brute physical force to get the use of their wives' bodies. One of these women writes that "no amount of State help can help the sufferings of mothers until men are taught many things in regard to the right use of

3

From a thoughtful woman's point of view, no ethical ideal has deserved our unconditional respect and adherence, because in every ethics crimes against women are mysteriously unnamed or glossed over. We have always been outside the (manmade) law, although we have been much more stringently punished than men for breaking the law, as in the case of prostitution and adultery.

The absence of respect for women's lives is written into the heart of male theological doctrine, into the structure of the patriarchal family, and into the very language of patriarchal ethics. This is the underlying hypocrisy of the orthodox Catholic or "Right-to-Life" argument against abortion.* It is a fiction—not just an "unexamined assumption"—that respect for human life has been an ideal, or, as John Noonan phrases it, "an almost absolute value in history." Women, upon whom most of the burden of respect for life has been placed, know that it is not. We know too much at firsthand about the violence of the warrior, the rapist, the institutional violence of political and social systems in which we have little part, but which affect our bodies, our children, our aging parents: the violence which over centuries we have been told is the way of the world, but which we exist to mitigate and assuage.†

the organs of reproduction, and until he realizes that the wife's body belongs to herself, and until the marriage relations takes a higher sense of morality and bare justice. And what I imply not only exists in the lower strata of society, but is just as prevalent in the higher. . . . Very much injury and suffering comes to the mother and child through the father's ignorance and interference" (*Maternity: Letters from Working Women* [London: 1915], pp. 27-28).

* 1986: On October 7, 1984, ninety-seven leading Catholic scholars, religious and social activists published a "Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion" in the *New York Times*. It pointed out that the papal and hierarchical denunciation of abortion as "morally wrong in all instances" is not the sole legitimate Catholic position and that there is a diversity of belief among Catholics which deserves "candid and respectful discussion." It opposed "the kind of legislation that curtails the legitimate exercise of the freedom of religion and conscience or discriminates against poor women." Many of the signers have felt reprisals, including dismissal from jobs and harassment. In the *New York Times* of March 2, 1986, a "Declaration of Solidarity," signed by hundreds of Catholics, protested these reprisals as violating the right to free speech.

† I have written elsewhere of the impression made on me by two films, released at about the same time: Marcel Ophul's *The Sorrow and the Pity* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. In each of these—one a

Neither the theologians, nor the Right-to-Lifers, nor the fertility experts, nor the ecologists, have acknowledged that, where "humanity" and "humanistic values" are concerned, women are not really part of the population. It is not enough that the ecology-minded, or the Society of Friends, or the planners of Planned Parenthood or Zero Population Growth, concerned for "the quality of life on the planet," happen at this time to support the decontrol of abortion. Abortion legislation has always come and gone with the rhythms of economic and military aggression, the desire for cheap labor, or for greater consumerism. In pre-Christian Rome a husband could order or permit his wife to have an abortion in one pregnancy, and forbid her to in another. We have seen the vacillations of official Church policy. In the Soviet Union, the first modern country to legalize abortion (in 1920), virtual abortion factories were provided at first by the state. These were abolished and abortion declared illegal when it became clear that a confrontation was building with Nazi Germany. After World War II, with a new emphasis on consumerism, abortion was again legalized to encourage wives to stay in the labor force and earn a second family income. Throughout, by continuing a half-hearted and ineffective program of birth-control information, the Soviet Union has in effect forced abortion on many women who would have preferred not to conceive at all.²⁰ In Japan, as we have seen, a liberal abortion law was rescinded, and birth-control pills made virtually unavailable, when the birth rate began to decline and the supply of cheap labor was threatened.

