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Woman, Body, Conception: Unveiling the Arcana

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Abstract

The development of techniques of medically assisted procreation (hereinafter MAP) – above all the ability to form an embryo outside a woman's body and surrogacy procedures – has generated heated international debate involving doctors, geneticists, biologists, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, bioethicists, feminists, and legal experts. This long list of protagonists might yet grow as MAP affects one of the two most important symbolic aspects of human life: the beginning and the end. Reflecting on the issue of birth (the beginning of life) means asking questions about sexuality and conception which relate directly to the female body. This article highlights the decisive impact of MAP techniques on the new social imaginaries of the body, sexuality, and conception. The new symbols and myths which emerge tell of sexless, de-eroticised, and empty male and female bodies: the horizon of the imaginary now features the 'androgynous' woman and the 'gynandrous' man, while conception occurs in a relational vacuum.

Keywords: woman, body, sexuality, medically assisted procreation.

1. Introduction

The development of techniques of medically assisted procreation (hereinafter MAP) – above all the ability to form an embryo outside a woman's body and surrogacy procedures – has generated heated international debate involving doctors, geneticists, biologists, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, bioethicists, feminists, and legal experts. This long list of protagonists might yet grow as MAP affects one of the two most important symbolic aspects of human life: the beginning and the end. Addressing these

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aspects entails asking when life begins and ends. The response to this question is no longer only grounded in the symbolic terms of the shared social imaginary but also in the field of scientific knowledge. Indeed, the issue now involves more than just the birth (in the sense of coming into being) and death (in the sense of breathing the last breath) of the body[1]. It is on the basis of these definitions – and the scientific consensus about them – that the boundaries of the licit and illicit are established, moving from the technical and scientific field to the ethical and moral realm, and from the supposed neutrality of the technique to the assimilation of these new technologies into familiar everyday procedures. The practices are made possible by knowledge but are in turn able to have retroactive effect on the symbolic[2] and cultural system of a society (Taylor, 2005). As Jonas put it, "given that it is no less than the nature of man that falls into the sphere of power of human intervention, prudence becomes our primary moral precept and in-depth reflection on the basic hypothesis becomes our main task" (Jonas, 1997: 122).

If we accept Jonas's invitation, 'prudence' becomes the leitmotif for understanding whether, and if so how, the latest reflections on the body, the woman, and childbirth have changed the social imaginary related to 'birth' and the indispensable presence of the female body at the scene of birth, and whether this has weakened or strengthened the 'power of women'. This study will be conducted on the basis of myths and symbols with the awareness that they have played an important role in cultural mediation (Crespi, 1982). Even today, we have our own symbols and myths. These cannot be dismissed as mere stories, fables, and inventions that reveal nothing about our social imaginary, which we help to create through our practices. Although myths and symbols were written by the holders of knowledge – men – and reveal nothing about a hypothetical historical phase of female rule (Magli, 1978), the fact that they existed and

[1] As studies on embryos and foetus development have shown that there is life before birth, there is a need to identify at which point of pregnancy there is autonomous life in the foetus. The development of transplants has raised the problem of establishing when a person can be declared dead for purposes of transplantation, as the organs removed must still be 'living'. For those in a coma, there is the issue of deciding when to switch off life support. These are clearly technical problems, but there is no single consensus about them even within the scientific community. Above all, though, they are issues with profound ethical and moral implications as they touch on the two mysteries of life.

[2] "The term symbolic is used here, in accordance with the broad meaning defined by Ernest Cassirer, as inclusive of all forms of cultural mediation through which people build their reality (language, myth, art, religion, philosophy, science, etc.)" (Crespi, 1982: 12, note 8).

persisted for many centuries speaks volumes about the social imaginary constructed around the female body and function.

2. In search of female power

Das Mutterrecht (*The Mother Right*) by Johan Jakob Bachofen was published in Stuttgart in 1861: "Das Mutterrecht burst onto the scene like a brick thrown by a child or a clotpole in the midst of an assembly of learned men; after the first legitimate astonishment faded, many elbowed it aside and thought no more about it" (Jesi 1988: XIII). Although this monumental book was complex and difficult to read, it became part of the emerging branch of anthropological, sociological, ethnological, and historical studies on the origins of 'civilisations' and human societies in general. L. H. Morgan published his *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* in 1877, followed seven years later by Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Attuned to the dominant positivist and evolutionist climate, these works posited a theory for all human societies featuring a transition from unlimited sexual promiscuity (the hetaerism referred to by Bachofen) to a phase dominated by the female code and/or power and, finally, a stage of male power.

Regardless of the issue of historical evidence for their theses, these works entered the epistemological debate about the most suitable cognitive tools for studying human society as a whole. This was triggered by the awareness that nature and culture were two separate areas of the human condition requiring different cognitive tools as they were governed by different 'laws'[3]. To use Crespi's words, "This humanistic tradition, which underlines the importance of practical action as a source of knowledge, was defended by Giambattista Vico, who referred to *sensus communis* and the ideal of *eloquentia* as sources of cognitive experience and wisdom, standing in contrast to abstract forms of science. *Sensus communis* is the sense of what is right for the common good; according to Vico, it is present in all men and is expressed in concrete form in social orders. The value and independent cognitive function of eloquence are also grounded in this common sense for the true and just, which is not scientifically demonstrated knowledge but makes it possible to discover what is *likely*" (Crespi, 1985: 56-57)[4]. The need to identify the great principles of universal history through

[3] The reference is to the broad debate that started in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century between 'sciences of nature' and 'sciences of the spirit', first expressed systematically in the thinking of W. Dilthey. This debate is still open.

