

Book Reviews Chroniques Bibliographiques

Strong Mothers, Weak Wives: The Search for Gender Equality.

By Miriam M. Johnson. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988.

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Si avant le livre de Miriam Johnson dans le contexte des écrits du féminisme radical des années 60 et 70, Phyllis Chester, elle-même féministe radicale et auteure bien connue (elle a écrit notamment *Women and Madness* et *Mothers on Trial*), évalue la contribution de cette auteure au développement de la littérature sur la maternité, l'égalité et la garde des enfants. Elle partage la critique que fait l'auteure du "maternage" par les hommes, qu'elle perçoit comme une extension de leurs privilèges et non pas comme une incarnation de l'égalité entre les sexes. Elle se rejoint particulièrement du fait que l'auteure développe une théorie de la différence, contrairement à celle qui prévaut actuellement et que prônent les féministes libérales en matière d'égalité. Elle est moins satisfaite, par contre, de la manière dont l'auteure traite des contradictions profondes mais inhérentes au sujet lui-même du discours féministe sur la question (elle relève de nombreuses contradictions dans la pensée exprimée par l'auteure sur le sujet) ainsi que des divergences des féministes entre elles et des conséquences de sa propre analyse qui "devrait l'entraîner à prôner l'abolition 'of the male dominated family'". Dans l'ensemble, Phyllis Chester estime que ce livre sera particulièrement utile aux juristes féministes, tant pour les praticiennes que pour celles qui travaillent à l'élaboration de politiques législatives.

Locating Miriam Johnson's book in relation to the literature of radical feminism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, Phyllis Chester — herself a widely-published radical feminist (her titles include *Women and Madness* and *Mothers on Trial*) — evaluates this contribution to the growing scholarly literature on motherhood, equality, and child custody. Phyllis Chester applauds the author's critique of male "mothering," which she sees as an extension of the principle of male privilege, not as the embodiment of sex equality. She is particularly pleased that the author seeks to do away with male dominance by retaining gender specificity — an approach that runs counter to prevailing liberal feminist theories of equality. She is less pleased with the way the author handles the deep contradictions inherent in this area of feminist discourse (she describes how the author "says something and then means or tempts it"), differences among

feminists, and the full implications of her own analysis (her analysis "should lead her to call for the...abolition of the male-dominated family"). Overall, the reviewer concludes that this book will be particularly useful to feminist lawyers who are involved in litigation and the formulation of legislative policy.

In *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives: The Search for Gender Equality*, Miriam M. Johnson has written a scholarly and exceedingly sensible book. She makes expert distinctions: between women as socially powerless "wives" and as psychologically powerful "mothers;" between gender and sexuality, sexuality and heterosexuality; and between male "parenting" and female "mothering." Miriam Johnson focuses on patriarchal fathering and heterosexual marriage as the means by which sexism is reproduced. She clarifies that what oppresses women is not intrinsically or necessarily female reproductive biology or motherhood, but "the way in which heterosexual relationships themselves (especially in marriage) are structured."¹

Miriam Johnson wants to present a strong pro-mother line ("to reassess woman's mothering in a more positive light") without offending anyone (a magic act if I have ever seen one). Like psychologist Paula Caplan² (whom she does not cite), the author opposes mother-hating and mother-blaming. She also understands that the right *not* to bear or rear a child is as important (maybe more important) as the right *to* be a mother; she "emphasizes [that] mothering need [not] be central in the lives of the women who [bear or rear] children."³

Miriam Johnson models the "feminist ability to see connections instead of conflicts." She reinterprets "conflicting" schools of feminist thought in true maternal fashion: she wants feminism to behave respectfully, appreciatively toward each other. She does not like to throw anyone, anything out; she wants us to get along and to use everything we have. (I admit this goal.) Thus she shows deep respect for Nancy Chodorow⁴ and is in no way "matricidal" toward her — as some feminist intellectuals sometimes are toward foremothers who committed the sin (originally, maternally) of being their first. Citing Pauline Bart's (but not Janice Raymond's) work,⁵ she takes Nancy Chodorow gently to task for her blind-sightedness on lesbian motherhood and on heterosexuality itself. As she puts it: "Chodorow cannot quite bring herself to separate woman's mothering from heterosexual marriage."⁶

