

CONSIDERING CHILDLESSNESS:
AN ARGUMENT FOR THE EXTRICATION OF CHILDBEARING AND MOTHERHOOD
FROM THE CONCEPT OF WOMANHOOD

by
TANYA ELIISE OJA

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Queen's University
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Abstract

The stereotypical concept of womanhood is tethered to childbearing and motherhood. Even though childlessness is becoming more common, the belief seems to be that all women must want and should have children as well as should assume the role of primary caregiver.

I explore and argue against the belief that bearing and raising children is essential to the concept of womanhood. I pinpoint four reasons why childbearing and motherhood are thought to be rightly tethered to the concept of womanhood: that childbearing and mothering are the “norm” for women, that women’s potential to bear life is considered a sufficient and necessary condition to reproduce, that the presence of a “maternal instinct” means women want to bear children and they exhibit maternal behaviour, and that it is “natural” for women to want to procreate and mother.

I then present a series of arguments showing why childbearing and mothering must be extricated from the concept of womanhood. I focus on the concern that the concept of womanhood demanding procreation means a woman cannot independently meet the criteria for womanhood, the oversimplifying consequences of making a biological possibility a defining characteristic of women, the oppressiveness of prescribing the demanding role of motherhood to all women, and the freedom associated with the child-free life. I argue against the existence of the maternal instinct and point to the coercive manner in which the term “natural” is employed. After illustrating the social pressures women face to procreate and mother, I argue that such pressure would not be

needed if procreation and mothering were indeed “natural” for women. Allowing for the possible existence of the “maternal instinct” I argue that its existence is irrelevant in light of the wax and wane of the importance placed on what is “natural” and the ability of social pressures to overcome what is deemed “instinctual” and “natural”. Finally, I argue that both a belief in the “maternal instinct” and the idea that wanting and raising children is “natural” undermine belief in women’s intelligence.

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Chapter I. Introduction

Voluntary childlessness is a phenomenon on the rise. According to a study published by Statistics Canada, although “those who opt to stay childfree constitute a small minority” (Stobert & Kemeny 2003, 1), the number of child-free¹ men and women is increasing. The report affirms that “in addition to having fewer children, more [Canadian citizens] are not having children at all” (Stobert & Kemeny 2003, 1). The American National Centre for Health and Statistics has determined even more specific findings and recently reported that the number of *women* who are child-free by *choice* is on the rise, a fact that confirms that it is not infertility that has resulted in the increasing number of child-free women. In 2002, 6.2% of American women were voluntarily child-free, compared to 4.9% reported in 1982 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2005, 7-8). In the United Kingdom, sociologist Catherine Hakim has studied childlessness and has found that “in many European countries around 10% of women reach the age of 45 with no kids” (Westcott 2008, 1), and she is confident that this number is sure to increase. Indeed, “in the UK, the most commonly cited statistic is that by 2010, one in four will be either childfree or childless”² (Westcott 2008, 3). These findings suggest that in the Western world, certainly in North America and the United Kingdom, more and more women are choosing to remain child-free. Despite this

¹ A debate about usage of terms is still in progress. Many authors and women without children believe that the term “childless” suggests a person is missing something (May 1994, 182), and thus opt for the term “child-free”. This too is an imperfect term, however, as some women without children believe this term suggests children are something one should wish to be rid of. Other suggestions, such as “non-mothers,” are deemed awkward and imprecise. For the purpose of this essay, I will employ the term “child-free” to describe women who have *chosen* not to have children, and will use the term “childlessness” to describe being child-free, as these terms are the most popular among child-free women, who are my focus.

² In this case, “child-free” refers to women who voluntarily choose not to bear children, while “childless” refers to women who cannot conceive.

increasingly common life choice, child-free women continue to face a great deal of stigmatization.

Adrienne Rich believes that “Historically, cross-culturally, a woman’s status as a childbearer has been the test of her womanhood” (Rich 1979, 261). Further, “Motherhood³ has been an enforced identity for women” (Rich 1979, 261). Although Rich made these claims more than three decades ago, many authors have argued that her points remain a true account of the way in which the modern concept of womanhood is still tethered to procreation and motherhood. Even though childlessness is becoming more common, “women who choose not to have children are often regarded as selfish, maladjusted, unhappy, hedonistic, irresponsible, immature, abnormal, and unnatural” (Vissing 2002, 23). Indeed many authors have agreed that “we have seen what the concept of the non-mother means (cold, selfish, unwomanly, abnormal)” (Rollin 1974, 156). Child-free women often face unrelenting criticism for their choice not to bear and raise children, and in contemporary first-hand accounts, most child-free women admit to having been accused of being some or all of the above. Many child-free women explain that they continually feel pressure to want and to have children.

Much of the criticism directed toward child-free women stems from pronatalist attitudes. A “key element in pronatalist thought is the age-old idea that woman’s role must involve maternity—that woman’s destiny and fulfillment are closely wedded to the *natal*, or birth, experience” (Peck and Senderowitz 1974, 1, emphasis in original).

However, pronatalist attitudes are not only concerned with pregnancy and birth, as it is

³ Although I recognize that many women who have not borne children consider themselves mothers (adoptive mothers, step-mothers), when referring to mothers in this essay I will mean women who have borne and raised their biological offspring.

typically expected that a woman will also raise the child(ren) she has borne. The pronatalist attitude is expressed when people talk about “when” and not “if” a woman will have children. The assumption is that “everyone wants (should have) children, that childlessness is an undesirable condition to be escaped if at all possible” (Peck and Senderowitz 1974, 251). The belief that “everyone wants children” is particularly problematic for child-free women. While childless women, who are unable to bear children, are often pitied, women who have chosen not to have children are often met with scorn and harsh criticism. That a woman wouldn’t *want* children is considered unnatural. This criticism is closely tied to the view that a child-free woman has “failed” at womanhood, or cannot be considered as fully a woman as a woman who has borne and raised children.

I am interested in exploring and arguing against the belief that bearing and raising children is essential to the concept of womanhood. In chapter two, I first illuminate the stereotypical concept of womanhood that demands that women (want to) bear and raise children. Then, I flesh out what is at the heart of the concept of womanhood and point to a need for arguments that extricate childbearing and mothering from the concept of womanhood. In chapter three, I explain my reasoning for keeping the term “womanhood” and why I focus on what should be extricated from this term rather than arguing for its disposal. In chapter four I pinpoint four predominant reasons why childbearing and motherhood are thought to be rightly tethered to the concept of womanhood. The reasons I focus on are: that childbearing and mothering has historically been and continues to be the “norm” for women, that women’s potential to bear life is considered a sufficient and necessary condition to reproduce, that the presence

of a “maternal instinct” means women want to bear children and they exhibit maternal behaviour, and finally, that it is “natural” for women to want to procreate and mother. In chapter five, I present a series of arguments indicating why childbearing and mothering must be extricated from the concept of womanhood. I focus on the concern that the concept of womanhood demanding procreation means a woman cannot meet the criteria for womanhood on her own, the oversimplifying consequences of making a biological possibility a defining characteristic of women, the oppressiveness of prescribing the demanding role of motherhood to all women, and I discuss the freedom associated with the child-free life. Anticipating arguments that speak to the “naturalness” of women’s desire to procreate and mother, attributed to the idea of a “maternal instinct,” I discuss the maternal instinct and argue against its existence. I point to the coercive manner in which the term “natural” is employed and after illustrating the social pressures women face to procreate and mother, I argue that such pressure would not be needed if procreation and mothering were indeed “natural” for women. Allowing for the fact that perhaps one day the existence of the “maternal instinct” will be proven and childbearing and mothering will be found to be “natural,” I argue that its existence is irrelevant in light of the wax and wane of the importance placed on what is “natural” and the ability of social pressures to overcome what is deemed “instinctual” and “natural”. Finally, I argue that both the “maternal instinct” and the idea that wanting and raising children is “natural” undermine women’s intelligence.

The philosophical issues I address are conceptual/metaphysical, ethical and social. I consider the question, “What is a woman?” and argue against the inclusion of

childbearing and childrearing among the criteria for womanhood. I also argue that women have no moral obligations to procreate and mother.

I should also briefly explain that my focus is largely on the belief that women should *want* to procreate and mother. I do not discuss women who are physically unable to bear life⁴. In the process of arguing for the extrication of childbearing and mothering from the concept of womanhood, however, I do isolate different arguments that focus specifically on the reproductive function women possess or the desire to procreate, but also arguments that combine these two points.

⁴ I believe the topic of women who are physically unable to reproduce would be better suited to a much larger project. However, some of my arguments *are* applicable to women who are physically unable to bear life, for some of my arguments reject the importance of a reproductive function to womanhood.

Chapter 2. The Stereotypical Concept of Womanhood

In what follows, I have included excerpts from contemporary first-hand accounts of child-free women and other works concerned with childlessness. These excerpts serve to illuminate the stereotypical concept of womanhood. I explore the assumption that a woman who has not borne and reared children has failed at womanhood, so as to clearly flesh out the stereotypical concept of womanhood I will address. I conclude this chapter by illustrating the need for arguments that demand the extrication of childbearing and motherhood from the concept of womanhood.

In a short essay, “This is a Question I Do Not Answer,” Mary Mackay discusses the negative attitudes she has endured as a child-free woman. Throughout her life she has faced intrusive questions pertaining to the reasons for her child-free life. When it is discovered that she is not infertile and she has *chosen* to be child-free, she is frequently met with unkind words and harsh critique. People in her life are adamant that she should *want* to bear life and be a mother. She recounts in this essay an interaction with someone whom she considers to be the most “insensitive interrogator” (Mackay 2000, 30)—a former beau. Though he was polite to her during their high school reunion, he later wrote to her and, Mackay explains,

“upbraided me for not having had children and informed me that he should have gotten me pregnant when I was seventeen. Not married me, mind you; not helped me raise these phantom children he regretted not fathering; just impregnated me like a stray tomcat so I—who had clearly put my perverse desire to be a novelist before my desire to be a mother—wouldn’t have missed out on what it meant to Really Be a Woman” (Mackay 2000, 30).

