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Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Womb envy: The cause of misogyny and even male achievement?

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S Y N O P S I S

Although misogyny, patriarchy and gender inequity are central concepts of gender studies, the original cause(s) of these symptoms are not as widely explored as the symptoms themselves. Womb envy has been cited as a possible cause. This article provides an attempt at a complete literature review of womb envy (sometimes referred to as parturition envy, vagina envy, uterus envy or even woman envy), structured by theme (manifestations of this concept in, for example, social anthropology, religion and literature), followed by an analysis of the silence surrounding the concept of womb envy. It also examines scholarly input that supports Karen Horney's suggestion that this envy may be the cause of much of male achievement in recorded history.

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Freud (1930/1961b, p. 50) noted that “The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men”. Male domination in societal evolution has long been explained as the result of biological factors through, for example, concepts such as *the variability hypothesis* which argues that males show a greater intelligence variability span than do women (Shields, 1982). But, while some lament that women always lag behind men's development of civilisation (Hirdman, 2007, p. 225), others turn the tables on this argument, suggesting instead that womb envy may be the basis for male domination in the development of human civilisation. One person who suggested this was Karen Horney.

The purpose of this article is to provide an attempt at a complete literature review of the concept of womb envy (structured by theme), to analyse the silence surrounding the concept of womb envy, and to examine scholarly input that supports Horney's suggestion that this envy may lie behind much of male achievement in recorded history. This article is based on documentation pertaining to womb envy but, before exploring this, it outlines another type of gender envy that is more widely recognised in the Western world – Freud's concept of penis envy.

Penis envy

According to Freud's theory of the psychosexual development of women, the little girl (like the little boy) sees the

mother as her first love object. But the girl later discovers that she, like her mother, lacks a penis and as a result of this castration feels hostile towards her mother, transferring her love from her mother to her father (Freud, 1925/1998, pp. 21–23; Kittay, 1984b, p. 388). The discovery leads to the girl suffering a narcissistic wound, causing penis envy (Freud, 1925/1998, pp. 23–24). However, her penis envy can be resolved through the wish for a child (Freud, 1925/1998, p. 24), preferably a male child “who brings with him the longed for penis” (Kittay, 1984b, p. 388).

Kittay (1984b, p. 385) notes that Freud mentioned male envy of female reproductive physiology in the theory of Dr Schreber, the Wolf Man and Little Hans. Meanwhile, both Chasseguet-Smirgel (1976, p. 282) and Kittay (1984a, pp. 122–123, 1984b, p. 385–386, 1995, p. 132) note Freud's own story of the child's disappointments of making a baby (Freud, 1920/1961a, p. 15): “His own attempt to make a baby himself, carried out with tragic seriousness, fails shamefully”. But Freud never acknowledged womb envy, arguing instead that the girl's wish for a baby compensates her for her lack of a penis (Kittay, 1984b, p. 386).

Freud also rejected womb envy on the basis that children believe babies are excreted like faeces and they therefore see this function as available to both boys and girls (Fast, 1994, p. 54). Although Freud believed all people to be inherently bisexual (Kittay, 1984b, p. 386), he did not include this notion of bisexuality in his theory of gender development in boys –

he only believed in penis envy in girls, not in womb envy in boys (Fast, 1994, pp. 53–54).

Freud himself has been broadly criticised, as in Kramer (2006) and Danielsen (2000/2005). For example, Freud has been accused of not adhering to scientific rigour in his work (Danielsen, 2000/2005, pp. 19, 41, 80, 90, 122, 166, 187, 191; Kramer, 2006, pp. 14, 60), of bullying patients (Danielsen, 2000/2005, pp. 80–82; Kramer, 2006, pp. 9, 210) as well as of being prone to self-glorification (Danielsen, 2000/2005, p. 121; Kramer, 2006, pp. 135, 209), authoritarianism (Danielsen, 2000/2005, pp. 176, 192) and social ineptitude (Kramer, 2006, pp. 26, 32, 210).

Freud's theory of sex and gender development itself has also been subject to criticism. Matthis (1983, p. 169) notes that Freud does not put any particular emphasis on the role of the mother in the child's life, but focuses mainly on the father, as is also noted by Nordström (1987, p. 83). Ross (1975, p. 810) says that, although revolutionary, Freud's theory reveals a sexual ideology that grants a woman little of her own and definitely nothing that is particularly enviable. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1976, p. 281) points out how Freud's theory of female sexuality is a series of lacks, whereas male sexuality is much fuller, a comment that fits with Hirdman's (2001/2003) *male-as-norm* concept where males are seen as the norm and females are regarded as a deviance from that norm. However, Chasseguet-Smirgel (1976, p. 275) notes how Freud's theories of female sexuality have persisted in spite of opposing clinical material, the contradictions of the theories and other theories that have portrayed female sexuality in different ways. Kittay (1984a, p. 98) says that psychoanalysis predominantly continues to ignore womb envy and not consider it seriously. Lehman (1992, p. 50) says that while Freud's focus on penis envy in the psychological development in children probably is correct overall, Freud's writings show significant lapses, adding that Freud neglected to explore fully womb envy in boys. Eschbach (2008, p. 53) suggests that Freud's denial of the child's awareness of vagina and uterus, its wish for children and desire to connect with the preoedipal mother may well be the result of his own narcissistic injury due to his inability to procreate. Ducat (2004, p. 42) says that the theory of penis envy is a "curious irony in psychoanalytic thinking in general", representing "a failure of Freud to think psychoanalytically".

