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Monstrous Mothers:

The Politics of Forced Mothering

By

Gillian Henry

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Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for

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ABSTRACT

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ADVISOR: Lori Marso

Can a woman be a woman without being a mother? By studying the control of women's bodies around reproduction, my work elucidates the insistence on women becoming "good mothers" for society. Is the childless woman a monster? Analysis of the Medea trope identifies that the most monstrous woman of all is thought to be the woman who kills her children. And while white women fight for reproductive choice, women of color fight for reproductive freedom, as coercive policies such as forced sterilization deprive women of color as even being considered as potential mothers. Society's insistence on women fulfilling their destiny as good mothers produces several versions of social panic about mothers, demonstrating that women are still inextricably linked with motherhood.

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To my friends, for supporting me with words of encouragement, for providing many shoulders to cry on, and for listening and contributing to my angry feminist rants that lead to and were a product of this thesis.

To my Mother, who escaped the fate of female infanticide but was abandoned instead, for trying her best even though she had no mother to look to.

To my Dad, for helping me understand that my mother is human and does not need to be perfect. You have been my best friend and advocate every step of the way. Thank you for being the best dance partner, teacher, and cheerleader a girl could ask for.

And to all the women who chose not to be mothers, who are choosing not to be mothers; to all the single mothers, all mothers, and all the single ladies out there. This is for you.

Introduction

"It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny…"
~ Simone de Beauvoir

The capacity to bear children is a magical ability that has long defined the possibilities for the female sex. Little girls are tasked with the care of baby dolls; womanhood is achieved in the arrival of menstruation: the *period* which marks the *end* of childhood and the ability to finally reproduce. Generations of women are burdened with the bearing and rearing of children, relegated to the role of housewife and mother, the ultimate job for women. Pity the woman unable to bear children, negatively connoted as *barren*. Adrienne Rich, author of the 1976 book *Of Woman Born*, once believed herself that "to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full," a belief that perpetuates the institution of motherhood (25). Rich explicates the "institution" of motherhood as a patriarchal establishment that has contained women within the home and devalued the potentialities of women; she argues that "female possibility has literally been massacred on the site of motherhood" and that motherhood has incarcerated women in their bodies (13). Can women, then, so incarcerated in and confined to this institution, be women without being mothers? As much as women have been liberated today, the institution of motherhood is such a pervasive convention that the bonds between womanhood and motherhood have yet to be broken. True woman status is not achieved until one becomes a mother, and the woman who seeks to define herself outside of the constraints of motherhood is a monster.

The inability of women to be “real women” without being mothers is exemplified by the characterization of bad mothers—and even women ambivalent in motherhood—as monsters. Women seeking to postpone motherhood through the use of birth control are frightening; women obtaining abortions to limit their number of children or delay motherhood are confusing creatures. Meghan Daum, the editor and compiler of sixteen stories on people’s decisions not to have kids, characterizes the most common accusations against non-mothers in the title of her book: *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed*. Even women ambivalent in their decision to become mothers—those not yet decided, time left on their “biological clocks” (Hodell 18)—are disapprovingly goaded. Actual mothers, ambivalent or not in their actual roles, are misconstrued worst of all. Mothers who might feel regret in having children, or anger, or uncertainty of any kind, are deemed “bad” mothers. While strong emotions about motherhood are most likely universal, they are used to devalue women, and “bad” mothers become the scapegoat for women:

> Reading of the “bad” mother’s desperate response to an invisible assault on her being, “good” mothers resolve to become better…The scapegoat is different from the martyr…She represents a terrible temptation: to suffer uniquely, to assume that I, the individual woman, am the “problem.” (Rich 278)

And thus is Medea the ultimate scapegoat. Euripides presents the authentic Greek tragedy, in which Medea kills her children to make Jason suffer. Medea is in no way ambivalent; even in her decision to kill her children, she is unwavering. But the social panic about mothers, especially those who kill their children, causes *Medea* to represent

the most monstrous woman of all. The absolute characterization of all types of mothers as monsters illustrates the inextricable nature of motherhood and womanhood.

The ever-existing institution of motherhood is demonstrated in the seemingly endless argument over the control of women's bodies. Women fight for access to birth control and abortion to this day, ultimately seeking full reproductive autonomy. This language of choice does not apply universally, though, as some women—black women, for example—cannot even enter the category of women to be considered as mothers. Worldwide, some women are strictly limited in how many children they are allowed to have, whereas birth control is restricted from other women, all in the name of population control. The control of women's bodies in terms of reproduction is an omnipresent facet of the institution of motherhood.

A pioneer of birth control in the 1920s, Margaret Sanger collected thousands of pleas written to her, asking for "deliverance from the bondage of enforced maternity," and compiled them in her book *Motherhood in Bondage* (xiv). Accounts range from mothers of ten, desperate to have no more children for concern for their health, to young girls hoping to wait until they are older to have children, to women seeking the ability to control whether or not to become a mother at all. While the general ages of these women are much younger than we are used to today, these stories do not seem dated. The cry for birth control was varied but common, and Sanger hoped these stories would help promote the acceptance of birth control. Nearly a full century later, a former President of Planned Parenthood writes in the Foreward (sic) to *Motherhood in Bondage* that "we can see the partial realization of Sanger's vision," but the fight is anything but over (Feldt, vi). She

laments that "in the U.S. and around the world, extremists are working to restrict access to reproductive health care and information," a clear instance of the mistrust in women (Feldt, vi). To these conservatives, any woman seeking reproductive control of her body is challenging the maternal ability of her body, and is thus a monster.

On the other, more suppressed aspect of birth control, Dorothy E. Roberts explores the significance of race in the story of birth control in her book K*illing the Black Body*. In the progression of birth control, "the movement veered from its radical, feminist origins towards a eugenic agenda," and birth control was utilized to "regulate the poor, immigrants, and Black Americans" (Roberts, 58-59). Used to prevent "unfit" women from reproducing, "Birth control became a means of controlling a population rather than a means of increasing women's reproductive autonomy" (Roberts 80). Through governmentally-funded birth control programs, or forced sterilization, black women were so monstrous in just their blackness that they were deemed unfit to become mothers. These black women and other women of color, involuntarily sterilized, were barred from the discussion of choice and not even considered for the category of mother. Roberts delineates this awful history of the birth control movement, and differentiates the language of choice that white women experienced from the imposed infertility of women of color.

Adrienne Rich succinctly summarizes the issue of birth control as a binary. For white women, access to birth control is restricted in the attempts to compel the women to become mothers; for black women and women of color, motherhood is obstructed by their forced sterilization or imposed use of birth control. Rich argues that the difference

between the two experiences is "as distinct [as] being forcibly prescribed or rendered obsolete by fiat" (76).

Similarly fought for and opposed is abortion: an opportunity to practice bodily autonomy after the fact of conception—also, as a safeguard, the only way for birth control to be 100% effective. Caitlin Moran, author of her memoir *How to Be a Woman*, reminisces about her fourth pregnancy. For her, already a mother of two, her decision is simple: "not even for a second do I think I should have this baby. I have no dilemma, no terrible decision to make—because I know, with calm certainty, that I don't want another child now" (Moran 303). Even as straightforward as her own decision is, Moran recognizes the pattern of women providing justification for their abortions. Much like the dichotomy between the "good" and "bad" mother, Moran speaks of "good abortions" and "bad abortions". The "good abortions" fall under the justification of health or conception from rape; on the other hand "are the "worst" kind of abortions: repeated abortions, late-term abortions, abortions after IVF, and—worst of all—mothers who have abortions" (Moran 305). It is precisely the fantasy of motherhood, so idealized, that makes abortion out to be the obscene limitation of a mother's capacity to have children. There exists an idea that "by having an abortion, a woman is somehow being unfemale, and, indeed, unmotherly," marking abortion as a monstrous act (Moran 306).

Adrienne Rich connects the issue of abortion to the issue of birth control: "The demand for legalized abortion…has been represented as a form of irresponsibility, a refusal by women to confront their moral destiny, a trivialization or evasion of great issues of life and death" (267). As motherhood is female destiny, abortion is the

termination of women's true calling. Abortion is seen as monstrous because the potential of the baby is unrealized, whereas the pregnant woman's potential as *mother* is about to be realized—until she aborts. Killing both the potentialities of the baby and herself, the woman is regarded as a monster.

In a similar vein as birth control, the language around abortion differs depending on race. Dorothy Roberts argues that government restrictions on motherhood are doubly targeted to black women:

> On a theoretical level, family caps and the denial of funding for abortion are not contradictory: both limit indigent women's control over their own bodies by making it more difficult to realize their reproductive decisions. More concretely, these policies work concretely to achieve a common end that is against the interests of Black women. Faced with the untenable position of having no money either to get an abortion or to raise a child, poor Black women will be pressured into taking drastic steps to avoid childbirth. (235)

Whereas white women consider abortion as a *choice*, Black women are seeking something else. Rooted in the history of American slavery, Black women, who were once forced to bear children for their slaveowners, but not allowed to keep and raise them, seek *reproductive freedom* instead of *choice*.