The man Mackay had dated during her teenaged years did not believe she could experience womanhood without bearing life and raising children. He argued that she couldn't "really be a woman" unless she had borne and raised children.

Author Elissa Raffa explains in her essay, "The Vow," how her father tried to convince her that having children is essential to her womanhood. She recounts a conversation during which her father proclaimed: "a woman is not a woman until she has brought forth a child from her womb. It is a woman's highest duty to bear children" (Raffa 2000, 42). He too could not envision womanhood without motherhood. To him, the concept of womanhood required that a woman give birth, with the implication that she also raise her children and assume the role of mother.

Importantly, it is not only men who think of women as necessarily partaking in childbearing and then motherhood. Laurie Lisle writes that "mothers sometimes suggest that nulliparas [females who have not given birth] are not real women" (Lisle 1999, 167). Terri Casey, a child-free author, speaks of women who have questioned her womanhood and explains that people from all aspects of her life, from her neighbours to strangers, have told her, "when a woman has a baby, she feels like a real woman" (Casey 1998, xiii). Madelyn Cain, author of *The Childless⁵ Revolution: What it Means to be Childless Today*, confesses that when she began writing her book on child-free women she "believed that deep down every woman wanted to mother" (Cain 2001, 137). It is evident

⁵ As her use of terms is different from most authors focused on childlessness, I will briefly clarify her terminology. Cain refers to women without children as "childless" and considers three categories of childless women: those childless by choice, by chance, and by happenstance. Cain classifies women who are medically unable to, or face serious health risks if they do, procreate as "Childless by Chance". "Childless by Happenstance" is a category Cain uses to explain women who, among other situations, never found the time to have children, or never found the right partner, or who were afraid of having children.

that in modern Western society many men and women think that it is “‘unwomanly’ [for a woman] to admit to feeling happy and whole without children” (Cain 2001, 140).

Indeed, the connection between childbearing, motherhood, and womanhood seems to be so deeply rooted in our collective conscious that some child-free women question their own womanhood. In her article “Childless by Choice,” Sharon Gregg discusses her feelings about her childlessness and laments, “[S]ociety expects women to have children, so women expect it of themselves” (Gregg 2008, 54). This societal expectation prompted her to question: “Was I less of a woman [because I did not bear children]?” (Gregg 2008, 54).

Sometimes motivation for pregnancy mirrors these ideas about womanhood, child bearing and motherhood. Some women have pursued motherhood so as to meet the assumed criteria for “womanhood”. Anne Taylor Flemming explains in her work, *Motherhood Deferred*, that her motivation for wanting children was, in part, linked to her desire to no longer identify with men. She speaks of her 1950s childhood and being unsympathetic to her mother, while admiring and emulating the independence her father enjoyed. However, she decided at one point that she “was finally ready to stop identifying with the aggressor [men] (Flemming 1994, 210). She writes, “I was ready to reconcile myself to my own sex” (Flemming 1994, 210). Flemming admits that pregnancy and bearing life, followed by motherhood, promised the reconciliation with womanhood she desired (Flemming 1994, 63). She and her female peers wanted to experience true womanhood, and having children was thought to be essential.

In light of these comments, it is no surprise that Carolyn M. Morell, author of *Unwomanly Conduct: The Challenges of Intentional Childlessness*, believes that we live “in a world where womanhood is synonymous with motherhood⁶” (Morell 1994, 71). Even though women have won many legal rights, such as the right to vote, and have made notable progress toward equality, the deep-seated societal views of women as necessarily biological mothers have proven difficult to step away from. Indeed, it has been argued that a “*childless woman* is the *other* of the *other*, doubly lacking first as a woman (not man) and then as a non-mother (not fully woman)” (Gandolfo 2005, 114, emphasis in original).

It is important to explore these implications, and clearly flesh out what is at the heart of the stereotypical concept of womanhood. Moving from being child-free to experiencing biological motherhood involves a number of stages: conception, pregnancy, giving birth (“bearing children”) and raising children (“being” a mother, motherhood). The stereotypical concept of womanhood I am concerned with values all of these stages. Though the first hand accounts I have pointed to employ different terminology—“bringing forth a child,” “having a baby,” “having children,” and “being a mother”—the sentiment is the same. The implication is that a “true woman,” a woman who meets the expectations of the concept of womanhood, experiences all stages of becoming a biological mother, and ultimately “has” children, an expression used in more than one of the accounts. Being “child-free”—the state considered unfavourable to proponents of the

⁶ Morell published *Unwomanly Conduct: The Challenges of Intentional Childlessness* in 1994; thus the “world” she is speaking of is very similar to the “world” of the 21st century.

concept of womanhood—is best contrasted with raising children or “being a mother,” the assumed outcome of conception, for both are continuing states⁷.

However, even if a woman wants to have children, she will not necessarily progress through the aforementioned stages smoothly. Some women may conceive a child, but miscarry. Others may give birth, but the infant might die shortly after. Some women may be unable to procreate and opt for adoption. Conversely, one must not forget women who do bear life, but perhaps give their child up for adoption. How do these (and other) women fit into the stereotypical concept of womanhood? The concept of womanhood can best be explained as a spectrum: child-free women at one end (“not truly women”) and women who have conceived, borne, and raised biological children at the other end (“real women”). A woman who has experienced only pregnancy is thought to be more fully a woman than a child-free woman, but less of a woman than one who has borne and raised her children. Likewise, an adoptive mother is considered more of a woman than a child-free woman, but she has not experienced “womanhood” as fully as the woman who has borne and raised her biological offspring. In other words, the implication is that a woman must bear and raise a child to be considered a complete and “true” woman, and thereby fully experience and meet the criteria for “womanhood”. Variations are considered, but what is important to my project is that child-free women are explicitly rejected from this concept of “womanhood”.

The concept of womanhood, illustrated by the firsthand accounts I have included, suggests that childbearing followed by child-rearing is thought essential to womanhood.

⁷ J.E. Veivers, a leader in studying childlessness, has pointed to this parallel. She explains that “to a large extent the social meanings of parenthood can be comprehensively described and analyzed only in terms of the parallel set of meanings which are assigned to non-parenthood” (Veivers 1974, 295).

Importantly, many child-free women are unhappy with the concept of womanhood as linked to procreation and strive to have their child-free life included in what it means to “be a woman”. Some women have already fought the concept of womanhood that demands childbearing. In Gregg’s article she mentions her friend, Bonnie Brownlee, also a child-free woman, who “dismisses the stereotype of women’s identities being bound up with motherhood. ‘I don’t need to have a baby to know who I am’ she says” (Gregg 2008, 54). In lieu of bearing her own children, Gregg’s friend has bonded with other children in her life. Indeed, Gregg makes a point of explaining that her friend’s life “is full of kids, even if they aren’t her own” (Gregg 2008, 54). A heart-warming thought, for sure, but neither Gregg nor Brownlee make a convincing case for why womanhood should not be tethered to childbearing and motherhood. Further, the affirmation that despite being child-free, Brownlee’s life is filled with kids, suggests that the “deep bonds” (Gregg 2008, 54) she has forged with these other children are an integral aspect of womanhood, which serve to replace the childbearing she has declined. On the spectrum representing the stereotypical concept of womanhood, Brownlee might be considered slightly “more of a woman” than a child-free woman who has *not* forged deep bonds with children.

Though many child-free women *want* to extricate childbearing and mothering from conceptions of womanhood, they often fail to provide a reason for such a change. Furthermore, though women, including many feminists, have fought for childbearing rights—both opposing “coercive methods of curbing fertility” (Meyers 2001, 736) and also “campaigning for the right to choose not to procreate” (Meyers 2001, 736)—it has been noted that “the idea is to empower women to delay or space out childbearing.

Seldom, if ever, explicitly mentioned, the option of altogether abstaining is implicitly denied” (Meyers 2001, 736). Ann Snitow argues,

“feminism set out to break *both* taboos—those surrounding the experiences of mothers and of non-mothers, but for reasons I find both inside our movement and even more in the American society in which the movement unfolded, in the long run we were better able to attend to mothers’ voices (or at least to *begin* on that project) than we were able to imagine a full and deeply meaningful life without motherhood, without children” (Snitow 1992, 33, emphasis in original).

Though a great deal of attention has been paid to the frequency of childlessness, and the related literature has sought to establish childlessness as a legitimate choice and lifestyle for women, “western society continues to define women on the basis of their sexual and care-giving roles” (Vissing 2002, 7). There is a need for arguments to show that childbearing and consequent child-rearing should not be essential to womanhood or what it means to be a woman. More specifically: women need not *want* to bear life or assume the role of mother.

Chapter 3. Considering the Term “Womanhood”

Before continuing, it is important to examine the term “womanhood” and the methodological problem with a concept that defines womanhood based on women’s reproductive and mothering potential. Following that, I explain my justification for continuing to employ the terms “woman” and “womanhood” using Cressida Heyes’ Wittgensteinian feminist critique of essentialism.

“Woman” is one of two often-polarized, socially-constructed genders. When studying human bodies, many people, often doctors delivering babies, search for one of two desirable sets of sex organs: male and female. Gender construction (“man” and “woman”) is based on these sex organs. As Judith Lorber explains,

“For the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth. Then babies are dressed or adorned in a way that displays the category because parents don’t want to be constantly asked whether their baby is a boy or a girl. A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the usage of other gender markers. Once a child’s gender is evident, others treat those in one gender differently from those in the other, and the children respond to the different treatment by feeling different and behaving differently” (Lorber 1994, 14).

Thus, “what it means to be a woman,” though linked to reproductive bodies, is more than the physicality of the body. In other words, the female “body is not enough to define her as woman” (De Beauvoir 1989, 37). Certain expectations and characteristics are attached to gender identities.