Jacobson (1950, p. 141), van der Leeuw (1958, p. 354) and Warnes and Hill (1974, p. 26) all point out that the wish for a child precedes the wish for a penis but several people also argue that this male envy of females takes cardinal place historically, as well as individually. Zilboorg (1944, p. 290) argues that male envy of women is older, and therefore more fundamental, than female envy of man (also mentioned by van Leeuwen, 1966, p. 320 and Nelson, 1967, p. 215). Eschbach (2008, p. 49) says that womb envy may be considered the most primordial of all envies. Lederer (1968, p. 214) says that there is no indication of penis envy in either myth or anthropology.

Origins of the term 'womb envy'

Within psychology, the specific phrase *womb envy* is often associated with the German psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Karen Horney (1885–1952), who used the term in three

articles (1926/1967b, pp. 60–62; 1926–7/1967c, p. 77; 1933/1967d, p. 151). According to Britannica Online Encyclopedia (2011), the concept of womb envy was indeed introduced by Horney. However, she was not alone in discussing it. Her contemporary, Melanie Klein, mentioned it (Klein, 1928, pp. 206–207; Klein, 1937/1953, pp. 31–36, 81; Klein, 1957 pp. 38–39, 53–54) as did Georg Groddeck, 1923/1969, pp. 14–19; also noted by van der Leeuw, 1958, p. 353). Michael Joseph Eisler (1921) wrote on male pregnancy fantasies, although without direct mention of womb envy. Hence, the subject of male envy of female reproductive physiology was not first officially broached by Horney.

Other writers have introduced related terms. Boehm (1930) coined the terms *parturition envy* (Evans, 1951, p. 165; Macalpine & Hunter, 1953, p. 340; Faergeman, 1955, p. 4; Lederer, 1968, p. 5; Stannard, 1977, p. 325) and *vagina envy* (Faergeman, 1955, p. 4). Zilboorg (1944, pp. 281, 290) uses the term *woman envy*. Chesler (1978) speaks of *uterus envy*. Eschbach (2008, p. 54) notes that womb envy is almost always shown in quotation marks, as though its existence is not certain or requires an excuse. As described later in this article, womb envy is not limited to the ability to conceive and bear children, but may also include envy of menstruation and the ability to lactate.

Womb envy explored in psychology

Horney became aware of womb envy as a result of analysing men (Kelman, 1966, p. 20). In fact, she considered whether penis envy is the result of male envy of the female (Kelman, 1966, p. 20), an idea that has been reiterated in recent years. Turkel (2004, p. 44) suggests that the concept of penis envy may arise from a male desire for his to be the envied gender rather than from a female desire to be male. Eschbach (2008, p. 53) argues that the narcissistic injury of not being able to procreate may have caused Freud to deny the child's awareness of feminine functions. Horney did not refute the concept of penis envy altogether, but argued that it mostly manifested itself in a desire to be able to urinate like a man (Horney, 1922/1967a, p. 39). Boehm (1930, p. 457), Mead (1949, p. 153) and Klein (1937/1953, p. 31) also note desires among girls to urinate like boys.

Although Horney's view that men envied women's ability to give birth was a reason for her ostracisation by the analytic community (Maroda, 2000, p. 312), womb envy has been explored and mentioned since, often within a psychoanalytical context of science. For examples, see Boehm (1930), Zilboorg (1944), Jacobson (1950), Evans (1951), Macalpine and Hunter (1953), Faergeman (1955), van der Leeuw (1958), van Leeuwen (1966), Nelson (1967), Greenson (1968), Jaffe (1968), Kubie (1974), Lerner (1974), Warnes and Hill (1974), Ross (1975), Kittay (1984a, 1984b, 1995), Wisdom (1983), Fast (1984, 1994, 1998), Lax (1997), Stevens (2005), Silver (2007), Ducat (2004) as well as Eschbach (2008), Janowitz (2008) and Shabad (2008) in Wurmser and Jarass (2008). Kubie (1974) mentions male envy in the context of both sexes being driven to become both sexes (that is, for men to have breasts and a vagina, and for women to have a penis). Fast (1984, pp. 63, 65, 71, 168–175) mentions male envy in the context of a gender-differentiated model of development that includes an overinclusive phase in which

both boys and girls hold early desires of being sexually complete (that is, being both male and female) and Fast (1984, pp. 160–183) also suggests that the Wolf Man (Freud's classic case) might have been suffering from womb envy. Kubie (1974, p. 414), Ross (1975, p. 804) and Wisdom (1983, pp. 160, 161) note that, whereas women and girls can associate with masculine ways and activities without losing their femininity, men cannot associate with feminine ways and activities without losing their masculinity. This can be interpreted as yet another example of Hirdman's (2001/2003) *male-as-norm* concept, in which males are seen as the norm and females are regarded as a deviance from that norm, for women (the deviance) are more likely to want to be like men (the norm), than men (the norm) to want to be like women (the deviance).

Faergeman (1955, p. 16) points out that the male envy of woman for her breasts, vagina and womb is a well established fact. Jaffe (1968, pp. 534, 544) says that the degradation of motherhood leads to a conflict in women regarding their identification with men; this impairs the mutuality in the mother–child relationship, which in turn leads to a conflict in boys regarding their identification with their mothers. This creates a vicious circle of conflict-ridden identifications through the generations.