[4] Giambattista Vico (Naples, 1668-1744) claimed that man can only know what he has created (*verum ipsum factum*) and that society (culture) can be an object of knowledge, but

research in the history of ideas and customs led Vico to broaden the analysis of manifestations of human life to include religions, languages, laws, customs, trade, empires, and governments in the subject matter of philology (Crespi, 1985: 45), as well as fables, myths, and folklore.

In the humanistic tradition, religions, myths, and symbols are thus human products. As such, they have always had a function, albeit a latent one, and have consequently become constituent elements of the various social imaginaries, making practices possible. They therefore have real effects even though they are 'invented'. The subsequent work by J.G. Frazer *The Golden Bough*, published in 1922, fell within this framework: "In this way, through beliefs, institutions, and superstitions, Frazer connects classical civilisations to primitive peoples, and these to commoners in civilised peoples, inasmuch as his connections form a scale with primitive peoples on the first rung, classical civilisations on the second, and folklore on the third" (Cocciara, 1973: XVI).

In light of these considerations, Bachofen's work was important for various reasons: "Bachofen's undoubted merits included offering sometimes masterful interpretations of myths, breaking down patriarchal prejudice, putting forward for the first time in historiography the hypothesis of a society based on the maternal right, and offering a rare example of interdisciplinary research. Bachofen received plaudits from a wide variety of sources. By contrast, his detractors highlighted his lack of critical rigour and his casual tendency to manipulate the documents he examined" (Schiavoni, 1988: XLI). He certainly displayed ambivalence by praising male sexual and legal superiority (which he genuinely agreed with) and expressing unprompted sympathies for the maternal: "the beneficent not the terrifying Maternal, the Eumenides rather than the Erinyes" (Schiavoni, 1988: XLI).

Accused of creating the 'myth of the matriarchy', Bachofen's work turned out to be less fanciful than was first thought. Indeed, the repercussions that his 'myth of the matriarchy' had on scientific literature in the first half of the twentieth century show that the narrative entered the social imaginary of the modern age under construction in Europe (Schiavoni, 1988), together with the myths of progress, civilisation, rational thought, and the triumph of technique. With regard to such statements, the virtue of 'prudence' referred to by Jonas

nature cannot as it is divine. Subsequently, Vico asserted that mathematical and logical methodology could be applied to study nature. Crespi identifies the acknowledgement of a form of knowledge that cannot be reduced to the mathematical and natural sciences in the concept of empathy developed by Shaftesbury (1671-1713) and the moral sense elaborated by F. Hutcheson (1694-1746) and D. Hume (1711-1776), up to the moral conclusions based on practical reason developed by E. Kant (1724-1804) (Crespi, 1985: 57).

(1997) is required to formulate interpretive hypotheses and offer conclusions. It cannot be empirically demonstrated whether the matriarchy ever existed or preceded the patriarchy (as a form of social organisation) for the simple reason that we lack the necessary empirical instruments. Even if we had them, it would not change much. Those who attempt to prove whether or not it existed act on an ideological level, trying to legitimise the utopian present or future by rewriting history. They outline the features of a "utopian imaginary that can provide models that do not (yet) exist and guide the processes of political, religious, social, and economic change towards the concrete realisation of this world" (Secondulfo, 2019: 14)[5]. However, it is now an accepted fact that matrilineal societies existed, just as the extensive archaeological heritage of European and Mediterranean countries shows the spread of a culture centred on a female divinity, the 'Great Goddess' of death and regeneration (Gimbutas, 1990, 2010, 2020)[6]. Influential scholars who attempted to explain 'why man constructs myths' – and with whom Durand (1999)[7] engages in scientific terms,

[5] Secondulfo offers four types of imaginary, connecting them preferably but not exclusively to certain internal processes of society as a system. The first of these is a 'proactive' imaginary, which stimulates the modification of the external and internal environment through the construction of imaginary models of natural objects, which are visible or invisible, so that the manipulative and productive capability of society is galvanised and steered. The second is a 'utopian' imaginary, which can provide world models that do not exist yet and guide processes of political, religious, social, and economic change. The third is a 'reflexive' imaginary, which acts as the continuous construction-reconstruction of the social aspect, capable of providing a stratified world model that can be renewed and modified as the world changes. The fourth is an 'archetypal' and resilient imaginary with a greater sense of inertia than the other meanings. This set of models and narratives can perpetuate itself and define the past of the world, with a tendency to regenerate and tone down changes (Secondulfo, 2019: 13-15).