Indeed, “[t]here are women and there are ideas about women” (Morell 1994, 3). When the term “womanhood” is employed, it is typically used in a way that points to what is considered “womanly”. In other words, it is an idea about what it should mean to

“be a woman”. The concept of womanhood serves to explain, and sometimes exact control over, what it means to be a woman. Concepts of womanhood (or manhood) can evolve and change over time, or across cultural groups⁸, but the concept of womanhood as tethered to procreation and mothering is a particularly pervasive concept that has successfully spanned many years and cultures.

One main problem with the concept of womanhood tethered to procreation and motherhood is that it is an essentialist definition. Proponents of this concept assume that there is a set of characteristics (wanting to bear and raise children) that define what it means to be a woman and anyone who is a woman must embody these characteristics. In her work, *Line Drawings*, Heyes speaks to the problems associated with essentialist definitions. In attempting to portray a “woman’s experience” or a “woman’s perspective,” for example, women can be guilty of describing only their *own* experiences and not truly capturing the *differences* among women’s experiences. As an illustrative example, Heyes points out bell hooks’ argument that

“Friedan’s⁹ presentation of ‘American women’ in fact describes the oppression only of white middle-class women, while her feminist prescriptions for these women to ‘get out of the house and into the workplace’ can be implemented, under existing social structures, only given Black women’s continuing subordination” (Heyes 2000, 22).

John Stuart Mill points to this kind of essentialist problem as well. He notes cultural patterns in defining women and explains that “An Englishman usually thinks that they

⁸The concept of manhood, for example, has changed so as to allow a man’s involvement in the birthing process. While a man of previous decades waited outside the delivery room and upon learning the sex of his baby “rushed back to work or to his friends or to a bar, passing out cigars” (Lorber 1994, 162) after the baby was born, modern men are more involved in the birthing process, frequently attend Lamaze class and, often in North America at least, accompany the woman into the delivery room. Afterward, men often “take time off work for a week or two to help care for and bond with the infant” (Lorber 1994, 162).

⁹ Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963.

[women] are by nature cold. The sayings about women's fickleness are mostly of French origin" (Mill 1988, 224).

The concept of womanhood demanding that women want to bear and raise children is committing a similar mistake. When used to describe "what it means to be a woman" this understanding of womanhood ignores the women who do not wish to bear children and desire to remain child-free¹⁰. The consequences of this kind of thinking about womanhood can be "inhibiting" (Heyes 2000, 21) and limiting. Heyes sees this kind of essentialism as misguided but does not suggest "giving up on generalizing about women and men" (Heyes 2000, 22).

I want to keep using the terms "womanhood" and "woman," even though the way in which "womanhood" is currently defined is limiting and not representative of all women. The term "womanhood" is linked to an ongoing debate about whether the distinctions and terminology, "male" and "female," "man" and "woman," do more harm than good. Surely, when the concept of woman is defined in a way that limits many women, the gender distinction is harmful. Arguing that we dispense with the concept "womanhood" would likely, in some ways, deal with the problem raised by women who do not want to bear children, for there would be no concept of womanhood that would demand that they want to have children.

However, even if individuals were no longer referred to as boys or girls, men or women, there will still be biological differences. Even without any type of labelling within a society, a society can still single out those with the reproductive organs required

¹⁰ It further excludes women who may not physically be able to bear children.

for childbirth and demand that this unnamed group of people use those organs and should want to procreate. That people *have* such organs could be considered enough of a reason for these people to *want* to use them, even if all the other ideas about these people were dispensed with. Regardless of what label we assign to people, one type of physical body (one with a uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, etc.) can potentially bear children, although only some people with this type of physical body may be able to realize this potential. Even without a gender category, or perhaps in a society with ten or twenty categories, the expectation that the kind of body that can bear children should bear children may still persist. So, I do not think dispensing with the term “womanhood” or arguing for the end of gender binaries will aid my project. It is important to note that although I will keep using the term “woman,” my arguments could (and should) apply to any person with the ability to bear children¹¹.

I support my decision to keep using the terms “woman” and “womanhood” in my project by relying on Heyes’ Wittgensteinian feminist critique of essentialism. In the “conversation” that plays out in the beginning of her chapter, “Philosophical Investigations (In a Feminist Voice),” an inquisitor asks how one can talk about “women” and still deny that all women have something in common (Heyes 2000, 78-79). Heyes’ response is, “I can see women have common experiences of being excluded and trivialized. But that is not to say that we are all the same. I can draw a boundary around us, for a special purpose” (Heyes 2000, 79). In the case of my project, I will keep the concept of “womanhood” and the term “woman” to focus on the commonality I wish to

¹¹ I am thinking here of people such as famed Oprah guest Thomas Beattie (Goldman 2008, 1), who identify as “men” but have a uterus, ovaries, and other reproductive organs required for childbearing.

address: that women are those who are expected to want to bear children and that procreation and motherhood is essential to womanhood. Arguing against these beliefs will be the “purpose” for which I continue to make use of the terms “womanhood” and “woman”. Heyes further argues that to vehemently deny that women can in any way be defined and to refuse to “draw lines around terms” (Heyes 2000, 95) does not “further feminist projects that must draw on the notion of specific groups of women, united in some identifiable set of experiences of political objectives” (Heyes 2000, 95). Additionally, because the term “womanhood” is used in the problem I am examining, I think it important to continue to make use of the term, to reclaim the term, perhaps, from the grasp of pronatalist attitudes. So I will not, for this project, abandon use of the term “womanhood”.

As I dismantle what is currently the concept of womanhood and argue for what should not be considered essential to womanhood, I offer no new construction. As Heyes suggests, “we do not need to specify what the concept ‘women’ is at all” (Heyes 2000, 80). A new concept of womanhood with a neatly defined set of requirements or criteria is perhaps not even a realizable goal. Heyes argues that “no *single* characteristic is necessary to make an individual woman, and none is sufficient” (Heyes 2000, 84, emphasis in original). In other words Heyes “side-steps the view that there is an essential womanness, separable from class, race, and other contexts, that all women share” (Heyes 2000, 85). I will sidestep this view as well and will focus only on what I believe must be extricated from ideas about what it should mean to be a woman, or what womanhood should entail.

Chapter 4. Four Arguments for a Procreative and Mother-Centred

Concept of Womanhood

Beliefs about women and what women should do or want “are not independent of the social and historical conditions from which they spring” (Morell 1994, 3). It is important to briefly consider why childbearing and biological motherhood are thought to be necessary and essential to a concept of womanhood. The reasons are complex and interconnected, and have likely developed and changed over thousands of years. Certainly, exploring this topic would be suitable for an entirely different and much larger project. In what follows, I have isolated and will briefly summarize what I believe to be four predominant arguments for why the concept of womanhood is thought to be rightly tethered to childbearing and motherhood: that childbearing and mothering is the “norm” for women, that (some) women are physically able to bear life and so they should, that women have a “maternal instinct” that is responsible for women wanting and caring for their offspring, and that women wanting and having children is “natural”¹².

4.1. Childbearing and Motherhood are the “Norm” for Women

Of the reasons why womanhood is tethered to childbearing and mothering, one that stands out is that even though childlessness is on the rise, both in modern society and throughout history the majority of women have borne children. Exceptions, of course, have been noted throughout history, such as the Great Depression¹³, but they mark only

¹² The “naturalness” of women wanting and having children is closely connected to the idea of the “maternal instinct”.

¹³ Morell explains that during the Great Depression, a time of economic hardship, “serious relationships and marriages were postponed and the decision to forgo motherhood seemed appropriate” (Morell 1994, 42).

brief dips in fertility rates. For example, though American birth rates “dropped to 18 percent in 1933” (Cain 2001, 4), American (and Canadian) birth rates soared again after WWII when “virtually everyone was having children” (May 1995, 3). Childbearing and mothering have been the “norm”—what most women have done. In fact, during some periods in history, women had very little choice to “do” anything else. For example, in the American colonies during the mid-late 19th century, a single woman “had no way of surviving economically” (Rich 1986, 43) and no man wanted a woman who could not have, or did not want to have, children. So women during this time typically bore and raised children if they were physically able.

In terms of birth control, although there have been various attempts at devising effective means to control pregnancy throughout the history of contraceptives, “until the creation of the diaphragm in the 1880’s the birth of babies was largely unavoidable” (Rollin 1974, 149). In other words, “women throughout history before the advent of birth control were at the continual mercy of their biology¹⁴” (Firestone 1971, 9). Though pregnancy in the 21st century is much more avoidable for women in the western world, as the statistics I have pointed to suggest, child-free women are still a minority. That most women historically have borne and raised children and continue to do so has done much to cement childbearing and mothering to conceptions of womanhood. Because it is the “norm” it is thought that women should continue to bear life and mother.

¹⁴ Which included menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause, and other “female ills” (Firestone 1971, 9).

4.2. Women Can Bear Children So They Should

However, there is more to explore than the commonness of childbearing and mothering. Even after the 1960s when “voluntary childlessness increased” (May 1994, 183), the stigma surrounding child-free women did not disappear. Another reason childbearing and motherhood have been tethered to the concept of womanhood, despite an increase in childlessness, is that because (some) women *can* bear children, it is assumed they should.

Men and women experience biological reproduction differently. Unlike men, who can fulfill their reproductive role within minutes¹⁵, some women experience a monthly menses and if pregnant will likely carry a child within their uterus for nine months. Afterwards, a woman’s body can provide nourishment for a newborn, and most infants will consume their mother’s breast milk for months, if not years.

Because the female body bears life and nourishes the new-born(s), bearing and rearing children *seems* to be a truly important function of being a woman. The impressiveness of childbearing has outshone many of women’s other abilities and has historically been the “one rare and awesome ability we [women] were thought to possess” (Brady 1998, 113). Because women possess this function, many assume, and argue, that the function must be fulfilled. A woman interviewed by Cain illustrates this understanding of women’s perceived purpose quite clearly. She believes, “I’m a woman and it’s my function to reproduce. If I don’t, then why am I here?” (Cain 2001, 143).