The situation in China has been described by the fertility expert Carl Djerassi as "approaching Nirvana"—not, it would seem, for women but for epidemiologists. "China probably has already, or certainly will have within another two years or so, more women on oral contraceptives than any other country. In addition or in contrast to many women in North America and Europe, Chinese women are much less mobile, their jobs and

documentary of French collaboration with and resistance to Nazism in World War II, the other a dramatization of a best-selling novel about a Mafioso "family"—the men hold their councils of war, while the women, as if symbolically, listen at doorways, silently serve drinks and food, watching the faces of the men with acute anxiety and alertness. It is they who will later hold those men and their children in their arms, whatever crimes they have committed against life.

residences are changed rarely, and the potential for local record-keeping at the site of job and/or residence is unsurpassed." (Birth-control information is not available to students, even at the university level, and is officially disseminated only to married couples; early marriage and premarital intercourse are socially unacceptable.)

"Chinese achievements in fertility control during the past decade are extremely impressive and provide lessons from which most of the world could learn," Djerassi claims. Among these lessons is the fact that "the Chinese *modus operandi* appears to be more flexible than that in the United States . . . animal toxicity requirements do not exceed 6–12 months (as compared to U.S. requirements of up to ten years) . . . the decision to undertake clinical testing is carried out in 'discussions' between the laboratory scientists, clinicians and representatives of the health authorities. . . . The rationale for this *ad hoc* procedure is 'to alleviate human suffering as quickly as possible.'"

Moreover, "subjects for clinical experimentation are obtained by 'making propaganda' among women in nearby Street Committees. The volunteers know that they are participating in an experiment in which they might become pregnant (abortion is, of course, available as a back-up procedure), but they are aware that this is 'science for the revolutionary cause' and hence are willing to undertake the necessary risks." Djerassi himself is slightly skeptical about the conflict between "as quickly as possible" and the safety of the women experimented on, and even about the "extent of real informed consent of the patient (rather than revolutionary zeal)."^{80*} But however much the Chinese woman benefits today by the possibility of limiting her family to at most two children, the same *modus operandi* may easily be applied, at some further time, to enlarging the size of the population. "The revolutionary cause" can just as easily re-

* 1986: In 1980, the State Family Policy of "one couple, one child" was implemented by incentives such as "preferential housing, employment, childcare, free education and medical benefits for the child." In 1982, tax penalties were levied on the income of a family producing a second child. Pre- and postnatal care and delivery at home or in a hospital are all free, in any case. (See Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Global* [New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1984], pp. 144–45. See also Gwen Iver, "China's Population Policy," *off our backs*, Vol. 15, No. 3 [March 1985], p. 15.)

quire that contraceptives become limited, that abortion no longer be available, and that, as presently in the Soviet Union, medals be awarded to women producing more than ten children.

The *New York Times* noted on March 17, 1975, that the Argentine government, hoping to double its population by the end of the twentieth century, had recently prohibited the dissemination of birth-control information and severely restricted the sale of contraceptives. As set forth in the Peronist magazine *Las Bases*, the motives are unambiguous:

. . . when the year 2000 is at hand, we will have over-populated neighbors with great food problems, and we, on the contrary, will have three million kilometers of land, practically unpopulated. We will not have the arms to work this immense and rich territory, and if we do not do it there will be others who will. . . . We must start from the basis that the principal work of a woman is to have children.

These words have a familiar ring. In the early part of the twentieth century, as contraception became more popular, both in England and America panic arose lest the middle and upper classes, to whom methods were most available, were "breeding themselves out," while the "lower"—therefore "unfit"—masses were still producing large families. (Poor women, as we have seen, were vocal about the need to limit their families, but abstinence or self-inflicted abortion were the chief methods they knew.) Apart from the social-Darwinist fallacy inherent in these polemics (the idea that poor people are poor because they are unfit, rather than because the rich take care to protect their wealth), the arguments have a fascinating honesty about the "true meaning and purpose" of motherhood. Rarely, whether from the Christian or the Freudian, the fascist or the Maoist Fathers, do we get so pure and clear a description of the institution of motherhood as from obscure pamphlets like the Reverend George W. Clark's *Race Suicide—England's Peril*, published in 1917 by the Duty and Discipline Movement.