[6] Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994) was an American archaeologist of Lithuanian origin. Her studies focused on the myths and rites of the ancient European populations before the great Indo-European invasions (which occurred between 4000 and 3000 BCE). In her final work, published posthumously, she speaks of the "living goddesses" in Minoan, Greek, Etruscan, Basque, Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic religions.

[7] In the introduction to his *Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, Durand criticises those who saw the image and the imaginary as the expression of weak and erroneous rationality-thought: "The main general criticism that one can make of the theories aired up to this point is that they all minimise the imagination, either by perverting its object, as in the case of Bergson where it is reduced to a residue, or by downgrading the image into a mere sensory doublet, thus paving the way for the psychological nihilism of the Sartrean imaginary" (Durand, 1999: 30). Starting from the statement that an image is never a randomly chosen sign but is always a symbol, Durand builds his theory through

albeit from a critical stance – highlighted and demonstrated that the male-female dichotomy, for example, can be found in the myths of many different populations. Furthermore, archaeological museums, which collect evidence of our (European) past are full of images of female divinities. Is this all the product of the male imagination, offering male-constructed images to placate oppressed women? But if women are subjugated and the whole of society is organised to keep them subservient, why were myths of mother goddesses kept alive for thousands of years? Why did women not rebel? How powerful were women really and how much were they feared? Are the artifacts in question perhaps talismans? As an initial response, it is certainly true that these statuettes – unmistakably female and mother figures – were attributed with a power that was evoked to achieve or obtain something. To provide a more complete answer to these questions, attention could be shifted from the matriarchy to the gradual penetration of steppe peoples into Europe: nomads, hunters, and warriors who built burial mounds (kurgans) to honour their kings and warriors. These Indo-European peoples superseded the ancient culture that was matrifocal, sedentary, and based on cultivating the land (Gimbutas, 2010). As a result of this slow, centuries-long penetration, myths and symbols were written or rewritten. In the new social imaginaries, the meanings attributed to women, the body, childbirth, and birth changed: they became less important or were even removed. As Filippini put it, "One is born from a woman's body; everyone, men and women alike, is born from a woman's body; there is no birth without a woman experiencing pregnancy and childbirth. This is evidence, in the etymological sense of the term (from the Latin *video*), which highlights the further attestation that only the female body has the ability to split into two, giving birth while maintaining its own unity. Nevertheless, this fact has not been symbolically inscribed in Western culture or given sufficient importance at a representational level, at least not since the Indo-European society imposed its male Olympus, declassifying the most ancient tradition of mother goddesses (Isis, Ishtar, Demeter)" (Filippini, 2017: 15).

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reference to authors like Jung, Piaget, and Bachelard who, from different perspectives, deem that thinking is based on images and researchers who examined the reasons why people create symbols. He references Krappe, Eliade, Bachelard, Dumezil, and Piganiol (Durand, 1999). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Piganiol underlined-hypothesised that the myths and customs of the Mediterranean world are ordered in two sociological categories: a pastoral culture that erects altars and worships male fire, the sun, bird flight, and the sky, and a sedentary culture that invokes female and telluric divinities. This segregation of basic mentalities was said to be due to the survival of 'Asianic' indigenous tribes subjugated by Indo-European invaders (Durand, 1999: 38).

3. The dark and magical side of the female body: the womb and the arcana of profundity

In the introduction to his complex work on symbols and myths, and indeed throughout the volume, Durand (1999)[8] highlights that arcana and symbols recur in almost all types of society (in Europe, Asia, and the Americas). Supported by an extensive bibliography on symbols, myths, and archetypes, this motif continues throughout the volume. To provide a few examples, the cross is a symbol that is ascensional, spatial (each arm indicates a direction), and chronological (the four seasons), an extremely widespread and recuring symbol of life. The tree is a symbol of life, growth, and renewal (with the changing seasons), water is a symbol of both life and death, and the wheel is a cyclical symbol (the cycle of human life, nature, and time that returns). The moon is a symbol of the female and of cyclical time (many ancient calendars were based on the four phases of the moon); indeed, terms like month (μήν), menses (καταμήνια), and measure (μετρϵω) derive from the word moon (μήνη). A woman's sexual maturity is shown by the onset of menstruation.

Durand aimed to go beyond a mere classification and description to examine why man creates symbols and why some stereotypes (which are transformed into symbols) recur. His hypothesis was that they are linked to specific stages in the development of a child. He took his cue from Jung (1983), for whom symbols are structural components of the subconscious expressed through dreams, and started by identifying three dominants that connect simple reflexes and associated reflexes.