The Medea trope illuminates the greatest fears about mothers. Euripides' Greek Medea, the mother who kills her two children, garners intense fear and disgust in reaction to her killing her children. The cultural trope of Medea, exemplified in many varying instances, epitomizes the social panic surrounding mothers ambivalent in their

motherhood. Though Medea herself is not ambivalent in her motherhood, and rather quite certain in her decision to kill her children, the fear that a woman could be able to kill her own children is intensified in every Medea reincarnation. Christa Wolf, an East German writer, reimagines *Medea* having no part in the death of her children. Removed from their deaths, Wolf's Medea is still implicated, and the reaction towards her is indicative of society's feelings about filicide. Though innocent, Medea is greatly feared, exemplifying the social panic surrounding the idea of mothers killing their children.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, former slave Sethe is a 19th century African American incarnation of Medea. With the addition of her blackness, Sethe faces complex challenges in her Medean experience. After escaping slavery with her children, she faces the prospects of returning to slavery and losing the right to her children when her master follows her to bring her back. In a desperate attempt to protect her children, she kills one of her daughters. So frightened is she of her children's potential futures in slavery that death by her hands is preferable; she recollects "if I hadn't killed her she would have died" (Morrison 236). In fearing for her children's lives, immediate death by their own mother is her only solution to prevent either their deaths by Schoolteacher or lifelong servitude. Stamp Paid, who is present at the attempted killing, explains to Paul D that Sethe "ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (Morrison 276). Sethe's Medean actions are successful in preventing her and her children's return to slavery, even though she only murders one of her daughters.

While Sethe experiences the aforementioned issues of motherhood as a black woman, wanting not *choice* but *freedom* for herself and to keep her children, she is still

regarded as a monster by her community. Her actions are so horrific that the slaveowner leaves without her; the neighbors ignore her and her family disappears from her. She is questioned as a mother, for her actions of killing her child cloud society's views of her as a woman and a mother. Ultimately, she sees herself as a monster, too, and tries to make amends for what she did. Her own views of herself, along with society's blanket horror in regards to all Medea characters, illuminates that crucial dichotomy of "bad mothers" and "good mothers". A larger representation of what some dramatize birth control and abortion to be, the woman who kills her children is the most monstrous woman of all.

Simone de Beauvoir, French political theorist and author of *The Second Sex*, argues that "Forced motherhood results in bringing miserable children into the world, children whose parents cannot feed them, who become victims of public assistance or "martyr children" (525). Restrictions to birth control and abortion access are main culprits in forced motherhood, but societal expectations and pressures ultimately bring many unwanted or unplanned children into the world. Patriarchy combined with biology has defined femaleness as child-bearing, so to become a woman, one must become a mother. Women seeking to define themselves outside of the constraints of motherhood are regarded as unfeminine, as selfish, and as monsters. Autonomy over a woman's body is seen as a rejection of motherhood, whether it be through birth control, abortion, or infanticide. This paper will examine the deeper nuances behind each identification of woman as monster and the societal norms that demand all women be "good mothers". Extricating motherhood from womanhood, the exploration of monstrous mothers will help us understand how to be a woman without having to be a mother.

Chapter 2: Birth Control

"There has been an especially strong connection between the subjection of women and the prohibition on birth control: the latter has been a means of enforcing the former."
~ Linda Gordon

Disentangling the institution of motherhood from the experience of womanhood commences, almost immediately, conversation about birth control. Control and prevention of pregnancy is perhaps the most important facility for any individual woman seeking to remain consciously childless. This kind of autonomy is necessary to be able to dissect the institution from the biology; with the potentiality of motherhood looming over much of every woman's life, control is necessary to allow women to enjoy their womanhood. Reproduction control is imperative to preventing involuntary motherhood, and the ability to plan for and choose children is essential to promoting voluntary motherhood. It also allows for the separation of sex and reproduction. However, birth control has an arduous history, the resolution of which has not been reached today. Restrictions to birth control have transformed over the years, but still prevail. Inversely, these restrictions fall away and birth is forcefully controlled for women of color and other women deemed "unfit" to bear children. This thread of eugenics occurred simultaneously in secret and in support of the birth control movement. Used in this way, birth control prevented those who were already regarded as monsters from becoming mothers, and thus from being accepted fully as women. The women whom patriarchal society did want to become mothers were prohibited from access to birth control, in fear of not fulfilling

potential as a mother. Ultimately, these restrictions and coercions exist as verification that patriarchal society still equates woman with mother.

While forms of contraception have existed for many thousands of years, little change occurred until relatively recently. In the United States, the movement for the right to control reproduction began about two centuries ago. Linda Gordon examines the history and development of the movement in her book *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*. Gordon identifies four distinct stages of the reproduction control movement, the last of which is still the main platform of the movement today. Each different framing of the movement reflects the mindset behind and the goals of the movement at that time.

The initial catalyst for the movement, and much of what the movement is ultimately based in, is the idea of "voluntary motherhood" (Gordon 4). Beginning as a promotion of this idea, with an emphasis on choice and freedom, the movement created the term "birth control" in its second stage in the 1910s-20s . The movement then developed into one of "planned parenthood", which is now the name for the most widespread reproductive health clinic organization in the nation. While termed differently in each stage, the overarching reasoning for the majority of the movement is still voluntary motherhood. Though legitimate, this framing only reinforces the institutionalization of motherhood; it does not provide an alternative, but rather a solution for "involuntary motherhood" (Gordon 55). Thus does the desire to achieve reproduction control to promote voluntary motherhood become a reinforcement of maternity. Birth control developed as a "tool for women to strengthen their positions within conventional

marriages and families, not to reject them," acting more as a sentimentalization of motherhood rather than a liberation from it (Gordon 71).

In fact, "the presumed special motherly nature" of women was used as a fundamental argument to promote the birth control movement (Gordon 59). This is well exemplified in Margaret Sanger's fight for these rights. A pioneer of the birth control movement, Sanger first became interested with the issue in her experience as a nurse (The Margaret Sanger Papers Project). Tending to young girls and women in painful and unwanted childbirths, Sanger saw a desperate need for the ability to control or prevent pregnancy. Despite censorship and a federal law that prohibited the circulation of information about contraception, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the United States in 1916, and went on to found a multitude of other clinics and organizations, including the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. As a leader of such a necessary movement, she received countless pleas from men and women alike for help in accessing contraceptives. She collected some of these please in her book, which brings to light the extent of the institutionalization of motherhood, titled *Motherhood in Bondage* (1928).

In Margaret Sanger's collection of pleas for contraception, appeals range from wanting to wait to have children, to already having many children and wanting no more, to being physically or financially unable to have more children. One woman writes to Sanger in criticism of her own mother's understanding of womanhood, that "everybody could and should have all the children they could even if it kills them" (257). This view of womanhood seems to be the prevailing construct that most of the correspondents identify as their main obstacle. One woman fears that her prevailing illness will mean

certain death if she becomes pregnant, and so has abstained from sex with her husband (253). One correspondent, who suffers from slight paralysis when she is pregnant, is told by her doctor "Don't play with fire and you will not get burned" when she asks for help (231). Some women take this advice to heart, and avoid or separate from their husbands in order to prevent pregnancies. The correspondent who most succinctly understands the greater issue writes to Sanger: "I hope the day will come soon when women can have the say if they are to be mothers or not" (62). However, it is clear that this is not yet the meaning of the movement. The tight connection of motherhood to womanhood elucidates the underlying reasons behind the innumerable pleas Sanger received; these women were unable to extricate themselves from the construct and pressure to be mothers, both physically and ideologically. Sanger herself acknowledges that motherhood for almost all of these women was subjected, not chosen—thus her title *Motherhood in Bondage*. Most of these women were unable to achieve voluntary motherhood, and were desperately hoping to prevent any further involuntary motherhood. These pleas illustrate the inextricability of motherhood and womanhood in patriarchal society, and how the institution of motherhood is not only promoted but also internalized. While restricted access to contraception underlines society's investment in the institution, every story's justification of already-born or soon-to-come children illuminates the association of woman and mother.

It was primarily this belief in the maternal instinct—and the societal importance placed on it—that stifled the development of birth control. The supporters of the movement justified the need for birth control for women *because* the women were

mothers. Birth control was not exalted in order to “open the possibility of childlessness” (Gordon 69); involuntary motherhood was viewed as “a prostitution of the maternal instinct” (Gordon 68). Gordon identifies this institution as the “cult of motherhood” in which it was believed that women who avoided motherhood “remained unfulfilled, untrue to their destinies” (69-70). Thus, for mothers seeking to attain voluntary motherhood, birth control was a woman’s “moral property” (64); but control to remain childless was out of the question.