Reverend Clark begins by declaring that the loss of human life through birth control is more terrible than the lives lost in war. (It is worth remembering that the 1914–1918 World War was considered to have destroyed the "flower of manhood" in the

British upper classes. Never mind the ordinary soldier; it was only the "best and brightest" that had been ravaged in the trench warfare of that "war to end all wars.") Clark is perfectly honest about his fear that middle- and upper-class restrictions on the size of families, while the "physically and mentally inferior" continue to breed, will prove a disaster for British society. He divides his sermon into three heads: (1) Limitation [of family] Threatens Our Empire; (2) Limitation Threatens Our Trade ("the merchant with one son has not the same inducement to launch out in new enterprise as his German competitor with two or more sons"); (3) National Defense is Imperilled by Limitation. He concludes with this appeal to the mothers:

No other service woman can render the State can compensate for her failure in this, the one function God and Nature have assigned to her, and to her alone. Everything else man can do. This is woman's function and her glory. For this she was sent into the world. Her best years must be spent in the nursery, or the nation perishes. In the noblest periods of a nation's history the ablest women are ambitious of bearing distinguished sons. Only in periods of decadence do women seek in barrenness to be distinguished themselves . . .^{31*}

Vous travaillez pour l'armée, madame. There is no guarantee, under socialism or "liberal" capitalism, Protestantism, "humanism," or any existing ethics, that a liberal policy will not become an oppressive one, so long as women do not have absolute decision-power over the use of our bodies. We have seen federal conservation programs give way to the lumbering, pipe-lining, and stripping of wilderness lands. We have also seen the laws and opinions regarding birth control and abortion fluctuate throughout history, according to the requirements of military aggression, the labor market, or cultural climates of puritanism or "sexual liberation," patriarchally controlled.

* Recently two American feminists reported from the East Berlin World Congress of Women for International Women's Year that report after report, working paper after working paper presented at this male-dominated gathering expressed the view that women's major value is as "the bearers of future generations" and in their "dual social function as mothers and bearers." "Hardly ever during the entire Congress was it pointed out that women are human beings first and foremost and deserve their rights for that and no other reason" (Laura McKinley, Diana Russell *et al.*, "The 'Old Left' Divided in Berlin over the 'Woman Question,'" *Majority Report*, March 6-20, 1976, pp. 10-12).

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When we think of an institution, we can usually see it as embodied in a building: the Vatican, the Pentagon, the Sorbonne, the Treasury, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Kremlin, the Supreme Court. What we cannot see, until we become close students of the institution, are the ways in which power is maintained and transferred behind the walls and beneath the domes, the invisible understandings which guarantee that it shall reside in certain hands but not in others, that information shall be transmitted to this one but not to that one, the hidden collusions and connections with other institutions of which it is supposedly independent. When we think of the institution of motherhood, no symbolic architecture comes to mind, no visible embodiment of authority, power, or of potential or actual violence. Motherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place. Perhaps we imagine row upon row of backyards, behind suburban or tenement houses, in each of which a woman hangs out the wash, or runs to pick up a tear-streaked two-year-old; or thousands of kitchens, in each of which children are being fed and sent off to school. Or we think of the house of our childhood, the woman who mothered us, or of ourselves. We do not think of the laws which determine how we got to these places, the penalties imposed on those of us who have tried to live our lives according to a different plan, the art which depicts us in an unnatural serenity or resignation, the medical establishment which has robbed so many women of the act of giving birth, the experts—almost all male—who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel. We do not think of the Marxist intellectuals arguing as to whether we produce "surplus value" in a day of washing clothes, cooking food, and caring for children, or the psychoanalysts who are certain that the work of motherhood suits us by nature. We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood.