¹⁵ I am speaking here of men’s ability to impregnate a woman.

Men, on the other hand, as they play such a seemingly minute role in conception, are thought to have many other abilities and skills. Indeed, men are *encouraged* to have and to value other abilities. Randell Turner, the vice president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, was quoted as saying, “We’re [men] so indoctrinated that work is our life—we really struggle with that” (Abel n.d., 1). Men often experience success and illustrate their abilities through employment outside the home, and employment and other interests can become a greater part of their identities than their home life. Additionally, “men can sire progeny without knowing it” (Lisle 1999, 152), but women are usually aware of their pregnancy and of giving birth¹⁶ and this awareness adds to why procreation is seemingly more important to womanhood than to manhood.

4.3. Women Want to Bear and Raise Children Because They Have a “Maternal Instinct”

The idea of the “maternal instinct” serves to enhance and further the argument that because a woman’s body can bear life, she should. The “maternal instinct” is something that women cannot seem to elude. Generally, “when people talk about maternal instincts, what they seem to be discussing are the inner promptings which induce women to care for their offspring” (Whitbeck 1984, 186). Additionally, the “maternal instinct” is thought to propel women to *want* to bear children in the first place. For example, Evie, a woman interviewed by Yvonne Vissing, believes that her desire to have children was more than the result of social pressure and points to a kind of biological urge. She explains, “[I]t

¹⁶ I want to avoid claiming “all women” are aware of giving birth, as modern medicine has altered the birthing process with C-sections and drugs. However, though not all women are aware during birth, all women who have given birth are aware of having given birth.

was gut level, a raw animal *instinct*, primal feeling” (Vissing 2002, 38, my emphasis). She further argues, “[I]t’s a *natural* instinct among all living things to want children” (Vissing 2002, 38, my emphasis).

Scientists and psychologists have dedicated considerable effort attempting to prove “the existence of a universal, protective, procreative female instinct” (Lisle 1999, 97). However, since the early 1970s some “social scientists have tended to discard the idea that parenthood is instinctive or inevitable or both and have postulated that individuals must be taught to aspire to parental roles” (Veevers 1974, 305).

Despite suggestions¹⁷ that the elusive “maternal instinct” is a myth, the phrase has not yet been eradicated from our language and continues to be used, even by contemporary mothers and child-free women, to explain why a woman is or is not inclined to bear and raise children. The “maternal instinct” and the sentiment behind it, that women want to bear and raise children, have contributed to the concept of womanhood as tethered to child bearing and rearing. Indeed, “society convinces you that you naturally have this built-in thing to want to be a mother” (Casey 1998, 53). The concept of the “maternal instinct” has become so deeply rooted in ideas about women that in contemporary first-hand accounts, voluntarily child-free women often make a point of explaining that they felt no maternal instinct. Some child-free women have questioned their identity, asking “What’s wrong with me? Don’t I feel it [the maternal instinct]?” (Casey 1998, 52).

¹⁷ In “Motherhood: Need or Myth?” Betty Rollin points to individuals like sociologist Dr. Jessie Bernard, psychiatrist Dr. Richard Babkin, and motherhood researcher Dr. Frederick Wyatt who all reject the existence of a “maternal instinct”.

4.4. Desiring Children and Mothering is “Natural” for Women

The belief that wanting to have children and mother is “natural” is closely tied to the idea of the “maternal instinct”. The “unnaturalness” of not wanting children is often implied by the litany of criticisms directed towards voluntarily child-free women. Indeed, the perceived “unnaturalness” of child-free women was cited in my introduction. Sophie Goodchild and Nicholas Pyke explain that women who chose to remain child-free were “dismissed as insane in the 19th century and ‘unnatural’ in the 20th” (Goodchild and Pyke 2004, 1). Other researchers have concluded that “the dominant cultural definitions of parenthood indicate that wanting and having children are natural and normal behaviours” (Veevers 1975, 473). The concept of “naturalness” is important to a discussion of the concept of womanhood as, “an ‘unnatural’ man or a woman is no longer a ‘real’ man or a woman” (Moi 1999, 13).

Thus, there are a number of reasons why childbearing and motherhood are thought to be essential to womanhood. First, childbearing and mothering have long been the “norm” for women. Second, because a woman’s body *can* procreate, it is thought that she should. Women’s procreative abilities have outshone women’s other abilities in a manner dissimilar to the importance placed on men’s procreative role. Third, despite scientific theory to the contrary, women are thought to have a “maternal instinct” that propels them toward *wanting* to bear children (thereby fulfilling their presumed “function”) and encourages behaviour that is most suited to motherhood. Fourth, wanting to bear and raise children is deemed “natural”. These ideas serve to argue for the essentialness of childbearing and mothering to the concept of womanhood.

Chapter 5. Childbearing and Motherhood Must be Extricated from the Concept of Womanhood

Even though it may *seem* to some that childbearing and mothering are essential to the concept of womanhood, the aforementioned reasons are faulty and flawed and arguing against such assumptions is necessary. Further, there are other important reasons that procreation and mothering must be extricated from the concept of womanhood. In what follows, I will argue that the stereotypical concept of womanhood denies a woman's independence and equality. Considering the argument for using one's procreative function, I believe it over simplifies what it means to be a woman, wrongly assumes that ability implies obligation, and does not consider the lifelong commitment associated with women's procreative ability. Addressing the "maternal instinct," I provide an argument against its existence based on evidence that many women do not exhibit the maternal behaviour associated with the "maternal instinct". In reference to the idea of "naturalness," I point to its use as a coercive tool, illustrate social pressures that suggest wanting to bear children and mother is not "natural," and point to the blatant use of the term "natural" when it is convenient. Though I argue that the term has no basis in human behaviour, I do allow for the possibility that the "maternal instinct" could exist and childbearing and mothering are "natural," but point to the social forces that overcome both, which suggest the unimportance of the "maternal instinct" and the "natural" in human life. Finally, I argue that an emphasis on either term undermines the intelligence of women.

5.1. The Stereotypical Concept of Womanhood Denies Women's Independence and Equality

To suggest that bearing life is integral to womanhood is to say that a woman cannot be a woman until a man has become involved with her. Further, in addition to suggesting that a woman is not fully a woman until a man has become involved, the concept of womanhood inextricably linked to childbearing and biological motherhood also implies that a woman is not truly a woman until she has borne life. Thus, a woman's identity as a woman is wrapped up not only in a man who must impregnate her, but also in the child to whom she gives life. A concept of womanhood tethered to procreation means a woman cannot truly experience womanhood or be considered a "true woman" until at least two separate individuals have provided their contribution.

The concept of womanhood relying on childbearing¹⁸ is very problematic. If this idea about women were true, some women's "womanhood" could be completely out of their hands. Unless a man opted to have sexual intercourse with a woman, or a doctor agreed to artificial insemination, a woman would remain incomplete, having failed at "womanhood". Further out of a woman's hands is the possibility that her child might be miscarried, stillborn, or die after birth. The concept of womanhood that requires procreation (and then mothering) has very little to do with women and, as Elizabeth Badinter explains, defines a woman's "existence only in relation to another person" (Badinter 1980, 72). The bulk of the control over whether a woman can be considered a true woman or not rests with men.

¹⁸ For a moment I shall set aside the implication that a woman should also assume the role of motherhood, and focus specifically on bearing life.

The concept of womanhood I am addressing thus denies a woman's independence, specifically in regard to her own identity. The concept of womanhood that demands a woman procreate and mother does not understand a woman as *independently* a whole person. On the contrary, a woman must have had a relationship with a man (at the very least, his sperm) and have borne and reared (or be in the process of rearing) her offspring to be "complete" or fully realized as a woman.

Mill argued that "by virtue of their humanity, women were entitled to equal rights with men with regard to labour, property and political governance" (Hein 1978, 257). However, the concept of womanhood in question ignores women's humanity and by defining what it means to be a woman based on a biological function—which requires a man's involvement—it implies that women are lesser people than men and require a man to be fulfilled and to "be a woman". Thus the concept of womanhood denies a woman's equality with men, for procreation is not emphasized in the concept of manhood as it is in the concept of womanhood. The concept of womanhood in question ignores women's humanity and renders women lesser beings than men.

Though impregnating a woman and "fathering a child" is important to the concept of manhood, it is not as integral to understanding "what it means to be a man" as procreation is to the stereotypical concept of womanhood. The difference in importance is illustrated by sociological findings on child-free people. Elaine Tyler May published a number of author's queries, about a book she was planning on writing about childlessness, in widely-read newspapers and journals across the United States of America. She "specifically asked for responses from a wide range of people: young, old,

women, men, gay, straight, from all ethnic, racial, and religious groups” (May 1994, 4). She also had her query translated into Spanish, and published in publications with very small niche markets to ensure she reached as many people as possible. She received more than five hundred responses and was successful in hearing from a diverse group of respondents. However, despite her efforts to gather opinions from child-free men she quickly determined that “the vast majority of the respondents were women” (May 1994, 4). May explains that “like others who have studied childlessness, I found that women were more likely than men to express the pain and isolation of childlessness” (May 1994, 4). Indeed, the literature on childlessness predominantly includes the words of individual child-free women, or women who are a part of a couple. That a woman is more likely to indicate feeling stigmatized as a child-free person suggests that having children is more integral to the concept of womanhood than it is to the concept of manhood. That progeny are more important to womanhood than manhood is the inequality I am speaking of: a woman’s identity is more entwined with progeny than a man’s identity is.