1. Miriam M. Johnson, *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives: The Search for Gender Equality* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 3.
2. Paula J. Caplan, *The Myth of Women's Masculinity* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985); Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale, "Mother Blaming in *Menorah* Clinical Journals," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (June 1985); Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale, "The Scapagoating of Mothers: A Call for Change," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (October 1985).
3. *Ibid.*, 98.
4. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).
5. See Pauline Bart, "The Mermaid and the Minotaur: A Fishy Story That's Part Bull-Philosophy of Female Abortion" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
6. Johnson, *Gender Equality*, 106.

Miriam Johnson, who acknowledges her husband as her "dearest friend," manifests a strong pro-lesbian sensibility. Often, her frame of reference is a single lesbian mother or two lesbian co-mothers whose needs will "hardly be served" by the psychological re-structuring of heterosexual marriage. She realizes that the heterosexual "solution would work against any kind of lesbian or couple sexual/female bonding and further emphasize the male-dominated relationship."⁷

The author views men's fathering as more "directly responsible for reproducing male dominance than women's mothering." She suggests that "men's aggression, distancing and sex objectification of women" are "reinforced" by male sex-segregated peer groups and by fathers — not by women or mothers.⁸ Apparently she has not read my work. This disheartened me — but I decided to like her book anyway. She reminds us, as I do in *Women and Madness: About Men*,⁹ *With Child*,¹⁰ and *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody*,¹¹ and as psychologist Deborah Leupnitz does in her recent and truly excellent book *The Family Interpreted: Feminist Theory in Clinical Practice*,¹² that patriarchy is based on the male legal ownership of children; that the male-dominated family is father-absent, male-dominated, and mother-blaming; that the "disconnected" men who have been socialized to reproduce sexism are the very men whom feminists have been calling upon to participate "equally" in childcare; that many (some? most?) patriarchal fathers do physically and psychologically neglect or abuse their children and/or seduce their daughters "good" little daddy's girls or "wives," that patriarchal fathers (not mothers) force and (in the case of sons) with their own "maternal" selves, Miriam Johnson concludes that fathers — not mothers — control and dominate gender stereotyping.¹³ She asks: would not such men "carry their dominating tendencies" into the nursery? Do we want such men involved in "mothering?"

Miriam Johnson is powerful and very clear on how concepts of gender neutrality — not *can* but *are* — being used to hurt women in family law. Drawing on twenty-five years of her own work, on the work of Judith Herman,¹⁴ Adrienne Rich,¹⁵ Lenore Weitzman,¹⁶ and Catharine MacKinnon¹⁷ (she does not cite

Andrea Dworkin¹⁸), she knows that men and women are not "the same" and need not be "identical" in order to be treated as "equals" — that feminist concepts of gender neutrality are themselves "male-oriented," that "gender blindness can cover over the handicaps under which women operate [and] can have unintended and negative consequences for women."¹⁹

Ninety-five percent of husbands and fathers simply do not do the *same* things, as *many* things as *often*, or for as long a period of time (see Letty Pogrebin's excellent review of this literature²⁰) as wives and mothers do. Fathers are held to different and much lower standards and are (custodially) rewarded for doing far less than what mothers are routinely expected to do. Even when men and women do the exact same thing (change a diaper, visit a child's teacher), it is *viewed* as, and is *experienced* differently. For example, the Michigan affiliate of the ACLU recently argued that if an infertile man could legally hire a father "surrogate" (i.e., a sperm donor) then it is sex discrimination and unconstitutional to prohibit an infertile woman from hiring a mother "surrogate" or birthmother. But is the time it takes to donate sperm equal to the much longer time it takes for a woman to be successfully inseminated, to carry a child for nine months with all its attendant discomforts (nausea, phlebotis, toxemia, swollen ankles, etc.), and to give birth with all its risks and consequences? Are the male and female reproductive experiences identical psychologically or biologically? Isn't the woman's contribution incomparable?

