

Maternal Inheritance – Lucy King – 12 May 2011

I am very aware sitting here with my foot in a 'post-surgical boot' that this is the result of an affliction from which I watched my mother become more and more crippled.

Certainly a maternal inheritance I could have done without!

When I was thinking, somewhat desperately, of what I might want to say in this series of discussions about 'The Maternal', I remembered either Ros or Christina suggesting that it might be that I could maybe speak from a somewhat personal viewpoint. My title, "Maternal Inheritance" certainly has echoes of some of my old interests as a cytogeneticist. While the research I did for my PhD, involved showing how changing the environment in terms of temperature and light, affected the patterns of cell division and growth in a particular species of fern, this reflected much wider interests in the complex interactions between genes and their environment - the old, and often spurious, nature/nurture debate with all its political ramifications because of its implications for arguments about such things as intelligence, gender and race. Such issues were raising a great deal of heat at the time.

I was also fascinated by the controversies surrounding the idea that the cytoplasm, and not just the genes in the cell nucleus, might play some role in inheritance. This, cytoplasmic inheritance, is often referred to as 'Maternal Inheritance', since, generally speaking, sexual reproduction involves the fertilization of a large female gamete/ovum by the nucleus of a much smaller male gamete / sperm i.e. most or all the cytoplasm is maternal in origin. This, at the time had political associations with the derided and supposedly completely discredited, claims for the inheritance of acquired characteristics that was said to have been responsible for the terrible failures of Soviet agriculture.

I am currently in the middle of a set of seminar discussions with the training group, under the title "Mothers, Daughters, Sisters". These have been based around the way that these relationships have been thought about (or more often, ignored) by psychoanalysis. My starting point has been Freud's claim that a young girl's relationship to her mother is inevitably mired in irresolvable ambivalence and her only escape from this is to turn away from mother and replace her with father as a love-object. Boys, he says, have equally strong feelings of both love and hate but suggests that they are better able to divert hostility from mother onto father and thus preserve feelings towards mother that are predominantly loving.

So what I want to do this evening, is to consider the theme of 'Mother, Daughter and Sisters as played out in the Women's Movement that gathered momentum immediately post 1968 (the year I completed my PhD as well, of course, as its having much greater fame as the peak of radical student and workers' uprisings!) It was an exciting time. The Women's Liberation Movement – often now referred to as 2nd wave feminism, was heir to the 1960s radical social and sexual revolutions; the shedding of old conformities and conventional modes of living; of a determination to 'get out from under' authoritarian social systems.

When I became involved with the Women's Movement in the early '70s, it was characterized by an adherence to fluid, non-hierarchical, structureless groups. There were no leaders, no spokeswomen. At first at least, it was very exhilarating. Small, rather intimate groups; political campaigning groups but also consciousness-raising groups in which people shared their experiences of home, of work; of intimate life. One of the abiding slogans of the time was that: 'The Person is Political' There was a lot of warmth, a lot of emotion, a great sense of freedom and newness. In 1969 the 1st UK National Conference was held in Ruskin College, Oxford. The next year's conference drew up a series of 'demands':

- 1) Equal pay
- 2) Free contraception
- 3) Abortion on demand
- 4) 24 hour nurseries

Clear in these is that, really *central* to the Movement was the conviction that the only way that women could gain greater control of their lives, was through gaining greater control of their bodies and especially over women's part in reproduction. Embodied here was intolerance towards accepting dependency and vulnerability. Vulnerability had strong associations with pregnancy and maternity, as well as infancy; all these involving dependency on the medical profession, on partners and, for the child, on *mothers*.

The battle was with patriarchy but it was not just men who were seen as the 'problem'; mothers were seen as the agents of patriarchy, embodying all that this

new generation of women wanted to escape. Mothers were regarded as having submitted to patriarchy and had then coerced their daughters into conformity, while passing onto them all their impotent resentments and sense of inferiority.