Surely progeny are important to men but the reasons for their importance to manhood are different. It has been suggested that a man’s desire “for offspring is directly connected to the desire for *immortality* (al-Hibri 1984, 83, emphasis in original). Azizah al-Hibri explains, “There is an Arabic saying that ‘he who reproduces does not die’” (al-Hibri 1984, 83) and this sentiment seems to be carried through other cultures as well. Firestone echoes a similar point. She believes that for men, children provide “extension of ego” (Firestone 1971, 260) through the “immortalizing of name, property, class, and ethnic identification” (Firestone 1971, 260). This hypothesis also provides a possible explanation for why male children are often regarded as more desirable than female

offspring: a male child can carry on a father's name, representing immortalization. Thus, reproduction is *important* to men, but their identity as a man is less entwined with reproduction and the reasons for which childbearing and child rearing are important is markedly different than the reason(s) for which reproduction is thought to be important to womanhood. For a woman motherhood "is the justification of her existence" (Firestone 1971, 260).

5.2 An Ability to Procreate Does Not Necessitate an Obligation to Bear Life

In response to the argument that because (some) women can reproduce, they should, some women have fought against the notion that womanhood can be found in the physical organs of a woman's body. Author Joan Brady spent much of her nursing career assisting with the removal of women's various reproductive organs, such as for a hysterectomy, and explains that it occurred to her one day that

"the essence of womanhood was obviously not rooted in our wombs or ovaries! I'd witnessed this [hysterectomy] surgery many times, and never had I seen a pathology report come back listing a woman's femininity among the excised specimens that were sent to be studied under the microscope" (Brady 1998, 35).

With this realization, she is certain that a woman's womanhood is not attached to her body. Brady's realization is a promising sentiment, to be sure, but perhaps too literal an understanding of womanhood. Surely, no organ labelled "womanhood" lies on an operating table after surgery. However, the concept of womanhood I am addressing does define womanhood on the basis of physical (reproductive) organs and their "function".

Emphasis on “Function” Oversimplifies What it Means to be a Woman

The concept of womanhood that demands that a woman procreate because she can oversimplifies what it means to be a woman. The stereotypical concept of womanhood is focused on biological ability, or function. Pierce explains that this kind of biological understanding of what it means to be a woman is problematic as “reproduction is not a function peculiar to human beings” (Pierce 1978, 281). Indeed, the “function” in question, procreative ability, is one that female¹⁹ animals perform also. So, defining women as childbearers²⁰ does little to distinguish womanhood from female zebra-hood. A “good” woman or a woman who wants to meet the prescribed criteria for womanhood aspires to the same criteria humans have set for animals: making use of the reproductive function. What is essential and necessary to womanhood, then, fails to suggest humanness. Further, emphasizing the procreative function as essential to womanhood portrays women as far less “human” than men, for whom the procreative function is downplayed and other abilities (for example, intellect) are thought essential to manhood.

An Ability Does Not Entail an Obligation to Use the Ability

Further, it does not follow simply because someone has an ability to do something that one must *use* this ability. Pierce explains,

“Being an essentially pragmatic society, we often buy without question the latter half of the teleological framework: that good things are those that function well; we fail to scrutinize what we mean by “good.” We easily overlook that having a function, even a so-called natural one, does not entail that those having it *ought* to use it” (Pierce 1978, 283, emphasis in original).

¹⁹ I recognize that not all animals, such as the nudibranch, have two categories of male or females. But for now, I am referring only to species that can have both males and females.

²⁰ I will briefly set aside the complimentary assumption that a woman must also mother.

Pierce turns to the example of poison, pointing out, “We can explain what poison is by citing its function, but it does not necessarily follow that it ought (in any moral sense) to function” (Pierce 1978, 283). That the existence of a function does not entail an obligation to use the function is made clearer if we consider another example, that of hair. The function of hair for most mammals includes heat regulation, among other functions. However, because hair has a function does not mean we must all grow our hair to its predetermined length and abandon all scissors, razors, and waxes.

Specific to childbearing, Pierce questions the good of fulfilling reproductive functions in a world that is overpopulated (and under fed) (Pierce 1978, 283). Further, one could argue that a woman with a deadly hereditary disease or perhaps one that is transferrable to her newborn, such as HIV, is *not* under an obligation to use her procreative function to bear life because she can. Women who use drugs or drink excessively are actually *discouraged*²¹ from procreating, lest their child be born with birth defects, such as those caused by fetal alcohol syndrome. In fact, an argument can be made that women who are addicted to drugs or alcohol should be, at least temporarily, under an obligation *not* to conceive a child. Though these cases may represent exceptions, they represent clear counter-examples to the belief that an obligation to procreate necessarily follows from an ability to bear life.

Interestingly, acting on the ability to procreate is encouraged much more than other abilities. Betty Rollin writes, “Women have childbearing equipment. To choose not to use the equipment is no more blocking what is instinctive than it is for a man who,

²¹ At least until they are sober and drug-free.

muscles or no, chooses not to be a weight lifter” (Rollin 1974, 148). However, *not* being a body builder (or doing any manual labour, for that matter), despite the fact that lifting objects is a function of the muscular system, does not jeopardize manhood or womanhood. Indeed, though bearing life may be a function of (some) women’s bodies, “whether it is good to make use of this function is a separate issue” (Pierce 1978, 283).

Cases of compulsory sterilization²² serve to illuminate the inconsistency of asserting that an obligation follows from a function or ability. In the United States of America in the first half of the 20th century, compulsory sterilization was practised to ensure that people deemed “unworthy” were not procreating: “In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court declared these [compulsory sterilization] laws to be constitutional. By the middle of the century, tens of thousands of Americans had been forcibly sterilized” (May 1995, 97). Unfortunately, compulsory sterilization was not confined to the United States of America and Canada²³ was also involved in eugenics. For example,

“The Eugenics Board established under The Sexual Sterilization Act [of 1928] of the Province of Alberta direct[ed] the sterilization of approximately fifty males and fifty females per annum, referred to it by superintendents of mental institutions or by medical directors of mental hygiene clinics” (McWhirter and Weijer 1969, 2).

Thus, Western society has, very recently in fact, deemed an ability to bear life insufficient grounds for an obligation to bear life. The social policy of eugenics contradicts arguments that demand women fulfill their reproductive function. Though regrettable,

²² I am not suggesting that compulsory sterilization is acceptable. I am pointing out that sterilization practices suggest that people do selectively separate a function and whether someone should use that function.

²³ However, eugenics is by no means exclusive to North America. I am simply pointing to two illustrative examples.

compulsory sterilization also serves to highlight my point that a function and whether one must use a function are two separate issues.

Women's Reproductive "Function" is a Lifelong Commitment

More than merely bearing life, the concept of womanhood demands that a woman also raise her children. It is important to illuminate what a lifelong commitment having children is, so as to highlight the oppressiveness of tethering childbearing and motherhood to the concept of womanhood. By demanding that a woman bear children and assume the role of mother, lest her womanhood be questioned, a woman's life choice is severely limited and a lifelong commitment is made for her.

Simone de Beauvoir goes so far as to claim that the more an offspring is separated from a mother²⁴, the "less enslaved" (de Beauvoir 1989, 22) the mother is to her offspring. Thus, human mothers, de Beauvoir believes, can be very "enslaved" to their offspring. However, the language de Beauvoir uses here is very strong²⁵, and many mothers would vehemently deny being "enslaved" to their offspring. Further, I anticipate objections to this term on the grounds that claiming mothers are enslaved ignores and undermines the plight of people who have genuinely been enslaved. In what follows, I would like to explore the kind of oppressiveness that mothers experience that might prompt de Beauvoir to claim that motherhood is akin to enslavement.

²⁴ Such as the offspring of avian species, which hatch from eggs a female bird has laid.

²⁵ The use of the term "slave" is echoed in Firestone's concluding chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*. She sees women as "the slave class that maintained the species in order to free the other half for the business world" (Firestone 1971, 232). Her implication is that women have been tethered to procreative demands. Though her use of the term "slave" is in a slightly different context, as she is speaking of the enslavement of having to procreate while de Beauvoir is speaking of the enslavement experienced once one is a mother, the theme in both cases is important: that both expecting women to procreate and the experience of motherhood can be oppressive.

A mother is responsible for another person(s): her offspring. A child, particularly a newborn, is completely reliant on another human being for many years and the role of primary caregiver falls to women given the concept of womanhood I am addressing. Motherhood is expected to be a lifelong commitment. Though a mother can abandon her offspring²⁶ (and some do), unless the circumstances are considered appropriate²⁷, Western society strongly discourages abandonment. On the contrary, mothers are expected to be “good” mothers and the requirements of this idealized motherhood are often so demanding that no mother could hope to meet them.

Andrea O’Reilly discusses the current oppressiveness and limiting nature of motherhood. She argues that women currently mother under the conditions of “patriarchal motherhood”. “Patriarchal motherhood” is defined by a prescribed method of mothering that outlines the kind of mother who should be idealized and “alongside the idealized mother we find the ‘bad’ mother, women who, by choice or by circumstance, are not the selfless and tireless nurturers of idealized motherhood” (O’Reilly 2006, 13). O’Reilly sees a demand upon mothers that developed in the 1980’s because of the belief that “children require copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources” (O’Reilly 2006, 39). Whereas the “ideology of ‘good’ motherhood” (O’Reilly 2006, 40) of the post WWII era demanded that mothers maintain a close proximity to their children as stay-at-home mothers, “little [was] said on the mother needing to be continually attuned to the psychological, emotional or cognitive needs of her children” (O’Reilly 2006, 40).

²⁶ Adoption agencies and orphanages exist for this reason (among others).

²⁷ Mothers who abuse drugs, for example, may have their child(ren) taken away by the Children’s Aid Society.

Instead, cooking, cleaning, budgeting and otherwise maintaining a household occupied much of a mother's time.

