

PERIODS:
BIRTH AND CULTURE IN HISTORY



Mary O'Brien as Ward Sister (Head Nurse) at Knightswood Hospital, Glasgow, Scotland, 1953

Through the Eyes of Mary

Maternity and Modernity in Italy

BY ANNETTE BURFOOT

I pick up an e-mail message from Somer Brodribb shortly after arriving in Tuscany in October telling me that Mary has just died peacefully in her sleep. I can't believe it: a woman of her physical stature and strength of will seems impervious to illness and aging. I soon find out from Mary's longtime companion, Cath McNaughton, that Mary was 72 and her health had been deteriorating for some time. To say, "but her ideas live on!" is hackneyed yet, nonetheless, true. Soon after I receive the sad news, Somer (a former student of Mary's and now a feminist political theorist) informs me of this special issue in honour of Mary, and I discuss my interest in the images of Italian maternity. This is the result of that discussion.

What follows is a personal tour through some of Italy's contemporary popular cultural representations of maternity. It is not designed to

As a response to Marx's notion that social relations are mediated only through work in order to establish a philosophy of birth, Mary brings to our attention the much overlooked meaning of reproductive labour as mediation of a female reproductive consciousness.

single out Italy as more problematic and patriarchal than anywhere else. The explicit images of (sexuality and) reproduction here indicate a popular discourse that engages with women's reproductivity more explicitly than in my own, Canadian, culture. It seems at first that this explicitness could be a sign of a cultural difference that supports, more than in other places, a female reproductive consciousness. After all, Italy is a place that has a long tradition of openly worshipping a dominant mother figure. I also thought that perhaps there exists the possibility of reading the explicit images counter to their intended signification as ads, thus rescuing a positive and encouraging image of female procreativity from campaigns for consumerism.

Mary's theory of reproductive consciousness helps explain the seeming contradictions that emerge when comparing the female arche-

types found in the Italian images of women. One of the main tenets of Mary's theory is the undervaluing of female reproductive labour in the scheme of social exchange. As a response to Marx's notion that social relations are mediated only through work in order to establish a philosophy of birth, Mary brings to our attention the much overlooked meaning of reproductive labour as mediation of a female reproductive consciousness. It is tempting to view a supposedly unproblematic public display of reproductive moments, such as those that follow, as the social recognition of the significance of female reproductive work (O'Brien 1981).

It was raining when I arrived in Milano last September to start the Italian part of my research leave and begin a book on contemporary popular culture and reproductivity. Running from the rain into the underground, I lower my new umbrella and there in a row are three four-by-five feet posters of a giant disembodied breast and a blond baby sucking intently with one hand holding the breast [image 7]. The only words on the posters are *Prenatal: Nuova Generazione* (Prenatal: New Generation). Prenatal, it turns out, is the name of one of the leading Italian maternity and babies' goods chain stores. Behind me a man remarks on the new advertising campaign: *Ah! Che carina!* (How cute!). I am left holding my dripping umbrella and slightly shocked WASP sensibilities.

The image carries a complex message. There is an often-used point of division between the "North" and



Image 7

the "South" of Italy which serves the serious purpose of discriminating against those in the South as poor, *terreni* (of the earth), and *neri* (dark-skinned). The divide typically renders southern Italian women as hot lovers and poor voracious mothers of many, and northern Italian women as prosperous, employed, pale, and frigid with only an overly precious child or two. Prenatal is working to win the affection and business of a northern clientele because there is more money in the North (and ironically fewer mothers and babies). This is hardly a foreign concept to someone from North America, where production of capital has long held ransom the interests of reproduction. The other disturbing aspect of the Prenatal ad is linked to the erotic objectification of the woman who, we have to presume, is attached to the breast. As a proponent of public breastfeeding, open displays of a child feeding from a breast do not disturb me. But this isn't a woman breastfeeding a child; it is a picture of a child taking milk from a titillating dispenser for the sake of a very different and dominant type of consumption.

Female objectification, generally, is more sexually explicit and taken more for granted in Italy than in Canada. Newspapers are sold in newsstands and stores called *edicole*. Your local *edicola* carries, in addition to the local and national newspapers, *fumetti* (comic books), some children's toys, a few gift items, knitting patterns, and pornography. The pornography comes in various forms: comic books, magazines, and video cassettes. No attempt is made to hide them away from anyone, and often

they form part of an outside display.