There was plenty of support for this view around. Simone De Beauvoir, writer of possibly *the* most classic feminist text – the *Second Sex* wrote:

“Most women simultaneously demand and detest their feminine condition; they live through it in a state of resentment. The disgust they have for their sex might well lead them to give their daughters a man’s education, but they are rarely large-minded enough. Vexed at having produced a woman, the mother greets her with this ambiguous curse.’ You shall be a woman’.”¹

De Beauvoir goes on to claim that things get worse as the child grows and wants some independence, “This seems to the mother a mark of hateful ingratitude; she tries to checkmate the girl’s will to escape; she cannot bear to have her double become *an other* “. On the other hand “she cannot bear to have her daughter become really her double – to substitute for herself”(ie for mother to be no longer indispensable)²

“Whether a loving or a hostile mother, the independence of her daughter dashes her hopes. She is doubly jealous; of the world that takes her daughter away from her, and of her daughter who in conquering a part of the world robs her of it”.³

Adrienne Rich in: “Of Woman Born” -another influential text at the time says:

“Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough; the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted. And it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations. The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be called ‘mothering’ even if she does believe it will help her daughter to survive”.

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively ‘whatever comes’. A mother’s victimisation does not merely humiliate her,

¹ (*2nd Sex*, 1st publ. 1949, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1972) p533

² *ibid* p535

³ *ibid*534

it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues about what it means to be a woman".⁴

Doris Lessing "A Proper Marriage"⁵:

"When her mother had gone, Martha cupped her hands protectively over her stomach, and murmured to the creature within it that nothing would deform it; freedom would be its gift. She Martha, the free spirit, would protect the creature from her, the maternal force; the maternal Martha, that enemy would not be allowed to enter the picture" p127

[Struggling with this paper, I read an account that my mother wrote about her family – my maternal inheritance. She quoted my great aunt Vivi as having said that: she and my grandmother were inseparable as children, forming an alliance against their mother, "the enemy". My grandmother grew up to become a relatively early student at Cambridge, becoming a scholar there in 1891 – although not being awarded a proper degree until, posthumously, about 1948. She loved the great sense of sisterhood in college. She later became very actively involved with the fight for women's rights and suffrage and, although had no career as such (which she regretted), she lectured to the Women's Cooperative Guild in Bradford. She was also involved with all sorts of groups trying to improve the lot of women. My mother admitted she herself had felt no such pleasure in the exclusively female atmosphere when she went to college after a coeducational schooling. In fact her rebellion was to join the 1st mixed acting group at Cambridge, although this was very much disapproved of by her tutors. She said somewhat regretfully in her account "In what was, I suppose, a natural reaction from our mother's enthusiasm, my generation of women seemed less concerned with these things. It has been left to our daughters to take up again the cause of women, unjustly treated in our society"

She was a strong and feisty woman, my mother, and my difficulty with her was not that she submitted passively to patriarchy so much as that she was embarrassingly forthright and provocative. I dreaded her power not her weakness, although I later came to appreciate it much more.]

On the whole, feminists in the late 60s, early 70s were extremely wary of psychoanalysis, sometimes *because*, in the US especially, of having had close and wounding encounters (directly or indirectly) with psychoanalytic convictions about

⁴ 1st published 1976; 2nd edition, Virago, London 1986 p243

⁵ Panther, St Albans 1966 p127

penis-envy, masculinity- complexes, female masochism and general inferiority. Nevertheless, such orthodox psychoanalytic views were very current and influential (again, especially in the US).