That is, childlessness was out of the question for privileged, white women, whom society desired to be mothers. But in regards to women deemed unfit to be mothers by patriarchal, Western society, reproduction control to prevent childbearing was not only accepted but encouraged. Those fighting for the birth control movement used this idea to justify the movement’s cause: “they combined eugenics and feminism to produce evocative, romantic visions of perfect motherhood” (Gordon 68). In conceptualizing the *good* mother—no, the *perfect* mother—the women who did not meet these standards were subjected to quite the opposite of restricted access to birth control. While this involves women with disabilities, mental illnesses, or criminal records, it predominantly concerns women of color. While this has played a role in the lives of Native American, Asian American, and African American women, Dorothy E. Roberts, a scholar on gender and race, writes how “Race completely changes the significance of birth control to the story of women’s reproductive freedom” in her book K*illing the Black Body* (56), focusing predominantly on African American women.

In the advancement of the birth control movement, a racist, eugenic agenda justified the otherwise monstrous idea of preventing childbirth. With the intent of restricting "socially undesirable people from procreating," the birth control movement gained greater popularity and legitimacy (Roberts 65). This racist thread more clearly defined the function of birth control to be a tool with which to control a population, in order to shift the movement away from its ability to increase reproductive autonomy (Roberts 80). Initially focused around the social Darwinist idea that intelligence, poverty, and other characteristics are genetically inherited, "the eugenicists advocated the rational control of reproduction in order to improve society" (Roberts 59). While the targets of this program ranged from women who would rely on welfare to raise their children, to women who might be mentally disabled, women of color as a group were especially targeted with the intent of improving and strengthening the white population. Racist beliefs that Black women were biologically inferior to white women created fear that they would be "bad" mothers, and would thus raise "bad" children.

In the name of preventing these women from becoming "bad" mothers, the eugenics movement merged with the redefined birth control movement. Margaret Sanger championed birth control as a means of achieving the nation's interests in "America's quest for racial betterment" (Roberts 72). To Sanger, positive eugenics, the improvement of human population by well-matched breeding, was insufficient. Negative eugenics, the improvement of a population by discouraging or preventing reproduction, was the program that Sanger introduced to the birth control movement. This motivation gave the movement greater legitimacy and facilitated the opening of many birth control clinics.

Eugenics not only advanced the growth of the birth control movement, but also motivated coerced reproduction control of many women. Black women were forcibly prevented from becoming mothers in two distinct ways. More covertly, government programs to increase access to birth control were supportive in theory but coercive in practice. Policies ranging from financially "incentivizing" a woman to use birth control to threatening a woman with the loss of a health benefit exploited the economic desperation of poor women. The birth control method Norplant was promoted to Black women "on the assumption that poor Black women are incapable of taking responsibility for their own sexuality and reproduction," thus giving the government that responsibility instead (Roberts 136). Furthermore, Norplant was marketed to all women receiving public assistance, with no consideration for suitability of or desire for the method. The combination of this targeted encouragement with the financial incentives offered by the government placed an acute pressure on poor women to use this birth control, one which wealthy—and thus predominantly white—women did not face. These government actions inappropriately influenced poor women, disproportionately women of color, to make a "choice" that they might not have made otherwise (Roberts 135).

More overtly, "states across the country forcibly sterilized thousands of citizens thought to be genetically inferior" (Roberts 59). Increasingly, the term "intelligence became a shorthand for moral worth as well as cognitive capacity," and so IQ tests of Blacks and Southern or Eastern European immigrants were used to substantiate claims of inferior intellect in comparison to Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent. In a racist attempt to improve society, birth control advocates and eugenicists advocated for forced

sterilization of potentially "unfit" mothers. This idea originated from practices of castrating Black males convicted of crimes, often a punishment for male slaves (Roberts 66). Laws authorizing compulsory sterilization spread quickly:

> In 1907, Indiana became the first state to pass an involuntary sterilization law, empowering state institutions to sterilize, without consent, criminals and "imbeciles" whose condition was "pronounced unimprovable" by a panel of physicians. Within six years, eleven additional states had enacted involuntary sterilization laws directed at those deemed burdens on society, including the mentally retarded, the mentally ill, epileptics, and criminals. Because most statutes mandated sterilization only for people confined to state institutions, they were imposed primarily against the poor. (Roberts 67)

The superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office in 1914, Harry Hamilton Laughlin, created a model sterilization law with which he hoped to achieve the sterilization of 15 million people within two generations. While this plan did not come to fruition, and many other laws were deemed unconstitutional, the 1927 Supreme Court *Buck v. Bell* decision justified and enabled the involuntary sterilization of women regarded as "feebleminded," a common term (of that time) that condemned a woman's sexual immorality (Roberts 69). While intellect and mental ability were considered, "Many women were sent to institutions to be sterilized solely because they were promiscuous or had become pregnant out of wedlock," a clear indication that women's sexual autonomy was feared and criticized (69). A woman would be deemed "sexually delinquent" for conducting herself as a man would, and could be institutionalized and sterilized for this alone (69). In the 1930s, these forced sterilization policies became even more directly targeted towards

Black women, and programs to specifically reduce the Black birthrate were proposed. The "deplorable state of Black health" was cited as rationale for the sterilization programs (Roberts 71), but ultimately Black women were considered too monstrous to become mothers. These racist beliefs were concealed within concerns about sufficient health, wealth, and intellect of Black women to be mothers.

Governmentally, eugenics-motivated sterilization programs came to an end in the 1940s, especially due to the shame that resulted from the movement's connection to the Nazi Holocaust. In the time period in which involuntary sterilization programs were federally prompted, from 1929 to 1941, approximately 2,000 forced sterilizations occurred every year, with an estimate of 70,000 forced sterilizations occurring in total (Roberts 89). But while federally endorsed compulsory sterilizations ended, compulsory sterilizations of Black women continued. No longer target by laws, but abused by doctors, Black women received sterilizations without their informed consent, without their knowledge, and for no valid medical reason. A young teenager underwent a hysterectomy instead of a traditional abortion; a woman was sterilized unknowingly after her C-section; the obstetrics and gynecology director of a hospital in New York admitted that "In most major teaching hospitals in New York City, it is the unwritten policy to do elective hysterectomies on poor black and Puerto Rican women, with minimal indications, to train residents" (Roberts 91). Doctors sterilized girls who they believed to not be capable of using birth control, which was "a code phrase for 'black' or 'poor'" (Roberts 92). The 1973 lawsuit involving the Relf sisters, two young Black girls sterilized without their knowledge, uncovered that approximately 100,000-150,000 poor

women had been forcibly sterilized every year in cooperation with the federal programs; half of these women were Black (Roberts 93). Other racial and ethnic groups that were also targets of the federal sterilization programs include Puerto Ricans and Native Americans, both of which were subject to horrific crusades against their reproductive capabilities. Though restrictions now exist to prevent forced sterilizations, abuses by individual doctors still occur. Whether because of subtly racist beliefs of hereditary poverty or overtly racist beliefs of lower intelligence, women of color are not considered fit to be mothers, which the United States' history of forced sterilization demonstrates.

In the same breath that women of color were sterilized against their will or without their knowledge, white women were routinely denied sterilization. These women, ideal mothers in Western culture, were barred from receiving sterilizations:

> Most hospitals followed the "120 formula" prescribed by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: "if a woman's age multiplied by the number of children she had totaled 120, she was a candidate for sterilization." Even then, she would need the endorsement of two doctors and a psychiatrist. Under this formula, a woman with three children would not become eligible until she reached age forty, and having no children would absolutely bar a woman from being sterilized. (Roberts 95)

It was believed that white women who did not want children "must be suffering from some mental disorder," in comparison to the women of color who were determined to be unfit to be mothers (95). Adrienne Rich recalls her experience, as a white woman, seeking out sterilization after the birth of her third child. In addition to receiving approval from a committee of (male) physicians, who supported her decision because of her three

existing children and her affliction of rheumatoid arthritis, she endured much scrutiny and disapproval. She faced criticism that her sterilization, though nothing was removed from her body, was "a cutting- or burning-away of her essential womanhood," from everyone from her husband to her nurse (29-30). For white women, sterilization, and to a larger extent any birth control, was understood as a suppression of femininity and thus a rejection of motherhood. But for Black women and other women of color, birth control and sterilization were means with which to control—and ultimately prevent—their reproduction. Roberts highlights one of the original fears of increased access to birth control, "that increased access to contraceptives would hinder the cause of improving the race by reducing the birthrate of the superior stocks" (75); this was the fear that through birth control, the white population would decrease, and other "less desirable" populations would replace them. The racist history of reproduction control demonstrates succinctly the roles for specific women that patriarchal Western society deemed appropriate.