To her credit, Miriam Johnson is critical of those feminist theorists who have advocated "doing away with gender in order to do away with male dominance." She in fact wants to do away with "male dominance by retaining gender specificity." She says: "gender identity per se does not have to be eliminated to eliminate sexism.... If feminists were to call for a 'birth strike,' in my view it should not be in order to end women's mothering but to end the penalties that this society exacts from women *for* mothering.... Equal parenting will solve nothing; indeed it will reinforce male dominance unless husband and wife are more truly equal."²¹

She is aware that contradictions exist, questions remain. For example: when (white) fathers so choose, aren't they (they have the power to be) more enabling of heroism in their daughters than mothers ever are? Studies and autobiographical accounts suggest this is so. Aren't patriarchal mothers still complicit in the reproduction of sexism? Don't they, in Sarah Ruddick's words, carry out "The Father's Will" — even or especially in His absence?²² Aren't

7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 107, 110.
9. Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).
10. Phyllis Chesler, *About Women, Men and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).
11. Phyllis Chesler, *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood* (New York: Lippincott-Crowell, 1980).
12. Phyllis Chesler, *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).
13. Deborah Leupnitz, *The Family Interpreted: Feminist Theory in Clinical Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
14. Johnson, *Gender Equality*, 133.
15. Judith Herman, *Father-Daughter incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
16. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).
17. Lenore Weitzman, *The Divorce Revolution: The Unexpected Social and Economic Consequences for Women and Children in America* (New York: Macmillan Free Press, 1985).
18. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); *Jurisdiction*, *Steps* 8 (1983): 635-658.

19. Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hunting* (New York: Dutton, 1974); Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood: Psychics and Disruptors on Sexual Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Andrea Dworkin, *Photography: Aton Posturing Women* (New York: Perigee Books, G. P. Putnam, 1979); Andrea Dworkin, *Right Wing Women* (New York: Perigee Books, G. P. Putnam, 1982); Andrea Dworkin, *For and Five* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1986); Andrea Dworkin, *Interruption* (New York: The Free Press, 1987); Andrea Dworkin, *Letters from a Man Zone* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1988).
20. Letty Pogrebin, *Gender Equality*, 249.
21. Letty Pogrebin, *Family Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), especially chapter three.
22. Johnson, *Gender Equality*, 100.
23. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking" and "Preservative Love and Military Destruction: Some Reflections on Mothering and Peace," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (New York: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984).

patriarchal mothers, in Mary Daly's words, their own daughters' "token torturers"²⁴ Aren't women only maternally "virtuous" (compassionate, nurturing) toward their "own" young or male children and toward grown men — but not toward other women's children or toward other grown women? Miriam Johnson is wrong on child abuse. She writes: "We know that women account for slightly more child abuse than men." Is she forgetting her own superb review of the literature on rape, battery, and incest? (Women do not abandon or rape their children as much as men do, etc.) Or is she only thinking about maternal *psychological* imperfection as in Alice Miller?²⁵ If so, she should say so. Miriam Johnson's book is ambitious. It deserves — and I hope will be — widely read. However, her considerable strengths are also her weaknesses. Her writing style is obscure, circuitous, agonized, incomprehensible. (Example: "Feminists who de-emphasize gender difference are actually 'woman centered' in the sense that they see that an important virtue of women is that they are less likely to emphasize difference than men. Feminists who emphasize difference accept this larger truth that gender difference should not be as salient as it now is in male-female interaction but nevertheless want to examine the nature of the difference in order to create a woman-centered definition."²⁶) Her language makes her ideas virtually inaccessible to most women and to most non-academic clinicians, lawyers, and legislators.

Again and again, she takes two steps forward and one and a half steps back, disapproval or punishment. For example, she says that "the [heterosexual] marriage contract sidelines wives and mainstreams men" and that "for women seeking equally [heterosexuality] must remain problematic" — but no, she also says "the husband-wife relationship is potentially egalitarian," "this book is not a diatribe against men," "lesbianism is not a solution to male domination," "that incest researcher Florence Rush²⁷ is too 'harsh', that she herself will "not go so far" as to ask: "Has anyone thought of the fantastic notion of getting rid of the father?" Miriam Johnson has braved the psychologically dangerous waters of the "father-killing." For her "the solution seems to be women and men coming together not as married couples but as people and friends."²⁸ (As Pauline Bart says: "... and if pigs had wings, they could fly").

