

GLORIA KAUFMAN - PROPOSAL NARRATIVE for Guggenheim Fellowship

A History of Womb Envy

In the Rare Book Room of the New York Public Library, Henry Cornelius Agrippa informed me that women were superior to men because their pubic hair modestly concealed their genitalia--a feat not equalled by masculine pubic growth, however luxuriant. As Agrippa continued in praise of female reproductive organs tucked neatly inside the body and contrasting to grossly flapping male organs, as he waxed increasingly eloquent about the beauties of female genitals, I wondered if his comments were another instance of womb envy. Musing about the numerous womb-envy specimens that had in the past (uninvited and unexpected) forced themselves into my consciousness, I concluded: it is long past time for a monograph on the history of womb envy. We should be able, at this late date, to assess the significance of arguments such as Agrippa's in terms of a detailed and cross-disciplinary description of womb envy. I am proposing such a study. The concept of womb envy is, however, so strange to most people that I feel I must first demonstrate its widespread existence.

Religion and anthropology afford many examples of womb envy, narrowly defined as a male desire to give birth or to possess female sexual organs. Adam gives birth to Eve from his rib. Zeus gives birth to Athena from his head, and he also carries Dionysus to term in his thigh. Womb envy was expressed in Cyprus at the Festival of Ariadne where priests took to their beds and groaned in imitation of women in labor. The Yakut of Siberia believed their male shamans actually could bear children. Galli priests of the Goddess Astarte (to become sexually like her) castrated themselves and received female clothes in exchange for their testicles. Subincision (the slitting of the penis) was practiced by other male priests in some ancient goddess cultures and is still practiced today. In Australia, males of the

Central Aborigines call their wound a "vagina" or "penis womb." Some New Guinea tribes also practice subincision. In ancient times, priests irritated the subincised penis to bleed each month (like female menses). Currently among the Naven tribe (New Guinea), boys are initiated into life by male sponsors who dress as pregnant women, who are called "mothers," and who cry out for their children in falsetto. Also in New Guinea, in Sepik River and coastal "homosexual" societies, men are said to give birth to men.

In Christianity, the male Father metaphorically takes on female sex organs. Clement denigrates women's breasts as incapable of nourishing and ascribes that power to the divine Father: "to those babes that suck the Word, the Father's breasts of love supply the milk." Puritan preachers describe themselves as "breasts" of God. Increase Mather complains in 1697 that there are places in New England "that have no Breasts, no Ministers from whom they may receive the sincere milk of the World." Cotton Mather preaches (in 1723): "...Ministers are your Mothers too. Have they not Travailed in Birth for you...?" Paul in Corinthians says, "The man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man." Medieval Jewish mystics refer to the golem, a creature made of clay by a man and given life by him. In Christianity, the significant mother is the church Mater Ecclesia, not the biological mother. "The birth of Christians is in baptism," writes Cyprian in 256. A Catholic rite refers to the baptismal font as a "stainless womb." Theologically women birth humans into mortal life while superior male priests birth people into eternal, immortal life.

Womb envy is found in the writings of alchemists who tried to create a little man, a "homunculus." In one of his recipes, Paracelsus comments that the resulting "living child" would have "every member as well-proportioned as any infant born of woman."

Euripides satirizes womb envy in Hippolytus but Aristotle turns it into science in his Generation of Animals, stating that man actively supplies the form of the child and woman passively contributes the matter, as a carpenter (male) creates a bedstead (child) from wood (female). Neo-Aristotelians further describe the father as the true parent and the mother as mere incubator. After the invention of the microscope, biologists observe and draw homunculi (complete human beings) in the head of spermatozoa.

Anthropologists describe couvade--men going to bed and groaning while their wives are in labor and even remaining prostrate for days while the new mothers work in the fields. Felix Boehm coins the phrase "parturition envy" in 1930, and Karen Horney discusses intense desires of her male patients to bear children. W. H. Trethowan, a British psychiatrist specializing in pregnancy symptoms in men, contends that one man in seven shows symptoms such as nausea, appetite-loss, and abdominal swelling when his wife is pregnant. Sex-change operations have been preponderantly male to female, and there is much documentation of womb envy in that area. A spate of books with titles such as The Pregnant Man have appeared in the 1970s.