When we think of motherhood, we are supposed to think of Renoir's blooming women with rosy children at their knees, Raphael's ecstatic madonnas, some Jewish mother lighting the candles in a scrubbed kitchen on Shabbos, her braided loaf lying beneath a freshly ironed napkin. We are not supposed to

think of a woman lying in a Brooklyn hospital with ice packs on her aching breasts because she has been convinced she could not nurse her child; of a woman in Africa equally convinced by the producers of U.S. commercial infant formula that her ample breast-milk is inadequate nourishment; of a girl in her teens, pregnant by her father; of a Vietnamese mother gang-raped while working in the fields with her baby at her side; of two women who love each other struggling to keep custody of their children against the hostility of exhusbands and courts. We are not supposed to think of a woman trying to conceal her pregnancy so she can go on working as long as possible, because when her condition is discovered she will be fired without disability insurance; or of the women whose children have gone unnourished because they had to hire themselves out as wet-nurses; of the slave who, severed from her own child, has rocked and tended the children of her masters; of the woman who passes for "childless," who remembers giving birth to a baby she was not allowed to touch and see because she might love it and wish to keep it. We are not supposed to think of what infanticide feels like, or fantasies of infanticide, or day after wintry day spent alone in the house with ailing children, or of months spent in sweatshop, prison, or someone else's kitchen, in anxiety for children left at home with an older child, or alone. Men have spoken, often, in abstractions, of our "joys and pains." We have, in our long history, accepted the stresses of the institution as if they were a law of nature.

The institution of motherhood cannot be touched or seen: in art perhaps only Käthe Kollwitz has come close to evoking it. It must go on being evoked, so that women never again forget that our many fragments of lived experience belong to a whole which is not of our creation. Rape and its aftermath; marriage as economic dependence, as the guarantee to a man of "his" children; the theft of childbirth from women; the concept of the "illegitimacy" of a child born out of wedlock; the laws regulating contraception and abortion; the cavalier marketing of dangerous birth-control devices; the denial that work done by women at home is a part of "production"; the chaining of women in links of love and guilt; the absence of social benefits for mothers; the inadequacy of child-care facilities in most parts of the world; the unequal pay women receive as wage-

earners, forcing them often into dependence on a man; the solitary confinement of "full-time motherhood"; the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility; the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother; the pediatric assumption that the mother is inadequate and ignorant; the burden of emotional work borne by women in the family—all these are connecting fibers of this invisible institution, and they determine our relationship to our children whether we like to think so or not.

Because we have all had mothers, the institution affects all women, and—though differently—all men. Patriarchal violence and callousness are often visited through women upon children—not only the "battered" child but the children desperately pushed, cajoled, manipulated, the children dependent on one uncertain, weary woman for their day-in, day-out care and emotional sustenance, the male children who grow up believing that a woman is nothing so much as an emotional climate made to soothe and reassure, or an emotional whirlwind bent on their destruction.

I come back, as we must, to Joanne Michulski. Desperation surely grew upon her, little by little. She loved, she tried to love, she screamed and was not heard, because there was nothing and no one in her surroundings who saw her plight as unnatural, as anything but the "homemaker's" usual service to the home. She became a scapegoat, the one around whom the darkness of maternity is allowed to swirl—the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood, the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt. So much of this heart of darkness is an undramatic, undramatized suffering: the woman who serves her family their food but cannot sit down with them, the woman who cannot get out of bed in the morning, the woman polishing the same place on the table over and over, reading labels in the supermarket as if they were in a foreign language, looking into a drawer where there is a butcher knife. The scapegoat is also an escape-valve: through her the passions and the blind raging waters of a suppressed knowledge are permitted to churn their way so that they need not emerge in less extreme situations as lucid rebel-

lion. Reading of the "bad" mother's desperate response to an invisible assault on her being, "good" mothers resolve to become better, more patient and long-suffering, to cling more tightly to what passes for sanity. The scapegoat is different from the martyr; she cannot teach resistance or revolt. She represents a terrible temptation: to suffer uniquely, to assume that I, the individual woman, am the "problem."