Peter Thielst, a Danish author, mentions womb envy in his book on gender political thoughts. He begins by discussing gender and envy in general, only reaching the concept of womb envy by a process of elimination (Thielst, 1978/1980, pp. 12–13):

“Thus, we must look past external differences [between the sexes] and find characteristics specific to each sex. Here we may note the relatively greater physical strength of the male, and the ability of the female to lactate and bear children. You might immediately think that these differences would compensate for each other considering different forms of envy, but that is far from the case. All things considered – and things move fast in the development of culture – it seems among humans to be a more important characteristic to bring the human race forth by giving birth to healthy individuals than to possess great and sustainable physical force. In all cultures, the former carries greater social and material significance than the latter and, what is more, motherhood yields a much greater existential and narcissistic satisfaction than to have a greater physical potential at one's disposal; this is also because this [greater physical strength] is a potential that has to be maintained which therefore requires a greater activity on the part of its owner – with whatever adversities and frustrations and the (gender specific) insecurity this occasionally has to entail.” (author's translation from Danish).

Lars Jalmert, professor of educational science and psychologist and a notable gender researcher in Sweden, cites Thielst (1978/1980) in his book on the Swedish man (Jalmert, 1984, p. 122).

Boehm (1930, p. 469) argues along similar lines to Thielst (1978/1980, pp. 12–13) that, during earlier stages of human existence, women's ability to give birth gave them a social advantage. This raises the question whether women at some

point in history had a higher status as a result of their child-bearing ability, and whether matriarchies have existed, an idea that has been contested by some scholars (such as Bamberger, 1974).

Can womb envy be linked with femiphobia and misogyny?

Having explored the concept of womb envy, a question remains: how to link womb envy with femiphobia and misogyny? Boehm (1930, p. 457) argues that “it excites our envy when others have something *more* than we have ourselves. We may say, further, that when they have something *different*, something which we can never have, we experience a sense of inferiority”. Lerner (1974, p. 542) points out the direct link between envy and devaluation: “Devaluation of an envied object is a typical defensive manoeuvre, for as long as an object is devalued it does not need to be envied”. Kubie (1974, p. 372) also notes a link between envy and debasement and contempt. Klein (1937/1953, pp. 19–20) also notes depreciation and contempt as mechanisms to deal with disappointments.

Jacobson (1950, p. 143, 144), Jaffe (1968, p. 529), Lax (1997, p. 127, 128, 132), and Ducat (2004, p. 44) speak of *reaction formation*, a defence mechanism whereby one (possibly unconscious) emotion deemed socially unacceptable is replaced by a more socially acceptable emotion that is the opposite of the original emotion (Lapedes, 1978, p. 1330). What could be at work in this case is womb envy (the original and socially unacceptable emotion, which might in turn lead to a sense of inferiority as mentioned by Boehm (1930, p. 457)) being replaced by femiphobia and/or misogyny or, as Lerner (1974, p. 542) says, devaluation (more socially acceptable forms of emotion). However, Horney herself never used the term *reaction formation* in connection with the womb envy concept. Indeed, the earliest mention of *reaction formation* in connection with womb envy appears to be by Jacobson (1950, p. 143, 144).

Klein (1957, pp. 62–67) described six defences against envy that she had found through her clinical work: 1) idealisation, 2) devaluation of the object, 3) devaluation of the self, 4) appropriation, 5) stirring up envy in others, 6) stifling feelings of love and corresponding intensifying of hate (also noted in Kittay, 1984a, pp. 106–120 and Ducat, 2004, pp. 34–44). Ducat (2004, p. 42) says Freud's notion of penis envy, and male privilege in general, are examples of the defence mechanism of *provoking (or stirring up) envy in others*, as described by Klein (1957, p. 65).

It seems, then, that the link between womb envy on the one hand and femiphobia and misogyny on the other is various psychological defences. Of these, *reaction formation* appears to be the most widely cited. This explanation seems to support Chodorow's (1974, p. 45) comment that ‘women's motherhood and mothering role seem to be the most important features in accounting for the universal secondary status of women’.

The silence surrounding womb envy

Jacobson (1950, p. 144), Macalpine and Hunter (1953, p. 338), Faergeman (1955, pp. 1, 3), Bettelheim (1954/1962,

p. 56), van Leeuwen (1966, pp. 323–324), Lerner (1974, p. 542), Stannard (1977, pp. 322, 324–328), Kittay (1984b, p. 385, 1995, p. 126), Lehman (1992, p. 50), Fast (1994, p. 53), Lax (1997, p. 133) and Stevens (2005, p. 281) all point to the relative silence surrounding the concept of womb envy, while Jaffe (1968, p. 521) notes that the concept has been met with some resistance. While Jacobson (1950, p. 144) believes it may be a reaction in male analysts against their own unconscious feminine desire to bear children, Lax (1997, p. 133) suggests it may be due to an unconscious attempt to conceal the topic and focus on information stressing the value of the penis in order to cater to male narcissism. Fast (1994, p. 53) says that the absence of this idea within psychoanalytic psychology for understanding men's reactions to their wives' pregnancies stems from Freud's theories, and van Leeuwen (1966, pp. 323–324) cites the respect held by both female and male analysts for Freud and for his phallic orientation as reasons for this silence. Stevens (2005) discusses Freud's reading of Dr Daniel Paul Schreber's memoirs of his mental illness (Schreber, 1903/1955), mentioning Macalpine and Hunter's (1953) critique of Freud's reading and criticising the fact that this critique has been suppressed. Lehman (1992, p. 50) says that the openly patriarchal bias of the culture in which we live tends to cloud the importance of womb envy. As noted by Corea (1985/1986, p. 286), Lederer (1968, p. 153) states "Indeed, of our fear and envy of women, we, the psychoanalytic-papers-writing-men, have managed to maintain a dignified fraternal silence". Stannard (1977, pp. 325–327) says that human insight into male psychology has been seriously held back by male inability to admit male desire to give birth, mentioning Erik Eriksson's analysis of Martin Luther's identity crisis as an example of the inability of Freudians' as well as Freud himself to acknowledge womb envy. Stannard (1977, p. 328) adds that men have instead projected their maternal drive onto women.