The birth control movement finally began to separate itself from the idea of voluntary motherhood with the advent of the sexual revolution in the 1960s. While *planned parenthood* was not entirely rejected from the movement, the idea of motherhood being a woman's primary duty dissolved away from the feminist movement. Directly challenging the dominant argument of voluntary motherhood, the birth control movement embraced women's rights to sexual freedom, even if that included conscious childlessness. The movement currently focuses on the "reproductive rights" of women (Gordon 4), a complete shift from the original regulation of women of color and the idea of voluntary motherhood for white women. This change better reflects the women's

liberation movement and came to be understood as the fight for "control over our own bodies." This call "identified a claim for reproductive rights that rested on a critique of male domination and a demand for women's liberation," separate from the previous claims of "family planning, population control, or eugenic motives" (Gordon 297). It was this eventual transition that finally challenged the "primary identification of woman *as* the mother" (Rich 30) and triggered the most vehement argument of opposition. The movement agreed on a consummate goal, "a liberal vision in which birth control is an individual right, a woman's right, part of a society committed to sex equality and sexual freedom," but garnered passionate resistance that grew from "a conservative vision in which birth control is a modern convenience that must be closely restricted lest it become destructive of social cohesion and sexual and family morality" (Gordon 296). This fundamental pitting of ideologies against each other is now the basis for much of the backlash against the feminist movement; it defines the current preoccupation surrounding birth control.

Reproduction control remains contentious to this day, Rich argues, because "there always has been, and there remains, intense fear of the suggestion that women shall have the final say as to how our bodies are to be used" (30). There was fear that white women would not have children; the challenge that birth control raises to the institution of motherhood cements birth control as a direct offense to the supposed essence of womanhood. There was fear that women of color would have children; there was fear that "unfit" women would become bad mothers. This danger of potentially bad or monstrous mothers colors the meaning of birth control today. Today, the fear is that the cult of

motherhood will be broken if womanhood can be separated from motherhood. Birth control poses one of the greatest threats to the institution of motherhood, and is thus still extremely controversial and constantly restricted.

Society—the institution of gendered norms of mothering—demands not only mothers, but "good" mothers. For potential "good" mothers, birth control endangers the potentialities for these women to truly "become" women through motherhood. For potential "bad" mothers, birth control is a tool with which to restrict mothers from becoming monsters; these mothers would also undermine the institution of motherhood. Women are still fighting for their ability to choose—a privilege that some women have not been able to even consider yet. Black women have not been included in this language of choice, and seek not to choose conscious childlessness, but to have the ability to choose motherhood. Ultimately, the exhausting fight for birth control enlightens us to the ever-existing identification of woman as mother. Womanhood's societally inextricable ties to motherhood entail that access to reproduction control will be an uphill battle.

Chapter 3: Abortion

On a very elemental level, if women are, by biology, commanded to host, shelter, nurture, and protect life, why should they not be empowered to end life, too?

~ Caitlin Moran

While the issue of "birth control *before* conception" (my emphasis) is contentious, the termination of a pregnancy is even more controversial (Gordon 18). Due to the identification of woman as mother, preventing the actualization of that pre-destined path through the use of birth control is bad enough; killing that potentiality is monstrous. Thus is the right to abortion intensely disputed. This dissension is evidence that woman's identity is still strongly linked with motherhood. Rich argues that, "In a society where women always entered heterosexual intercourse willingly, where adequate contraception was a genuine social priority, there would be no 'abortion issue'" (269). But in reality, the need for abortion is strong, and the debate about it is alive and well. Abortion is perceived as a threat to the institution of motherhood and the idealized maternity of women, while it remains a key characteristic of the fight for reproductive justice and women's rights. Though it has existed in many varying forms for countless years, the impassioned debate surrounding its legality began only recently, with social class and race again playing a crucial role, as with birth control. With the framing of abortion as murder, the women and mothers who obtain—and even those who advocate for access to—abortions are painted as monsters.

Within the long-standing institution of motherhood, "The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests" (Rich 42). Consigning the entire responsibility of bearing and rearing children to women has enabled men to achieve success outside the realm of children; confining *all* women to this role, no matter their say in the matter, has helped men maintain their dominance. Abortion, as either a means of delaying, limiting, or preventing entirely the experience of motherhood, threatens this institution as a whole, and as such "is considered deviant or criminal" (Rich 42); abortion makes women monsters. Varying feelings towards abortion have evolved over many years to culminate in this belief. Always a conflict of superior personhood, "Arguments against abortion have in common a valuing of the unborn fetus over the living woman" (Rich xvi) and many conflicts arise in differing opinions of a fetus's attainment of personhood. Termed "ensoulment" by early Christian theologians, abortion was believed to be murder "only if the fetus (if male) was within forty days of conception and (if female) within eighty to ninety days, the time when "ensoulment" was presumed to occur for each sex" (Rich 266). Following this line of logic, abortion was accepted and practiced on varying levels until 1588, when Pope Sixtus V proclaimed that all abortion, no matter how soon after conception, was murder, and excommunication was the punishment. This rhetoric, or what Simone de Beauvoir identifies as "intransigent humanitarianism for the fetus," prevails today (526). Beauvoir argues that, quite similar to the concept of motherhood, or in fact due to the institution itself, abortion has come "to be considered one of the risks normally involved in the feminine condition" (524-525), a part of the essential destiny which women can so look forward to.

Though so intertwined as abortion may be to women's experience, it is not accepted quite as such. In the U.S. during the late 20th Century, abortion became the most targeted aspect in the restriction of reproductive rights, and ultimately motivated much of the battle for reproductive justice. With the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 came what Gordon argues to be "one of the most clear-cut and concrete among many women's rights gains" of the time, when abortion was largely unpolarized and uncontroversial (297-299). It was not until after abortion was legalized that it became so intensely disputed, when it was reinterpreted and absorbed by the feminist movement. Previously seen only as an unfortunate but perhaps necessary medical procedure, the women's movement reimagined abortion as a "right of self-determination to which all women were entitled," a concept that brought much scrutiny with it (Gordon 300). To encapsulate this belief and include it in the feminist agenda,

> …the dominant pro-abortion rights lobby fixed on "choice" as its slogan. This language evoked the emotional and political power of the idea of freedom—as in freedom of choice—in American political discourse. (Gordon 302)

As the women's movement increasingly saw abortion as a right which women should be afforded in the attainment of gender equality, the institution of motherhood was only further threatened.

Through her own abortion experience, Caitlin Moran explores the threat to motherhood that abortion imposes. As a result of this perceived threat, there exists a

forceful stigma which surrounds the rhetoric about the experience entirely. She recalls how stigma changes the way women act about their own abortions:

> In 2007, Guardian columnist Zoe Williams wrote a wholly clearheaded and admirable piece examining why women always felt compelled to preface discussion about their abortions with an obligatory, "Of course, it's terribly traumatic. No woman enters into this lightly." She went on to explain that this is because, however liberal a society is, it assumes that, at its absolute core, abortion is wrong—but that a forgiving state must make legal and medical provision for it, lest desperate women "do a Vera Drake" down a back alley and make things even worse. (304)

Moran does not do this herself, as she unashamedly asserts that she had an abortion, and does not waver in her decision to get one. But her two young children, and perhaps her luck and privilege in not being reprimanded, guides her resolute decision to seek an abortion, and to not apologize for it. Regardless of the morality of it, she knows that she cannot have another child, in order to remain sane.

Moran illustrates the morality of abortion to be on a "spectrum of 'wrongness,'" on which some abortions are tolerated or accepted, while others are condemned (304). The "good" abortions, those that are condoned, are those obtained in the event of rape or endangerment of the mother. These types of abortion are most strongly supported, even by more conservative or right-wing individuals. These "good" abortions are also less stigmatized; the women who obtain these will not be pressured to feel guilty, will not be judged harshly. Moran identifies repeated abortions and abortions after in vitro fertilization (IVF) as some of the "worst" kinds of abortions: repeated abortions are so

strongly opposed because they are a reoccurrence, considered to be used as an easy escape; abortions after IVF are criticized due to the fact that women undergoing IVF are seeking to have children. Even worse than these types of abortions are late-term abortions, in which the aborted fetus is almost fully developed. These abortions are reviled because it is most closely understood to be murder. But Moran argues that the abortions that are the "worst of all" are mothers who acquire abortions: "Our view of motherhood is still so idealized and misty—Mother, gentle giver of life—that the thought of a mother subsequently setting limits on her capacity to nurture and refusing to give further life seems obscene" (305). Moran grapples with this idea that abortions are "unfeminine" and "unmotherly," which ultimately contributes to this horror at women, and especially mothers, who have abortions (306). The institution of motherhood defines the essence of womanhood to be motherhood, and abortion destroys this institution. It is not enough for women to be mothers, even; women must be perfect mothers. Moran criticizes that abortion is such a threat because "The greatest mother—the perfect mother—would carry to term every child she conceived, no matter how disruptive or ruinous, because her love would be great enough for anything and everyone" (305), and abortion threats this potentiality for perfection. Mothers who are not perfect—and women who are not mothers—are instead monsters.

