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*Mary O'Brien and feminist analysis of
reproduction*

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During the summer 2008/2009 I completed a review of first, second and third-wave feminist scholarship ranging from Harriet Taylor Mill's *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) to Monique Wittig's *The Straight Mind* (1992). The reading resulted in a 5,500 word annotated bibliography of 15 major feminist works and 5 auxiliary readings on contemporary debates in bioethics and contraceptive and reproductive technology. During the reading I discovered a unique materially based perspective in Mary O'Brien's two major works *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981) and *Reproducing the World* (1989). Her work is particularly important because it brings a value to women's biological reproduction that is not seen in most other feminist scholarship, and is forcefully negated in many others. The following report gives a summary of key readings from feminist scholars on reproduction, with an overview of Mary O'Brien's 'potency principle', and her argument for women's reproductive labour being recognised as creative, meditative labour. The bibliography will serve as an invaluable reference point for my upcoming Honours thesis on Mary O'Brien and reproduction.

The process of discussing “masculinity” and “femininity” as terms associated with male and female bodies at times comes at the cost of negating both in a move towards a utopian genderless society. Although bodies are indisputably affected by cultural gender normatives, they also have a basis in material difference. With biological determinism and sociobiology posing a significant threat to the feminist cannon of scholarship as legitimisation of male dominance, many feminist scholars have backed away from biologically based theories. The issue in doing this is that there has been no success in developing cultural or material value for the generic work that women do in reproducing the species. The result is that the androcentric culture is in fact propagated through women’s legitimisation of the ‘public’ sphere, men’s refrainment from entering the ‘private’ sphere, and homosexual and queer cultures struggling through legal and technical labyrinths in search of reproductive autonomy (Mamo 2007). Despite third-wave feminists’ intentions to ‘fix’ certain aspects of second-wave feminism, there has been no success in changing the low-status of women’s reproductive processes. In fact, post-feminist culture gives a significantly low-status to reproduction compared to the positive status that women had as reproducers in the pre-feminist culture (Wolf 2001, p8).

This is not to say that feminist scholarship has not attempted to address women and reproduction. Dorothy Dinnerstein in her 1978 book *The Rocking of the Cradle, and the Ruling of the World* (formerly published as *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* 1976), takes a psychoanalytic approach to describing the effects of the monopoly of female early-child care on male and female children. She concluded that the liberation of women would come when women no longer held monopoly over early childcare (1976, p33). Germaine Greer wrote in 1984 that a myth of overpopulation led to all dignity and pride being crushed from the

process of childbearing, resulting in an adult/child dichotomy where children are removed from society, ignored and actually hated (1984, p4). Shulamith Firestone was concerned that the male domination of birth science and technology would further preclude women from a life liberated from biology, while the liberation of women would be impossible without the liberation of children (1979, p73). However, these ideas were not argued in a holistic way to regard both men and women as actors in the reproductive process. They also suffered from an established approach to feminist analysis that negated the importance of women's biological reproduction. In 1963 Betty Friedan published the bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*, which became popular among stay-at-home mothers, at the time in the process of repopulating the post WWII society. Although many basic civil rights were not available for women at that time, Friedan chose to simply transplant the 'mystique' from the 'private' sphere of childcare, to the 'public' sphere of the workforce, undermining the hard reproductive labour those women undertook at home.

Feminist Analysis of Reproduction

The following report analyses the way in which first, second and third-wave feminist scholarship addresses reproduction. It looks at the concise political agenda found in first-wave scholarship, the discussions of sexuality and cultural gender norms in second-wave feminism, and the issues of medicalisation and commodification debated in third-wave feminism.

Starting with Harriet Taylor Mill's *Enfranchisement of Women* written in 1851, her argument does not specifically address reproduction, but instead works towards opening up options for women, without putting a value judgement on individual choices. She gives a clear and concise argument on the principles that women should vote, hold political office,

have access to education, career opportunities, equal property rights between married couples, and that the word 'male' be removed from the State Constitutions. She is also concerned by the "habit" of women slipping into an unquestioned position of subordination. She states "Custom hardens human beings to any kind of degradation, by deadening the part of their nature which would resist it" (1851, p10). She goes on to explain the uniqueness of women's oppression, as it is instilled in women that they are to be honoured by their degradation. When asked if there is a need for change women first think "there is no issue" (1851, p39).

... "there is no complaint"; which is generally not true, and when true, only so because there is not that hope of success, without which complaint seldom makes itself audible to unwilling ears... It would be very simple to suppose, that if they do desire it they will say so." (Mill 1851, p39)

Mill's concise, intelligent, and convincing argument is also strong in its understanding of diversity and the need to make available avenues for women to grow as individuals. In discussing the public and private spheres, she argues that women are not necessarily meant for the domestic sphere, but the proper sphere in which they can achieve their highest potential on a personal, individual basis (1851, p13). She argues that this cannot be ascertained 'without complete liberty of choice' to enter into the public sphere, without negating the private sphere and its importance (Ibid).

