

## Maternal Desires and Compulsory Motherhood

---

### The Metaphor of “the Child of the Night” in Women’s Reproductive Fantasies

*Maternal desires have been explored from contrasting approaches in psychoanalysis. Women’s urges to have children have roughly said been put into two categories: positive maternal desires and compulsive or corrupted maternal urges. But can a perspective be developed, that holds together both sides without either idealizing or denigrating maternal desires? Can maternal subjectivity and ambivalence be appreciated without blaming the mother for negative aspects of maternal desires? This article is an attempt to present such a perspective with the works of Italian psychoanalyst Silvia Vegetti Finzi and her idea of the metaphor of omnipotence called “the child of the night.” Her theory has inspired my clinical work; psychoanalytic psychotherapy with women who are not yet mothers. Inspired by psychoanalytic ideas about the value of holding together opposites for reflection and by feminist critique of societal dynamics, I describe a way to use metaphors for omnipotent fantasies to deepen our understanding of maternal desires. If women are to find their own definitions of mothering in a feminist and matricentric sense, we may help as clinicians and scholars by holding space for the omnipotent fantasy trope of the child of the night.*

#### Desire or Compulsion? An Integrative Approach

Certain risks are taken when talking about “compulsory motherhood.” The expression itself is provocative and maybe even offensive to some. It raises questions about female and maternal agency, choice, rights, and ideals about so-called normal motherhood or normal maternal desires. How can compulsory motherhood be discussed without violating female and maternal subjectivity? It connotes the idea that reproductive desires must meet a certain standard of balance, and the onus of that, as with most aspects of parenting, is on the

mother. So how can we present a critical perspective on maternal desires with respect for maternal subjectivity? The work of Daphne de Marneffe is a notable example of focusing on the healthy passions of maternal desires. From a contrasting perspective, Estela Welldon has provocatively suggested the idea of the “perversion of motherhood,” which is caused by the cultural idealization and denigration of mothers. Several scholars have written about and demonstrated the idealization of motherhood and its consequences—Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow, and Susan Contratto, for example, have shown how the consequence of idealization of the maternal is denigration.

These writers offer insights about maternal development. However, I believe there is a need for an approach that focuses on holding together the positive, empowering, constructive, organic, authentic, and powerful desires of motherhood *with* the negative, denigrated, repressive, skewed, debilitating, corrupted, and coercive aspects of motherhood—but without either becoming too absorbed in one of these sides or losing sight of maternal subjectivity, for example through pathologizing. While searching for this, I have studied the work of Italian feminist psychoanalyst Silvia Vegetti Finzi. To my knowledge, her work has yet to be integrated into these debates, although she offers a valuable analysis of the psychodynamics of maternal desires, perversions, and compulsory motherhood. In this article, I apply a feminist approach of looking critically at cultural and societal dynamics to inform a psychology of maternal desires on the individual level, inspired by the work of Finzi. The aim is to critically reflect on maternal desires and maintain respect for maternal subjectivity. My psychoanalytic perspective is a nondogmatic combination of Kleinian and Jungian perspectives, and contemporary feminist psychoanalysis (Benjamin; Parker; Chodorow and Contratto), which focuses on maternal subjectivity. Hence, my inclination is to look for aggressive, anxious, or negative shadow elements and see what happens when they are invited into the conversation and exploration, instead of split off. I am inspired by the Kleinian and Jungian understanding of the dialectic of opposites, which postulates that psychological development occurs when positive and negative aspects are integrated into whole-object relating (Klein) and that the holding together of opposites—the transcendent function—is the key to psychological transformation and insight about an individual’s wholeness and sense of self (Jung). I also write from the contentions of contemporary feminist psychoanalysis, which include a critical stance toward the idealization of mothers (Chodorow and Contratto), emphasis on the importance of acknowledging maternal subjectivity (Benjamin), and appreciation of the developmental functions of maternal ambivalence (Parker).

Finzi’s work on mothers is an approach to psychoanalytic thinking on female development that emphasizes cultural analysis and, therefore, prevents the pathologizing of the maternal subject by putting her into a collective context.

I will focus on two central and overlapping tenets of Finzi's theory. First is the feminist critique of cultural motherhood, which she describes as a coercive mechanism that turns the desire for procreation into compulsion. This critique offers an explanation on how maternal desires can turn compulsive. Second is the concept of "the child of the night," which is an image of the lost feminine fantasy that she claims is universal but repressed in the female psyche, regardless of whether motherhood in the sense of childrearing is actualized. With this concept, Finzi offers a way to understand the psychological functions and the values of girls' and women's fantasies of reproduction. Using Finzi's model, I will discuss this problem of compulsory motherhood versus maternal desire and demonstrate how her interest in these phenomena has inspired me in my clinical practice.