The first of these is the position dominant, which coordinates or inhibits all the other reflexes. An example of this is when a child's body is placed in a vertical position: *high-low*. The second dominant – the nutrition dominant – appears even more clearly, taking shape through the reflexes of lip-suction and the corresponding position of the head: *nutrition-digestion*. This dominant also has the effect of focusing stimuli from distant sources and preventing the other centres from reacting to direct stimuli. As in the previous case, all reactions that are unrelated to the dominant reflex are delayed or inhibited. The third natural dominant has only been studied in the male adult animal. Despite the lack of information in this field, it can be accepted (from Oufland's conclusions) that the copulative dominant is cyclical in nature and internally motivated. On the other hand, psychoanalysis has accustomed us to perceiving sexual drive as an extremely powerful dominant in animal behaviour. Mating patterns do not take

[8] When referring to other scholars, Durand often cites them only by their surnames, listing them in the extensive bibliography at the end of the volume. In this article, the style chosen by the author has been maintained.

shape through experience but depend on the maturation of neural connections that were previously dormant in the innate structure of the organism. Mating patterns depend on the eroticisation of the nervous system (Morgan). What is most striking, though, is the fact that the hormonal triggers of copulation follow a cycle and that the sexual act itself is accompanied by rhythmic movements in higher vertebrates. The third component is *movement-stasis* (Durand, 1999: 49-51). "To sum up, we maintain that the three reflex dominants, "intermediate links between simple reflexes and associated reflexes," are sensori-motor matrices into which representations will naturally be integrated, and all the more effectively when certain perceptual schemata coincide with, and are assimilated into, the primitive motor schemata, and when the swallowing or rhythmic postural dominants concord with certain perceptual experiences. It is at this level that the main symbols are formed, their dual motivation providing them with the vital aspect of overdetermination so characteristic of them" (Durand, 1999: 52). If overdetermination has a biological imperative nature, these reflexes can assume multiple forms, giving rise to symbols and myths that are different in terms of formulation but not archetypal meaning. "If, as Levi-Strauss would have it, the natural has universality and spontaneity as its criteria, and is thus separated from the cultural, the domain of individuality, relativity and constraint, it is nevertheless necessary that an agreement be reached between nature and culture, in order to ensure that cultural content is *lived*. In a valid culture, one motivating human thought and reverie, the natural project provided by the dominant reflexes is overdetermined by a finality that replaces the prompting of the instincts. [...] A minimum affinity is thus mandatory between the reflex dominant and the cultural environment. Far from its being censorship and repression which motivate the image and give the symbol its vigour, it appears on the contrary that agreement between the reflex drives of the subject and his or her milieu anchors the main images necessarily in representation, and endows them with sufficient virtues and appropriateness for their perpetuation." (Durand, 1999: 52-53).

Archetypes constitute the point where the imaginary meets rational processes. In human cultures, archetypes are stable and recurrent, but they are linked to a wide range of images in cultures, in which many different schemata are arranged: while the archetype leads to the idea and substantiation, the symbol leads to the substantive, the noun, and sometimes also the proper noun[9]. Myth can be seen as an extension of schemata, archetypes, and simple symbols, a dynamic system tendentially consisting of narratives under the impetus of a schema. Myth is an outline of rationalisation because it uses the

[9] In the Greco-Roman tradition, 'Hercules' is a symbol of strength, a name-sign still used today to indicate a person's physical force.

thread of discourse in which symbols are expressed in words and archetypes are expressed in ideas. Just as archetypes foster ideas and symbols generate names, myths facilitate religious doctrines, philosophical systems, and historical and legendary narratives. Finally, the isotopy of schemata, archetypes, and symbols in mythical systems or static constellations reveals the existence of certain well-defined and stable normative protocols regarding imaginary representations, which can be called structures. Groupings of adjacent structures define what are known as Orders (Durand, 1999: *passim*).

Durand draws on this comprehensive and profound discourse on the subject of myths, symbols, and archetypes to identify two Orders of the image: diurnal and nocturnal.

- *The Diurnal Order* consists of opposites, light-darkness, dualism, antithesis, separation, and the diairetic order. There is significant isomorphism between the different symbols in a specific order of the image, characterised by symbolic constellations which are polarised around the two main diairetic and ascensional schemata, and the archetype of light. Durand feels that his thinking is summarised by Minkowski, who writes that "the rational personality delights in the abstract, immobile, solid and rigid; it is not sensitive to movement and intuition; it thinks rather than feels and perceives directly; it is cold like the abstract world; it discerns and separates, and by virtue of this, sharp-edged objects occupy a privileged place in its vision of the world; thus it achieves precision of form" (Durand, 1999: 178).
- *The Nocturnal Order*, which captures the vital energy of becoming, exorcises the murderous idols of Kronos, transforming them into beneficent talismans, and finally, incorporates the reassuring figures of constants into the inescapable dependence on time; cycles that seem to follow an eternal pattern at the same time as they evolve. The values are inverted. Descent is more difficult than ascent, penetrating to the core with digging techniques, as it can easily turn into freefall; there is a difference between burning, shining heat and the intimate warmth of the womb. Light laughs and shines, while warmth is a sign of depth, the sense of profundity. Dark values associated with the night are reversed: the night is calm and serene, a place of great rest, a symbol of the subconscious that allows the lost memories of the heart to re-emerge. Water is a central symbol, becoming a symbol of fertility. The Semitic names of the Great Goddess, the Syrian *Astarte*, the Arab *Atar*, the Babylonian *Ishtar*, and the Carthaginian *Tanit* are reduced to a form *Tanaïs*, closely linked to *Nanaï*, which is believed to be an ancient name for water and river, later deformed into *Nana* to resemble a name used by children (Durand, 1999: 219).