By the time the second-wave of feminist analysis came through between the 1960's and 1980's, there was a substantial move towards looking at women's bodies and sexuality. Kate Millett's argument in *Sexual Politics* (1971) is one against a biological base of male dominance. She discusses the issue of male physical strength stating that it is social factors

such as breeding, diet and exercise that exasperate men's physical strength, while physical strength has not always been a measure of power (especially in the age of machinery, technology, etc.) (1971 p27). Millett fails to consider women's position as reproducer as a unique biological disadvantage or strength.

Juliet Mitchell also took this approach to male physical strength in her 1971 book *Woman's Estate*. Looking at the subordination of women in the labour force, Mitchell writes:

“For, if it is just the biological incapacity for the hardest physical work which has determined the subordination of women, than the prospect of an advanced machine technology, abolishing the need for strenuous physical exertion, would seem to promise, therefore, the liberation of women”. (1971, p104).

Earlier in the second-wave movement, there was a significant attempt to contest all physical difference between men and women in place of countering the situation of masculine and feminine cultural practises. This had the unfortunate side-effect of denouncing female reproductive labour as legitimate human experience. Perhaps the most influential writer in subverting woman's unique biological process of reproduction, was Betty Friedan's 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*. This book is the most direct attack by a feminist critic on the role of childbearing, nursing and early childcare. Apart from the book's major flaw of targeting the white suburban 1950's American housewife, it undermines the hard work that mothers, and now increasingly fathers, do in creating safe, healthy environments for young children to grow up in. Friedan's concern over a loss of identity for suburban housewives suggests a need for integration into a malestream workforce; at the expense of bringing the status of domestic and child-rearing work higher. Despite Friedan's conviction

that being a file-clerk or newspaper reporter would somehow give 'better' meaning to women's lives, the issue still remains that women's reproductive labour is so under acknowledged and undervalued in our society that no amount of female penetration into the workforce will reverse that. Friedan simply reiterates the importance and superiority of the male-created sphere of 'public life', versus the effeminate, dull, and ultimately unimportant sphere of domestic work.

Shulamith Firestone argued in her 1970 book *The Dialectic of Sex* that the oppression of women stems from the biology of their reproductive functions. She argues that in all societies, even if in some cases women were valued or worshipped for their uniqueness as reproducers, they have always been oppressed by the reproductive process (1979, p74-5). She claims that the oppression of women and children happens simultaneously, and that "...we will be unable to speak of the liberation of women without also discussing the liberation of children – and vice versa." (1979, p73). To prevent further oppression of women and children, she calls for women to take control over the power and knowledge of birth science and technology. Although Firestone's perspective is a unique and powerful one, she fails to move past an idea that reproduction is a pathological process with exclusively negative effects for women.

Monique Wittig in her 1992 *The Straight Mind* argues that feminists who make an attempt to base patriarchy in biology work towards confirming heterosexuality as 'natural', helping legitimate patriarchy and heterosexuality simultaneously:

"For me this could never constitute a lesbian approach to women's oppression, since it assumes that the basis of society or the beginning of society lies in heterosexuality. Matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy: it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes." (1992, p10)

The tendency in feminist scholarship to inadvertently affirm male-dominated work as superior (such as Friedan) is explored by third-wave feminist bell hooks. hooks is a fierce critic of the assumption that all women want to act in androcentric and ethnocentric labour fields. In her 1995 book *Killing Rage* hooks argues:

“No doubt white patriarchal men must have found it amusing and affirming that many of the white women who had so vehemently and fiercely denounced domination were quite happy to assume the role of oppressor and/or exploiter if it meant that they could wield power equally with white men.” (hooks 1995, p99)

Starting in the third-wave feminist movement, a concern with the over-medicalisation of female reproductive processes became prominent in debate. In Laura Mamo’s 2007 book *Queering Reproduction*, she looks at the increasing difficulty for lesbian women to become pregnant in the age of medicalisation of birth science and technologies. Her thesis is that with the medicalisation of conception and parturition, and pathologisation of homosexuality, getting pregnant for lesbian women has become much harder. Women’s experience conceiving becomes increasingly complex due to legal implications of parental rights, child rights’ to know an anonymous donor, rights for lesbian partners to be legal parents, etc. After getting over personal, social and familial issues, Mamo concludes that the largest barrier for gay couples remains institutional discrimination in marriage rights.