The development of this ideology progressed in reaction to the women's movement's support of abortion. As "The first campaigns against abortion, in the mid-nineteenth century, focused primarily against women's rights," the feminist movement's incorporation of abortion rights into the movement emboldened much rebuke (Gordon

305). Originating from the Roman Catholic aversion to abortion, the antiabortion movement rallied around "Right to Life" rhetoric which focused on the life and rights of the fetus (Gordon 302). While some attacks focused on a woman's "frivolity" in abortion's rejection of motherhood, or the "selfishness of those who would evade their maternal calling" (Gordon 305), the greatest focus was on the rights of the fetus, which "worked to transform abortion from a traditional form of reproduction control into murder" (Gordon 302-303). Abortion was understood to be a multi-faceted attack on motherhood and the "traditional" family (Gordon 304). The saturation of the Right to Life movement in antifeminism has only bolstered this belief, and the fear associated with it. This movement also redefined the fetus as a "preborn child," which converts the interpretation of abortion into baby killing, "thus positioning aborting women as murderers of their own children" (Gordon 305). Thus abortion became a compelling symbol of anti-motherhood, or the "antithesis of motherliness" (Gordon 305). Many women, themselves not conservative or religious, opposed abortion in defense of their own positions as "traditional" women and mothers (Gordon 307). With the stressed importance of a fetus, regardless of the woman's body and desires, the undervaluing of women in favor of potential humans is implicit. Mothers are valued more highly than women, but the *perfect* mother would sacrifice her desires, her body, perhaps even her life, for her potential child, thus eliminating potential animosity surrounding the priority of the child over the woman.

The anti-abortion movement mobilized in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*, as passions and controversy have only grown since abortion's legalization. Shame and

stigma have heightened, as terrorist attacks against abortion providers and women seeking abortions have been repeatedly committed. As the movement in opposition of abortion has grown, so has the overall controversy. Though it seems that today, almost 45 years after abortion became legal in the U.S., there should be little to no apprehension or debate about abortion, access to abortion has in fact become more and more restricted since that landmark decision. The prevailing contentions about abortion demonstrate the fierce fears surrounding woman's role as mother. Rich scorns the movement, arguing that "An antiabortion morality that does not respect women's intrinsic human value is hypocrisy" (xvii). The antiabortion movement respects only women's intrinsic value as mother, and in fact expects this fulfillment.

This fulfillment is respected and expected of white women, not to be confused with all women. Simone de Beauvoir identifies abortion as a "class crime," in which the reality of poverty necessitates abortion (527). Similarly to birth control, race plays a crucial role in the abortion discourse, as does racism. Considering the U.S. enslavement of African Americans, abortion has been an integral piece of Black women's history. Rich identifies the argument of Angela Davis, "that although "Black women have been aborting themselves since the earliest days of slavery," abortion has not been seen as "a stepping stone toward freedom," but as an act of desperation "motivated…by the oppressive conditions of slavery" (xix). So although the women's movement articulated abortion as a vehicle of *choice*, abortion has a rather different meaning for Black women.

With the feminist embodiment of the abortion issue, Black women—already pro-abortion—were alienated from the movement. This was in part due to the overwhelming

whiteness of the movement and its leaders, but this white majority mostly impacted the focus of the movement, and not the potential new membership. The priorities of the movement focused on and benefitted mostly white and middle-class women. Influenced by the white majority, the movement's "single-minded focus on abortion rights did not meet the needs of women who were poor and/or discriminated against," thus ignoring the specific needs of poor Black women (Gordon 308). Additionally, some women of color might have been wary to join the abortion movement, having a basic understanding of the racist motives of some birth control advocates. Those suspicious of racism within the abortion movement had to rely on the knowledge that "antiabortion advocates were often the same people who cheered the dogs and water hoses directed against civil rights activists," and thus identify a greater evil (Gordon 307).

More than just prioritizing the needs of white women, the reproductive choice that the women's movement is fighting for also privileges white women. The fight for unrestricted access, in the interest of making reproduction control and abortion easier, often has dire consequences for poor women of color who are routinely misinformed and manipulated by their doctors. Much worse, however, is the feminist movement's indifference and neglect to other social issues that further worsen the plight of women of color. Roberts demonstrates that:

> This view recognizes the violation in a statute that bans a white, middle-class woman from taking the procreative option she wishes (a law that absolutely prohibits abortion or a method of birth control, for example). But it disregards how poverty, racism, sexism, and other systems of power

> —often facilitated by government action—also impair many people's decisions about procreation. (297)

The prevailing view of the fight for abortion through the lens of a white woman often disregards the perspective of women of color. This often leads to the movement's privileging of the wealthy and powerful over the less advantaged, disproportionately women of color, who require more protections in the fight for bodily autonomy. Thus do black women not seek reproductive *choice* in the same way that white women do. Instead, black women seek reproductive *freedom*, a comprehensive objective that encompasses the forced motherhood of slavery, the history of sterilization abuse, and the social, economic, and racial inequities that strongly inform the need for abortion.

In addition to the inherent inequities that women of color face due to racial prejudice, right-to-life rhetoric and especially legislation have a disproportionately negative impact on women of color. As the most effective anti-abortion strategy is achieved through legal recourse, so are the most oppressive measures also achieved in this way. Reduction or denial of funding for abortion is a key policy that the right-to-life movement utilizes. Roberts identifies how "the Supreme Court's decision in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, which weakened the holding in *Roe v. Wade* and denied women a right to abortion in publicly funded hospitals," particularly impacted Black women (4-5). In just the past decade, Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers, or TRAP laws, have successfully been shutting abortion clinics down, under the guise of protecting the health and safety of patients. Examples of these laws include unnecessarily large hallway specifications and intensely rigid specifications as to location of the clinic.

As these laws have seen the closure of numerous abortion clinics, many which cater specifically to the needs of poor women and women of color, the laws meant to prohibit abortions inordinately prevent women of color from accessing them. And just as governmentally-funded financial incentives for sterilization targeted women of color, so do federal denials for financial assistance in paying for abortions. Coupled with family caps that deny poor women federal benefits for any additional children they bear once they are on welfare, poor women, disproportionately women of color, are faced with the impossibility of being forced to give birth and yet unable to support their child. The combination of both of these policies is an "impermissible government [manipulation] of poor women's reproductive decisionmaking" (Roberts 240). This confrontation is a targeted attack which wealthier, likely white, women will not have to encounter. The ultimate consequence of the restrictions on funding of abortion and provision of welfare is " a rule that poor people should not have children," though it is denied by the welfare reformers (Roberts 242). This view illuminates the ever-present fear that "unfit" women will be bad mothers, and these policies attempt to prevent this.

Abortion is a contentious issue for which passions continue to heighten. The power of abortion to delay, prevent, or limit the possibility of motherhood threatens the institution of motherhood; support for abortion is a bold statement that declares that "The living, politicized woman claims to be a person whether she is attached to a family or not, whether she is attached to a man or not, whether she is a mother or not" (Rich xvi). The primary identification of woman as mother is thus destroyed. In the 2017 edition of Roberts' book K*illing the Black Body*, Roberts laments that "All the devaluing ideologies,

laws, and policies [she] wrote about not only persist, but have expanded in new guises to inflict even more injury on even more women and their families and communities" (xi). Abortion's strong symbolism as anti-motherhood stimulates anti-abortion fervor, resulting in more restrictions with each coming day.

The pro-abortion movement's declaration of their fight as one of choice, while important to the overall message and goal of the movement, undermines and represses the experiences of women of color. In the goal of gender equality, even the Supreme Court, in their *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision, articulated that the right to an abortion was crucial for the equal social status of women (Roberts 287). It is precisely this level of significance that makes the fight for abortion so critical. As Roberts notes, "Government policy concerning reproduction has tremendous power to affect the status of entire groups of people," a consequence which can be of great value (for some women) or to the detriment of poor women and women of color (287). In addition to the fact that anti-abortion policies aim to prevent women, and primarily Black women, from having children, they also "persuade people that racial inequality is perpetuated by Black people themselves," and thus inform the actual definition of reproductive freedom (Roberts 5). Considering that the system of reproductive rights privileges the white and wealthy, the relationship that exists between reproduction and human dignity is dismaying.

The targeted restrictions of abortions, through TRAP laws and funding prohibitions, have disproportionately deprived poor women and women of color of reproductive choice. Lack of access to or funds for abortion, women are forced to scramble for funders for the procedure, seek unsafe abortions, self-induce abortions, or

give birth. While abortion remains legal, the restrictions to access create financial and material obstacles, to which blindness of “results in a double standard of justice” (Gordon 312). A truly feminist movement would recognize this contradiction, and fight for both access to and support in seeking abortions. Quite strategically, the antiabortion movement attacks singularly.