Perhaps because more modern mothers have found gainful employment outside of the home, and daycare and early education afford many women the freedom from fulltime care of their young children, many women might argue that they are more liberated than mothers of previous decades. O'Reilly disagrees with the suggestion that the modern mother is liberated and points out,

“Today, the ideology of good motherhood demands more than mere physical proximity of mother-child: contemporary mothers are expected to spend, to use the discourse of the experts, ‘quality time’ with their children. Mothers are told to play with their children, read to them, and to take classes with them. As the children in the 50’s and 60’s would jump rope or play hide-and-seek with the neighbourhood children or their siblings, today’s children dance, swim, and ‘cut and paste’ with their mothers in one of many ‘moms and tots’ programs” (O'Reilly 2006, 40).

A quick scan of a community bulletin board or newspaper in the Western world confirms the prevalence of the genre of mom and tot program²⁸ that O'Reilly points to.

Though women may enjoy²⁹ the time spent with their offspring, the point O'Reilly makes is that the way that a woman should mother is outlined for her by “experts”. Furthermore, she is expected to behave a certain way and achieve certain mothering standards. She explains, “[M]others who do not seek to achieve, either by choice or by circumstance, idealized motherhood, become ‘unfit’ mothers who find themselves and their mothering under scrutiny and surveillance” (O'Reilly 2006, 13-14). Contemporary

²⁸ An illustrative example is “Kindermusik,” the mom and tot music program that, according to the Kindermusik website www.kindermusik.com, has classes available for offspring as young as newborns.

²⁹ Neither O'Reilly nor I want to suggest that mothers should not enjoy programs with their children. Nor am I able to comment on whether these programs are beneficial for children.

mothers who refuse to enrol their child in such programs or spend less time with their child than is “recommended” fail an aspect of what is understood as being a “good mother”.

Importantly, the ramifications of failing to be a “good mother” and to uphold ideals for motherhood can be more adverse than stigmatization. Several social policies illustrate the ways in which “good” mothers are rewarded and also how women are directed toward embodying the characteristics and making the life choices expected of “good” mothers. Terry Arendell explains that social policies in the United States of America serve to favour women who have most met the ideal of motherhood imposed upon them. She writes,

“Social policy, thus, has reinforced the dominant ideologies of the good mother, promoting, in the process, a particular view of appropriate women's roles. Overall, married and widowed mothers have fared significantly better under American social policies, especially White women, than divorced, separated, deserted, or never-married mothers” (Arendell 2000, 10).

As an illustrative example, Arendell points to the fact that “mothers are systematically disadvantaged in the employment sector by the lack or limited scope of programs aimed at accommodating their child raising” (Arendell 2000, 10). Arendell believes that the social policies in place in the United States, to support working mothers are few and far between. The specific aspect of the “good mother” ideology supported in this case is that women should spend their time at home, raising their children.

My point is this: more than demanding that women procreate, the concept of womanhood I am addressing, specifically the argument that because reproduction is a “function” of women’s body they must bear life, also demands that a woman commit to

lifelong motherhood under the prescribed conditions, striving for often unattainable ideals lest she face intense scrutiny. A woman is not truly free to “mother” in the way she sees fit³⁰, even if her method of mothering is still one that ensures her children are safe, healthy and happy. On the contrary, there are strongly upheld ideals³¹ governing the way that women should mother their children. Thus, a woman who is required to procreate lest her womanhood be questioned is being forced into a certain character: the “good” mother, who practises intensive mothering and exhibits complete selflessness. The concept of womanhood, then, demands even more than the successful use of one’s function; it demands that women assume similar roles to one another and strive to achieve the “ideal” patriarchal motherhood has outlined. The concept of womanhood, then, leaves little individual life choice for women as it demands a lifelong commitment to raising children. So, we cannot simply speak of women having a reproductive function they must fulfill. The “function” translates into a responsibility and life course.

Further, the motherhood demanded of women is not one that is conducive to successfully enjoying a career or many interests. Indeed, the motherhood expected of women serves to limit women’s freedom and authority. M. Rivka Polatnick explains, “Full-time childrearing responsibility limits one’s capacity to engage in most other activities” (Polatnick 1984, 24). Certainly this is the case if being a mother requires the intensive mothering outlined by O’Reilly. Indeed, many mothers would agree that

³⁰ I recognize that in some ways allowing a mother to tend to her children any way she sees fit is to potentially condone child abuse and neglect. However, I am also aware of the oppression that comes with ideals that direct a mother to care for her children in one prescribed manner. Further, the mothering style women are encouraged to assume is one that allows them little time or energy to care for themselves or pursue their own interests or goals.

³¹ Illustrated by the stigmatization mothers who fail to aspire to the ideology of motherhood face and also by social policies that encourage women to stay at home to raise their children and reward women who have aimed to meet the ideal.

bearing life and raising a child are incompatible with many of the other interests or careers they would like to pursue. Lucia Valeska even sees motherhood as a liability that is “clearly visible when a mother looks for a job, a place to live, babysitters, or childcare, whenever she tries to *take* her children any place she goes” (Valeska 1984, 74, emphasis in original). Women who are mothers often have to work much harder to accomplish what a child-free woman can accomplish with greater ease³². Indeed, considering the specific example of finding and retaining employment, if two women of exactly the same situation³³ are searching for a job in their field, the woman with children must arrange childcare³⁴ for her offspring during the interview process and also during the hours she will be working. A child-free woman, on the other hand, does not have to make childcare arrangements, arguably making it easier for her to attend interviews and work. A child-free woman can accept different shifts or work overtime without having to rearrange childcare. Indeed, I think no mother would argue that motherhood does not present challenging demands child-free women do not experience. Added to the demands of motherhood are the expectations associated with being a “good” mother. A woman buried beneath enormous demands associated with being a “good” mother can be

³² One might argue that the availability of paternity leave suggests that men are assuming a much greater responsibility for childrearing and that the burden on mothers is really not as great as it is claimed to be. However, according to Katy Abel, “the data on paternity leave shows that despite the enactment of federal and state laws [in the United Kingdom] allowing men to take parental leave, few actually do” (Abel n.d., 1). Further, the influence of government officials indicates that men are dissuaded from using any paternity time. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Tony Blair wanted “to ‘set a public example’ by [not] taking leave after the birth of his fourth child—instead, cutting back on his schedule—[which] is typical of how men on both sides of the Atlantic handle the birth of a child” (Abel n.d., 1).

³³ For example, both own a vehicle, both are unmarried, both have a degree in nursing, etc.

³⁴ Arranging childcare can be impossible for some mothers as, in Canada in 2003/04, “there were only enough regulated child care spaces to accommodate 15.5% of Canadian children aged 0-12” (Canadian Council on Social Development n.d., 5).

distracted from asserting her authority and gaining power³⁵. Thus, there is more to consider in the case of procreative abilities than their mere function.

5.3. Freedom Associated With Childlessness

The freedom that is associated with childlessness is often noted in the literature on childlessness. That childlessness can be a source of power, independence and freedom has long been understood. Lisle explains that in the days of the Roman Empire, child-free women were not uncommon. In fact, “Nonmotherhood was regarded as a way to increase personal authority, perhaps through greater wealth or legal rights, and when one mother lost a son to death, the Roman Seneca tried to comfort her by saying that ‘childlessness gives more power than it takes away’” (Lisle 1999, 62). In order to limit the independence and freedom experienced by women “laws were passed in the third century A.D. that eliminated inheritance rights of single and childless persons” (Lisle 1999, 62), thereby forcing the hand of many women who might otherwise have remained child-free. And so, though it originally afforded more freedom, abstaining from childbearing and motherhood became a detriment to women as they could not inherit property or be financially solvent.

Although some child-free women may care for an ailing spouse or aging parent, these women do not have to care for their offspring and offspring can limit the freedom and independence experienced by mothers. Rich writes about her sons, “[T]heir every new independence meant new freedom for me” (Rich 1986, 32), suggesting that their

³⁵ Andrea O’Reilly’s definition of “empowered mothering” is a kind of motherhood that does not require full-time responsibility. On the contrary, in her account, empowered mothers share the responsibility and do not accept that a good mother must be available every hour of every day (O’Reilly 2006, 47). Similarly, “freeing” women in Firestone’s account also demands that childrearing (and in her argument, bearing) responsibilities be shared among a society as a whole (Firestone 1971, 270).

previous dependence in various regards limited the freedom Rich experienced. Indeed, the freedom that a child-free life affords is not difficult to pinpoint. In the literature on childlessness, many sources³⁶ point to the freedom child-free women experience.

For example, a modern child-free woman who makes the exact same income as a woman with children has more economic freedom³⁷ that can translate into freedoms such as the freedom to pursue a lower-paid career, take a sabbatical, or enjoy an extended holiday. A woman without children does not have the added expense of raising a child, which can be very costly. In fact, “The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that a *no-frills* kid, i.e., one receiving just the basics, costs the *average* consumer more than \$100,000 to raise to age eighteen, and another \$100,000 for college” (Lang 1991, 206, emphasis in original). Considering that many children receive more than the basics (toys, family vacations, brand name clothing, etc.) it has been noted that “women without children have the equivalent [in savings] of winning a lottery valued at \$250,000 to \$1 million (depending upon their lifestyles and incomes)” (Lang 1991, 205). Indeed, “[b]ased on estimates from the economics section of Manitoba Agriculture, the cost of raising a daughter to age 19 in 2004 was an average of \$166,549. For boys, the figure was slightly higher—\$166, 972—due to extra costs for food” (Canadian Council on Social Development, n.d., 8). Additionally, child-free women typically have “three months more in leisure time” (Lang 1991, 205) per year than women with children. I have pointed to just a few of the freedoms of childlessness, a sharp contrast to the ways in which motherhood can be oppressive and restrictive.

³⁶ *Barren in the Promised Land* and *The Childless Revolution*, for example.

³⁷ Modern, western women can earn their own income, claim an inheritance, purchase property etc.

5.4. Arguing Against the “Maternal Instinct”

Belief in the “maternal instinct” sometimes serves to supplement discussions concerning reproductive function. Specifically, the idea of a “maternal instinct” purports to explain why women should want to use their reproductive abilities and why they should assume the role of primary caregiver.

