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# "If I Can do Without a Husband" *Lesbian Maternity and H.D.'s Asphodel*

It is in the course of this regulatory cultivation of life that the category of sex is established. Naturalized as heterosexual, it is designed to regulate and secure the reproduction of life. Having a true sex with a biological destiny and natural heterosexuality thus becomes essential to the aim of power, now understood as the disciplinary reproduction of life. (Butler, 1996: 60)

One of the functions of the emergent field of queer theory has been to interrogate the inscription and practice of heteronormativity, a term referring variously to the policing of gender boundaries, the production of sexual identities, the regulation and naturalization of sexuality as the prerogative of male/female couples, the relegation of other sexual groupings (or singularities) to the abject, and even the forcible maintenance of the nuclear family. Marriage, for example, stands in the service of this normative pressure, functioning as a "voluntary" contract that individuals make in order to secure full privileges within the social realm. Yet even in the late twentieth-century, marriage is neither a necessary nor a sufficient guarantee for heteronormativity. Rather, reproduction serves, at least in public discourse, as both the excuse for and "proof" of heterosexual compliance. Thus, as rumors circulate about a subject's presumptive sexuality, the rejoinder might be "But s/he has children." Thus, one hears as a rationale for homophobic anti-adoption laws: "The child deserves to have a father *and* a mother."

This reproductive politics has constituted a contested ground in the U.S. at least since the last century, when first wave feminists, recognizing the way in which childbearing and rearing had special impact on the lives of women, made freedom from compulsory motherhood a key feature of their agenda. Despite advances in birth control and ostensible changes in attitudes, however, the figure of motherhood continues to guard the bastions of orthopedic hetero-

sexuality. For example, while the legal right of women to abort a fetus (or of young women to gain access to birth control and reproductive information) continues under fire, reinforcing the “responsibility” of heterosexual women to bear children, the right of lesbians and bisexual women to parent even their own or their partner’s children remains unsecured. Motherhood, then, while theoretically available to all women, seemingly reinscribes a cultural dilemma: lesbian or mother, but not both.

Of course, as Ellen Lewin (1993) and others have documented, lesbianism and motherhood are not exclusive of each another, currently or historically. The writer H.D., herself a mother who had significant lesbian relationships, focuses closely on the matters of childbearing and sexuality in her proto-novel *Asphodel* (c. 1922). Many critics would like to see the book’s inclusion of pregnancy and childbearing as a valorization of female creative power, a “writing beyond the ending,” to use Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s (1986) term, that makes pregnancy a metonym for bringing forth cultural production. Arguably, though, the picture of maternity that emerges from the text is actually a critique of this view of gender function, and a point of resistance against biological determinism.

Certainly some critics, such as Susan Stanford Friedman, have read protagonist Hermione’s pregnancies, with some subtlety, as disruptive of cultural expectations of motherhood. For example, she sees Hermione birthing a self along with the more literal baby: “The birth of the baby births the mother as well, not only because the child gives her a new identity, but also because she is pregnant with herself. The baby mothers the self that is healed in the act of procreation” (1990: 189). Friedman believes an early scene between Vane and Hermione to be an avatar of the Lacanian mirror stage, which in this case mobilizes the whole process of maternity. Hermione sees her own image in the mirror: “yourself opposite smiling with eyes uptilted, smiling at something that had crept out of Mrs. Darrington, small, not very good, looking at you in a glass, tall, very tall” (H.D., 1992: 142). Friedman writes: “But instead of identifying with her image in the Lacanian sense, Hermione recognizes “Mrs. Darrington’s as the false imago, as the socially constructed self out of which the woman who will be the mother steps” (1990: 187).

At another point, Friedman glosses the narrative’s representation of pregnancy as an instance of the Semiotic erupting into the Symbolic, “not only inscribing the daughter’s longing for the maternal body, but also representing the mother speaking.... The conventions of dominant discourse provide no language in which to speak as pregnant subject” (1990: 187). Finally, she claims explicitly that “[t]he procreative politics of *Asphodel* is *not* a valorization of motherhood, but rather the basis for a pacifist critique of the patriarchal order” (Friedman, 1990: 189, my emphasis), which poses birth against death against the backdrop of the First World War.