> [It] seeks to drive a single monolithic wedge into a cluster of issues such as male sexual prerogatives, prescriptive heterosexuality, women’s economic disadvantage, racism, the prevalence of rape and paternal incest. The woman is thus isolated from her historical context as woman; her decision for or against abortion is severed from the peculiar status of women in human history. (Rich xvi)

In this method, the individual is forgotten. Racist histories are repressed and material obstacles are ignored. Abortion is once again reduced to a simple rejection of motherhood. The very destiny of woman is murdered. But this view disregards the very real experiences of so many women before, including the inequitable experiences of poor women and women of color.

Goals of gender equality aside, abortion is an important right to fight for because of its ability to demonstrate woman’s worth. Whether seeking an abortion to delay or prevent motherhood, or even in spite of a desire to be a mother, the ability to abort would enable women to “prove their worth as people, rather than being assessed merely for their *potential* to create new people” (Moran 275, my emphasis), an objective that is not yet achieved. Women are still recognized as potential mothers, incomplete if they bear no children. With this understanding of woman’s intrinsic maternity, abortion is a wholly

unfeminine act that threatens the entire institution of motherhood. Mothers who obtain abortions are bad mothers, and women who seek to not become mothers are monsters. Rich argues that in fact, "the stakes are not abortion per se, but the power of women to choose how and when we will use our sexuality and our procreative capacities," an ability that still innately threatens motherhood. As long as motherhood continues to be the primary and expected vocation for women, abortion will remain a threat, and thus will continue to be threatened.

Chapter 4: The Medea Trope

Feminism is a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.

~ Pat Robertson

As the dramatization of birth control and abortion is the killing of (potential) children by their mothers, the apprehensions about reproduction control reveal society's ultimate fear about mothers. A mother who kills her children is frightening and despicable; this mother is a threat to all that motherhood symbolizes. The violence of murder fractures the feminine presumption of motherhood. The idea of the perfect mother who is selfless and all-sacrificing is shattered by the mother killer. The killing of a child by its mother threatens the very foundation of ideal motherhood, jeopardizing the institution itself.

The actual act of infanticide, or maternal filicide to be more precise, is quite common, a point that is concealed within the horror which these acts provoke. Rich identifies that from the Middle Ages through the 18th Century, maternal infanticide was the crime most repeatedly committed in Western Europe (259). And yet, in spite of its prevalence, it is still greatly feared. The social panic surrounding such an act of defiance is so tremendous, due to its perceived threat to motherhood and womanhood. Women, mothers especially, have been expected to love unconditionally and selflessly, and filicide is a direct assault on this expectation. Rich herself feels monstrous in recognition of the

parts of herself that do not reconcile with this cult of motherhood. It is precisely this identification of imperfect, not selfless, *human* mothers as monsters that provokes such fear surrounding infanticide.

The story of Medea, a Greek woman who is the protagonist of the myth named after herself, encapsulates this identification and subsequent fear inimitably. Euripides' *Medea* memorializes the Greek tragedy in theatrical form, and clearly articulates the horror and panic felt in reaction to Medea's murder of her two sons. Christa Wolf reimagines Medea as innocent in the killing of her children in an experiment of social stigma and blame. Toni Morrison tells the story of Sethe, a Black interpretation of Medea, and her quest for freedom in *Beloved*. In each retelling, the manner in which Medea's sons are killed differs, but the horror and outrage at their deaths is universal. I will examine the motivations behind the murders within the Medea trope, an exploration that women are not afforded enough in reality. In everyday instances, Rich argues that "Instead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological" (263), with no attempt to comprehend the woman's circumstances or autonomy. In this dehumanized narration do these women become the "scapegoat" or "escape-valve," an *other* from which "good" mothers can separate themselves (Rich 277-278). Additionally, the Medea figure is universally regarded as a monster, a motif that represents a repeated assault on the idealized mother. Through analysis of the Medea trope, in which society regards the Medea figure as the most monstrous woman of all, the intricate relationship between motherhood and womanhood is scrutinized.

In the play presented by Euripides, Medea begins to plan her revenge upon discovery of her husband's infidelity and abandonment. With news of her banishment, she formulates a plan of perfect vengeance: she will kill Glauce, King Creon, and her two sons. Implicated in the murder of the princess and the King, her sons are quickly brought inside their home, and Medea kills them. The Chorus is horrified at the "Wretched woman" for killing her own children herself, accusing her of being unfeeling and cold (1279-1281). Jason is outraged and roars at Medea:

> You abomination, what woman can earn more hatred than you, from the gods, from me, from the whole human race? You had the heart to plunge a sword into your children, you, their mother, and have robbed me of life as well as sons! This you have done, this monstrous deed you have dared commit, and still you look upon the sun and earth? (1323-1328)

He avows that her deeds have made her the most loathed being in the world, and accuses her of being a monster. Vilifying her as an animal, a "creature" (1393) and a "lioness" (1408), Jason claims that her actions have deprived her of her humanity. Yet Medea is not so severely accused for her murder of the princess and the King. In reaction to these less despicable murders, Jason refers to her as an "arch-criminal" (1295) who has committed mere "misdeeds" (1302). It is purely in her murder of her own children that she is deemed "wicked" (1365) and "contemptible" (1393). This distinct contrast exemplifies society's horror at not murder, but the murder of one's own child—filicide. Medea's murder of her two sons utterly defies the institution of motherhood's strict identification of the mother as selfless and gentle. Her insensitivity and violence

distinguish her as a *bad* mother; these actions towards her own children make her the *worst* mother—a monster.

Medea also condemns Jason as an "unfeeling monster" (489) for his disloyalty and banishment of her, but this sentiment is not widely supported. While Jason does not kill their children, he does betray their family dynamic and is complicit in the banishment of Medea and the children. In this culture, banishment is comparable to a death sentence. But Jason is not vilified for his actions as Medea is. This confirms that the atrocity is not in the mistreatment of the children, but by whom it is committed. It is precisely in the nature of her motherhood, and the expectation of ideal motherhood, that her actions are reviled.

An underlying fear of the killer mother is the expression of ambivalence towards motherhood. Women are supposed to be mothers, want to be mothers, and *know* they want to be mothers. Thus is uncertainty about one's feelings towards motherhood threatening to the institution. Maternal filicide is understood to be the most extreme measure of maternal ambivalence; it therefore greatly compromises the institution. But Medea is not in any way ambivalent towards her children or in her motherhood. In fact, Medea's decision to kill her children is unambiguous, as is her love for them.

Many interpret Medea's actions as rash and unthinking. The Nurse warns of "that savage temperament of hers, that stubborn will and unforgiving nature!…It's clear that this anger of hers will grow; soon enough her grief like a gathering cloud will be kindled by it and burst in storm" (102-106). It is assumed that Medea is a woman governed by her passions, and that she will be unable to control her emotions to make a level-headed

decision. She is, as a “foolish woman” (333), typecast as overemotional, “hot-tempered” (319), and shortsighted. The Nurse accuses her of acting impulsively in reaction to her jealousy; that she is a “proud, impassioned soul, so ungovernable now that she has felt the sting of injustice” (108-110). However, this characterization robs Medea of her autonomy and wisdom. She is quite lucid and composed in her decision to kill her children, a clear refutation of the claim that she comes to this decision in an emotional haste. In calm resolution, she declares:

> They must be killed, there is no other way. And since they must, I will take their life, I who gave them life. Come, my heart, put on your armour! We must not hesitate to do this deed, this terrible yet necessary deed! (1237-1243)

In this decision, Medea’s reasoning is determined and even-tempered. She speaks directly to her heart, bidding it to harden, so that her emotions do not overpower her decision. This refutes the idea that her emotions have overwhelmed her reasoning. In fact, she is well aware of the wrongdoing she is about to commit, and remains resolute in spite of her emotions.

Though her actions might indicate ambivalence towards her children, Medea is quite confident in her motherhood. Though it is feared that her actions are symptomatic of an uncertainty about her feelings for her children, or even worse, disdain for them, she kills her sons in spite of her love for them. She knows that killing them will be painful; she confesses to them that, “Robbed of your company, I shall endure a life that brings me pain and sorrow”

(1036-1037). The institution of motherhood idealizes the mother as self-sacrificing, whose love is infinite. Thus is ambivalence, or a limit to motherly love, extremely threatening. Filicide is believed to be an extreme manifestation of ambivalent feelings towards one's children, but Euripides' Medea proves that there is no correlation between a mother's ambivalence and the act of filicide. To the contrary, Medea loves her sons very much:

> No time now for cowardice or thinking of your children, how much you love them, how you brought them into this world. No, for one day, one fleeting day, forget your children; there will be the rest of your life for weeping. For though you will put them to the sword, you loved them well. (1245-1250)

Medea is in no way ambivalent in her love of her children, but she still commits filicide. Perhaps is this the most frightening fact—that a mother who truly loves her children is capable of murdering them.

