

THE WANDERING UTERUS: POLITICS AND THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Cheryl L. Meyer. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

BY AIDAN BAKER

In William Blake's poem "London" are the lines "How the youthful Harlot's curse/Blasts the new-born Infant's tear," referring to the prostitute's sexually transmitted disease which causes her child to be born blind. Whether Blake is condemning the harlot's actions or the society which allows such occurrences to happen—or both—is debatable. In either case, the issue of maternal versus foetal rights is raised. Should the woman be held responsible for the child's affliction? Should she be punished? Should she sacrifice her rights for those of the child?

These and other questions regarding women's reproductive rights are the focus of Cheryl L. Meyer's *The Wandering Uterus*. The title refers to Hippocrates' misconceptions about female physiognomy. He supposed that the uterus "wandered" about the body, attaching itself to various organs and afflicting the individual with anything from heart pains to indigestion—and, of course, hysteria, an ailment from which men could not suffer because they do not have an uterus.

One would think in today's more enlightened times, such biased attitudes and double standards would

not exist. Not so, argues Meyer, especially when it comes to the rights of women to bear (or not to bear) children. Immediately one thinks of abortion, but Meyer claims that abortion is only one aspect of the medical profession's, and society's in general, suppression of women's bodily control and reproductive autonomy. This suppression extends to the methods in which a woman may give birth, to her rights while carrying the foetus, to how and even if she might become pregnant.

Meyer begins by examining reproductive technologies such as artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization, and the various repercussions of such technologies. This is followed by a discussion of foetal health and a woman's responsibility not to harm the developing child by imbibing alcohol or using drugs. The last few chapters deal with issues of reproductive choice such as the use of contraceptives and such surgical procedures as hysterectomies and cesarean sections. For all of these issues, Meyer provides ample evidence that the medical, legal, and societal hierarchies are biased against women. Here are some examples Meyer uses to prove her points:

- For sperm donation there is very little donor screening and there is no established legislation to regulate it. Donors are remunerated for their contribution. Egg donation, on the other hand, involves a rigorous and lengthy screening procedure and donors are not remunerated. In England it is illegal to pay egg donors.

- A male substance abuser who goes to a treatment centre cannot be arrested unless he is in possession of an

illegal drug. A woman in the same situation can be arrested and placed in jail simply because she is pregnant and might endanger the life of the foetus. Moreover, some states require health care workers to report pregnant substance abusers.

- 600,000 women a year (76.4 per cent of childbearing age) undergo hysterectomies. One reason for this procedure is prevention of uterine cancer. Five out of every one hundred males is afflicted by prostate cancer but 600,000 men do not have their prostates removed yearly.

The Wandering Uterus is certainly well-researched, well-argued, and written in a clear, straightforward style. The fact that Meyer learned she herself was pregnant during the course of writing the book adds an additional impact to the work. The main problem with the book, however, is that Meyer provides so many examples, tells so many horror stories about women forced to carry fetuses against their will or dying from botched abortions, that one becomes overwhelmed and, ultimately, desensitized. Meyer's arguments and topics of discussion are certainly interesting, but a different structure or better organization would be beneficial in maintaining the reader's interest and, most importantly, concern over the issue of women's rights and personal autonomy.