### Compulsory Motherhood: The Repression of Reproductive Fantasies

Finzi argues that motherhood has remained obscured by repression despite the liberation of sexuality. This notion is based on a distinction between motherhood as a generative and interactive power within women and motherhood as being socially constructed. She argues that the latter has caused women to identify with and internalize a restrictive and repressive mother role. Such a coercive mechanism transforms the maternal experience into a social role, in which women's maternal desires become necessities. The mechanism results in women feeling compelled to have children, as if motherhood were a matter of life and death. In this way, a psychology of the underlying dynamics of the compulsory aspects of maternal desires can be developed.

Finzi appears to be largely isolated from the literature that connects psychoanalysis, feminism, and the maternal. Finzi's book, *Il bambino della notte*, published in 1990, was translated to English and published in 1996 with the title *Mothering. Toward a New Psychoanalytic Construction*. She offers a psychoanalytic take on motherhood through a feminist critique of social and cultural dominating gender roles. She examines how women have historically identified with the social and cultural function of mothering, and starts from the central distinction between the disposition that motherhood is a generative and interactive power within women, and motherhood as being socially constructed. This is similar to Adrienne Rich's seminal work, published in 1976, that presents a distinction between a woman's potential for mothering and motherhood as institution. Interestingly, Finzi does not draw on Rich's work throughout her book and only offers a single reference to it.

Finzi places the maternal in a layered context of collective mythology and feminist psychoanalytic theory, and then succeeds in holding together the contrasting aspects of maternal desire without pathologizing it. This is, in my

view, a sincere attempt to capture a maternal subjectivity. Finzi argues that the social regulation of motherhood has caused women to identify with and internalize a restrictive and repressive mother role, which, psychoanalytically, is an invisible process internalized in the unconscious. She views this dynamic as a coercive mechanism that transforms the maternal experience into a social role. The consequence of these social expectations is that women's desire to become mothers is made into a necessity: when the maternal experience is confined to a purely social role, a significant shift happens from desire to necessity. Women now feel compelled to have children. Finzi does not attempt to define motherhood or mothering or present an exhaustive model for the psychology of motherhood. She also states that she does claim to offer a perfect method for treatment of girls and women with maternal psychological issues. However, she seeks to reveal some of the unexpressed possibilities by separating mothering from its socially regulated functions. Her message is that women must search for their own definition of motherhood outside the established discourse so that women can be "reformulated in her own complexity—capable of alternating narcissistic and maternal stances, according to the goals she sets" (4).

### The Child of the Night

The original Italian title of her book, *Il bambino della notte* ("the child of the night"), is central to Finzi's conceptualization of mothering as the creative dimension of a woman's body. In this image, Finzi captures the fantasy and the childish desire to be able to give birth to a baby of one's own; an expression of the generative power of the female body and sign of a narcissistic grandeur that does not contemplate sexual intercourse as the action of the primal scene. It is a fantasized child, universal in the female psyche, and connected to the gendered bond between mother and daughter. The child of the night represents the little girl's awareness of her womb's capacities to create; an ability that defines her gender and connects her to her mother. This awareness is jeopardized in the Oedipal phase when the girl goes through a restructuring of the gendered aspects of her personality. Finzi argues it is further repressed by patriarchal culture. What is important for the symbol of the child of the night is that the fantasy of spontaneous reproduction is *pre*-Oedipal. It is not the Oedipal fantasy of being impregnated by the father. It is the omnipotent visceral fantasy of being able to create life from one's body, by one's own powers. In Donald Winnicott's theory of development, omnipotence is central in the first developmental stage of undifferentiated unity. At this stage, before the sense of differentiation is fully developed, the child depends on the illusion of omnipotent control over the mother to feel connected to her. When fed, the baby gets a sense that whenever she is hungry, food appears as if by magic. This fantasy is naturally

given up as the baby develops, but remains in the psyche, as any development stage. Omnipotence is often highly defended against in adult women because they are socialized to suppress it. I agree with Finzi that the developmental function of omnipotence does not end with adulthood. These dynamics are not linear; they are cyclical throughout life. Finzi states that “unconscious desire never stops moving against time, pursuing the impossible recomposition of the fragmented parts of that lost unity” (12). For maternal life transitions, it is crucial for a woman to connect to and enjoy the illusion of omnipotence. Finzi argues that fantasies about the body’s reproductive capacities play an important role in girls’ and women’s relational development: “[the] capacity to give and preserve life can be translated into a particular existential quality that is syntonic with the feminine identity and its specific modality of being in the world and living in relation with others” (4). This notion does not include an essentialist view on motherhood; the psychological value of the fantasies is not dependent on motherhood being concretized. It is through the question of maternity, whether physical or psychological, that a woman can work through her relationship to her own mother and thereby negotiate her relationship to herself and the world.