And within psychoanalytic literature mother – blaming was pretty prevalent (then and now):

Eric Erikson in 'Childhood and Society' writes of 'mom' the pathogenic mother that lay in "case history after case history" "Mom is a woman in whose life cycle remnants of infantility join advanced senility to crowd out the middle range of mature womanhood, who has thus become self-absorbed and stagnant".⁶

Erikson even blamed *mother-blaming* on mothers: "No doubt both patients and psychiatric workers were blamed too much when they were children; now they blame all mother because all causality has become linked to blame."⁷

Susan Contratto rather later commented on this trend:

"Many professionals attribute delinquency, drug abuse, school failure, schizophrenia, depression, neurosis as well as physical ailments such as asthma, allergies, colitis etc etc and virtually all anti-social manifestations have been attributed to 'bad mothering' despite no clear evidence of links with any particular maternal pattern. Only gross neglect and abuse is clearly linked with psychological difficulties"⁸

The Women's Movement in the early 1970s idealised relationships between women at *peer* level – "Sisterhood is Powerful" was proclaimed and, indeed it did, most of the time, feel that this was so. However, it was not without its darker, more problematic side. When disagreements arose, as they inevitably did, the lack of structure made it very difficult to negotiate such conflicts in ways that avoided them becoming pretty hostile, personal attacks. Personal rivalries were taboo and as they could not be admitted, they could not be mediated The structurelessness seen, at first as liberating, became a tyranny and like in Animal Farm 'everyone was equal but some were more equal than others' as 'behind-the-scenes'-cliques formed. I never went to a National Conference but tales from them sounded horrendous [– I would

⁶ NY Norton 1963 p291

⁷ibid p289

⁸" Mother: Social Sculptor and Trustee of the Faith" in Lewin ,M ed *In the Shadow of the Past: Psychology Portrays the Sexes* NY Columbia U.P. 1984 p249

add that psychotherapists/ psychoanalysts appear similarly bad at managing dissent and PA meetings in the past at least have felt very similar]. In the feminist movement there were profound divisions between those who wanted an end to any gendered division of labour, and those who wanted the re-valuing of female roles such as improved status for motherhood, wages for housewives etc. Even more acrimonious were the seemingly irreconcilable disagreements between those who believed that women should fight for *equality* with men – in workplace and home – “anything you can do I can do as well” (and the other way round “anything I am supposed to do, you could do also”), and, on the opposite side, the ‘radical feminists’ who thought that *men* were the problem and advocated separatism.

Even though I never encountered the bitterness such disputes were said to elicit at National Conferences, I did find myself the target of considerable hostility when I had the temerity to go, heavily pregnant, to a meeting about child care– I think the feeling from some people there was that I was somehow submitting to the patriarchal status quo by choosing to give birth. Again, a bit later, at the Women’s Therapy Centre in London, I was criticised robustly by the group I was in, for my choosing to breastfeed – thereby fixing me in the traditional maternal role of primary carer.

I really enjoyed the strength and warmth of the relationships between women within the Women’s Groups but I was never a separatist. I belonged to a pregnancy advisory group offering pregnancy tests, contraceptive advice and support for those unwillingly pregnant. For years we met in the local Women’s Centre but were eventually expelled because we allowed couples to come together for help and we even had a few male group members.

This ‘2nd wave Feminism’ sought increased power and control for women and it was men who were seen as those who had the power and who sought to control and possess their women. There is some plausibility, however, to Luisa Murraro’s claim in her paper on ‘Female Genealogies’ that part of the virulence of the anger against men and male power felt by women is a displacement of:

“Unresolved aversion toward the mother that is latent and ever ready to be directed against themselves or other women, especially against those who embody some aspect of the mother image”⁹

Murraro, following Irigaray, sees at the heart of political feminism, the need for a change in women’s relation to the figure of the mother and, consequently, with the meaning of sexual difference. She suggests that the celebration of ‘mothers’ is difficult because of our ambivalence, our reluctance to be grateful, when our feelings towards our own mothers are so fraught with pain and disappointment and distrust as well as fear. She is too powerful, too weak, too tied into the roles we may want to shed.

If this *is* so then maybe for all of us, ‘mother ‘ and the idea of the maternal are fraught with deep unease. This being especially problematic for women since, if she repudiates her mother, she seemingly repudiates herself in some sense.