Morgane is born of the sea like Venus. Even if the Church attempted to undermine this female image and the cult of water and fountains[10], the Virgin Mary is referred to in liturgy as Spiritual Moon, Star of the Sea, and Queen of the Ocean (Durand, 1999: 221). The cult of the Great Mother oscillates between aquatic and telluric symbolism. The universality of the belief in the maternity of the earth can be seen in the widespread incidence of giving birth on the ground in China, the Caucasus, Africa, India, Brazil, and Paraguay, as well as among the Maori people, ancient Greeks, and Romans. Linked to burial rites and reveries of repose and inherent intimacy, cradle and grave tend to be seen as welcoming symbols of containment of life and death. The dead are ferried to the afterlife by boat, a symbol of welcome and containment. There is isomorphism of the return, death, and dwelling place; the dead are buried in the foetal position. The grave is associated with the chthonico-lunary constellation of the Nocturnal Order, while Uranian and solar rituals recommend cremation. The great myths of romantic literature include a taste for death, a romantic infatuation with death, suicide, crypts, ruins, and the intimacy of the tomb. There is a complete reversal of values in the mystical structure: the lower takes the place of the higher, the first become the last, Tom Thumb's power thwarts the strength of the giant and the ogre. In this microcosmic revolution, predominantly diurnal cultures give prominence to human figures and tend to exaggerate heroes and their feats, while cultures based on mysticism and a feeling of cosmic harmony generally favour naturalistic iconography. The mythological canons of all civilisations are grounded in the possibility of repeating time: the canon of repetition, the regeneration of time, the annual repetition of rites and the inception of the year, so universal that it is an archetype. The calendar has a periodical or circular structure. The moon is the archetype of measurement, with four phases of the lunar cycle and the archetype of four: four directions (north-south-east-west), four seasons, four wind directions. Four symbolises the earth in yoga and is the symbol of the cross. The serpent is the symbol of renewal and circularity: it is the symbol of fecundity as it is lunar and thus female, but its oblong shape suggests the virility of the penis; weaving and spinning are universal symbols of becoming, while the wheel is a universal symbol of time and circularity. For Durand, the cross and the tree are symbols of life and birth because they are made of wood, and fire is made by rubbing wood: fire is male, while the earth on which it is created through rhythmic friction is female. Sexual coupling is rhythmic and for Durand its isomorphism is associated with music (Durand, 1999: *passim*).

[10] Water is used in purification – and often initiation – rites. It is used to bless and baptise. Healing is often 'obtained' from immersion in water (such as the cult of Our Lady of Lourdes).

"One could not hope for more complete isotopic constellation, and Tieck makes the reader aware of the ambiguous value of the feminoid symbols which, their powers of seduction notwithstanding, always have a sinful aura. However, in spite of the moral hesitation inherited from the Diurnal Order, the images of earth and water create a sensual, happy atmosphere, which constitutes a rehabilitation of femininity" (Durand, 1999: 226)[11].

4. The Diurnal Order versus the Nocturnal Order: the female as negative symbolic arcana

For Durand, the two Orders coexist as they are based on recurring schemata, archetypes, symbols, and myths that link biological reflexes to culture. Nevertheless, if culture is synonymous with specificity and tends to transform the imperative overdetermination of the dominants in accordance with recurring schemata with different senses and meanings, it can be argued that every cultural system actualises the two different Orders by associating archetypes with different symbols which have different values and behavioural connotations. The Diurnal and Nocturnal Orders in every cultural system in history generate myths and archetypes that, as Durand claims, produce polyvalent and ambivalent symbols. After selecting a symbolic meaning and resolving the ambivalence by choosing which value, norm, and meaning is favoured, each cultural system produces its own social imaginary in which the symbols of the Diurnal Order and the Nocturnal Order form the basis of coherent representations and narratives and are equipped with meaning for the social actor.

The terms conception, woman, body, and female entered Western European culture – first in its Greek and then its Christian framework – loaded with generally negative meanings and were marginalised by their male equivalents. The Diurnal Order of opposites, separation, light and darkness, and ascensionality generates polarities in which female and male are separate, contrasted, or complementary: nature-culture, action-thought, cold-hot, passive-active, body as a container-body as an impregnator, the womb as guardian of sperm instilled by the man, woman that produces bodies without spirit-man that instils the spirit into the body, emotion-reason, and laws of

[11] The extensive presentation of the Nocturnal Order derives from the observation that it appears strongly influenced by female symbology and therefore lends itself to considerations regarding conception, childbirth, and the female body. Furthermore, given the difficulty of summarising Durand's complex thinking, the presentation of the two Orders is more fragmentary than systematic.

nature-laws of man[12]. In the Nocturnal Order, the female archetype is the fall (Eve the temptress) and the womb is a damp, cold cave; caves contain negative forces (witches always live in such places, while the devil and the wicked fell into hell, which is always 'below'), while water becomes a symbol of death. The moon becomes a symbol of instability and unpredictability (the adjective 'moonstruck' is still used to describe someone who is unable to think or act normally), whereas the sun maintains its positive symbolism: a person with a 'sunny' disposition is cheery and bright. Women bleed, menstrual blood is a source of fear, women are often isolated during their menses and must be purified after childbirth; women are incomplete and, according to Freud, suffer from penis envy.

