

“Elle a besoin de lait”: Womb Envy, Ovarian Phallus, and the War Film 1917

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It is without doubt that Sigmund Freud’s descriptions of childhood knowledge acquisition and gender constitution have provided his concept of penis envy, alongside related concepts of castration anxiety and the phallus, a substantial amount of relevancy in the field of psychoanalysis. What Freud’s narratives leave in the periphery through the *assumed* dominance of the male body is the logical possibility for a psychoanalytic basis that is an inverse to penis envy—that is, womb envy. Using the same logical operations as Freud but starting from womb envy will reveal a corollary ovarian phallus, a theoretical move which decenters the phallus as a symbol of androcentric power. The war film *1917* will be used by this essay not only as a case study that helps develop these theoretical models, but also to show the potential of an ovarian analytic frame to identify and resist heteropatriarchal elements of popular culture.

In *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud suggests that both boys and girls share the view that the penis is or should be universal. When a boy is introduced to the female genitals, he encounters confusion in her lack of what he has, in what she should have too. This narrative, however, is not paralleled from the girl’s perspective: “Little girls do not resort to denial of this kind when they see that boys’ genitals are formed differently from their own. They are ready to recognize them

immediately and are overcome by envy for the penis” (61). The penis signifies a presence, the female genitals signify a lack. Potential for a sexual reversal of penis envy is therefore neglected by Freud’s presumption of the male genital’s primacy. But what about womb envy? Could it not be possible that as a boy grows up and learns about the productive powers of the female genitals he encounters an internal desire to birth? What about when placing the cause of foot fetishism, Freud says, “The foot represents a woman’s penis, the absence of which is deeply felt” (21)? Could it be possible to understand departures from the vagina to displacements not as female-directed disappointments in penile lack, but as self-directed vaginal lack? That is to say, could there be a conceivable logic that renders the male body as lacking a power specific to the female genitals?

In a later work, Freud articulates that the typical construction of women’s femininity relies on the following transformation: “the appeased wish for a penis is destined to be converted into a wish for a baby and for a husband, who possesses a penis” (“Analysis Terminable and Interminable” 251). The root of such a trajectory is of course penis envy, and the root of penis envy is of course the primacy of the male genitals. The inverse trajectory might suggest the following: that the *appeased wish for a womb is to be converted into a drive for life-controlling power in an alternate sense, desire to constitute and subsume a male phallus*. The observed male “repudiation of femininity” that Freud calls “a biological fact” (251) would be understood as an expression not of male primacy but rather of displaced rejection of female primacy.

Continuing this thread of logic, if the female body in one way or another signifies the threat of penile castration, then it can be said that the male body signifies the reality of ovarian castration—while, paradoxically, at the same time affirming ovarian efficacy by its productive powers presupposing access to male sperm. Moving forward, if the male body’s absence of ovaries isn’t enough to engender threat,

then it would be the destructive and negating associations that the male body carries. There is a prevalent history of cultural knowledge in the West that entangles men and male bodies with violence, rape, war, abuse, and exploitation. From such a collection of associations, one can interpret the penis as a signifying locus of prohibitive heteropatriarchal law. And of particular interest to this essay, the male body engenders threat specifically as it is the traditional cultural paradigm of the soldier, who acts antithetically to ovarian reproductive power by *ending* lives instead of cultivating them. All of this is to lay a foundational consistency for womb envy to adopt psychoanalytic stakes.

Womb envy as a desire for ovarian productive capacities is logically just as justifiable as penis envy. It just so happens that its theoretical presence has been suppressed by both patriarchal societal forces and preexisting biases in psychoanalytic language. To illustrate these points, and further develop the model, attention to a recently released Oscar-winning war film proves beneficial.

Directed by Sam Mendes, *1917* (2019) takes place in war-torn northern France during World War I. The two main characters, Schofield and Blake, receive a mission to travel through deadly territory to another group of British troops to have them call off an attack. Should they fail, this company will charge into a trap and surely perish. Through the blood-spurting encounters, emotional turmoils, and pervasive death and destruction, the movie falls in line with most war movies in its illustration of the horrors of battle. Taken for its palpably apparent value, the scene depicting Schofield coming upon a woman taking care of an abandoned child reinforces the terror of war with its utilization of the woman and child as contrasting meaning-bearers for innocence and life:

An exhausted British soldier (Schofield) finds refuge in a dark, torn-down apartment. He sits, slowly lifting his hand to cover the bleeding wound on the back of his head. A woman emerges from the shadows. She cares for the wound. A baby's

cry interrupts the soldier’s rest. He looks up and follows the woman move to a back corner of the room and hold in her arms an infant girl. The soldier exhibits a startling sense of urgency as he rushes to the child and offers all the food in his backpack. The woman shakes her head. She says, “*Elle a besoin de lait* [she needs milk].” The soldier pauses dumbfoundedly. He turns his body and hands her a pouch. It’s milk. He has milk. Relief and joy emerge in the soldier’s face. He turns his full attention to the child. His eyes widen and mannerisms fade. He reaches out to the infant. The woman asks if he has children, but the distracted soldier doesn’t reply. His eyes water as he recites to the infant:

“They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they went to sea:
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter’s morn, on a stormy day,
In a Sieve they went to sea!