Does motherhood release rage and cruelty in anyone except me and "sick" child batterers? . . . My children, when they were about a year old, released in me terrifying fantasies of torture and cruelty. They did it by being children, with normal childish traits of persistence, nagging, crying, curiosity.

Fantasy films unwind in my brain . . . I . . . seize a child by the heels, swing it round, and smash its head into the wall, watching the blood and brains flow down. . . . Sometimes . . . I leave them in the house alone and just run away. . . . After the fantasy films run out I look at my babies and realize I could never do those things . . . I love my children too much. Then I am able to be tender and gentle with them once again.

But I really have, in anger (not rage: that makes me turn inward or destroy things, not children) kicked at their legs, spanked, pulled hair, and pushed them to the floor. . . . I understand how the battered children become that way . . .

I am ashamed to admit I . . . really have hit and kicked my little children. . . . I spend so much time in self-hate . . .

(Autobiography of a student in a class in "Women's Biography," California State College at Sonoma)²²

Self-hatred of the mother in anger, the woman in anger. She does not look beyond her individual anger hurled at the individual child, even when, like Tillie Olsen's Anna, she herself is the target of her husband's violence:

For several weeks Jim Holbrook had been in an evil mood. . . . He had nothing but blows for the children, and he struck Anna too often to remember . . .

Anna too became bitter and brutal. If one of the children was in her way, if they did not obey her instantly, she would hit at them in a blind rage, as if it were some devil she was exorcising. Afterward, in the middle of her work, regret would cramp her

heart at the memory of the tear-stained little face. " 'Twasn't them I was beating up on. Somethin just seems to get into me when I have somethin to hit."²³

In her prose-poem *Momma*, the poet Alta places her finger on the raw nerve of motherhood: loving our children, defending them, as did Joanne Michulski, "like a mother bear," we still find in them the nearest targets for our rage and frustration:

a child with untameable curly hair. i call her kia,
pine nut person, & her eyes so open as she watches me try
to capture her,
as I try to
name her . . .

what of yesterday when she chased the baby in my room
and i screamed

OUT OUT GET OUT & she ran
right out but the baby stayed
unafraid. what is it like to have
a child afraid of you, your own
child, your first child, the one . . .

who must forgive you if either of you are to survive . . .
& how right is it to shut her out of the room so i can
write about her?

how human, how loving, how can
i even try to
: name her

maybe they could manage w/out me
maybe I could steal
away a little time
in a different room
would they all still love me
when i came back?²⁴

What woman, in the solitary confinement of a life at home enclosed with young children, or in the struggle to mother them while providing for them single-handedly, or in the conflict of weighing her own personhood against the dogma that says she is a mother, first, last, and always—what woman has not dreamed of "going over the edge," of simply letting go,

relinquishing what is termed her sanity, so that she can be taken care of for once, or can simply find a way to take care of herself? The mothers: collecting their children at school; sitting in rows at the parent-teacher meeting; placating weary infants in supermarket carriages; straggling home to make dinner, do laundry, and tend to children after a day at work; fighting to get decent care and livable schoolrooms for their children; waiting for child-support checks while the landlord threatens eviction; getting pregnant yet again because their one escape into pleasure and abandon is sex; forcing long needles into their delicate interior parts; wakened by a child's cry from their eternally unfinished dreams—the mothers, if we could look into their fantasies—their daydreams and imaginary experiences—we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation, we would see the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood.

What is astonishing, what can give us enormous hope and belief in a future in which the lives of women and children shall be mended and rewoven by women's hands, is all that we have managed to salvage, of ourselves, for our children, even within the destructiveness of the institution: the tenderness, the passion, the trust in our instincts, the evocation of a courage we did not know we owned, the detailed apprehension of another human existence, the full realization of the cost and precariousness of life. The mother's battle for her child—with sickness, with poverty, with war, with all the forces of exploitation and callousness that cheapen human life—needs to become a common human battle, waged in love and in the passion for survival. But for this to happen, the institution of motherhood must be destroyed.