Similarly, DuPlessis, in her work on H.D., argues that a link between creation and procreation is salutary for feminist readings:

Contemporary critical writing on the female *Künstlerroman* agrees that women's growth into the creative act, as depicted by women, is tied emotionally and materially with issues of the maternal, with procreativity, and with identification with women ranging from resistance to merging. Susan Gubar has proposed that the "centrality of childbearing" in women's "artist novels" ruptures a controlling historical either/or choice for women of either creation or procreation; she suggests that with this merging of creativity and procreativity "feminist modernists struggled against the conservative consequences of asserting a natural and distinct sphere." (1986: 42)

But because motherhood functions culturally as the warrant of heterosexuality, readings such as these that valorize the maternal as a "creative force" are not innocent of heteronormative ideology, even as they attempt to struggle against it. Nor is *Asphodel*, situated in the England of 75 years ago, innocent of similar tendencies. Yet the images the novel actually uses to represent pregnancy are far from being stable or uniformly positive. Instead, they fall into three main categories: images of invasion and takeover, of monstrosity, and of religious visitation.

In the first category, the fetus is figured as an alien, holding Hermione captive: "this being that had trapped her" (H.D., 1992: 158), while Hermione herself is made inanimate, a mere vessel:

Painted case that had been so hieratically perfect for its receiving became (like the very larva of the future butterfly) now a jelly of vague unrest, of vague forebodings. Painted case so lovely and so calm and so inviolate if only you could stay a painted case, if only all the artificial glamour and hieratic spiritual fervour could be maintained. Did Madonna hold her own against this glue in nothingness, this inchoate mass that you become once you take—full hands for the taking? (H.D., 1992: 156)

Then to the claim that procreativity presages or even fosters creativity, the narrative answers that pregnancy imposes limitations on intellectual activity:

almost a year and her mind glued down, broken, and held back like a wild bird caught in bird-lime. The state she had been in was a deadly crucifixion. Not one torture (though God that had been enough) but months and months when her flaming mind beat up and she found she was caught, her mind not taking her as usual like a wild bird but her mind-wings beating, beating, and her feet caught, her feet caught, glued like a wild bird in bird-lime. (H.D., 1992: 113)

This pregnancy, while inarguably symbolic, also remains materially and

historically resonant in the terms of the text: "She was caught and the recurrent symptoms made her realize that she was not so neatly a painted box, a neat coffin for its keeping," seemingly participating in the maintenance of the same socially-gendered choice of maternity over posterity: "Women can't speak, and clever women don't have children. So, if a clever woman does speak, she must be mad. She is mad. She wouldn't have had a baby if she hadn't been" (H.D., 1992: 113). Friedman's (1990) suggestion that only the Semiotic can voice a pregnant subjectivity may tend to intensify this sort of already-present marginalization, as well as reinscribing the assumption that maternity is somehow a precultural reality, prelingual and infantilizing.

Rather, H.D.'s imagery *defamiliarizes* the culture-laden terrain of motherhood by refusing sentimentality. In opposition to naturalized visions of serene mothers fostering cuddly miniature humans, "[Hermione] was being disorganized as the parchment-like plain substance of the germ that holds the butterfly becomes fluid, inchoate, as the very tight bud of her germination became inchoate, frog-shaped small greedy domineering monster" (H.D., 1992: 158). The "germinating bud" is elsewhere referred to in other non-human ways, as a colt, a dragon, a butterfly, as a "little le Fay," but it does not seem to be a child. In fact, one of the most interesting illustrations of this point is that, even after birth, Phoebe Fayne retains the ungendered pronoun. In English, a human is almost never an "it." Unarticulated pronomial gender—calling the baby it—simultaneously dehumanizes and propels the baby away from a lineage of Victorian sentimentality *and* draws attention to the issue of interpellation through en-gendering, how core such a fiction is to the concept of what counts as human.