Luce Irigaray herself says:

“One of the lost crossroads of our becoming women is situated in the blurring and erasure of the relation with our mother, and the obligation to submit to the laws of the world of men – among themselves.”¹⁰

She also claims:

“One thing is plain, not only in everyday events but in the whole social scene: our society and our culture operate on the basis of an original matricide”¹¹ (the primal mother of the primal horde).

⁹ in “*Engaging with Irigaray*” ed Caroline Burke, Naomi Schor, Margaret Whitford NY 1994 p327

¹⁰ “Thinking the Difference for a Peaceful Revolution” trans Karin Montin, 1989 Routledge London

¹¹ “Body Against Body: in Relation to the Mother” trans Gill, G.C. in *Sexes and Genealogies* NY Columbia U.P. 1993 p11

One way in which the mother is murdered, is that she is wiped out, 'disappeared'; shoved into the cracks in our world and only allowed out if she behaves herself – like the Furies at the end of the Orestia. For Plato she wasn't really even a parent, the womb is only a receptacle – the matrix out of which we grow. And of course, Athena, who passed judgement on the Furies, was born, not of woman but out of the head of her father, Zeus (Zeus having swallowed up her mother for fear of the reproductive power of her womb). For Freud, the early relationship with the mother is largely 'lost in the mists of time' "so grey with age" etc.

If not actually murdered, she must be *buried*, left behind, maturity being judged in terms of our having achieved separation from mother (and her allowing us to do this) While, as is said, there are more ways of killing the cat than choking it with cream, 'choking her with cream' is another way that mother is 'dealt with'. Idealised out of any real existence; becoming the all nourishing, comforting, self-sacrificing 'good-object' with a consequent lack of subjectivity and ordinary humanness. But of course, this trails behind it, the heavy undertow of a, much darker fantasy of the mother, both denigrated and feared.

Alice Balint claimed:

"The ideal mother has no interests of her own...For it remains self-evident that the interests of the mother and the child are identical, and it is the generally acknowledged measure of the goodness or badness of the mother how far she feels this identity of interests"¹²

So, if not openly murdered, she is mutilated, split asunder into 'good' and 'bad' [when she is good, she is very, very good; and when she is bad she is *awful*]

In 'Hate and the Countertransference', Winnicott made the seemingly shocking statement that "mothers hate their babies from the word go" (with the implication that hate came before love), although he somehow managed to domesticate this hate in

¹²" Love for" the Mother and Mother Love" in Michael Balint ed *Primary Love and Psychoanalytic Technique* NY 1965 pp91-108

reassuring, comfortable ways (the equivalent of charging fees and time-limiting sessions, in therapy) –so mothers sing nursery rhymes such as Rock a Bye Baby, and institute bed times (the common phrase ‘putting the baby down’ may be a clue!). Winnicott suggests that mother’s hate may allow babies to own their own hatred and so be important in a positive way – as long as it is expressed in such manageable ways.

Others such as Rheingold, however, suggest that maternal ambivalence is a serious ‘risk factor’ and he seems to blame all the ills of the world onto “noxious mothering” and “maternal destructiveness”. Furthermore, he saw this as the norm, with over-protectiveness just the other side of it.¹³

Rozika Parker in her book “Torn in Two”¹⁴ puts forward her view that maternal ambivalence is not just universal but should be regarded as having potentially *positive* rather than just negative functions in the development; development not just of the child (as with Winnicott) but also of the mother’s maternal role. To have such positive effects, however, it must be acknowledged and not acted out in damaging ways. Unfortunately, we tend to be so horrified by the idea of mothers having hateful feelings or thoughts towards their child, that they become hard to own up to. [LK Maternal violence, abuse or neglect arouses much greater horror and outrage than that by fathers or others]

Winnicott has written of the idea that the child’s ambivalence can lead to the development of concern for the loved person. Parker wants to extend this from the child to the mother’s ambivalence also; that it too can stimulate the development of reflective identification with the child, and thus to a restoration of love. The mother’s hatred can lead to persecutory anxiety (a ‘bad baby’) or to depressive anxiety (bad mother) Parker suggests that depression (in the sense of Klein’s ‘depressive position’) may be as much an achievement for the mother as for the child. It needs the recognition and acknowledgement of her hostile aggressive feelings and not their repression through fear of being judged (by herself as much as by others). [This