This casual attitude to what in Canada requires considerable effort to control and hide from public view, spills into other public places. In

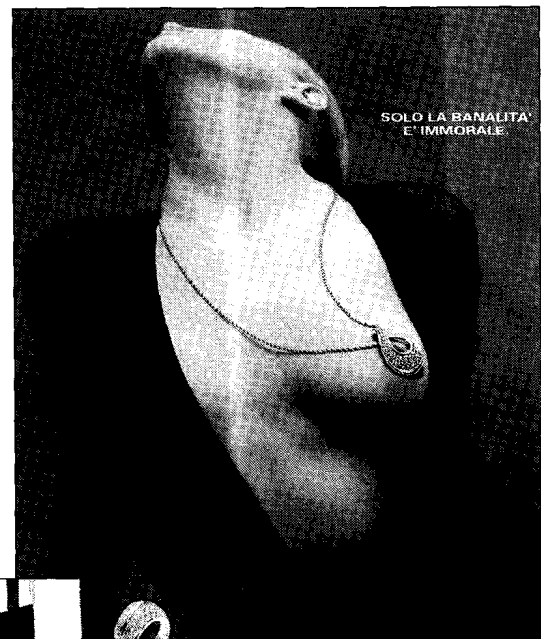
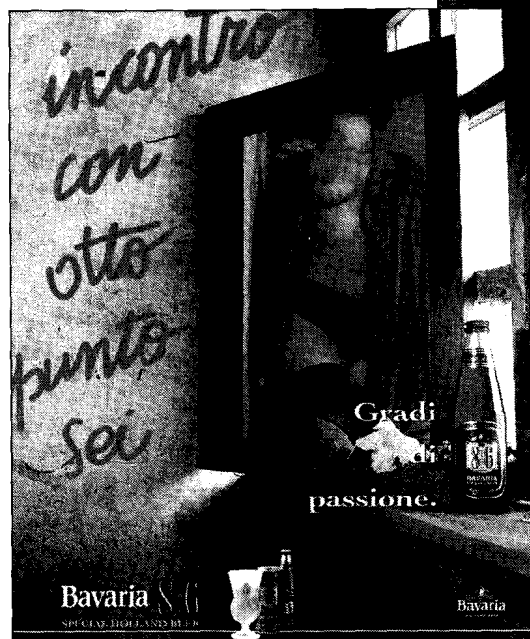


Image 5

only a matter of degree. In Canada our beer ads rely on exactly the same approach with the only difference being the extent of sexual explicitness.

Not surprisingly the contrast between Italian women's daily lives and the female archetypes they face in public are striking. My Milanese friend, Maria, has been sick with colds since I have arrived. She was not initially aware of the reoccurrence but eventually admits that they are "working colds." She over-works, and so is sick by Friday. She stays in bed all weekend, and returns to work Monday. Besides working for a large national concern from 9:00 a.m. to at least 6:00 p.m. each day, Maria is the single mother of a nine-year-old. This child, like most Milanese children, has a host of post-school activities that require elaborate, often remote, coordination strategies to get the child in the right place at the right time. Maria explains that these activities (sports, art classes, music ...) are designed to help working parents as a sort of after-school daycare. They also address what seems to me to be women's collective guilt over the shift from extended families with

Italian advertising, the excitement used to mass market all sorts of things is usually equated with a machismo view of sexual tension written on the bodies of naked or near-naked women. It took me a while to figure out the advertised product in the magazine ad that features a woman's half-naked body with black panties and stockings [image 8]. In another ad for jewelry not only is a woman's exposed breast used to sell a necklace, the pendant is hooked on the nipple [image 5]. The embellishment of an object of masculine desire and a hint to men on how to win sexual favours from their women are combined in one message. As with the beer ad, this cultural distinction is