The reimagined *Medea: A Modern Retelling* by Christa Wolf is a testimony to how powerful the fear of monstrous mothers is. Wolf re-envisions the Medea trope with a significant twist: Medea is in fact innocent of the monstrous crime for which she is indicted. Wolf subtly manipulates the story line to maintain Medea's condemnation for the murders of the princess, Glauce, and Medea's sons, but without her engagement in the crime. The report that Medea murdered Glauce is spread by Akamas, the King's First Astronomer who is vying for the throne. Akamas goes to great pains to ensure that this story is understood as true, as "whoever contests his version is as good as dead" (Wolf

179). His effort in establishing her notoriety must be remembered in the reading of her involvement in her sons' deaths. The public, so trusting in this depiction of her, desires to completely eradicate the country of any trace of Medea, even after her banishment.

> The crowd falls silent, then several of them call out: We've done it. They're gone. Who, the fellow asks. The children! is the answer. Her goddamned children. We've freed Corinth from that pestilence. And how? asks the fellow, with a conspiratorial expression on his face. Stoned them! many voices bellow. As they deserved. (Wolf 182)

In her framed murder of Glauce, Medea is already perceived as a monster. This judgement compels the public to murder her sons, who are associated with her monstrosity. Their deaths are a consequence of the fear that Medea invokes. Medea is also implicated in the murder of her sons, although she has no actual involvement. Her murder of them is fabricated to simultaneously serve Akamas' needs and to enshroud Medea's name with infamy. This false indictment symbolizes the intense fear of ambivalent mothers, solidifying her role as warning and scapegoat.

Even in her utter innocence, Wolf's Medea is still monstrously feared. Despite her absence, the notion of her alleged role is so horrific that she is subsequently loathed. Medea's lack of involvement, but blame nonetheless, is indicative of the power of the fear of the bad mother. The monstrous mother is so atrocious that the possibility of Medea's complicity overshadows any possible doubt; Medea is accepted as a child-murderer without protest. This interpretation exemplifies the potency of the social panic

surrounding mothers who kill their children; Medea's inaction strengthens this example, as the level of panic for her alleged role is no different than as if she were truly guilty.

Medea also serves as a warning of ambivalent mothers. Society's fear of bad mothers compels the creation of a message in Wolf's *Medea*:

> Arinna says that in the seventh year after the children's death the Corinthians selected seven boys and seven girls from noble families. Shaved their heads. Sent them into the Temple of Hera, where they must remain for a year in commemoration of my dead children. And this is to be done from now on, every seven years. That's the way it is. That's what it has come to. They're at pains to assure that even posterity will call me a child-murderess. (186)

Used as a deterrent, this tribute warns children, parents, and the entire kingdom of the consequences of bad motherhood. Memorializing Medea as the killer of her children commits her deeds and her punishment to institutional memory. This effort warns of the importance of abiding by the institution of motherhood. Medea's infamy is a reminder to all of her monstrosity, and cautions against any similar actions. The concerted effort to establish Medea as a monster is indicative of the panic surrounding bad mothers.

Medea's implication in her sons' murders establishes her role as scapegoat; she is able to silently assume the blame and accept the label of monster. This designation as scapegoat encompasses both the acceptance of blame and the point of comparison for mothers. In reading Medea as a bad mother, she becomes a "scapegoat" by whom good mothers are absolved, and also alienated from, any sufferings. Thus is Medea not only a warning, but also a motivation to prompt mothers to be better. Her memory alienates

mothers from their own feelings of ambivalence. Attributing anomalous acts of violence to Medea, ambivalence or violence are presented as intolerable exceptions, and individuals are compelled to feel shame for any feelings of imperfectness. Medea as scapegoat evokes the unattainably high standards for motherhood; she provides an outlet for society to explain away monstrous actions and dissociate from them.

Toni Morrison's reinvention of Medea in *Beloved* is a full-bodied exploration of the social panic about the Medea trope. Sethe, the Medea figure, experiences complete social isolation from her community, comparable to banishment, in response to her murder of her unnamed daughter. As Euripides' and Wolf's *Medea*s both end shortly after her murder and banishment, neither fully explores the scope or span of the societal fear. Beginning 18 years after Sethe's act of filicide, *Beloved* provides a more fully actualized study of the societal fear of the Medea trope. Dubbed "the Misery," Sethe's actions are not forgotten (Morrison 201). The community of escaped and freed slaves with which Sethe lives, in a realization of the myth's traditional banishment, imposes a social "banishment" of isolation. She reminisces about her brief moment of welcome, before she kills her daughter:

> The twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being part of a neighborhood; of, in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own—all that was long gone and would never come back… Those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life. (Morrison 204)

This unforgiving community illustrates the complete horror at her actions, and symbolizes her exile. The community's unwavering disapproval and isolation of Sethe, even after 18 years, demonstrates the magnitude of the panic felt in reaction to monstrous mothers.

The reaction of Sethe's family is an even deeper examination of the fear of the Medea trope. In contrast to the traditional telling of *Medea*, Sethe's two sons survive, thanks to a timely interruption. Wary of their mother's intent, and well acquainted with her capability, they both run away by the time they are 13 years old. While this is first believed to be in reaction to the ghost haunting their home, it is later made clear that they are fleeing from their mother. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is "Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, [and] she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it," so she resigns herself to the bed until she fades away (Morrison 4). Even their dog, Here Boy, runs away, and Sethe's living daughter Denver knows he will not return (Morrison 65-66). Denver is the only family member who remains. Well aware of the reasons their family has abandoned them, in one shape or another, Denver confesses to the reader, "I spent all of my outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me" (Morrison 245). She discloses that, although she loves her mother, she is scared of her; Denver is perpetually looking to her mother in search of that "thing that makes it all right to kill her children," in fear that it will happen again (Morrison 243). Paul D, whose arrival opens the narrative of the book, also leaves Sethe when he is told the history of Sethe's family. When he finally confronts Sethe about her actions, he berates her for her "wrong" behavior. He accuses her of acting beastly, reminiscent of Euripides' Jason

—“You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” (Morrison 194)—belittling her humanity. The fact that Sethe’s own family fears her is symbolic of the deep-rooted panic about bad mothers.

The figure most central to the story is the namesake, Beloved herself. When Sethe kills her daughter, she is yet to be named, and is referred to as “crawling-already? girl” (Morrison 110). In deference to the priest’s words at the funeral, crawling-already? girl’s headstone reads Beloved; after 18 years of a ghost haunting, a young girl of the name Beloved arrives at the house. Both the baby ghost and the girl Beloved are accepted as the crawling-already? girl whom Sethe killed, haunting her mother and murderer. Beloved is the embodiment of the karmic retribution that the community believes she deserves. A neighbor woman criticizes Sethe, observing “Guess she had it coming” (Morrison 301) when she learns that “Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her” (Morrison 300). The belief that Beloved’s abuse of Sethe is warranted reveals the strong institution of perfect motherhood. But the community is not alone in its belief that Sethe’s punishment is deserved; Sethe herself believes in her guilt, too. Beloved personifies the shame and guilt that Sethe feels, and her abuse is a manifestation of the punishment Sethe believes she deserves. Sethe repeatedly explains to Beloved why she killed her baby, but “It was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out,” (Morrison 297). Beloved symbolizes Sethe’s personal burden, resulting from an internalization of the fear of bad mothers. Though Sethe knows “that what she had done was right because it came from true love,” (296) she internalizes the characterization of her as a monster and unapologetically accepts Beloved’s subsequent punishment of her.

Beloved's presence, as ghost and as girl, epitomize the aversion to and horror of the Medea trope. Maternal filicide's threat to womanhood and motherhood is greatly feared, a sentiment which Beloved embodies.