In the 1980s, womb envy proliferates. The Kinsey Institute reports (in September, 1986) that technology now exists "to enable a man to maintain a pregnancy." Birth technologies have gone far beyond "test tube babies" to artificial, man-made wombs, which some physicians contend are superior to female organs. They even label woman's womb "a dark and dangerous place." A recent study The Man-made Woman even describes removing the mother's genetic component in her egg cell and injecting it with two sperm, thus fulfilling the claims of Aristotelian biology. John Hughes's film "She's Having a Baby" depicts the husband Jake climbing on his wife's bed (while she is in the delivery room) and mimicing

the birth process. Dr. Alfred Goldson, in 1987, invented the Baby Bonder, a terry-cloth bib with false breasts (disguised baby bottles) that allow father to "breast-feed" their children. (Womb envy can be healthy and positive.)

Nineteenth century professors of gynecology in the United States obsessively described almost all women's illnesses as disorders of the womb. "It is almost a pity that a woman has a womb," states an 1860s monograph on the uterus. With thinly disguised (though probably unconscious) envy, Dr. A.K. Gardiner repeatedly compares the womb to a grave and a prison. The solution has been to remove the offensive organs. The consistent attack on women's womb by American gynecologists is a variation of womb envy that has devastating impact today. Because of the high rate of hysterectomy (800,000 per year) and ovariectomy (500,000 per year) in the 1970s, physicians indicate that one of every two women in the U.S. will reach menopause surgically.

Literature, art, history, and popular culture also demonstrate striking cases of womb envy. Contemporary instances are too numerous (and various) briefly to suggest their breadth and import. One aspect of possible significance, however, deserves mention. Immersion in these materials suggests that womb envy relates to FEAR of women. For example, the stridency and virulence of many 19th and 20th century medical texts resonate with Gilbert and Gubar's latest work in literary criticism. Their discussion of modernist preoccupation with male impotence in the context of women's potency (No Man's Land, 1988) strongly suggests the discourse of subconscious fear and conscious repugnance found in medical literatures. Indeed very few of the hundreds of Gilbert-Gubar references in the first three chapters (which have 268 footnotes) do not strongly relate to the womb-envy theme, whether they be mention of F. Scott Fitzgerald's worrying about his "penile inadequacy," or their powerful analysis of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "Old Woman Magoun," or their discussion of contextual popular and psychological literature, such as Walter

Heape's Sex Antagonism (1913). Womb envy is richly alive in literary texts. Nor do the hundreds of Gilbert-Gubar references cover the territory (such was not their aim). In Lawrence Durrell's Tunc, for example, one of the male characters retires to an obscure island, grows female breasts, and suckles infants.

A monograph of the magnitude I am proposing cannot be brought to completion in a single year. As my above comments suggest, my readings lists are extensive, and they will continue to grow. I plan to consult with experts in a number of fields at a number of different campuses as well as working in special collections at the New York Public Library, the Lilly Library (Bloomington, Indiana), the Newberry Library (Chicago), the Arthur Schlesinger Library (Cambridge, Mass.), and many others. My local campus has in the past secured for me xeroxes and microfilms from places as distant as the Vatican and Buenos Aires (the latter no small feat, as anyone researching in Argentina will testify), so that I expect also to do some of my work in South Bend.

I shall begin in the area I regard as my weakest--psychology--and work with those readings the entire year as I concurrently work on other areas. In psychology I shall not focus merely on major figures (such as Freud, Jung, Horney, etc.). Lesser-known theorists such as Joseph Rheingold (The Fear of Being a Woman, 1964), Helmut Schoeck (Envy, A Theory of Social Behavior), Marc Feigen Fasteau (The Male Machine, 1974) and scores of others will also receive careful attention. by the end of the year, I shall have done some of the writing and I shall know with a high degree of exactitude how much longer will be required to complete the entire project.