Ancient Greek thinkers asked questions about conception: how it occurs and who is the real protagonist. With regard to the unknown, they broke with the archetypes of the Great Mother, and conception lost its sacred and mythical nature, becoming the result of sexual coupling between a woman and a man in which the man plays the active role. As Aeschylus recounts in *Eumenides*: "The mother of what is called her child is not the parent, but the nurse of the newly-sown embryo. The one who mounts is the parent, whereas she, as a stranger for a stranger, preserves the young plant, if the god does not harm it." (658-661). Filippini claims that this "ends up reiterating the blood tie that directly connects children to their father and not to the mother that gave birth to them; essentially the primacy of the paternal bond, as Aristotle maintained, which provided a scientific basis for this representation to the son" (Filippini, 2017: 19). This leads to the metaphor of the soil and the sower, which is widely used in the literary, medical, and philosophical fields; the metaphor was transmitted to the Roman world and then to the Middle Ages and the early modern period. "Soranus of Ephesus (98-138 CE), who is considered the founder of scientific obstetrics and gynaecology, uses it for example to give advice on how to get ready for sexual intercourse (which he calls "sowing"). In order to become more fertile, he suggests giving relaxing massages and eating light meals, preparing the body in the same way as the farmer who prepares the field before sowing it" (Filippini, 2017: 19).

The social imaginary of conception and the role of the female body produces a narrative that breaks with the social imaginary of the Mother Goddess and legitimises the patriarchy; this social institution perceives children

[12] The myth of Antigone is cited as a symbol of this archetype as she claims the right to bury her brother in the name of the law of nature, which is contrasted with the law of man. The myth of Antigone is also examined by E. Fromm as the symbolic tale of the transition from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal society, and often features in feminist literature.

as owned by their father, sees acknowledgement by the father as the moment of the social birth of a baby, and creates the myth of the female body as a mere receptor or custodian, like soil that has to be fertilised to be 'fruitful'. A woman is like a tree, with a baby growing inside: mother and foetus are inextricably joined, and life starts with childbirth and the cutting of the umbilical cord. Everything associated with the delivery of a child and birth becomes a matter of female knowledge, managed by women. Greek culture contrasted a woman's ability to procreate using her body with a man's ability to 'create with his mind' in a form of gender representation that combines procreation with creation, generating children with generating thought, in the multifaceted sense of artistic, literary, and philosophical creation. This was "appropriation through metaphorical transfer", a "symbolic theft" that was particularly recurrent in Greek culture, especially in philosophy, before moving into the Christian world where it formed one of the main metaphorical cornerstones in Western culture (Filippini, 2017: 28).

This social imaginary of conception, childbirth, and the female body was reiterated for centuries. It naturally changed over time and was also enriched with positive narrative elements (about virginity and women as welcoming and comforting, such as the image of the Madonna), but while the idea of female passivity remained the same, the negative connotations about women increased. They became a symbol of perdition and temptation, driven only by their instinct, feelings, and emotions, and incapable of rational thought or following the expected moral principles – universalistic and decontextualised – at the dawn of modernity (Tronto, 2013). The birth of a child was due to a kind of weakness in the male humours. Female beauty was also viewed with suspicion, used by women to lay their traps (for men).

Even though philosophers and physicians in Antiquity and the Middle Ages developed a range of ideas on conception, the foetus, and the role of the woman (such as the equal importance of men and women in conception, due to the fact that children can resemble their father or mother regardless of their sex), the general overview of this social imaginary did not change significantly until the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century when the positive method was first adopted as a result of developments in medical and scientific knowledge, and the introduction of the microscope (Filippini, 1997). With the strong impact of technology in the field of obstetrics and gynaecology, the female arcana started to be unveiled.

5. Technologies and techniques applied to the female body: science and knowledge unveiling the female arcana

The development of positive science (in the sense of knowledge based on the observation of facts and the collection and cataloguing of empirical data) led to the introduction of new elements in the social imaginary of conception and childbirth. Discoveries included the nature and function of eggs and semen, and the fact that women are only fertile at certain moments, while studies were conducted on the male and female reproductive systems, aborted foetuses, and women who died in childbirth to find out more about them and how they developed (Prasad, 2014).