The changes required to make this possible reverberate into every part of the patriarchal system. To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work.

AFTERWORD

. . . there are ways of thinking that we don't know about. Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn. The sense of urgency, the spiritual restlessness it engenders, cannot be appeased . . .

—Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*

But what do we do with our lives? There are growing, collective efforts to meet the institution of motherhood head-on, for example, the National Welfare Rights Organization, the National Abortion Rights Action League, and numerous special groups such as Catholics For A Free Choice, the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers in New York, and the Lesbian Mothers' National Defense Fund, based in Seattle. A national organization, MOMMA, with a newspaper and chapters throughout the country, addresses itself to the problems of single mothers in general.* The women's health-care movement, challenging the ignorance and passivity fostered in women by the male medical profession, is a spreading force, already having an incalculable effect on a new generation of women.†

* 1986: MOMMA no longer exists. There is, however, a Single Parents' Clearing House, 1165 Broadway, New York, NY 10001.

† 1986: By far the most exhaustive and up-to-date resource presently available is The Boston Women's Health Book Collective's *"The New" Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984). The bibliographies, listings of organizations, and wealth of information on reproduction both as process and as politics are incomparable.

In the four years of writing this book I have seen the issue of motherhood grow from a question almost incidental in feminist analysis to a theme which now seems to possess the collective consciousness of thoughtful women, whether as mothers, as daughters, or both. Various writers have called for a new matriarchalism; for the taking over by women of genetic technology; for the insistence on child-care as a political commitment by all members of a community or by all "child-free" women; communal child-raising; the return to a "village" concept of community in which children could be integrated into the adult life of work; the rearing of children in feminist enclaves to grow up free of gender-imprinting. There is a ripple of interest in "new fatherhood," in the establishing of a basis of proof that men, as well as women, can and should "mother," or for redefinitions of fatherhood which would require a more active, continuous presence with the child.

To seek visions, to dream dreams, is essential, and it is also essential to try new ways of living, to make room for serious experimentation, to respect the effort even where it fails. At the same time, in the light of most women's lives as they are now having to be lived, it can seem naive and self-indulgent to spin forth matriarchal utopias, to "demand" that the technologies of contraception and genetics be "turned over" to women (by whom, and under what kinds of effective pressure?); to talk of impressing "unchilded" women into child-care as a political duty, of boycotting patriarchal institutions, of the commune as a solution for child-rearing. Child-care as enforced servitude, or performed out of guilt, has been all too bitter a strain in our history. If women boycott the laboratories and libraries of scientific institutions (to which we have barely begun to gain access) we will not even know what research and technology is vital to the control of our bodies.* Certainly the commune, in

* It is, rather, essential that women become well informed about current developments in genetics, cloning, and extrauterine reproduction. A two-pronged approach is needed: just as more women are receiving medical training, while other women are educating themselves and each other as lay persons in the fields of health-care and childbirth, so we need women scientists within the institutions, and lay women who are knowledgeably monitoring the types of decisions and research that go on there, and disseminating the information they gather.

1986: See Ruth Hubbard with Wendy Sanford, "New Reproductive Technologies," in *"The New" Our Bodies, Ourselves*, pp. 317-24.

and of itself, has no special magic for women, any more than has the extended family or the public day-care center. Above all, such measures fail to recognize the full complexity and political significance of the woman's body, the full spectrum of power and powerlessness it represents, of which motherhood is simply one—though a crucial—part.