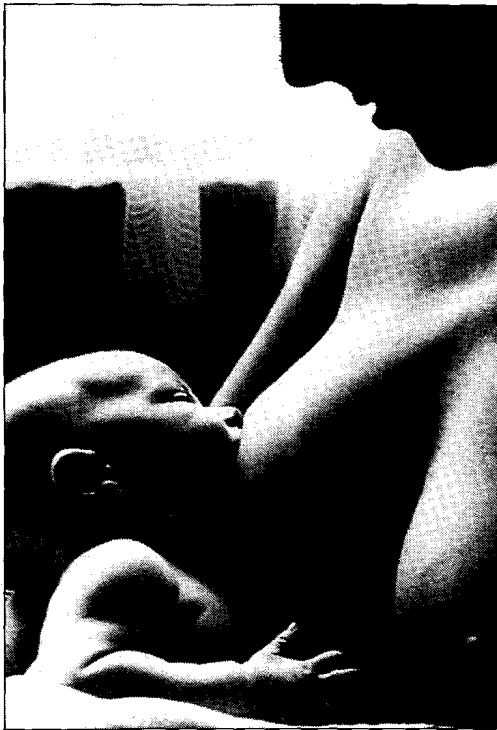


Image 6

stay-at-home mothers to nuclear and single-parent families where parents work. Since parents cannot spare the time to be with their children, they purchase for the children other forms of stimulation and “invest” in their future by supplementing their education. Parenting is a serious business here, and despite the nuclear family image generated for public consumption, such as that in the ads for the ever-present Italian *telefono* (little telephone or cell phone), “mamma,” as well as “papa,” works and has to keep in touch with her children by telephone.

Maria also explains to me that her progress in her profession is hampered by the fact that she is not available to work overtime. She would prefer to cut back on her hours, and although there are provisions negotiated by her union for part-time work, she is worried about applying for it. She would be one of the first, and it would send a message to her employers that she is not very “serious” about her job. Largely because of Italy’s idealization of the family as prime caretaker of all (the young, unemployed, and the aged) and the complicated politics since the Second World War, Italy doesn’t have unemployment insurance even

though the labour unions are strong and full-time workers’ rights are well-protected. Maria, like most Italians, would have to move back with her parents if she lost her job. She turns 40 this year. Last night, Maria told me she has another cold.

After two weeks in Milano, I move to my Tuscan home in the small mountain village of Valdottavo for the next eight months with too much luggage and kilos of shipped academic material in tow. Valdottavo sits near the beginning of the Garfagnana valley with the Serchio river and numerous huge paper milling plants running its length. “Garfagnana” is a local term used to describe the area just north of us and is typified by rough mountain terrain that cannot sustain large olive groves or vineyards like most of Tuscany. Only a few subsistence crops grow here. Castagna (chestnut) trees were key to the survival of those living here and in the past provided building material, fuel, and flour. Today, the castagna forests are denuded. *Farina di castagne* (chestnut flour) is still available, but chiefly as a souvenir and a very local delicacy for making sweet crepes and tortes.

Between the world wars, without the possibility of even feeding their families off the land, many Garfagnese—in some cases entire villages—emigrated to find work. I don’t know why, but Glasgow and Ayr in Scotland were the chosen sites, and once one family established a living there, others followed to work chiefly in the restaurant and hotel trades. They had their children (and grandchildren) in Scotland but have recently returned to the valley with their earnings and adult children to build anew. In the nearby valley city of Barga a friend points to a row of elegant homes known as the “Scottish villas.” While shopping in Borgo a Mozzano, I hear a young woman telling her children to behave. Initially she speaks in Italian, then all of a sudden, she breaks into a thick Scottish brogue, apparently hoping that using the children’s other tongue will make them listen. Two

seemingly disparate worlds collide. More than that, I find it pleasant to imagine that some of the friends of the people here might have been delivered by Mary who worked as a midwife in Glasgow when the Garfagnese settled!

I also find Mary’s work while contemplating what to write in memory of her and editing an entry on historical interventions in breastfeeding for *The Encyclopedia of Reproductive Technologies*. I come across an article on breastmilk substitutes, accompanied with a striking picture of a woman breastfeeding (Altergott). The image is an improvement over the objectification of women in the Prenatal ad: it includes a section of the woman’s face (though only in dark profile) and her breasts are clearly a part of her and her act of feeding the baby (in contrast to the baby feeding from a breast in isolation) [image 6]. But the whole story indicates the patriarchal nature of medical views of maternity as it tries to displace women’s procreativity with something “better.” The text contradicts the pro-breastfeeding image and engages with a long history of debate over the relative merits of breast-



Image 4

feeding versus scientific formulations.