Silence is not the only way of responding to reports of womb envy. Stannard (1977, pp. 325–326) notes the psychoanalytic community around the time of the articles by Karen Horney and Felix Boehm (in the 1930s) dismissed the arguments for womb envy as "not very convincing".

The relative silence and dismissive attitude around the concept of womb envy seems consistent with the prestige and endurance of Freud's penis envy concept, Horney's ostracisation from the analytic community (Maroda, 2000, p. 312) and male homosocial ostracisation of those viewed as a threat to androcentric culture (Holmberg, 1996/2003, p. 93). Such silence would constitute an example of what Lukes (1974/2005, pp. 22, 111) calls the *second dimension of power* – that is, deciding what is on the agenda (what is generally discussed) or, as in this particular case, what is not on the agenda (what is generally not discussed). Indeed, if womb envy may lead to narcissistic mortification as described by, for example, Lax (1997, p. 131), it seems a natural continuation of this process to conceal or ignore the very concept (in this case, womb envy) that has led to the narcissistic mortification in the first place.

Womb envy in social anthropology

The anthropologist Margaret Mead (1949) explores womb envy patterns in her study of the sexes, both among Papua

New Guinea people (Arapesh, Iatmul, Mundugumor, Tchambuli, and Manus) and in the US. Like Bettelheim (1954/1962) after her (although Bettelheim was a psychologist not an anthropologist), she mentions various initiation rites. For example, she describes Arapesh male ceremonies, open to men only, that underline the nature of maternity and in which the men feed those to be initiated with blood drawn from the men's arms (Mead, 1949, p. 67) and notes that, behind many initiation rites, lies the myth that it was all stolen from women (Mead, 1949, p. 103). As also noted by Kittay (1995, pp. 130–131), Mead (1949, pp. 98–103) argued that underlying the initiation rites of Papua New Guinea was a theme, according to which men can only become men through ritualised rebirths organised by men: "Women, it is true, make human beings, but only men can make men".

The psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (1954/1962) also writes about womb envy, launching his hypothesis that male initiation rites in traditional societies are an attempt to resolve this envy. The focus on male envy is due to the fact that this is less discussed than female gender envy (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, p. 56).

Bettelheim (1954/1962, pp. 47, 10) discusses preliterate societies, where male initiation rites partly help vent womb envy, as opposed to civilisations where womb envy may be more carefully hidden although no less common. Bettelheim (1954/1962) also mentions subincision, circumcision, couvade, transvestism, blocking of the anus and rebirth rituals as rites whereby males can compensate for womb envy. Bettelheim (1954/1962, pp. 136–138) discusses the menstrual taboo and suggests that childbearing and menstruation may at some point in history have elevated women so much that men created taboos out of an envy of this elevation. Bettelheim (1954/1962, pp. 61–62, 136–137, 161) criticises Freud for his scientific inaccuracy, for his inattention to taboos relating to menstruation and for his interpretation of initiation and circumcision.

The couvade is a ritual whereby men simulate childbirth (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, pp. 109–111). The ritual is for men not women and, while the woman who has given birth to the baby may return to everyday activities soon afterwards, the man may take to his bed and be nursed for days or weeks (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, pp. 109–110). The couvade ritual has been mentioned by others, including Zilboorg (1944, pp. 281, 288–290), Klein (1937/1953, p. 35), Trethowan and Conlon (1965), Stannard (1977, p. 290), Chesler (1978, p. 37, 51), Kittay (1984a, p. 111), Corea (1985/1986, pp. 284–285), Ducat (2004, pp. 35–37) and Janowitz (2008, p. 125). Stannard (1977, pp. 290–291) also mentions circumcision and subincision rituals. Corea (1985/1986, p. 284–285) mentions that the couvade ritual has been noted on all continents in both ancient times as well as recently. Ducat (2004, pp. 35–37) adds that the couvade can be seen as an example of an *appropriation* defence mechanism, noted by Klein (1957, pp. 62–67). Ducat (2004, pp. 219–220) points out that, among male religious fundamentalists, the couvade fantasy is a major leitmotif, and the exclusive rearing of children by men is there seen as a solution to female impurity.

Most of Bettelheim's (1954/1962) book centres on male initiation rites. However, he does mention female rites, but adds that there is much less information on these, partly due to the fact that most researchers have been men (Bettelheim,

1954/1962, p. 145). He notes that, in comparing rites of the manipulation of genitalia, there is a difference in those performed by men and those performed by women (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, pp. 145–146). In rites where men manipulate female genitalia, the manipulation is destructive and this can often be explained by a fear or envy on the part of males. In rites where women manipulate genitalia (such as pulling the labia to make it longer), the manipulation often leads to greater sexual enjoyment and making the genitalia more like those of men.

As part of his hypothesis, Bettelheim (1954/1962, pp. 45, 124) argues that the reason that male initiation rites are surrounded by secrecy is to hide the fact that they do not achieve the desired goal. In this context, Bettelheim (1954/1962, p. 127) notes that pretended power needs to be surrounded by secrecy, lest the world realises that “not only does the emperor not wear very special clothes but, in fact, no clothes at all”. Keeping the rituals a secret from women is in some places so important that women witnessing the rituals may be killed (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, p. 124).