Miriam Johnson assures us that she is not recommending any "specific course of action" (Goddess forbid!), and that "there are no easy solutions."²⁹ She is right. Does this mean that all we can do is become individually more "aware," "conscious," "psychologically insightful?" Like Cassandra, she sees, understands,

speaks — but cannot act. She calls for "the invention of new ways of seeing."³⁰ I agree. But why doesn't she also call on feminists (both men and women) to seize the means of production and reproduction? If we did, that is precisely what might also help us to invent those "new ways of seeing."

Humanists obscure the need for women's freedom; they are often terrified by, contemptuous of our attempts to actively achieve it. Miriam Johnson is a liberal-humanist — not a radical; an academic — not an activist; a philosopher — not an empirical researcher; and interestingly (for a sociologist), more psychological than materialist. It is not surprising that she lacks the courage of her own analysis. She has shown us that as currently structured, both heterosexuality and marriage subordinate women to men; isolate women (especially as mothers) from each other; and reproduce sexism. She is absolutely right. Her own analysis should lead her to call for the revolutionary and material abolition of the male-dominated family. It is the least she could do; she could even cite Emma Goldman here. Or Marx. Or sociologist Rae Blumberg³¹ (whose work she does not mention). Rae Blumberg's studies show that when women control the fruits of their labors (not merely work outside the home — slaves also work), that *they have more power within heterosexual marriage*. Miriam Johnson bypasses Rae Blumberg and economic structure (or economic consciousness) almost entirely.

Nevertheless, she is absolutely right in what she says about marriage and the male-dominated family. Many radical feminists (Elaine Frankfort,³² Andrea Dworkin,³³ Shulamith Firestone,³⁴ Elisabeth Fischer,³⁵ Ellen Frankfort,³⁶ Susan Griffin,³⁷ and Kate Millet,³⁸ to name just a few), said precisely this in the late 1960s and early 1970s; some are already dead by their own hand, ill, mad, homeless, unemployed, under-employed, out of print, forgotten. I am glad Miriam Johnson is saying something true again. I hope her fairness, humanness, and academic reasonableness spare her such suffering and help her to be heard.

I would like Miriam Johnson to join us on the barricades: in the anti-incest, anti-rape, anti-battery, anti-pornography, anti-prostitution, anti-surrogacy

24. Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
25. Alice Miller, *Prisoners of Childhood* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983); Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child* (New York: Johnson, Gender Equity, 1984).
26. Florence Rush, *The Best kept Secret: The Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1980).
27. *Ibid.*, 127.
28. *Ibid.*, 251.

30. *Ibid.*, 95.
31. Rae Lesser Blumberg, *Sexual Stratification: A Paradigm of Female Productivity, Power, and Position* (1978).
32. Elaine Frankfort, *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Links Books, 1974).
33. See generally the essay of Andrea Dworkin, cited in note 19 above.
34. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: William Morrow, 1971).
35. Elisabeth Fischer, *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1979).
36. Ellen Frankfort, *Bigfoot Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1972); Ellen Frankfort, *The Sister Life at the Village Voice — An Unsanitized Account* (New York: Morrow, 1976); Ellen Frankfort, *Kathy Bourke and the Doctor of Death* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979); Ellen Frankfort, *Susan Griffin, Minors and Minors: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Susan Griffin, *Poemography and Silence: Calver's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).
37. Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1972); Kate Millet, *The Prostitution Papers* (New York: Avon Press, 1972); Kate Millet, *Frigit!* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Kate Millet, *Going to the Matrons: a Human Sacrifice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Kate Millet, *Elegy for Sin* (New York: privately printed, 1980).

movements; especially in the sanctuary movement for mothers and children who have fled the male-dominated family; especially in the courtrooms where "good enough" mothers are unjustly losing their children – just because they are women. (They have less money and are blamed, not rewarded, because they are mothers). What Miriam Johnson is saying must be said to judges, lawyers, prison wardens, and mental health workers on behalf of "weak wives" whose skills as "strong mothers" are discounted or used against them in divorce and custody battles.