Unlike the images of invasion and grotesquerie surrounding Hermione's pregnancy, then, tropes of religious visitation would seem to be positive ones. Yet the ur-story governing Hermione's revelations is that of Mary and Jesus, a story long used to cordon off gender boundaries within the Church. The place of women is to emulate Mary, to bear children, while the place of men is to imitate Christ. Quite early in the novel, however, this discrepancy becomes contested, when Hermione muses: "I always think the most awful thing in the world to be would be to be the mother of God" (H.D., 1992: 13). During this scene, the projected pain of childbirth becomes conjoined with that of Christ on the cross, just as, in the bird-lime passage above, pregnancy is seen as a crucifixion, and Hermione appropriates the right to occupy either gender position or both.

Initially, Hermione's reliance on mystical signs and visions seems to shore up the romantic convention of a relationship "meant" to happen. In contrast to romantic expectation, however, the narrative of her relationship with Vane, the father of her child, juxtaposes the diction of angels and insects, constructing a scene that evokes both religious offering and a queen bee devouring her mate: "The cigarette was the incense and the wine was the wine and the body opposite her the sacrifice. She could eat that body, devour it, it was gold, it was honey-

comb and the wine was good and she was quite happy, had never been so happy" (H.D., 1992: 143). The implication in either case is that Vane, far from the romantic hero, serves merely the purpose of impregnation, and can then be cast aside.

Later, on the other hand, Hermione's imagination of gods, lowering white bulls, and annunciation angels works to disavow *any* connection of Vane with her pregnancy—"What has Vane to do with it?" (H.D., 1992: 152)—suggesting as well a disavowal of sex with men—"Must she go back to men, men, men?" (H.D., 1992: 162). Instead, "God had swept across her clean white body" (H.D., 1992: 155) a gesture that Friedman (1990) calls parthenogenic, and which imaginatively moves reproduction out of the arena of the heterosexual. For even though the Judeo-Christian god has traditionally been figured as a man, a father, he also calls forth the myth of a recovered whole, or as the narrator says, "God was the answer and the question. God was the lover and the beloved. God was the union of God with God" (H.D., 1992: 154). Indeed, Hermione is rewritten as a lover, not of men, but of the sea and sea-things, amorphously or polymorphously perverse: "Do they know the ecstasy of the senses when a phosphorescent eel or some globe shaped sea-monster turns and makes a cone of light in the shadowy tank of the aquarium?" (H.D., 1992: 147).

These redactions and reinhabitations of old narratives may profitably be seen as a negotiation with heteronormative stories of procreation, which make legible, even in resistance, the coercive economy of what Wittig would call the "straight mind." At the same time, they serve to highlight what constitutes the body, what constitutes the sexual, in what is otherwise a highly oblique discourse. This is the "problem" with a concept of post-gender sexuality, since that which calls the body into being is seemingly allied with the same force that genders it. Judith Butler has described the body as a material effect inscribed within a field of intelligibility produced and governed by power. As her essay on the lesbian phallus suggests:

the very contours of the body, the delimitations of anatomy, are in part the consequence of an externalized identification. That identificatory process is itself motivated by a transfigurative wish. And that wishfulness proper to all morphogenesis is itself prepared and structured by a culturally complex signifying chain that not only constitutes sexuality, but establishes sexuality as a site where bodies and anatomies are perpetually reconstituted (1993: 90)

Yet to understand that the construction and intersection of gender, sex, and sexuality take place under coercion is not the same as believing them to be determined. Butler uses the trope of the lesbian phallus as a form of travelling theory, to show that "the signifier can come to signify *in excess* of its structurally mandated position; indeed, the signifier can be repeated in contexts and relations that come to *displace* the privileged status of that signifier" (1993: 90).

Clearly, identifying the phallus with lesbian interests troubles both the specificity of lesbian desire and the sexist/ heterosexist constraints of privileging a phallic signifier.