Furthermore, it can be dangerously simplistic to fix upon "nurturance" as a special strength of women, which need only be released into the larger society to create a new human order. Whatever our organic or developed gift for nurture, it has often been turned into a boomerang. About women political prisoners under torture, Rose Styron writes:

The imagination, the "emotionalism" a woman is classically assigned—the passion she has developed defending her children, the compassion (or insight into human motive and possibility) she has acquired being alert to the needs and demands of her family or community—can make her into a fierce opponent for her tormentors. *It can also make her exceptionally vulnerable* (Emphasis mine).*

This has been true for women in general under patriarchy, whether our opponents are individual men, the welfare system, the medical and psychoanalytic establishments, or the organized network of drug traffic, pornography, and prostitution. When an individual woman first opposes the institution of motherhood she often has to oppose it in the person of a man, the father of her child, toward whom she may feel love, compassion, friendship, as well as resentment, anger, fear, or guilt. The "maternal" or "nurturant" spirit we want to oppose to rapism and the warrior mentality can prove a liability so long as it remains a lever by which women can be controlled through what is most generous and sensitive in us. Theories of female power and female ascendancy must reckon fully with the ambiguities of our being, and with the continuum of our consciousness, the potentialities for both creative and destructive energy in each of us.

I am convinced that "there are ways of thinking that we don't yet know about." I take those words to mean that many

* "The Hidden Women," in *Women Political Prisoners in the USSR*, Ukrainian National Women's League of America, New York, 1975, pp. 3-4.

women are *even now* thinking in ways which traditional intellection denies, decries, or is unable to grasp. Thinking is an active, fluid, expanding process; intellection, "knowing" are recapitulations of past processes. In arguing that we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings, I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to *think through the body*, to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized—our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multi-pleasured physicality.

I know no woman—virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate—whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves—for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. There is for the first time today a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power. Physical motherhood is merely one dimension of our being. We know that the sight of a certain face, the sound of a voice, can stir waves of tenderness in the uterus. From brain to clitoris through vagina to uterus, from tongue to nipples to clitoris, from fingertips to clitoris to brain, from nipples to brain and into the uterus, we are strung with invisible messages of an urgency and restlessness which indeed cannot be appeased, and of a cognitive potentiality that we are only beginning to guess at. We are neither "inner" nor "outer" constructed; our skin is alive with signals; our lives and our deaths are inseparable from the release or blockage of our thinking bodies.

But the fear and hatred of our bodies has often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies—hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection.* There is an inexorable connection between every aspect

* Even Mary Wollstonecraft, viewing with pain the "passive obedience" and physical weakness she saw in the majority of women around her, remarked that she had been "led to imagine that the few extraordinary

of a woman's being and every other; the scholar reading denies at her peril the blood on the tampon; the welfare mother accepts at her peril the derogation of her intelligence. These are issues of survival, because the woman scholar and the welfare mother are both engaged in fighting for the mere right to exist. Both are "marginal" people in a system founded on the traditional family and its perpetuation.

The physical organization which has meant, for generations of women, unchosen, indentured motherhood, is still a female resource barely touched upon or understood. We have tended either to *become* our bodies—blindly, slavishly, in obedience to male theories about us—or to try to exist in spite of them. "I don't *want* to be the Venus of Willendorf—or the eternal fucking machine." Many women see any appeal to the physical as a denial of mind. We have been perceived for too many centuries as pure Nature, exploited and raped like the earth and the solar system; small wonder if we now long to become Culture: pure spirit, mind. Yet it is precisely this culture and its political institutions which have split us off from itself. In so doing it has also split itself off from life, becoming the death-culture of quantification, abstraction, and the will to power which has reached its most refined destructiveness in this century. It is this culture and politics of abstraction which women are talking of changing, of bringing to accountability in human terms.

The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers. The female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life. We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human

women who have rushed in eccentric directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex, were *male* spirits, confined by mistake in female frames" (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792 [New York: Norton, 1967], p. 70). I am indebted to Barbara Celpi for drawing this passage to my attention.

existence—a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed.

This is where we have to begin.

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