Christine Overall points out, in her paper “Against Instinct,” that the way that instincts such as the maternal instinct are defined is circular. She writes, “For example, we might attribute maternal behaviour to a so-called maternal instinct. But, when asked what the maternal instinct is, we then describe it as the tendency to evince mothering behaviour” (Overall 2008, 4). As maternal behaviour is important to the understanding of and belief in a “maternal instinct,” philosophers like Badinter and de Beauvoir have pointed to cases of women who are *not* maternal to argue against the existence of such an instinct.

Badinter points to examples of indifferent mothers, such as wealthy, upper-class women who “had the financial means necessary to raise their children themselves and who for several centuries chose³⁸ not to do so” (Badinter 1980, 59). Indeed, during the middle of the 18th century, in liberal countries such as France and England, “all who could afford it refused to nurse their children, even if it meant doing without in other areas” (Badinter 1980, 73). She also points to women who express indifference upon the death of their child, or favour one child (such as an elder male child) over another (Badinter 1980, 64-65). Sarah Blaffer Hrdy also writes of women who murder their child

³⁸ Badinter adds to this that these women opted not to raise their own children, “without eliciting the slightest protest” (Badinter 1980, 59).

(Hrdy 1999, 314) or give up their child for adoption (Hrdy 1999, 302-307). Many additional examples spanning history and different cultures point to mothers behaving in a manner contrary to the behaviour associated with the “maternal instinct”. Arguably the women in question do not mark an aberration but instead represent women of the time quite fairly and accurately. The importance of these examples is that if the “maternal instinct” truly made women want to have and care for children, women could not experience such indifference toward procreation and their biological offspring.

Indeed, it is Badinter’s argument that if there did exist a “maternal instinct”, then all (or we could add, certainly most) mothers should exhibit the attitudes thought to be influenced by the “maternal instinct”. However, as women throughout history, particularly in the case of 18th century French women whom Badinter uses as an illustrative example, have not always exhibited the attributes associated with an automatic “maternal instinct,” then whatever maternal attitudes women *do* express toward their offspring are not based on instinct, but something else. Badinter and de Beauvoir both point to social conditions and societal pressures, instead of biology, as a source of women’s maternal behaviour.

De Beauvoir points to examples of women who consider their offspring a burden, are indifferent to their offspring, or have otherwise failed to manifest the characteristics associated with women who have a “maternal instinct”. She further explains that the way a mother treats her offspring is often influenced by her relationships with those close to her and *their* relationship to the offspring. For example, a woman’s “relations with the baby’s father and his own feelings in the matter [of having a child] also exert a large

influence” (de Beauvoir, 1989, 511). De Beauvoir writes, “[T]he mother’s attitude depends on her total situation and her reaction to it. As we have just seen, this is highly variable” (de Beauvoir 1989, 511). De Beauvoir doubts the existence of a “maternal instinct” because of the diverse reactions mothers have to their offspring and the way that reactions such as love, jealousy, rejection, etc., do not seem to be an automatic reaction. On the contrary, women’s reactions are largely determined by their environment. This variability conflicts with the idea of any kind of “maternal instinct”³⁹.

5.5. Disputing “Naturalness”

Although many of the cases cited represent a majority of women, it could be (and has been) argued that these women were simply examples of “unnatural” women. Indeed, “[T]he concept of instinct is also used to signal the presence of the natural” (Overall 2008, 3). Thus women who do not want children and fail to exhibit the maternal behaviour associated with the “maternal instinct” are discredited as “unnatural”.

The implication is that something that is “natural” is something that is good and desirable. “Unnatural” things, on the other hand, are thought to be bad and undesirable. Hrdy explains that many people believe the “emotional ambivalence many mothers feel about investing in infants is ‘unnatural’ and hence very rare, and completely separate from more common, or ‘normal,’ maternal emotions” (Hrdy 1999, 290). The idea is that the behaviour of ambivalent mothers is “wrong,” an exception to the attitude toward procreation and motherhood that a woman should have.

³⁹ Though Badinter and de Beauvoir both believe that no “maternal instinct” exists, I will, for argument’s sake, allow for the possibility that a “maternal instinct” does exist later in this chapter. However, I argue that its existence does not imply its importance. I discuss the unimportance of “maternal instinct” and “naturalness” in the subsection “Natural and Instinct Subject to Control”.

Labelling something “natural,” given the positive connotation of “natural,” has been a method employed to coerce human behaviour and attitudes. For example, it has been argued that “suicide, birth control and homosexuality are wrong, because they are unnatural” (Pierce 1978, 276). Tuija Takala reminds us that “not so long ago it was quite natural⁴⁰ to say that it is unnatural for women to take part in political life” (Takala 2004, 16). To deter childlessness, women who do not want children are labelled “unnatural” (Lorber 1994, 145). Women who do not want to be considered “unnatural” by society should want to bear life and raise children. The way that the term “natural” is used suggests societal pressure and an underlying agenda, which I shall explore in what follows.

Social Pressure to Procreate and Mother

De Beauvoir argues that women are *encouraged* by social forces to want to bear life and mother. She explains,

“from infancy woman is told over and over that she is made for childbearing, and the splendours of maternity are forever sung to her. The drawbacks of her situation—menstruation, illness, and the like—and the boredom of household drudgery are all justified by this marvellous privilege she has of bringing children into the world” (de Beauvoir 1989, 491).

Indeed, women throughout history have often been both implicitly and explicitly encouraged to bear children. For example, during periods in history where cultures were primarily agricultural and societies “needed children to help out” (Rollins 1974, 149), procreation was strongly encouraged. Specifically, during the early years of the building of the United States of America, “children were a cheap source of labor” (Vissing 2002,

⁴⁰ Given the tone of her paper, I believe Takala makes use of the term “natural” in an ironic sense in this case.

9) and desperately needed. Child-free women were scorned for their uselessness. They were considered as useful as land that would not yield crops.

However, when children were no longer needed as much to maintain a farm or home, childbearing and motherhood were still encouraged and tethered even more concretely to the concept of womanhood. For example, before industrialization it was expected that women bore and raised children, but also worked alongside men. In some cases in the time shortly before industrialization, Rich explains that women actually made more money than men, because they were employed under conditions that did not limit how many hours a woman could work (Rich 1986, 48). However, industrialization reshaped the way that home and work were related to one another. While many families had previously worked and lived in the same home, with industrialization many men found employment in factories and office buildings. With this change, “the burden of domestic life and of creating a comfortable environment for others became women’s work, work that was unpaid, devalued, and expected⁴¹” (Morell 1994, 4). Women’s work outside the home was seen as a waste of their time (Rich 1986, 49). Society decided “against the idea of the ‘working mother,’ and in praise of ‘the mother at home’” (Rich 1986, 44). Specifically, “Women were warned that their absence from home did not only mean the neglect of their children; if they failed to create the comforts of the nest, their men would be off to the alehouse” (Rich 1986, 49). Morell explains that this new ideology demanded “full-time mothering” (Morell 1994, 4).

⁴¹ The expectation that women would prioritize motherhood and housekeeping affected the middle and upper classes the most. Working class and poorer women still sought employment outside the home, often as servants, and thus the care of their children was left to others. Care for their own children did not become as central to these women’s lives (Morell 1994, 4).

Despite these pressures to bear children and mother, there have been times throughout history when many women have refused. During times when childbearing and motherhood have not been eagerly pursued by women, active measures have been taken by “experts,” organizations and governments to encourage procreation. For example, “[t]oward the end of the nineteenth century, middle-class and wealthy women began openly challenging maternalist ideology” (Morell 1994, 73), and questioned the legitimacy of a society in which women were expected to prioritize motherhood and life within the home. However, when these women sought “independence and a career of some kind” (Morell 1994, 73), their sanity was questioned and they were accused of “attempting to avoid their womanly responsibilities” (Morell 1994, 73). Women who successfully shirked their “responsibilities” were threatened by physicians with “images of being or becoming mentally, morally, or physically sick” (Morell 1994, 73).

In 1905, the President of the United States of America, Theodore Roosevelt, “chastised the nation: ‘The primary duty of the husband is to be the homemaker, the breadwinner for his wife and family, and the primary duty of the woman is to be the helpmeet, the housewife, and mother’” (Cain 2001, 4). A decade later, “in what may have been the most powerful symbolic response to the sagging enthusiasm for motherhood, a 1914 joint resolution of [United States] Congress established Mother’s Day” (May 1994, 64). The United States hoped to enhance the appeal of motherhood by “honouring” mothers with their own special day.

Religion has often served to supplement these governmental forces. The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has encouraged childbearing and motherhood. Sexual

intercourse with the intent to prevent conception was, and still is, considered sinful. Women are expected to accept that they may become pregnant upon sexual intercourse. Further, the Catholic Church has actively encouraged procreation. An example of a religious push to procreate can be found relatively recently, in Quebec, post 1960. In her article, “Demography and Pronatalism in Quebec After 1960”, Heather Jon Maroney explains how the Roman Catholic Church encouraged the women of Quebec to procreate to enhance the population. With a population in much need of an increase, “women were called upon to be obedient and loving daughters of the Church, wives of men and mothers of children” (Maroney 1990, 57), and in return for bearing life and raising children, women were promised “fulfillment” (Maroney 1990, 57).

These examples point to the social pressure to procreate and mother that women have faced. At different times in history, the mental health of child-free women has been questioned and government officials have reprimanded women for not bearing children and assuming the role of primary caregiver. These examples of social pressure suggest that wanting to bear children and mothering are *not* “natural”. As Mill argued, “[W]hat is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions” (Mill 1988, 203) and encouragement in other directions. If women “naturally” belonged to a certain sphere then there wouldn’t be the need for the kind of social controls that force women into that sphere. Indeed, if wanting to bear and raise children were *natural*, Mother’s Day need not have been created to encourage women to assume the role of primary caregiver.