Contiguous with Butler's (1993) phallic lesbian might then be, for the purposes of discussion, the idea of the phallic mother. Obviously, the phallic mother "acquires" the phallus in a different way and, as it were, for a different audience, and certainly pregnancy is not in itself the generative condition for such acquisition. But setting aside for a moment Freud's understanding of how such a putative crisis occurs and how it gets resolved, the two figures (who may, to anticipate my argument, be inhabited by the same subject) have in common the potential to rupture the discursive content of sex (understood here as the cultural mandate toward differentiation), and their very commonality begins to dismantle the picket fence that so carefully separates the lesbian from the (presumptively heterosexual) mother. From another perspective, the relationship between mother and child by its nature jeopardizes the stability of corporeal projection and individuation. In other words, Hermione, as well as her child, is transformed into otherness by the experience of her pregnancy: "This is not what lizard-Hermione wanted. This is not what eel-Hermione, what alligator-Hermione, what sea-gull Hermione was after" (H.D., 1992: 158).

Curiously, however, the most-textualized body in the novel is neither Hermione's nor her baby's. Instead, it is Beryl de Rothfeldt, who becomes visible largely through repeated attention to her eyes and mouth:

But blue eyes, evil eyes, were calling her out of that nebulous world into which she had so softly fallen, blue eyes were dragging her ashore as one drags the mercifully almost dead to land, blue eyes were working their horrible first aid and were calling, calling to something in Hermione that was lost. . . . Hermione was defenceless and blue eyes called her back to war. (H.D., 1992: 183)

and: "Eyes don't usually look out of faces like that. Small chin, small Eros chin, mouth more than a child-Eros, a mouth that was a youth Eros, perfect bow of a slightly too wide mouth but lips narrow, coral" (H.D., 1992: 185). The unavoidably eroticizing narrative gaze supports a reading of Beryl and Hermione as lovers, and yet even queerness becomes queered in this narrative. While the "real" baby takes shape as a monster or a puppy, Beryl is figured as "that girl" (perhaps also "that boy," by way of her identification with Eros) or "the child." The maternity that is not a maternity becomes displaced onto the beloved, who becomes the lover's child.

Even granted Butler's (1993) provocative thesis, though, can it really be said to have deconstructed the gendered, sexed position of motherhood? What is left standing, in the text under consideration, as a manifestation of the anxiety surrounding the surrender of such a position? When Hermione considers her

relationship to Darrington in the aftermath of a stillborn child, she worries that to refuse another pregnancy, or more specifically, sex with her husband, would be to “refus[e] her womanhood.” This subtext runs through the novel, shoring up social thresholds: “Don’t be too inappositely feminine. But I must be. I am having a small le Fay. This is evil and bad of someone, something to send this fantastically wealthy de Rothfeldt girl to me. If I can do without a husband ... if I can do without a lover ...” (H.D., 1992: 187). Motherhood is still constructed as the outer limit, the last stop of a positivist materialism, which can protect and maintain the hegemony of the gender system and its corollary heteronormativity.

For Foucault, in fact, it is precisely power’s concern with the “production, maintenance, and regulation of life” that first institutes a regime of reproductive technologies in the eighteenth century—taking the form, that is, of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1996: 60). As possibly the most contingent element in this practice, it is no accident therefore that the institution of motherhood produces/is produced by new regulatory modes in nineteenth-century Anglo-America, and that resistance, in the form of agitation for birth control for example, emerges at the same moment. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling of 1908 declared that since “healthy mothers are essential to vigorous offspring ... the physical well-being of woman becomes an object of public interest and care in order to preserve the strength and vigor of the race” (Simons, 1993: 191). But sexual technologies do change over time. The possibility of asexual reproduction must have seemed more than merely idle when *Asphodel* was written in 1922; beginning in 1899, Jacques Loeb had succeeded in reproducing frogs parthenogenetically and raising them to sexual maturity (“Loeb”), leading to speculation that the same technology could ultimately replace heterosexual intercourse for reproductive purposes.

Since the honeybee is one of a number of insects that can reproduce parthenogenetically outside of laboratory conditions, Hermione’s imagination of bees, queens, pollen, and honey, together with her repeated assertion that Vane had nothing to do with her pregnancy, registers a wish in *Asphodel*’s symbology: “She could eat that body, devour it, it was gold, it was honey-comb” (H.D., 1992: 143). The two conflicting stories, one in which Hermione conceives a baby via her relationship with Vane, and one in which he does not figure, occur synchronously, so that “[t]he utter uninventiveness of God showed here. Seed dropped into a painted coffin was the same seed, the same germination that had always been,” but three lines above, “seeds brought to the light after thousands of thousands of years, sprouted, germinated, were sheer seeds of grain or barley, or of ‘some other grain’ showing after thousands of thousands of years the inventiveness of God” (H.D., 1992: 163). In one narrative, heteronormativity is upheld; in the other, it is imaginatively rewritten.