"In 1741, the anatomist Giovanni Battista Bianchi published the book *De naturali in humano corpore vitiosa morbosaque generatione Historia* (*History of Natural Imperfect and Insalubrious Conception in the Human Body*) in Turin. The weighty Latin text presents the results of lengthy research: for years, the author collected and selected embryos and foetuses from different ages, building up a veritable 'museum of abortions' and managing to reconstruct the stages of growth of the foetus in detail" (Filippini 1997). As Filippini claims, Bianchi's text can be placed within the context of scientific discoveries in the field of generation made possible through use of the microscope from the end of the seventeenth century onwards. These studies developed in tandem with the birth of obstetrics and gynaecology, which featured only male physicians (who gradually distanced the traditional midwives from the scene of childbirth). This led to greater focus on the body and the health of the pregnant woman, and the discovery of the independence of the foetus, the 'as yet unborn citizen' (Filippini, 1997). The Age of Enlightenment ushered in perhaps one of the most anti-female periods in history: with the total waning of the myth of the Amazons, the only war fought by women was childbirth[13]; pregnancy outside wedlock was stigmatised and condemned, the mother's right to live was countered by the foetus's right to live; while previously the foetus was removed from a mother who died during labour so that it could be baptised, it was now extracted so that its life could be saved; in the event of a difficult delivery, it was considered legitimate to sacrifice the mother's life to save the baby for the good of society, which always needed new lifeblood; Caesarean sections were performed more frequently although they constituted a major risk for the mother. In the event of pregnancy following rape, it is still said that the woman must have felt pleasure (as sexual gratification is only tolerated if it has the higher aim of conception) or that God has blessed the carnal coupling for some unfathomable reason.

[13] In some populations in the classical age, such as in Sparta, women who died during childbirth were given the same honours as warriors who died in battle.

In the social imaginary of birth, childbirth, and women, there was a transition from an image of the woman as a tree – a trunk containing the foetus that emerges through delivery – to an image of the woman as a plant that sprouts a 'bud', which can live separately from the mother plant when it is well-rooted (Filippini, 1997). This reaffirmed the imaginary of the womb as a container that requires medical and psychological assistance, thereby becoming an object of external manipulation. At the same time, efforts to guarantee the survival of the foetus have increased, even if the birth is extremely premature. In more recent times, studies have also been conducted to create an artificial womb and placenta in the laboratory (Prasad, 2014). In the social imaginary of maternity and childbirth there is also a broad range of popular scientific literature that aims to teach women to be mothers (given that experience and tradition have been delegitimised) but also to identify in advance (from conception onwards) the needs of what is no longer an embryo-foetus but a baby. Ultrasound scans allow parents to see their 'baby' from the start and discover its sex before birth: photos enable an imaginary dialogue with the foetus which actually leaves little room for the imagination. The foetus becomes the protagonist, far more important than the mother (Piontelli, 2020). Feelings and involvement are transmitted by technology, which in this case substitutes the image with visible reality.

Social imaginaries are not fixed; they change, albeit slowly, and give rise to new, diverse practices. After two world wars that saw both sexes fighting the same battles and as a result of female emancipation processes, the new knowledge and technology in the fields of conception and childbirth have ushered in a new cultural age. Often superficially dismissed as a new form of subjugation of women and control over their bodies, the female alliance with medicine has produced many benefits such as reduced rates of childbirth and infant mortality, frequent monitoring of pregnancy (with risks unveiled as well as arcana), experiments with painless childbirth, and pain control during labour. Above all, however, the new female alliance with medicine and technology has produced something that completely changes their relationship with their own bodies and with their male partners: contraception. Women have reappropriated conception, with the ability to decide when to procreate and with whom, as a result of the processes of de-normativisation of the family and society (Di Nicola, 2017a). It has become common procedure to 'programme' pregnancy; maternity is now a choice, increasingly one of self-fulfilment rather than an obligation towards a Church or nation. Indeed, as a practice, sexuality must guarantee pleasure. Pregnant women are perceived as 'beautiful' and no longer need to hide their condition with long baggy clothing: they display their bodies. Famous actresses now pose nude for photos while hugging their pregnant bellies; there is sometimes a man behind who timidly and almost

respectfully places his hand on the woman's baby bump. In diaries written by women who have given birth, the photo of the first ultrasound scan is often followed by one of the pregnant mother. Women have started to produce narratives from their experience of pregnancy, which is denied to men: mutual support groups have formed, also online, which no longer offer only solidarity, but the opportunity share a personal experience. At the same time, the loss of a baby by miscarriage has become a bereavement to overcome, the failure of an unfulfilled project. This is even more painful as the 'baby' has been observed since conception: not imagined but seen. Women have again become perceived as Eumenides in the social imaginary of the last few decades.

However, as Durand claims, symbols are always ambivalent and other narratives can emerge in the same social imaginary. Increasingly frequent reference is made to the struggle between the sexes and the limits of a positive female narrative totally focused on maternity; groups have formed that claim the right not to have children by choice (because there are already too many people on the planet) or because the identities of men and women have nothing to do with procreative sexuality. Texts are published which illustrate that many women do not see themselves as cut out for motherhood, which does not make them feel any less of a woman or any less fulfilled. References are now made to the tyranny of mothers and stepmothers, and the potentially negative repercussions of the maternal relationship on the development of children. The myth of the Erinyes has resurfaced.

There is thus a new cultural age which requires a fresh narrative on maternity, conception, and the female body that allows Erinyes and Eumenides to coexist. The underlying hypothesis of this article is that initial confirmation of the birth of a new and – perhaps – futuristic narrative is offered by the development of MAP practices and surrogacy that favour the transition from a programme-based concept of motherhood to a project-based notion.

With the female arcana unveiled, conception and birth are no longer an enigma to fantasise about, and the female body has become neutral. Women are no longer Erinyes or Eumenides.