¹³“ The Fear of Being a Woman: a Theory of Maternal Destructiveness” NY Grune and Stratton 1964

¹⁴ Virago, London 1995

might be more palatable if 'depression' here was replaced by 'concern' as in Winnicott's 'Stage of Concern' his replacement of the 'Depressive Position']

The fear of ambivalence, if course, is that the hatred will prove stronger than the love, or at least will nullify it. Because it is 'not allowed' it may seem especially *yours* - whereas, loving your baby is just what you are supposed to feel – a general attribute of all mothers.

Unmanaged ambivalence can lead to an increase in guilt and resentment towards the child. Managed ambivalence can, Parker says, increase creativity. Bion claims that there is not just the conflict between love and hate but also between the *desire* to know and understand, versus the *fear* of knowing and understanding. The awareness and anguish over ambivalence may release the ability to think and understand what is going on between mother and child.

Ferenci, in a passage quoted by Parker¹⁵ thought that the frustration in ambivalence *can* –if we can tolerate it and bear its pain - lead to an increased consciousness. He noted that the most significant people are not those we *always* love or are *always* hostile to, but are those we love for some things and hate for others. The struggle through conflict, intra- and inter- psychic, is how we grow and develop.

Ambivalence towards mother is likely to be there with both boys and girls but again, that between mothers and daughters may have greater intensity and be more difficult to bear, because of the need both to identify *and* differentiate from them – to see them as an 'other woman'.

Sylvia Plath's mother Aurelia wrote in her preface to the published selection of her daughter's "Letters Home":

"Between Sylvia and me existed – as between my own mother and me – a kind of psychic osmosis which at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy"¹⁶

¹⁵ *ibid* p7

¹⁶ Faber and Faber, London 1999

Plath herself in her poem 'Medusa' says:

In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.
I didn't call you.
I didn't call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Adrienne Rich again in "Of woman Born"¹⁷ says:

"Matrophobia' as the poet Lynn Sukenick has termed it is the fear not of one's mother but of becoming one's mother. Thousands of daughters see their mother as having taught a compromise and self-hatred, they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting on her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull towards her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely'

And:

"Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free"

And again:

"Whatever the individual mother's love and strength, the child in us, the small female who grew up in a male –controlled world, still feels, at moments wildly unmothered.

¹⁷ 2nd edn 1986 Virago, London 235-236

When we can confront and unravel this paradox, this contradiction, face to the utmost in ourselves the groping passion of that little girl lost, we can begin to transmute it, and the blind anger and bitterness that have repetitiously erupted among women trying to build a movement together can be alchemized. Before sisterhood there was the knowledge – transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial – of motherhood and daughterhood”¹⁸

Julia Kristeva may have said that matricide is our vital necessity but she also wrote:

“Outside motherhood, no situations exist in human experience that so radically and so simply bring us face to face with that emergence of the other, I like to think that in our human adventure, we can encounter ‘the other’ – sometimes, rarely – if, and only if, we, men and women, are capable of that maternal experience, which defers eroticism into tenderness and makes an ‘object’ an ‘other me’”.¹⁹

¹⁸ ibid 225

¹⁹ in Catherine Clement and Julia Kristeva “The feminine and the sacred” 1996 trans Jane Marie Todd NY 2001 p57

approach to life and the way that she is. We have a lot of characteristics in common but also many differences (example of shoes and handbags).

Finally, to go back to the mythological. I suppose I do feel that I’m in the middle of a Greek myth, even if it is a somewhat mundane, every day one. Because despite feeling that I have been a free agent and that I have remained child free through choice, is the truth more likely that I am actually carrying out my own mother’s desire not to have children and that this was my destiny all along? I had no choice after all? I’ll leave that to you to decide....