Marjorie Altergott, the author of the breastfeeding entry in the encyclopedia, provides a fascinating and exhaustive analysis of how nursing has been problematized over the last century. She explains how one of the major initiatives to replace breastfeeding was provided by Henri Nestle and his breastmilk substitution formula. Nestle's name appears in the Italian press as I write. His much expanded food empire is grappling with industrial sabotage that poisoned and caused the withdrawal of the company's line of *panettoni* (Italian Christmas cakes). The sabotage is linked to the company's widely criticized and continued practice of marketing milk substitutes as a preferred alternative to breastfeeding, especially in Africa where disastrous results, including lethal pediatric diarrhea, occur. The breastfeeding article indirectly challenges criticisms of bottle feeding with milk substitutes, by using the exact argument Nestle used over 100 years ago: thanks to science we have a perfectly healthy and nourishing alternative to mother's milk. Such interventions become warranted as breastfeeding is medicalized and its diseases are defined: mastitis, ulcerated nipples, lack of milk. Further in the article, *intervento di plastica* (plastic surgery), which undoubtedly refers to breast implants, is also identified as a reason to use milk substitutes! Thus women's pursuit of an ideal female form with big breasts (a demand of masculine desire) becomes the rationale for another form of control and displacement: unwarranted medical intervention in women's procreativity.

Indeed the look of the ideal Italian woman, pregnant or not, is unquestionably important in the public imagination where images of beauty are both more elegant and sexually explicit than the ones I am used to. This youthful, curvaceous female body has replaced the ancient Greek and Roman fetish of a masculine ideal. But where that objectification of the male was a celebration of masculinity as beauty as well as a symbol

of national strength, the female ideal reflects a male desire that extends to the appropriation of female procreativity.

In Italy, the line between women as the mask of male sexual desire and the ideal mother blur. For example, the most striking aspect of the cover of a pregnancy guide, *Gravidanza*, is how a woman clearly and heavily pregnant maintains the sexy look found in the beer ad [image 1]. She is young, her hair is in a pony tail, her lips are painted, pouty, and slightly apart. Her fingers alight on her swollen belly as she gazes upon it. Her breasts are carefully half-revealed under a silky cardigan, open and pulled aside. The magazine is filled with these models of the explicitly pregnant woman. One has a woman posed lying on her side on a couch with cut-off underwear exposing her very swollen belly; her hand holds it, Madonna-like, as if to emphasize its significance.

She faces the camera with a wide-eyed, expectant look, her nipple visible through her silky top [image 3]. In another image that clearly eroticizes pregnancy, a young blond woman in pigtails is posed doing stretching exercises while dressed in an outfit that allows her very swollen belly to burst forth [image 4]. The image is one of part innocent, rounded-bellied child and part exclamation and celebration of a woman obviously "with child." Mary's ideas help explain.

Although these are explicit views of female reproductivity, they are hardly female-centered. Mary's theory of reproductive consciousness demonstrates how, in the absence of a certain connection to history (men do not necessarily know who their children are), masculinity needs to assert itself in the flow of time. Historically this has been managed



Image 1



Image 3

through a fictionalization of fatherhood. The father must name and head his family in order to ensure his continuity—often conflated with his property—through “his” children (who may or may not be genetically related to him). Whereas women always know who their children are (or did until the advent of new reproductive technologies and genetic engineering). The pregnant models are the products of a male gaze. They simultaneously satisfy the masculine need for tangible evidence of its reproductivity (the woman as a container obviously filled with his child) and provide visual sexual pleasure (O'Brien 1981).

Also, the Italian visual culture seemingly celebrates what Mary calls the “reproductive moments” of a female reproductive consciousness. There are also cultural attitudes that

apparently award a place of social distinction to the reproducing woman. I have heard that here it is considered lucky and an honour to have a pregnant woman among you. Pregnant women are treated publicly with respect and as strong women carrying out a worthy task (countering the middle-class, Anglo-Saxon notion of pregnancy as a somewhat mysterious, delicate condition). This positive view of reproduction seems to be confirmed by the importance granted publicly to childrearing. Many visitors to Italy marvel at how children (and their ever-present mothers) are welcome everywhere at any age. And the burden of childrearing seems shared between the sexes as Italian men and boys gladly cuddle and entertain babies and toddlers.