The Inconsistent Importance of “Naturalness”

At different times in history, or even during the course of a woman’s life, she is presented with conflicting views of the importance of respecting the “naturalness” of wanting and having children. At times when it is necessary or convenient, the “naturalness” of women’s wanting, having, and raising children is downplayed or ignored entirely. For example, de Beauvoir points to a discussion of abortion for an illuminating insight into the inconsistent emphasis on childbearing. She notes that women are told from a young age how important childbearing is, and that childbearing is a woman’s purpose and source of fulfillment in life. However, a man will encourage a woman to abort a fetus conceived at an inconvenient time, thereby asking “woman to relinquish her triumph as female in order to preserve his liberty, so as not to handicap his future, for the benefit of his profession” (de Beauvoir 1989, 491).

The control of birth of which de Beauvoir speaks also happens on a large scale. For example, Chinese government officials have attempted to control population growth in China. In an effort to “limit growth of its population of 1.3 billion, many parts of China rely more on financial penalties and incentives than on coercive measures, including forced abortions and sterilizations, that were common in the 1980’s, when the so-called one-child policy was strictly enforced⁴²” (Kahn 2007, 1). Having no more than one child in China is considered by government officials to be better, while having more

⁴² The article by Thomas Kahn is entitled “Chinese Villagers Riot over Stricter Population Control”. Some might suggest that these riots indicate that a desire to procreate cannot truly be controlled. However, the reason for the uprising cited in the article is not women’s desire to mother more children than is currently permitted. Instead, the reason for the riots is said to be “corruption, land grabs, pollution, unpaid wages and a widening wealth gap” (Kahn 2007, 1), which are consequences of the population controls. People living in rural regions of China are particularly upset and face economic hardships as a result of the financial penalties enforced on families with too many children.

than one child is deviant. The naturalness (and instinctual nature) of women's desire to bear and raise children is markedly less important and disregarded in such situations.

Women who are married, of a certain age or social standing, have often been encouraged to procreate, while at different periods in history, lesbians, very young women, and unmarried women have been discouraged, sometimes forcefully⁴³, from procreating on the basis of the "unnaturalness" of their bearing life. Indeed, the emphasis on the "naturalness" of having children is down-played and discouraged when convenient.

Further, much of what is emphasized as "natural" has served the interests of men and been to the disadvantage of women. Indeed, "the notion that *all* women *should* be and *desire* to be mothers has always been used to keep women in a subordinate position" (Giminez 1984, 287, emphasis in original). Specifically, "[b]y propagating the belief that women are the ones who really desire children, men can then invoke a 'principle of least interest': that is, because women are 'most interested' in children, they must make most of the accommodations and sacrifices required to rear them" (Polatnick 1984, 27). The alleged "naturalness" of women's wanting children has helped shape ideas that women should stay home and raise children, while men pursue employment outside the home. In other words, the idea has been that "motherhood is natural and hence the duty of women" (Pierce 1978, 276).

⁴³ I refer to the compulsory sterilization in the United States of America mentioned earlier.

“Natural” and “Instinct” Subject to Social Control

The application of the term “natural” when it is most convenient suggests that perhaps what is “natural” is not instinctual and unavoidable, but has been created and manufactured by humans. However, though my arguments have suggested that there is nothing “natural” about women wanting and raising children, even if we are to pretend that perhaps a “maternal instinct” does exist, what is deemed “natural” or driven by “instinct” is nonetheless subject to human control. Lisle argues,

“If child bearing were merely second nature and immune to reason, it seems likely that human beings could not refrain from reproducing again and again. The urge to parent is obviously subject to social inhibition, since people have always attempted to limit the number of their offspring” (Lisle 1999, 98).

Though her point is to show that no procreative instinct exists, she also shows that, if there is a maternal instinct, it can be controlled. Indeed, it can be (and has been) very effectively controlled by societal pressures that discourage pregnancy and child rearing. Indeed, Firestone argues, “human nature is adaptable *to* something, it is, yes, determined by environmental conditions” (Firestone 1970, 8, emphasis in original).

Thus, because social pressures can effectively and easily control what is supposedly a natural instinct, then social pressures must exert a stronger force than the “maternal instinct”. The “maternal instinct” cannot be the dominant force in determining women’s reproductive actions and choices. If social pressure can effectively control what is supposedly a natural instinct, then social pressures must exert a stronger force than this “instinctual drive”. If social pressures do exert a stronger force than the “natural instinct,” we must question why we value what is “natural” and the “maternal instinct”. Surely society has a greater effect on women’s reproduction, and social pressures are

more important than the “instincts” that are said to influence and determine our actions and desires. As humans are members of a culture that can control what is thought to be “natural,” and overcome what is thought to be natural, it is clear that the “natural” is not a term that is of importance when describing human activities. Thus, women need not act on their “maternal instinct”. Nor should women be expected to want to bear and raise children even if they have a “maternal instinct,” as this instinct is of little importance in determining human action.

5.6. Exploring Why Childbearing and Mothering are the “Norm” for Women

Given these arguments, the only thing the “natural” points to is the norm. Mill points out, “unnatural generally means only uncustomary, and ... everything which is usual appears natural” (Mill 1988, 200). As pointed to earlier, that bearing and rearing children have been the “norm” for women has served to cement childbearing and mothering to the concept of womanhood. However, it is worth questioning *why* childbearing and motherhood have been the norm. As illustrated, women have faced intense pressure to bear life and mother. To claim that women typically bear children and mother, in light of the societal pressures⁴⁴ to do so, really means very little. Indeed, I cannot deny that the majority of women, both in modern times and throughout history, typically bore children. But a better explanation for this “norm” than the “maternal instinct” or that it is “natural” for women to want to bear and raise their offspring is the social pressure faced by women to continue to bear life and mother.

⁴⁴ One must remember that, as pointed to earlier, these pressures have included verbal reprimand from the President of the United States of America, stigmatization, religious pressure, threat of mental instability, and an inability to inherit money or property, among other social pressures.

5.7. Emphasis on “Instinct” and “Naturalness” Negates Belief in Women’s

Intelligence

It has been argued that, *even if* there does exist some instinctual drive to procreate and raise children,

“humans, to an extent greater than any other species, need not be slaves to nature. We are an intelligent and creative species. This means that neither nature nor we ourselves are given as fixed entities which must be pushed and pulled into some grudging alignment” (Wilder 14).

In fact, what humans do or want to do “is a reaction to the world as perceived. Once past the age of infancy, we do not just respond like automatons to inner promptings. Indeed, what and how we perceive and feel are at least partly a function of our experience and our learning” (Overall 2008, 4). Wilder and Overall both point to the intelligence of humans. Indeed, humans can learn, be creative, perceive and interpret the world according to experiences. Arguments that indicate women must use their procreative function because they can and that women must want to bear and raise children because they are instinctually motivated to do so suggest that women are unintelligent. These arguments suggest that women are driven by instinct and physical ability as opposed to their intellect. Rich explains,

“Not only have women been told to stick to motherhood, but we have been told that our intellectual or aesthetic creations were inappropriate, inconsequential, or scandalous, an attempt to become ‘like men,’ or to escape from the ‘real’ tasks of adult womanhood: marriage and childbearing” (Rich 1986, 40).

Indeed, despite arguments and evidence that “instinct” and “naturalness” play a minute role in *human* life (if they exist at all), society “demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence” (Rich 1986, 42). The suggestion that women are driven more by

instinct than intelligence once again suggests that women are lesser individuals than men. *Humans* are driven by intellect and reason, but *women* are driven by instinct and what is “natural,” suggests inequality and oppression.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

My point has not been to argue that women should *not* choose to have children. Indeed, I accept that many women want to bear life and raise children. Further, I agree that many women consider bearing and raising children as conducive to their flourishing as human beings. Though I have pointed to the ways that women have been coerced into bearing life and raising children, I have in no way suggested that women who *want* to have children and relish the idea of being a mother are in any way misguided or wrongheaded in their thinking.

My aim has been to illuminate how childbearing and motherhood are tethered to the concept of womanhood and the implications of *demanding* that women bear and raise children lest their womanhood be questioned. My arguments have focused on the coercive manner in which childbearing and motherhood are prescribed to women, regardless of their desire. My problem has been with the stigmatization and compulsion to have children that child-free women face in a pro-natalist world.

I have argued that given the criteria for the stereotypical concept of womanhood, a woman cannot meet the criteria independently and what it means to be a woman is oversimplified. Further, a woman's identity is cemented to progeny in a way that a man's identity is not. I have also argued that an obligation to use one's procreative function does not follow from simply having a procreative ability. Further, the procreative function in question is not simply an ability to bear life. On the contrary, women who bear life are expected to mother and the conditions under which mothers care for their children can be oppressive and limiting. Women ought not be expected to bear

life and mother because they can, because the ensuing obligation is a life long commitment and forcing women into a certain life course is oppressive. Turning to the “maternal instinct” and what is “natural,” I argued that the “maternal instinct” does not exist and what is “natural” is not a term appropriate for describing human behaviour. I also point to the coercion to procreate and mother that women have faced, which suggests why childbearing and motherhood have been the “norm” for women. I do allow for the possibility of the “maternal instinct” to be scientifically proven but argue that even if the “maternal instinct” exists and bearing children and mothering is “natural” for women, social forces obviously exact greater control than the maternal instinct and thus what is “natural” is still of little importance when describing human actions. Further, an emphasis on instinct and naturalness serves to undermine women’s intelligence.

Thus, I have isolated a common pressure women face and have presented a series of arguments for why childbearing and motherhood must be extricated from the concept of womanhood. I do not deny that womanhood, procreation and motherhood are connected. However, I firmly believe that every woman with procreative abilities should and can choose whether to have children. If we are to keep using the term “womanhood,” then I believe the best way to connect childbearing, motherhood, and womanhood is this: childbearing and motherhood are questions that womanhood has to answer.

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