Although Bettelheim (1954/1962, p. 168) mainly focuses on initiation rites of preliterate societies, he notes that some rites (such as circumcision) exist in modern society, and adds that modern society also contains events that may be compared to puberty rites, such as final examination and the conferring of degrees. Bettelheim (1954/1962, pp. 148–149) suggests that the feats that boys have to perform in order to prove their manhood in modern society (such as playing football) may stem from a desire to deny any feminine tendencies by overasserting their masculinity. He argues that, with the many masculine prerogatives that exist in modern society, it is likely that girls' desires to be boys may be stronger or more openly displayed than boys' desires to be girls. Bettelheim (1954/1962, p. 156) also makes a connection between technology (a characteristic of modern civilisation) and phallic primacy. Bettelheim (1954/1962, p. 151) believes that if males were freer to recognise their desire to create life, they would not need to be emotionally distant towards women, they would not aggressively compete with each other, and they would not need to assert power through destructive inventions.

Bettelheim (1954/1962) may be one of the most frequently cited sources on anthropological research relating to womb envy, but other sources are also worth mentioning. Macalpine and Hunter (1953, p. 339) also make a reference to anthropology when they note: “That procreation fantasies in children precede the knowledge of sexual differences and are therefore asexual was confirmed by Rank (1914 pp. 61, 62) from his anthropological studies”. Lidz and Lidz (1977, pp. 20, 21, 29) write about male menstruation rites among the Australian Aborigine, the Indigene of Papua/New Guinea and the Mojave of the United States of America, noting that men not only envy women their power to give birth but also their purification through menstruation. Hogbin (1970, pp. 88, 188) who has studied the people of Wogeo, New Guinea, also notes the idea of menstruation as a means of purification.

Marjorie Shostak (1981/2000) writes about Nisa, a female member of the !Kung tribe of hunter-gatherers from southern Africa's Kalahari Desert. Shostak reveals something indicating womb envy when fathers claim to give birth to children (1981/2000, p. 123) and when both mother and father are verbally recognised as having given birth to a child (1981/2000, pp. 137, 179). Similarly, Zimbalist Rosaldo

(1974, p. 41) notes that, among the Arapesh people, both women and men are said to “give birth to” and “grow” their children.

Ducat (2004, pp. 38–41) makes references to social anthropology when mentioning the Sambia, a tribe of warrior-hunters and horticulturalists in New Guinea. Among the Sambia, the men insert sharp leaves into their nostrils in order to induce bleeding, a ritual that is referred to as *male menstruation* by other New Guinea tribes. Janowitz (2008) also mentions initiation rites, arguing that unconscious envy of maternal functions in sacrifice rituals is often overlooked in the academic world (p. 117) and adding that sacrifice rituals are social mechanisms for disentangling gender roles (p. 118).

Womb envy in mythology and religion

Bamberger (1974, p. 279) argues that women's ability to conceive, bear and care for offspring is overlooked in myth. However, given the wide range of examples of womb envy in mythology, it seems more likely that female reproductive physiology is usurped by males. Several religions indicate womb envy in the form of, for example, rituals and stories. Kittay (1984a, p. 96) notes that several metaphors and images of procreation have a male rather than a female giving birth. Ducat (2004, p. 43) notes that womb envy often appears in folklore, unlike penis envy.

Simenauer (1954, pp. 235–237) notes that Fromm (1952, pp. 198–201) brings up the Babylonian Myth of Creation (Enuma Elish) as an example of womb envy in ancient mythology. Lederer (1968, p. 156) and Corea (1985/1986, p. 294) both refer to this myth, while Corea (1985/1986, p. 294) mentions the myth of Danu in the Rg Veda of India. The Enuma Elish myth tells of how male gods rebelled against Tiamat, the great mother ruling the world (Fromm, 1952, p. 198). Following a war, Tiamat is killed and Marduk, who has been chosen as the leader by the male gods conspiring against Tiamat, becomes supreme God (Fromm, 1952, p. 198). The part of the story that suggests pregnancy envy in the myth's creator(s) is a passage (Fromm, 1952, p. 198) where a garment is placed before Marduk and he is asked to destroy and create it, which he does. As Fromm (1952, p. 199) puts it: “But how can they win when they are inferior to women in one essential aspect? Women have the gift of natural creation, they can bear children... In order to defeat the mother [Tiamat], the male must prove that he is not inferior, that he has the gift to produce. Since he cannot produce with a womb, he must produce in another fashion; he produces with his mouth, his word, his thought.”

Fromm (1952, p. 200) points out that, where the Babylonian myth ends (that is, by quenching matriarchal society and religion), the Biblical myth begins (that is, with almost no trace of a previous matriarchal stage). Instead, it is a male God that creates the world by sheer verbal action and Eve is created from Adam's rib (Fromm, 1952, p. 200). Chesler (1978, p. 36) also notes the story of Adam and Eve as an expression of womb envy, as does Ducat (2004, p. 37) who extends this to include many myths in the Judeo-Christian tradition and adds that God's need to rest on the seventh day is similar to the need for rest by fathers in couvade rituals. Lax (1997, p. 124) describes how womb envy is denoted in the

New Testament story of God the Father creating Jesus by implanting the Holy Ghost into Mary, who serves only as a vessel.