However, my friend from Barga, a non-Italian woman who married an Italian and has lived in Italy several years with her husband and young children, explains to me how childrearing remains the role of women. "Babysitters" (a recent import into the Italian language) are used by women only when they are working outside the home. The number of these women is increasing and is due partly in the North to the large-scale loss of traditional male-dominated labour possibilities (typically manufacturing). It is also due to the need for double incomes to maintain lifestyles that include several cars per family (gasoline prices in Italy, as with all forms of energy, are among the most expensive globally), *telefonini* (cell phones, of which Italy has the highest number per capita world-wide), and centrally heated homes (a fairly recent and expensive development). Despite the increase in the number of working mothers, expectations for a devout form of mothering remain high, and women remain the prime caretakers of children. Part of this expectation is that young mothers, unless required by work, will not be without their children and therefore have no need of after-dark babysitters, a social life of their own, or

the possibility of pursuing a career with the same time commitment as their male counterparts. Men, on the other hand, are typically freer to pursue their work and social lives outside the family, knowing that their familial interests are cared for. Women struggle to meet both mothering and employment expectations, which is exactly the cold-causing bind of Maria, my Milanese friend.

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Finally, in Italy the medical control of pregnancy and childbirth (and now, as with most industrial nations, conception) assists male, not female reproductive consciousness. The home birth movement has not been established in Italy. As part of Italy's modernization since the Second World War, a tradition of midwifery (largely serving the lower classes) has effectively been replaced by standardized hospital births with doctors in charge ("who are treated like gods," explains a woman who recently gave birth here). Also, the middle and upper classes of central Italy have a well-established tradition of granting medical authority over health generally. The famous fortunes of the Tuscan family, the Medici (which literally means physicians), are partly based on the success of their middle-aged and Renaissance medical practice. Barga, the seemingly remote hilltop city, owes its elegant state to the ritual passage of the Medici

through it on their way to the rest of the Tuscan Duchy. Today, the city's hospital is home to one of Italy's leading practitioners in assisted conception. Women come from all over Italy to Barga to try and be "made pregnant" by the man and to contribute to his fortune.

The notion that female reproductivity is lacking and requires medical assistance is related to its legitimation in visual culture where motherhood is both a service industry and the sign (the swollen belly) of male potency. The Prenatal ad turns nursing into a very much reduced reproductive moment that denies women's subjectivity and agency, and emphasizes the mother's function as essential provider of childrearing as a service. The moment belongs to the baby who is the symbol of the priority of the fictional nuclear family as well as the poster child for the prosperous commercial future of Italy's blond, pale, North. Even the explicit display of a pregnant woman complete with head, body, and limbs, is a reduction of female procreativity to an expression of masculine desire and potency. The quasi-erotic posing of the heavily pregnant models in the pregnancy guidebook is a pastiche of the ideal feminine form as simultaneously sex object of masculine desire and vessel of its reproductive abilities ("having his baby"). Thus, building on what Mary established, I see reproductive consciousness shifting from the site of work and reproductive labour to visual pleasures and cultural reproduction.¹ And what of the future? (O'Brien 1989a).

Female reproductivity, although somewhat demystified, is obscured and caricatured within publicized archetypes such as those examined above; however, within emergent visualizations of genetic reproduction women are displaced completely. Italy, as in most countries with western medicine and science, is fascinated with genetic engineering [image 9 and image 10]. On the recent covers of two popular Italian news magazines, *L'Espresso* and *Panorama*

we find reproduction without women. There are two forms of a-female reproduction on the *Panorama* cover: Michelangelo's depiction of genesis where God's hand is seen reaching out and touching that of Adam as an act of creation that superimposes the DNA spiral (now a common symbol of genetic replication). Not only is this an echo of the ancient story of denial and denigration of women's reproductivity with the anti-reproductive creation of man coupled with his fall from divine grace due to the temptation of Eve, it is also an illustration of contemporary trends in new reproductive technologies and genetic engineering that displace women's role in reproduction. The second genetic engineering image, the baby playing with the DNA spiral, is similar to the previous one as it takes women's bodies right out of the reproductive picture. The image also refers to the global industrial growth in baby-making (assisted conception) and baby-perfecting (prenatal genetic engineering and cloning). Assisted-conception experts, such as the specialist in Barga, become the means of procreation while reproductive and genetic science glorifies eugenics and the wedding of reproductive matter outside the bodies of women (O'Brien 1989b). In Italian society, the eugenic "faultline" lies between the wealthy North and a "needy" South.