6. Epilogue: surrogate motherhood as the archetype of the sexless, de-eroticised and empty female body. The 'androgynous' woman and the 'gynandrous' man

The techniques of medically assisted procreation and surrogate motherhood have forcefully entered the social imaginary related to maternity, paternity, and generativity (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2018). The acceleration in the development of these technologies, with the prevalence of institutions

and bodies operating in the (private) market economy, has broadened the scientific debate. It now not only involves doctors, geneticists, and biologists, but also human and social science scholars (philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and jurists). As Jonas highlights (1997 and 2011), this is for the simple fact that technologies are a human-made product with repercussions on real-life men and women. As such, they deserve consideration to underline how these techniques change our lives and contribute to the construction or, if desired, the reconstruction of our social imaginaries. Undoubtedly, as with all scientific progress, we should not underestimate the resulting advantages: the treatment of sterility and infertility, and prenatal diagnosis for the prevention and treatment of malformations and diseases of the foetus. The current models of fertility, which are characterised by the increasingly advanced age at which women (and men) generate their first child, have led to a rise in cases of age-related infertility, problems which MAP can solve. Nevertheless, the positive repercussions cannot overshadow the negative effects, which have also entered our social imaginaries, even simply as new perils of modernity (Di Nicola, 2017b). Examples in this respect include reproductive tourism (which now seems to have almost superseded its sexual equivalent), the rising commodification of the human body (donors of eggs and seminal fluid, and those who carry through a pregnancy for commissioning parents against payment), the risk of genetic selection (Habermas 2016), the mixing of lineages (Lonardi, 2020), expectations with regard to filiation (Di Nicola, 2019), the presumption of being able to 'deceive' nature (Teman, 2003; Viviani, 2017), the increase in the number of those present at the scene of childbirth and parental figures and, finally, the idea that anything can be done with money. Technology provides a form of 'demystification of the world' and instrumental rationality penetrates the deepest spheres of human action, which were traditionally not thought to be related to the logic of commodification and money.

Therefore, consideration of the effects of medically assisted procreation techniques requires, as Jonas suggests, the virtue of prudence.

With regard to the subject of this reflection – conception, childbirth, and the female body – MAP and surrogacy techniques have played a fundamental role in unveiling the arcana of the narratives that were constructed and reconstructed over time, like the constituent elements of a mythical structure. There is nothing left to be learned, only to be applied. These techniques have created a major – and in many respects irreversible – rupture between 'imagined' and 'experienced' narratives. They have separated conception from the female and male body, and dissolved the bonds, which are not only biological, between each parent and their children: the woman's womb has become merely an incubator – indeed, it is hoped that it will be replaced by artificial machinery as soon as possible –, while the male body becomes 'tinder', a sperm dispenser.

Viviani offers an interesting reflection on this matter: "While subjects offering a service work on themselves *on the surface* in an ongoing effort to refine their services and skills and achieve clear, well-defined objectives, performance implies work at the origin in an attempt to anticipate the result. In my view, the term service implies manipulation to perfect an act, while performance tries to foreshadow the result and is an action with deeper roots [...] The relationship between the act and the result therefore assumes a different value depending on whether it is a question of service and/or performance. In the former case, the service focuses on the action so that the result is achieved, while in the latter case, the performance anticipates the result; this is the aesthetic dimension that acquires definitive form through the performative act. This linguistic and conceptual analysis forms the backdrop for thinking on the body and procedures regarding procreative ability, medically assisted procreation techniques, and surrogate motherhood […] The starting point is that, just as there is a distinction between service and performance, a differentiation must also be made in terms of the type of work on the body and the vision of the body itself, as well as the kind of techniques used in medically assisted procreation" (Viviani, 2018: 93, 94).

Cold emotions dominate, and the suspicion and fear of dependency enter the couple's relationship (Hochschild, 2006).

Conception occurs in a relational vacuum which only features parts of a machine-body whose component parts can easily be substituted and/or bought on the market. The body becomes an object that can be modified and 'constructed' in accordance with dominant canons that have produced new, different myths: of success, money, consumerism, services, meritocracy, competition, and affective and relational self-sufficiency. Although sexuality is the very archetype of a relationship, it has been 'sterilised' and separated from male and female bodies. As Lévi- Strauss would say[14], this is the manifestation of "the joys, eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might keep to oneself".

To quote Lipovetsky, "The time when solitude characterised exceptional poetic souls has finished: here, everyone suffers it with the same inertia. Solitude is not accompanied by rebellion or lethal dizziness; it has become a *fact*, a platitude on a par with everyday gestures. Consciences are no longer defined by mutual affliction; recognition, the feeling of incommunicability, and conflict have given way to apathy, while intersubjectivity is neglected. After the social desertion of values and institutions, it is the relationship with the Other that, following the same logic, succumbs to the process of disaffection" (Lipovetsky, 1995: 53).

[14] Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969), *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston, Beacon Press, 497.

Female and male bodies are now sexless, de-eroticised and empty, with the 'androgynous' woman and the 'gynandrous' man emerging on the horizon of the imaginary.

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