French (1992, pp. 81–82) identifies aspects of Catholicism that mimic motherhood and female reproductive physiology:

“The teachings, structure and rituals of the Catholic Church are built on the same thinking as that of simple horticultural societies in which adolescent boys are ‘made’ in to ‘men’ by the adult males of the society. Although both sexes are intimidated at puberty, the rites differ: when a girl begins to menstruate, she is isolated, usually deprived (of food, drink or comfort), and often demeaned. Men initiate boys in groups. In a ritual that imitates birth through the mother, they force the boys to undergo a ‘second’ birth through men. This second birth is brutal and intimidating; the men may beat or otherwise injure them; they may cut their penises, spilling the boys’ blood in imitation of female menstruation, or send them through a frightening human tunnel that mimics the vaginal canal... Gloria Steinem point out that the architecture of Catholic churches mimics the female body: the outer portals serve as the labia majora, the inner portals as labia minora, the side altars as ovaries, and the high altar the uterus at the heart of the swelling dome that holds the body of the faithful, the child. Immersion in or sprinkling with holy water at baptism – a rite called rebirth – mimics the water in which the fetus lives. The God ingested at communion is a symbolic version of the actual nourishment a mother provides to her fetus and her newborn baby.”

Stannard (1977) brings further insight into the womb envy embedded in the Christian religion by mentioning the belief among early Christians that a person was not truly born until baptism (p. 293), adding that the Church has been regarded by some (such as Paul writing to the Galatians in the New Testament) as the mother of all people (p. 294), something that is noted by Corea (1985/1986, p. 285). Lax (1997, p. 125) also mentions the story of the stork who brings babies as another example of male envy, adding that the stork in flight is a phallic image that asserts male birth-giving and denies the role of the mother in procreation. Chesler (1978, p. 49) says that the story of King Solomon’s wisdom is not only a story of a mother’s love for her son, but also a story of a need to show that fathers will be better mothers to sons than women are.

The traces of womb envy extend far beyond Christian mythology and rituals. Groddeck (1923/1969, p. 16), Zilboorg (1944, p. 289), Lederer (1968, p. 155), Warnes and Hill (1974, p. 25), Fast (1984, p. 17), Corea (1985/1986, p. 295), Walker (1983/1996, pp. 106–107), Lax (1997, pp. 124–125), Ducat (2004, p. 36) and Stevens (2005, p. 280) all mention womb envy in Greek mythology. Warnes and Hill (1974, p. 25) note the story of how Zeus took from Semele the six month old foetus of Dionysus, sewed it up in himself and carried it full term. Another Greek myth relating to womb envy is that of how Zeus swallowed Metis, one of his wives (Ducat, 2004, p. 36), and later gave birth to Athena from his head (Chesler, 1978, p. 44; Ducat, 2004, p. 36). Stevens (2005, p. 280) says “A patrilineal society needs Athena to be born from Zeus’s head,

and not boys from their mothers, precisely because birth is so important”. Perhaps Walker (1983/1996, pp. 106–109) offers the most comprehensive account of male birth-giving mythology, including tales from Greek, Vedic, Egyptian, Hittite, Chinese and Norse mythology, as well as from Persia’s Zoroastrian cult and from Christian myths and rituals. Walker (1983/1996, p. 106) notes that usurping the female power to give birth appears to have been the distinguishing trait of the earliest gods.

Although Bettelheim (1954/1962) focuses mainly on the social anthropological perspective of womb envy, he also makes references to both Christianity and Judaism. He argues that at least five of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church can be seen as derivatives of rituals initially intended to give meaning to human life (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, p. 155) and that the Jewish myth of creation, whereby Eve is created from a rib of Adam, aims at asserting masculine superiority, in being so contrary to the natural course of events (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, p. 158). Shabad (2008, p. 75) also notes how the story of Adam and Eve contradicts biological facts. Lederer (1968, p. 157) only hints at the story of Adam and Eve, as the last of several examples of myths telling how woman is believed to have been created out of parts of man, such as growing out of his thumb (Greenland) or his urine (Polynesia).

Rank (1914), Lederer (1968, p. 159) and Shabad (2008) link womb envy to myths of male self-creation and immortality, as illustrated by the Oedipus story for example. Lederer (1968, p. 159) adds that this is connected with the association of women with sex and death. Moreover, Shabad (2008, p. 77) links this to a male journey from the maternal private sphere to the man-made public sphere, thus shedding further light on the female–male, private–public gender dichotomy (Lister, 2001/2004, pp. 323, 324).

To summarise, it seems that womb envy takes one of two forms in mythology and folklore: 1) male appropriation of female procreative powers, while erasing women from procreation (as in the Enuma Elish, the Bible and Greek mythology), or 2) male self-creation (as in the story of Oedipus). With male envy in the first form (appropriation of female procreative powers), it might seem paradoxical that, as Corea (1985/1986, pp. 169–170) points out, men have for centuries reduced women to the one function that they cannot annex for themselves: that is, a woman who cannot have children is not a real woman.

Womb envy in other contexts

Knowledge of the equal contribution to conception was not properly clarified until the second half of the nineteenth century (Laqueur, 1990/1992, p. 174). However, as mentioned by Lederer (1968, p. 156), Stannard (1977, p. 296), Kittay (1984a, p. 113), Corea (1985/1986, p. 295) and Ducat (2004, p. 37), womb envy has manifested itself in science in the form of the homunculus theory of human development. According to this theory, the offspring develops solely out of the male sperm’s and the womb is only an incubator during pregnancy. In this context, Lederer (1968, pp. 155–156), Stannard (1977, p. 295), Corea (1985/1986, p. 296), Laqueur (1990/1992, p. 57) and Ducat (2004, p. 36) mention that the idea of fathers as sole contributors to conception also

resounds in *The Eumenides* (final play of *Oresteia*), by playwright Aeschylus, in which Orestes murders his mother in revenge for her murder of his father, Agamemnon, but pleads not guilty with the argument that a mother is not a real parent. Corea (1985/1986, p. 296) mentions that the Marquis de Sade held this view of the father as the sole parent. Stannard (1977, p. 295) cites an old Japanese proverb, “A woman’s womb is a borrowed vessel to beget a child”, and also mentions that Aristotle regarded the male as the Master Creator.