Although female reproductivity is obvious in Italian popular culture, the ever-present needs of male desire and familial domination get in the way of anything like an expression of female-centred reproduction. The disappearance of women altogether from the contemporary reproduction scene is threatening. I say this knowing there are those who greet the trend to drop especially gendered stereotypes as a form of emancipation. These thinkers would be similar to those who criticize Mary's feminism as dated and essentialist. It is true that the negotiation of the significance of reproductivity, especially in Italy, is complex and cannot be reduced to the

simplification of gender difference. Race, for example, plays a key role. Italy, like Canada, worries simultaneously about the dropping birth-rate of its citizens and increased rates of immigration.

The Roman Catholic Church also complicates matters and forces a negotiation of sorts for women's rights. For example, ads for contraceptives cannot be found here for the obvious reason that they would bring un-

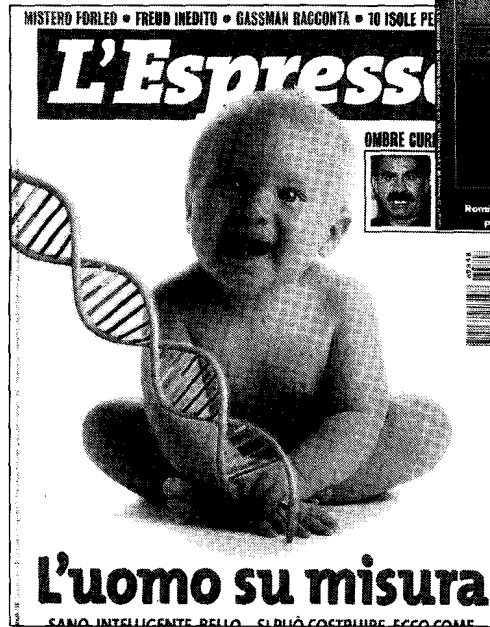


Image 9

wanted and very public criticism from the powerful Catholic church (which formally opposes almost all forms of contraception). However, in the Duomo (main church) of Castelnuovo, the town at the heart of the Garfagnana, I discover a crude handmade poster with the initials M.O.B. at the top. I look at it carefully because it seems to have a picture of an oral contraceptive pill dispenser. But what I find is a clever diagram of a menstrual cycle indicating the fertile and infertile periods with a clear reference to contraception (the Pill is widely available and often used in Italy so the shape of its container would also be familiar). The initials, M.O.B., refer to *metodico ovulazione Billings* (the Billings ovulation method). Effectively this poster provides contraceptive information and its approval to church-going women



Image 10

disguised as a way of determining how to become pregnant!

This sign, its setting, and the coincidence of initials was a delightful discovery that I think would make Mary O'Brien laugh. And Mary would laugh, contrary to what her critics tend to think, precisely because she understood the material needs of women, responded to the essential-

ism of women and our reproductivity, and contemplated the ways in which we have to negotiate our way through a world that tends not to embrace birth as a wholesome concept. Mary does.

Annette Burfoot has been interested in and involved with reproduction and reproductive and genetic technologies since 1985. She has published widely in these areas and now works as an Associate Professor of Sociology at Queen's University. She first met Mary in 1986 and holds a dear memory of Mary giving a New Year's day lecture on Freud from her living room chair that was both hilarious and brilliant.

¹See, for example, O'Brien 1989a, originally published in *Canadian Woman Studies*' Summer/Fall 1985 issue, "Women's Studies" (Volume

6, Number 3). Reprinted in this volume on page 79.

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MARY O'BRIEN

XXIII

I took a word
from off
a printed page
into my mind
cherished it a little
and it murmured there
with others
bringing the ease
of insight
to bewilderment;
and I thought
McLuhan
your shafts
bright
with paradox
are fun
but just
off target

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