Naomi Wolf in her 2001 book *Misconceptions*, specifically discusses parturition and the high-interventionist techniques currently used in place of the millennia old tradition of midwifery. She states: “Many midwives today believe passionately that birth has become too pathologized, and that obstetricians justify a high degree of medical intervention in part

because they see almost all circumstances of birth as pathological.” (2001, p150). Wolf is concerned that many women go through unsafe high-interventionist births not only because of the practise of birthing entering into the capitalist time-and-money driven system, but because of male doctor intervention in trying to measure each birth next to a ‘normal’ scale of birth processes and labelling all else pathological.

Germaine Greer also had this concern in her 1984 book *The Politics of Human Fertility*, in which she takes the argument one step further to state that adults actually hate children. She explains that the separation of children and adults in our (western) culture is actually a sign of a more general disrespect for reproductive processes and women’s creative (reproductive) labour. She criticises the hospitalisation and pathology associated with childbirth.

Mary O’Brien

It is here that Mary O’Brien offers important insight into how a theory might be developed that does not inadvertently add value to a malestream paradigm in the ‘public’ sphere, while actively framing women’s reproductive labour as valuable and creative. Throughout Mary O’Brien’s work it is clear that she is less concerned with breaking down the ideology associated with the practise of gender, and more interested in acknowledging the biological base of women’s reproductive labour as creative labour. Through this she is able to explain masculine and feminine experiences as a result of actual difference in reproductive praxis and bodily experience.

One of her first points of criticism is to Simone de Beauvoir for not recognising either the material connection of women with reproduction, or reproductive labour and nurture as genuine creative labour (p75).

“The implication of de Beauvoir’s model of human development is not only that parturition is non-creative labour, but that the product, the human child, has no value, that the value of children must wait to be awarded by the makers of value, men.” (p75).

O’Brien considers the negation of femininity and female biological processes as a serious oversight of the important history that women have shared together in the process of species continuity. Her goal is to reexamine the generic differences of female and male procreation, identifying the key moment of separation of the male from the reproductive process as the moment in which the seed is transferred. He is then excluded from all other aspects of “making” the child physically, leading to one of the only processes of parenthood for the male which is a very uncertain one; to ‘acknowledge’ the child as his. To add to the male’s detachment from the reproductive process, the time laps from copulation to birth further heightens the alienation of the male from his baby. This limited involvement in the making of the child, with no verification of the child’s biological connection to the father, is what O’Brien claims leads to the potency principle. The potency principle is the process of the male disconnect with species regeneration and a unique paternal uncertainty resulting in men needing to create another realm; social life, in which men can play an integral role in controlling. As they are physically detached from species continuity, this means they must negate the importance of reproductive processes and dominate public life.

In her critique of G. W. F Hegel O’Brien writes about the idea that men are negated as a parents by the abstraction of their sperm.

“Hegel simply fails to recognize that it is not as lover that man is negated, and that it is not in terms of sexuality that he is annulled. Man is negated not as lover but as parent, and this negation rests squarely on the alienation of the male seed in the copulative act.” (1981, p29)

Borrowing Hegel’s term of ‘A World Historical Event’, O’Brien points to two fundamental events in the history of human reproduction. The first was when the idea of paternity, or fatherhood was acknowledged. The second is the technological advancement of contraception and reproductive technology, allowing women to be removed from repercussions leading to childbearing or infertility. The implications of the ‘Age of Contraception’ (as she refers to it), are vast as it not only opens up women’s sexual experiences, but challenges heterosexuality as the only route to reproduction. As many third-wave feminists are beginning to discuss in more depth, the ‘medicalisation’ of childbirth, contraception, and all other aspects of the reproductive process has serious consequences both for the health and autonomy of women, and for the heterosexual structure of marriage and the family.

In conclusion, Mary O’Brien offers a unique feminist analysis of female and male reproductive processes as experiences based in material difference. The strength of her work not only lies in her understanding of women’s experience, but the specific vulnerability of men’s position in the process of reproduction. Throughout her work she actively elevates the status of female reproductive labour, recognising it as creative and meditative work, while bringing attention to the physical and emotional alienation of men. While problematizing the male experience, she brings attention to the distinct separation that men have from

reproduction, and can theorise the cultural experiences of men and women from actual bodily experience.

Further analysis of Mary O'Brien's work is needed in order to offer a new perspective in feminist analysis, specifically aiming to elevate the status of women's unique biological processes. An oversight by many feminist writers (such as Friedan, Millett, Firestone and de Beauvoir) is that they did not first look at the unique power that women have as reproducers, but instead looked first at women's position as subservient in an existing androcentric culture. They start by arguing against males as superior, without first considering the individual vulnerabilities of both sexes in the fundamental processes of copulation and reproduction of the species. It is in this way that many feminists are misguided towards legitimating a malestream set of values in the 'public' sphere, without bringing fundamental value to 'private', reproductive labour.

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