“Far and few, far and few,
the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.”

A church bell rings. The soldier, reminded of where and who he was, reminded of his mission, looks up from the infant with beating eyes of terror. “I have to go. ... I’m sorry” (1917 1:12:00-1:19:45).

This is one of the very few breaks from rampant gunfire and bloodshed in the two-hour-long movie. It is quick to see how this scene may function to highlight the banal violence of war and prompt the viewer to ask the cliché, existential question, “Why wage war?” A psychoanalytic consideration of womb envy in this scene, however, al-

lows for a much more complicated interpretation.

Schofield's derived pleasure from giving the infant milk is unlike any other moment in the film. In addition to being one of the few times a smile can be found on his face, it is the only moment the viewer witnesses Schofield forgetting the war, forgetting the mission. If a fascination with and desire for the reproductive powers of the womb are justifiably present in a sexually-knowledgeable male body, as the reversal of Freud's psychoanalytic logic suggests, then Schofield's provision of milk to the infant may be understood as a substitutive satisfaction of womb envy—for milk is a direct symbol of lactation, of functioning female biological processes, of ovarian power. More than that, it is the life force of an infant who may be just as close to death as the soldier. The giving of milk extends ovarian power beyond biological function into the symbolic reward of breathing life into another human being, all in the context of a war's death and destruction. Furthermore, the recited poem, which is the first and last stanza of Edward Lear's "The Jumblies," reflects the fulfillment of a prohibited desire characterized by yonic imagery—"In a Sieve they went to sea: / In spite of all their friends could say." A sieve is a typically round surface that may connote the curves of female genitals. To seek refuge and transport in the sieve can be understood as an attempt to realize a projected function—naval passage on one hand, ovarian productive power on the other. But in how the use of a sieve as a boat is destined to fail, so is the male body's wish to harbor a child. And the speaker's friends want nothing to do with womb envy—how could a man, assuming Schofield adopts the speaker's reality, meant to be soldier, meant to be father, meant to be what a mother isn't, have a desire for a womb?

So what can we say about Schofield's identifications as "male," as "man," as "soldier," as "informant"? Initially, the orchestration of the scene places the characters in their traditional kinship setting: a man, a woman, and an infant all under a roof together; and the woman

caring for the man, the man providing sustenance for the infant and the woman. But the orchestration’s heteropatriarchal orientation is disturbed by a deficiency of the idealized relations between the subjects. The child was found abandoned in wreckage and is not the daughter of the woman, the man and woman are not married, and their congruity is not one of coherence but transience. Furthermore, Schofield’s embodiments of male, man, soldier, and informant all in their own ways prohibit any permanent connection to the infant that he becomes so charmed by—they all prohibit the satisfaction of Schofield’s repressed womb envy: to biologically lack ovaries is to lack the productive powers of the womb; to conform to man’s ideal kinship role is precisely not to be mother; to be a soldier is to bring about death and disavow any regard for innocence and life; to have a mission means to deprioritize anything else. Womb envy is unequivocally destructive to the “bodily integrity” imposed by the aforementioned identities. And because so many suppressive forces are at play, it is to no surprise that subtleties are all there is to work with in locating womb envy’s presence in this mainstream war film’s scene.

Implicit in the analyses made so far is the use of womb envy as an entryway into alternative epistemic realizations. When Jacques Lacan definitively articulated his concept of the phallus in “The Signification of the Phallus,” he both underscores how the phallus is *not* the penis, but is nevertheless a matrix of patriarchal power. It is a fixed, “privileged signifier,” with “effects that are determinant in instituting the subject,” and “is *destined* to designate meaning effects as a whole” (Lacan 581; 578; 579; emphasis added). In “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” Judith Butler unveils how despite presenting himself as explicitly not doing so, Lacan’s logic nevertheless conflates penis and phallus. To accept that the phallus is fixed and “privileged,” “destined” to be the structuring force that constitutes all significations, would mean to accept the inevitability of an androcentric epistemological relation to the world. In response, Butler makes

the point that “The phallus *symbolizes* the penis; and insofar as it symbolizes the penis, retains the penis as that which it symbolizes; it *is* not the penis” (Butler 51). Butler’s emphasis on the fluidity of the phallus can be made evident by the illumination of womb envy as something that has stakes in *1917*.