One option for reading this “new” narrative is lesbian motherhood, where the sign for heteronormativity and the sign of the reproductive outlaw coexist

in mutual dissolution. Although Lillian Faderman claims that the figure of the lesbian mother did not really enter the public sphere until the 1980s, she admits that there have "always" been lesbian mothers (1991: 290). Indeed, Hermione presents Beryl with her child to take care of, apparently meaning to devise a family with two mothers. Yet much earlier in the novel, she goes to lengths to trouble the very idea of early twentieth-century lesbian identity, with its markers of Third Sex discourse and inversion, by telling Fayne:

I don't want to be (as they say crudely) a boy. Nor do I want you so to be. I don't feel a girl. What is all this trash of Sappho? None of that seems real, to (in any way) matter. I see you. I feel you. My pulse runs swiftly. My brain reaches some height of delirium. Do people say it's indecent? Maybe it is. (H.D., 1992: 53)

Without reifying a lesbian *identity*, then, the text at the same time signifies a desire outside of or resistant to the economy of reproduction. Neither can gender be secured in this passage. The speaker does not want to be "a boy," nor does s/he feel "a girl." This sexuality constituted within a matrix of heteronormative power can only be read as "queer."

Having now perhaps sufficiently tangled the issues of gender, sex, sexuality, and maternity, I would like to return to the thread of readings that try to make motherhood a site for recuperative feminist production. Generic conventions and gender categories function in *Asphodel* to make legible, to *embody* local historical struggle. If for Butler the body is the somaticization of a psychic crisis, then a novel must be the somatic projection of its exigent textual unconscious. Likewise, it has become almost a commonplace in Foucauldian post-structuralist theory to eschew the too-neat solution, to suspect the workings of power actively concealing itself at the locus of its nonappearance. Certainly, as Jon Simons claims, maternal politics has been one way of producing female agency; he notes, for example, that women gained suffrage in England just after the First World War largely because they were construed as bringing "maternal" values to the public sphere (1993: 195). Still, the use of maternity as a metonym for creative energies restricts the kinds of creating that can be done to those who have at least metaphorical wombs. Luce Irigaray's analysis of phallogocentrism suggests the reasons such a trope might be counterproductive: in a masculinist system, the masculine signifier takes on the camouflage of the neutral, the universal; any attempt to reverse the process is doomed, both because the feminin(ist) has no way to signify intelligibly within the system, and because even if it did, the very insistence on its coherence in the face of radical internal difference would cause it to fail.

Moreover, then, as I have suggested above, using the metaphor of maternity to describe the cultural production of women is to some degree to reinscribe the elision of non-childbearing subjects, and to reconstitute "women" as subjected bodies. While not necessarily essentializing in and of itself, the



power of such a metaphor to order discourse is well-documented. Obviously I do not wish to argue that (writing about) having babies is reactionary or heteronormative. At the same time it is absolutely necessary to interrogate the way in which "maternity" gets deployed as a policing agent for gender or for sexual identification.

Donna Haraway (1991) has described the possibilities for radically re-configured cyborg bodies where what is "natural" and what is "artificial" are no longer recoverable. As science continues to grapple with the collision of new reproductive technologies and old ideologies, the probability exists that the regime of sexuality described by Foucault has already begun to change focus, locating and structuring sexual subjectivities in, as has been suggested, narratives other than, or even opposed to, reproduction. *Asphodel* reinscribes, to no small extent, the mandate to reproduce, to engender, that Foucault would call the effects of power. At the same time, however, it attempts to render those effects legible, even permeable, where "inside and outside [are] the same." In its production of a queer/mother discourse, it puts into question, at the very least, the heteronormative features of reproduction.

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