### **Clinical Experiences with the Metaphor of the Child of the Night**

In my experience as a psychotherapist in outpatient private practice, I have worked with several women who are contemplating the question of having children. I have worked with female clients between the ages of twenty-five and forty without children, who may not necessarily present with problems related to the question of children. They then experience that the question of children comes up as they are reflecting on their life during treatment. I have not experienced working with a woman where the question never came up at all; however, this is likely because of my bias in the topic, which I consciously and unconsciously contribute to the co-constructing relational work that psychotherapy is. In the work, I have noticed topics of which I struggled to understand. I will describe my impressions of these and how Finzi’s concept of the child of the night has helped me make sense of them.

In working with these women, a common theme is anxiety about separating from one’s own mother, particularly concerns about how parenthood may cause a threatening separation from the mother. Separation may be something threatening, something a woman longs for, or a conflictual concoction of both. I often hear descriptions of deep anxiety about cultural pressure and fears about being swallowed by cultural motherhood—the expectations for parenting are all-consuming and are impossible to resist. When adequate rapport is established and we can safely embark on explorations of these anxieties, the

women say that they wish to create their own definition of motherhood. At the same time, they express a degree of uncertainty—whether or not they will be able to find their own way. I have experienced that these fears appear to block the women from connecting to, let alone explore, any primitive desires or fantasies about having babies. If we touch on the topic, the women might withdraw or become defensive, feelings that I must then respect. As I have reflected on these recurring dynamics with several clients, I have come to recognize a common pattern of polarities between bodily urges—including baby lust and sexual aspects of excitement surrounding conception, pregnancy, and birth—and anxieties about maintaining self-assertion related to pressures from partners, parents, and other family members.

When reproductive fantasies or longings come up, I often hear the women describe them with ambivalence and, sometimes, shame. The women seem to think that maternal desires should not be indulged, and that they may turn into greed if one is not careful. As if maternal desires must be balanced with rationality and modesty. The omnipotent material may then emerge in the form of dream symbols or other creative images that can be difficult for the client to make sense of. In my attempts to help my clients make meaning of this material, Finzi's concept has inspired me to listen carefully after any signs of a child of the night. I pay close attention to any symbols related to omnipotence-creation fantasies. I have found that the challenge here is to tease out aspects of omnipotence from fantasies and material connected to fulfilling societal and patriarchal ideas of being a good baby producer. One way to distinguish these aspects is to listen to any hints of feelings of emptiness. As Finzi contends, when a woman has an internalized feeling of being a vessel and feels that she must have a baby according to the laws of patriarchal society, there is a loss, or a trace of a loss, and also mourning related to the loss of omnipotence. The sense of loss can be so intense for some women that it develops into a void, which creates a passivity that may be defended against through compulsive urges. It is the loss of this child of the night—a woman's preverbal feeling state of her creative capacities—that corrupts maternal desires or, rather, prevents a woman from connecting her maternal urges to her core sense of self. If attention is paid to the signs of this void, the woman may be encouraged to begin the processing of the pain of that loss. I believe processing that pain is necessary before a woman can begin to connect to her child of the night. Some of the metaphors of the child of the night that I have seen include women's professional or creative projects, to which they feel strongly attached. They may discuss dreams or revelatory experiences connected to these projects, and in our explorations of them, they can connect better to feelings of omnipotence and creativity. Anxieties and insecurities can then be explored more freely.

## The Function of Fantasies

Finzi's work offers a psychoanalytic mythological perspective to maternal studies. I believe clinicians as well as scholars can draw on this imagery of omnipotence fantasies to develop an understanding of the complex interplay between individual and collective unconscious material in the maternal transition. The clinical value of Finzi's work lies in the connection of individual and collective aspects that the concept of the child of the night suggests. In this way, the psychological material of individual woman that may sound infantile and primitive can be connected to a cultural and societal context and, thus, appreciated. From a Jungian perspective, it is through the mutual confrontation of the opposites—in this case, the polarity of compulsory maternal desires of patriarchal motherhood and the omnipotent fantasies of the child of the night—that the transcendent potential of realization happens. Clinicians can listen to and look for this *Babino della notte* trope of the creative potentials of maternity. If women are to find their own definitions of mothering, in a feminist matricentric sense, we may help by holding space for this child of the night.

## Works Cited

- Benjamin, Jessica. "The Omnipotent Mother: A Psychoanalytic Study of Fantasy and Reality." *Representations of Motherhood*, edited by Donna Bassin et al., Yale University Press, 1994, pp. 129-147.
- Chodorow, Nancy and Susan Contratto. "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother." *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, edited by Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, Northeastern University Press, 1992, pp. 191-214.
- de Marneffe, Daphne. *Maternal Desires. On Children, Love, and the Inner Life*. Little, Brown and Company, 2004.
- Finzi, Silvia Vegetti. *Mothering. Toward a New Psychoanalytic Construction*. Translated by Kathrine Jason, The Guildford Press, 1996.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. *The Structure and Dynamic of the Psyche*. 2nd ed. Translated by Gerhard Adler. Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Parker, Rozsika. *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*. Basic Books, 1995.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1986.
- Welldon, Estela. *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*. Karnac, 1988.
- Winnicott, Donald. *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis*. Hogarth Press, 1975.