Furthermore, Stannard (1977, pp. 297–298) and Corea (1985/1986, pp. 296–298) explain that this male wish to ascribe parenthood to fathers alone constrained attempts to find the female reproductive glands (the ovaries, or *femal testes* as they were once known) and, after the female reproductive gland had been discovered, to identify its significance.

Chesler (1978, pp. 38–39) says that alchemy (and male science in general) has its roots in womb envy. Allen and Hubbs (1980) also suggest that alchemy was an attempt to seek maternal powers (also noted by Corea, 1985/1986, pp. 290–291). Corea (1985/1986) mentions transvestism as an attempt to obtain female birthgiving power (p. 285), hypothesising that transsexual surgery may at some point help turning men into mothers (p. 291). In addition, she mentions cloning as a means of achieving male self-creation (Corea, 1985/1986, pp. 260–270), as manifested in folklore (as in the story of Oedipus previously mentioned), and notes that some researchers are predicting male motherhood through abdominal pregnancies (Corea, 1985/1986, pp. 291–292).

Males, from the 17th century in Europe (Kittay, 1984a, p. 114) and the 19th century in the US (Corea, 1985/1986, p. 304) took control over what had thitherto been a female domain, midwifery. Meanwhile, the witch-hunting processes, taking place between the 13th and 18th centuries, often targeted midwives (Lederer, 1968, pp. 200–204).

Kittay (1984a, pp. 108, 112) sees Socrates’ maieutic technique as an expression of womb envy. This technique involves the teacher extracting knowledge from pupils by asking questions, as a midwife helps mothers bringing forth children — the method was based on midwifery, a profession carried out by Socrates’ own mother (Kittay, 1984a, pp. 108, 112). And so womb envy manifests itself not only in the medical sciences but also in the fine arts.

Kittay (1984a, p. 112) mentions the metaphor of “artistic and intellectual birth” conceived of in homosexual relationships in Ancient Greece, another example of how intellectual work was modelled on the childbearing capacity of women. Klein (1937/1953, p. 32) notes womb envy is expressed by “painters and writers, who feel they give birth to their works like a woman in labour after long pregnancy”. Indeed, paintings named *womb envy* have been created by artists Jane Anne Evans (2008) and Jeffrey Streed (Year unknown). Chesler (1978, pp. 43, 59) mentions the paintings *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo (1508–1512) and *Elohim Creating Adam* by William Blake (around, 1805), and also the sculpture *Rolling into the Future Without Love or Sorrow* by the German artist Hans Peter Alvermann (year unknown), as expressions of womb envy. Artist Naomi DesMoines has produced a piece of art named *womb envy* (Bosta, 2000, p. 17) and a song entitled *womb envy* was written by Ron Romanovsky for Peter

Alsop’s music album “Ebenezer’s Make Over” (Romanovsky, 1984).

Simenauer (1954) notes the pregnancy envy of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). As Corea (1985/1986, p. 286) notes, Wendy Lichtman (1982) has written a children’s book about a boy who wants a baby, using the foreword to thank “the men and boys who were vulnerable and brave in telling me their feelings of longing for that which is not possible”. Hence, not all men join in the “dignified fraternal silence” confessed by Lederer (1968, p. 153); Kittay (1984a, p. 95) notes at least some men admitting envy over women’s childbearing ability in classrooms where she has discussed the womb envy topic. Tom Malmquist, a former Swedish ice-hockey player who is now an author, has published a poetry collection (Malmquist, 2009), arguing that there is an envy in men for not being able to give birth or lactate (Hansson & Thunberg, 2009).

Steven Lehman (1992) notes how Mary Shelley’s book *Frankenstein* and H. G. Wells’ book *The Island of Dr Moreau* both tell the story of how a crazed male scientist takes of the natural female function of creating life. As Johnson (1982, p. 8) argues (also noted by Lehman (1992, p. 49)) the story of *Frankenstein* is about “a man who usurps the female role by physically giving birth to a child”, adding that “it would be tempting, therefore, to conclude that Mary Shelley...transposed her own frustrated female penis envy into a tale of catastrophic male womb envy”. But as Lehman (1992, p. 55) points out, the difference between the two protagonists, Victor Frankenstein and Dr Moreau, is that the latter never doubts or regrets his actions. Could this be related by the fact that the author of *Frankenstein* was a woman while the author of *The Island of Dr Moreau* was a man? Both books have been made into films. Sharma (2007) finds the womb envy concept illustrated in another film, Tarsem Singh’s *The Cell* (2000) and McLarty (1996, p. 250) mentions womb envy in David Cronenberg’s films *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1988).

Kittay (1984a, p. 117) argues that one type of misogyny that can be linked with womb envy is pornography, especially violent pornography. Chesler (1978, p. 59) argues that pornographic and erotic art expresses womb envy.

To sum up, it seems that womb envy is manifested in a variety of ways. Interestingly, it is not limited to far-away cultures and bygone times but, rather, continues to be expressed in Western culture to this day, for example in films (as noted by Sharma (2007) and McLarty (1996)) and in modern research (as noted by Corea (1985/1986, pp. 291–292)).