Though tradition might postulate that Schofield seeks a phallus through his manliness, his soldierness, his penis, it is possible to locate an alternate phallus he lacks whose gravitational force is womb envy; a different structure of that is properly constituted as an imaginary relation to an anatomical part. What rises is the possibility for an ovarian phallus, analogue to Butler’s lesbian phallus. The ovarian phallus could then carry with it power, not in the hegemonic masculinist sense, but one that relates to the generative capacities of the womb. A case should be made that having female genitals is not the necessary root of the ovarian phallus. Bodies often labeled female may, for example, be infertile for a number of reasons: menopause, polycystic ovarian syndrome, and primary ovarian insufficiency, to name a few. On the social level there are desires, social norms, sexual orientations, and economic conditions which hinder ovarian realizations, such as non-heterosexuality, disinterest in the pains of procreation, not having the financial means to support a child, and so on. Womb envy as desire for life-rendering power need not solely originate in subjects that physically lack ovaries; likewise, the ovarian phallus as a symbol of productive power need not be equated to the possession of a functional womb. What womb envy as a theoretical model conveys is not simply a biological vector, but rather a symbolic field characterized by contradictions and tensions between bodies, norms, desires, and power.

The theoretical foundations of womb envy and an ovarian phallus have been instantiated and to begin to consider their potentialities in anti-heteropatriarchal practice, we can consider the relationship between the proposed relevance of womb envy in *1917* and the spec-

tator’s viewership. It’s probably not the case that most male consumers of the movie watch the scene and find within themselves a miraculous desire to possess procreative powers. But, as Laura Mulvey proposes in her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the spectator’s psychic relations to the characters on the screen can foster shared matrices of desire. Mulvey’s work aims to illustrate the ways in which the Hollywood male gaze psychoanalytically engages with mainstream film. All movies are representation. Images, symbols, shapes, and bodies oriented one way or another to present to the audience tangible significations. In what Mulvey calls “ego libido,” what occurs is the “identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator’s fascination with and recognition of his like” (837). Such a move allows the viewer to disavow any moral or ethical responsibilities; the male protagonist on the screen becomes the eroticizing agent, no longer the spectator. Mulvey says that this mechanism, paired with brute scopophilia and realistic film technologies, has allowed Hollywood to entangle misogynistic and patriarchal codings of pleasure into film.

Mulvey does not, however, consider the potential for repudiated or non-normative pathways to pleasure to nevertheless be coded into film by the same processes. If mainstream film’s “formal preoccupations reflect the psychological obsessions of the society which produced it” (Mulvey 805), then its informal, or unintended, preoccupations reflect society’s unconscious and suppressed psychological obsessions. It could follow that through the male viewer’s “ego libido,” womb envy implicitly manifests society’s suppressed psychological obsession with ovarian power. Through his psychic projection of his desiring optics into Schofield’s, the male viewer, whether he wants or knows it, shares the soldier’s ovarian drives; the viewer also receives pleasure from providing the infant milk. This is a reversal of Mulvey’s dialectic: “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article” (Mulvey 805). In this case, however, the analysis

of womb-jealous pleasure actually unveils it, and thereafter paves a potential path for not only its future acknowledgment on a wider scale, but also a social realization of its subversive characteristics.

Within the mainstream war film genre, it is not rare to encounter a scene that features potentially ovarian themes. In *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a destroyed home shelters a family of four in immediate danger, and the spectator watches Vin Diesel get shot and killed in the process of stripping a child from her parents' hands to save her. Samuel Fuller's *The Big Red One* (1980) contains a chaotic scene where a dying husband delivers his pregnant wife to a group of soldiers, who later proceed to help her give birth in a tank. When the analytic frames of the ovarian phallus and womb envy are applied on and developed through scenes like these, what emerges is a destabilization of the traditional war film's involvement, complicity, and projection of violent heteropatriarchal norms. The analyses made in this essay on *1917* may serve as a model or starting point to do similar projects with other war films—and perhaps other domains of popular culture as well.

This essay has argued for one, that womb envy's potential presence in both psychoanalytic discourse and popular culture, alongside its socio-political implications, should not be denied; and two, that despite its presence, womb envy as desire is suppressed by numerous disparate forces such as infertility, sexual orientation, patriarchal law, masculine ideals, biological restriction, and, in Schofield's case, military assignment. Additionally, the revealed theoretical connection between womb envy and the proposed ovarian phallus has reinforced the characteristic plasticity of the traditional heteropatriarchal phallus. And finally, transcoding these theoretical maneuvers locates a creative flexibility to rework a psychoanalytic model for spectatorship that disrupts the previous male gaze-to-female sexual object model. It is important to note that a considerable amount of the methodology used in this essay has relied primarily on heterocentric articulations

and takes for granted the (perhaps) unavoidably constrictive qualities of psychoanalytic language when considering forms of desire and spectatorship—for example, how might spectatorship and womb envy work differently beyond sexual difference, in varying queer, racial, and socioeconomic contexts? Despite these limitations, womb envy’s lack of relevancy in psychoanalysis and its stakes in resisting heteropatriarchal representations and regimes within popular culture deserve attention.

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