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BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

Review of *The Mother in Psychoanalysis and Beyond: Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity*

The Mother in Psychoanalysis and Beyond: Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity, by Rosalind Mayo and Christina Moutsou (Eds.), London; New York: Routledge, £24 approx. Paperback, 2017, ISBN: 978-1-138-88505-9.

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This set of essays cogently deconstructs much traditional psychoanalytic theory and points at a direction for a vibrant maternal subjectivity.

Once upon a time there was a children's TV quiz show. Part of the quiz entailed children being asked the meaning of unusual words. One child was asked the meaning of 'matricide' and replied, 'it's the side of the bed the mother has to sleep on'. The child's innocence possibly reveals something about the way in which so-called 'phallic discourses' allocate the mother a position. That is, she is treated as a passive object. This set of essays cogently deconstructs much traditional psychoanalytic theory and points in the direction of a vibrant maternal subjectivity. The first half of the book focuses on matricide, which can be understood as the symbolic silencing and obliteration of the mother's discourse. Part two explores maternal subjectivities as a creative response to matricide. A key strength of the book is its willingness to tackle the complexity of 'matricide' and explore the creative/destructive dialectic inherent in this term. This book finally helped me understand Kristeva's iconoclastic claim that 'matricide is our vital necessity'.

The editors contend that discourses and narratives about the mother are marginalised on a sociocultural level and within psychoanalysis and philosophy. I think this is illustrated in the following anecdote about Jacques Lacan, who acquired a very famous painting called 'L'Origine du Monde' (1866) by Gustave Courbet, and concealed it behind a wooden screen. By a secret mechanism, the screen could be slid back to reveal the painting behind. The painting and its title, as well as Lacan's screen, can be understood in many ways, but they highlight male anxiety about the maternal body as the origin of the world. This masculine anxiety underpins our most formative narratives and could be described as the genesis of Genesis (Froula 1996).

One fascinating question posed in the introduction to this book is as follows: 'what does it mean to turn the term/word 'mother' into a noun ('the maternal') in the way that Freud used the concept of the unconscious and turned it into a noun, an entity?' The contributors argue that 'the maternal' is the foundation of the human condition – the ground of our being – influencing how we live our lives, and how we situate ourselves culturally, politically and within intimate relationships. It is the new-born infant's prolonged helplessness that shapes the human condition as one of interdependence and relationship, which is paramount to survival.

Contributors explore how 'issues of personal and gender identity are shaped by the ideals of separation from the mother, and look at the fears and anxieties of merging with the mother and discourses that lead to mother blaming'.

In Western culture, the mother is the impossible subject, caught in an ever increasing split between her idealisation and denigration – '[a] sort of damned if you do and damned if you don't position'. Many of us are also caught up in our favoured/preferred specialist discourses and these attract epithets such as 'radical' or 'reactionary.' The contributors move away from sectarian thinking and avoid offering idealising or denigrating critiques. We are given different styles of writing, and this provides us with a pluralism that is appropriate to the subject matter.

Lucy King explores maternal ambivalence through her readings of Sándor Ferenczi, Donald Winnicott, Julia Kristeva and Rozsika Parker. She reminds us that 'God made Eve from Adam's rib and Freud made feminine sexuality from male libido'. King mentions how 'Mother was seen as the problem by early feminist writers and how we have moved on from that'.

Christina Moutsou thinks that in object relations theory the mother is rendered as an object of desire and fantasy but has no theorised sexual subjectivity, and she re-examines the Metis-Athena myth and its underpinning of patriarchal ideology. On a personal note she adds, '[w]hen I could no longer pretend that I did not need a mother, then the question of the maternal opened up'. She explores and engages with the canon of psychoanalytic literature and notes that 'the Kleinian Breast' is detached both from maternal subjectivity and from the acknowledgement of the mother's vulnerability. Moutsou is concerned that the mother should be viewed as an actual other person and not reduced simply to a container, mirror or breast.

Amber Jacobs reconceptualises the Oresteian myth by radically rethinking Greek mythology; by taking up the story of Metis and Athena, she skilfully fractures the logic of Patriarchy. She describes the way in which the appropriation of female procreativity is inscribed in the myth of Zeus swallowing Metis to give birth to Athena from his brain. Jacobs is proposing (in line with Irigaray) complementary as well as alternative symbolic systems, which are not reducible to the Phallic Oedipal model. Jacobs approaches the maternal via the socio-symbolic structures, representations,

fantasies and discourses that have to be negotiated and/or circumvented when living one's life as 'a mother'.

Jacobs offers an analysis of Greek myths that challenges our usual understanding of the Oedipal myth central to Freud and Lacan's thinking. What I take from her approach is not so much that Freud and Lacan are erroneous, but that their previous readings of these myths are limited. For Freud and Lacan it is the incompleteness of their reading of the myths that creates a restricted, if not restrictive, viewpoint of the maternal and subsequent psychoanalytic theory.

The tendency to marginalise 'the complexity of the maternal' results in a proliferation of theories concerning individuation, autonomy and separation without taking into account maternal agency and the necessity of the mother's creativity in the process of healthy separation. Chodorow (1978) elsewhere proposes that male identification with the mother is violently repressed through cultural taboos, and argues that 'the son's painful discovery of sexual difference is the psychic site on which culture institutes the barrier of gender, inducing him to renounce and repress his early identification with his mother, at considerable emotional cost, and to identify instead with a masculinity defined oppositionally as the not-maternal'. Male envy of the womb leads to idealisation and denigration and oppression of actual women, giving us The Madonna-Whore axis.

Rosalind Mayo picks up the myth of Demeter and Persephone and the ageing mother, and explores feminism's collusion with youth culture as a form of matricide.

Melissa Benn urges us to be honest with our daughters about the depths and demands of becoming a mother and the need for them to fight for their due; to take on the world, not to retreat from it through seeking individualistic solutions.

Christina Moutsou and Rosalind Mayo have drawn together challenging, subtle, provocative, thoughtful, engaging perspectives from psychoanalysis, politics, personal testimony, mythology, anthropology, poetry and music and art. Each chapter is thoroughly referenced, highlighting the serious scholarship that has gone into this text and made it a valuable resource for trainees and advanced practitioners. It firmly

plants its flag and flies it in the disputatious territory of Psychoanalysis. It does so in a refreshingly inclusive, plural, panoramic and maternal manner.

Back to our quiz show! This exploration of 'Matricide' shows that there is more than one side of the bed/couch to lie on, and it cannot be allocated.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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