Womb envy and male productivity

Horney not only noted womb envy in her male patients, but also argued that creative work in men was a means of overcompensating for their limited role in procreation (Horney, 1926/1967b, p. 61): “Is not the tremendous strength in men of the impulse to creative work in every field precisely due to their feeling of playing a relatively small part in the creation of living beings, which constantly impels them to an overcompensation in achievement?” In another article, Horney (1926–7/1967c, p. 77) suggests that womb envy “drives the male to his productivity in the cultural area”. Klein (1928, p. 207) made an argument similar to this link between male envy and achievement or productivity when she said

that womb envy, or the *femininity complex* as she called it, is compensated for by *excessive protestations of masculinity*.

Several scholars have argued along the same lines:

- Psychoanalysts Mary Chadwick and Karl Landauer both argued that male disappointment at not being able to create human life led men to intellectual creativity (Bettelheim, 1954/1962, p. 56).
- Boehm (1930, p. 456) states that “Envy of the woman's capacity to bear children is a considerable incentive to the capacity for production in men” and Warnes and Hill (1974, p. 26) make an almost identical claim when they say that “Envy of the woman's capacity to bear children is a considerable incentive to the drive for production in men”.
- van Leeuwen (1966, p. 322) makes a comment similar to that of Boehm (1930, p. 456) and Warnes and Hill (1974, p. 26) in relation to a particular case report.
- Rank (1941, p. 236) argues that the project of self-creation and immortality (which can be regarded as a compensation for womb envy) leads to a need to eradicate his being born of woman: “Herein is to be found the dynamic drive for man's religious, social and artistic creativity through which he not only proves his supernatural origin (religion) and capacity (art) but also tries to translate it into practical terms of social organization (state, government)”. This is also noted in Shabad (2008, p. 77).
- Mead (1949, pp. 149, 157–160) makes the connection between women's ability to give birth and the need among males to achieve something in their own right, as the paternity of any offspring is never as certain as the maternity: “The recurrent problem of civilization is to define the male rôle satisfactorily enough – whether it be to build gardens or raise cattle, kill game or kill enemies, build bridges or handle bank-shares – so that the male may in the course of his life reach a solid sense of irreversible achievement, of which his childhood knowledge of the satisfactions of childbearing have given him a glimpse.” (p. 160)
- Fromm (1952, p. 199) links male need to produce in other ways (“with his mouth, his word, his thought”) with the lack of a womb and the inability to give birth to children (mentioned earlier).
- Nelson (1967, p. 216) puts forward the “thesis that some pressure for productivity in the boy and man has roots in their envy of the woman's feminine functions”.
- van der Leeuw (1958, p. 353) argues that “It would seem that creative work normally serves as an outlet for the sublimation of male wishes for pregnancy and childbearing”.
- Jaffe (1968, pp. 521, 534) notes suggestions that the rational and technological development of man has its origin in a compensation for his womb envy.
- Ortner (1974, p. 75) says that the universal devaluation of women can be explained as a result of female reproductive physiology: “In other words, woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, “artificially,” through the medium of technology and symbols,” Ortner (1974) links this to the nature–culture dichotomy that is sometimes used with reference to gender, linking woman to nature and man to culture (MacCormack & Strathern, 1980/1986).

- Ross (1975, p. 804) says that the desire in boys for a child of their own may be fulfilled through creative work.
- Lax (1997, p. 132) points out that creative activities such as “model building, art, etc.” as well as “the fulfilment of nurturing wishes by raising pets, gardening, and the like” may successfully compensate for the renunciation of the wish of pregnancy, child-bearing and suckling in boys.

Horney's proposal might be understood to mean that much of male achievement in recorded history may well be the result of womb envy. But the question arises: how to link womb envy with male productivity and ambition? This may be explained by another defence mechanism, *compensation*, whereby a shortcoming in one area is compensated for by achievements in another area, as indeed suggested by Horney's own wording: “overcompensation in achievement” (1926/1967b, p. 61). Hence, achievements in the public sphere could be a means of compensating for not being able to conceive and give birth to children. I would argue that this link could explain why women have often been (and are still, in some places) excluded from the productive sphere (and public life) and relegated to a life reduced to mainly nurturing and child-rearing activities (in the private sphere), as pointed out by Corea (1985/1986, pp. 169–170). In the same way as men are unable to obtain the natural female ability of conceiving and giving birth to children, perhaps they are likely to deny women the opportunity of achievement in the public sphere in return?

Conclusions

Freud's theory of penis envy has been criticised in the last few decades. Meanwhile, Horney's theory of womb envy has received growing support. Manifestations of womb envy appear to be found in areas ranging from social anthropology, religion and folklore, to modern Western culture. It is sometimes argued that no single cause for misogyny exists (Gemzöe, 2005, p. 92) but, given the cultural and anthropological pervasiveness of the womb envy concept, it could, in fact, be such a single cause. While male domination in societal evolution has long been explained as the result of biological factors, through concepts such as *the variability hypothesis* (Shields, 1982), Horney's suggestion that womb envy is the cause for much of male achievement now has the support of several scholars. In addition, her theory is consistent with at least two widely accepted gender dichotomies, nature (women)–culture (men) and private (women)–public (men). Several scholars mention the *reaction formation* defence mechanism in relation to womb envy. However, the *compensation* defence mechanism could explain the link between womb envy and the productivity and creativity of men in the productive (and public) sphere, as suggested by Horney's own wording.

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