Within the terrain of slavery, Morrison examines the impact of blackness on the Medea trope. As a Black woman and a slave, reproductive freedom is a form of resistance. As a slave, Sethe was "property that reproduced itself without a cost," (Morrison 269) and the babies she made did not belong to her. Upon her escape, she experiences the feeling of truly being the mother of her children for the first time:

> It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right… Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. (Morrison 190-191)

This particular experience is perhaps singular to slaves, and especially to mothers, who mothered children at the will and ownership of her slaveowner, for their possession. Even Paul D understands that her escape meant that she could finally become a mother in the truest sense of the word; "He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom" (Morrison 191). Thus, with this understanding of the mother slave's condition, Sethe's killing of her daughter is her attempt to retain possession and ownership—or more accurately, mother-ship—of her children. When she realizes her freedom is in danger, she "Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were

precious and fine and beautiful," in an attempt to keep them (Morrison 192). Furthermore, not only is Sethe endeavoring to maintain mother-ship of her children, but she also is attempting to protect them from a return to slavery. This freedom from inhumane possession and oppression is incredibly precious to Sethe, and she is committed to protecting her children from slavery if death is the only path to freedom. She argues with Paul D that her actions, though terrible, preserved her children's freedom:

> "It worked," she said.
>
> "How? Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard. How did it work?"
>
> "They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em."
>
> "Maybe there's worse."
>
> "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that." (Morrison 194)

Having been forced to bear children, to provide slave babies, Sethe seeks freedom in general: freedom to keep her children, freedom to keep her children from becoming slaves, and freedom from returning to slavery herself. Killing her children is her method of asserting maternal possession. Her murder of crawling-already? baby is successful in maintaining her and her children's autonomy; upon encountering the scene, "it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim," (Morrison 175). This exploration of freedom shows us more explicitly the influence of blackness on reproductive *justice*. While bad mothers are generally regarded as monsters, black mothers fight a different battle; this fight challenges their obstacles to motherhood.

Toni Morrison, recalling the foundation on which she began *Beloved*, examines black slave history,

> …in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required, but "having" them, being responsible for them—being, in other words, their parent—was as out of the question as freedom. Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal. (xvi-xvii)

Through this lens, Sethe's act of infanticide is one of extreme resistance—an attempt to be a mother to her children and to remain free—which has documented roots within the history of slavery (Roberts 48). *Beloved* is an examination of the shame and terror surrounding maternal filicide, which Sethe accepts unapologetically, due to the particular instance of slavery.

The Medea trope captures the social panic felt about mothers who are not selfless nor nonviolent; in other words, bad mothers. The mother who kills her own child is the worst type of mother, and is thus labeled a monster. She jeopardizes the institution of motherhood which expects mothers to be self-sacrificing, perfect, with no identification other than mother. The many realizations of the Medea figure represent the fear of ambivalent, scapegoat mothers, and she serves as a cautionary tale to the preservation of the institution of motherhood. The exploration of the black Medea, Sethe, provides insight to the different obstacles to reproductive freedom that women of color face. The recurrence of the Medea trope, in literature, throughout history, and in reality, establishes that ideal motherhood—selfless, pacifist, perfect—is unattainable, and the fear and shame

surrounding the stories of Medea demonstrate the threat that bad mothers pose to the institution of motherhood. Mothers who kill their children are the most monstrous, and thus the most threatening, of all.

Conclusion

To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work.

~ Adrienne Rich

Throughout history and across cultures, the oppression of women has been rooted in the primary identification of women as mothers. This interconnection is exploited to serve male interests, and thus is the institution of motherhood established. Roberts cites Margaret Sanger's assertion of the importance of reproduction control: "No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother" (57). But can a woman be a woman if she is not a mother? The institution of motherhood has so intricately bound the experience of mothering to the attainment of womanhood that to extricate the two is strictly forbidden. Jessica Valenti, the author of *Why Have Kids?*, argues that society identifies women as "mothers-in-waiting," for whom motherhood is not a choice (6-7). Women must not only be mothers, but also expert mothers, an issue which Dr. Joan Wolf entitles "total motherhood" (Valenti 40). These key components to the institution, the presumption—no, mandate—of motherhood, and the demand for these mothers to be perfect, serve to incarcerate women in their maternal potentials. Consequently, "Women who refuse to become mothers are not merely emotionally suspect, but are dangerous," (Rich 169); they are feared. Any range

of “behavior which threatens the institutions…is considered deviant or criminal,” (Rich 42) and thus is the bad mother or the non-mother characterized as a monster.

Woman’s ability to bear children imposes an assumption that they will. Asked *when* rather than *if*, “Men and women alike have convinced themselves of a dragging belief: that somehow women are incomplete without children” (Moran 271). This presumption excludes childless women from being accepted truly as women. Moran argues that there is something underlying this belief:

> Not the simple biological “fact” that all living things are supposed to reproduce, and that your legacy on earth is the continuation of your DNA —but something more personal, insidious, and demeaning. As if a woman somehow remains a child herself until she has her own children. (271)

This principle excludes non-mothers from self-realization to the status of women. It prescribes all potential women to the same task, and undermines many other experiences. The guidelines for womanhood arouse immense fear for any actions taken to undermine this fulfillment.

Birth control, abortion, and infanticide all demonstrate the immense fear that threats to the institution of motherhood induce. Forced sterilization, on the other hand, exemplifies the fear of the threat that bad mothers pose to the institution. In their most extreme manifestations, they are all methods by which women can kill their potential to become mothers, or by which non-white women can not be considered mothers at all. These categories enable women to delay, limit, or destroy their fact of motherhood. The still-existing controversy and fear around these issues indicate the menace that such

injury to the institution poses. With the direct connection of motherhood to womanhood, such threats represent the antithesis of both.

Access to or denied use of reproduction control wreak havoc on the institution of motherhood. The foundation of gendered norms of mothering seeks to restrict access to birth control for women deemed “good” potential mothers while simultaneously forcing control onto women categorized as “bad” future mothers. In this characterization, prospectively “good” mothers are monstrous for remaining childless, and the potentially “bad” mothers become monsters outright. The debate around abortion follows this same logic. With the additional rhetoric of murdering an unborn child, women who obtain abortions are monstrous, and mothers who obtain abortions are even more so. Infanticide is the worst realization of these fears; more than just the perceived act of terminating a child, filicide is the actual murder. The identification of woman as mother positions these autonomous acts, with the intent of childlessness, as monstrous.

The examination of the Medea trope and its incorporation of infanticide challenges the notion of all-consuming love. The expectation of mothers exhibiting “endless, self-sacrificial love” (Moran 306) establishes an unhealthy imposition. Rich analyzes this characteristic; she argues that “Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal “instinct” rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (42). The construct of the maternal instinct plays the roles of persuasion and humiliation. The idea pressures women into feeling that it is natural for them to have children, and that it is something they must do. On the other side of the same argument, Sigrid Nunez, author of the essay

“The Most Important Thing” from the collection *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed*, believes that the “fear of being a failure plays a large part in goading many women who are ambivalent about motherhood into maternity” (109). The pure existence of a supposed maternal instinct pressures women into thinking motherhood is natural, and that their ambivalence is unwarranted. The so-called instinct then shames mothers for not being perfectly inclined to motherhood. Laura Kipnis, author of the essay “Maternal Instincts”, argues that maternal instinct and “mother-child bonds” do in fact exist, but they exist “as social conventions of womanhood at this moment in history, not as eternal conditions, because what’s social is also malleable” (32). The challenge that the Medea trope presents to these conventions helps illuminate the fabricated nature of such notions.

Among all of these conversations, race provides a new lens. Roberts reminds us that, “…just as racism has imparted our understanding of reproductive liberty, attention to race can also help us to redefine reproductive liberty in a way that accounts for its importance to human dignity and equality” (245). In discussions of birth control and abortion, while the mainstream (white) narrative centers around choice, it is more accurately reproductive freedom that women of color seek, to be able to maintain autonomy in choosing not only to remain childless but also to have children. Understanding the intersections of race and gender, it is vital that the rights of one group are not surrendered for the rights of another. Thus is the fight for reproductive freedom for women of color more complex; she reiterates that “We must acknowledge the justice of ensuring equal access to birth control for poor and minority women without denying the injustice of imposing birth control as a means of reducing their fertility” (Roberts

56-57). The history of imposed reproduction control on women of marginalized status serves as a reminder to the specific meaning of reproductive freedom, and illuminates the broader picture of institutionalized motherhood in the United States. When the Medea figure is black, as in the case of Sethe in *Beloved*, the history of slavery lends a greater understanding of freedom. The interpretation of black women as monsters and thus unfit mothers reverses the narrative of expected motherhood. This focus determines that it is not only mothers, but *good* or *perfect* mothers, that society desires, the category under which black women are not allowed to fall.

The identification of monstrous mothers as related to their utilization of birth control, abortion, or even infanticide, raises the issue of conscious childlessness. If these specific and contained acts are so reviled, then what is thought of the woman who decides fully never to have children? There is much shame and stigma to childlessness. Moran concedes that

> …deciding not to have children is a very, very hard decision for a woman to make: the atmosphere is worryingly inconducive to saying, "I choose not to," or "It alls sounds a bit vile, tbh." We call these women "selfish." The inference of the word "childless" is negative: one of lack, and loss. (270)

These women are misunderstood monsters who missed their true calling. Pam Houston and M.G. Lord, both collaborating authors on *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed*, conjure visions of the custom of outsiders and even strangers who tell childless women that they should have been mothers—even better, would have been *good* mothers (167,

224). The title of Lord's essay even showcases the brilliant absurdity of the idolization of the good mother: "You'd Be Such A Good Mother, If Only You Weren't You." The fool who makes this comment reveals their implicit knowledge that Lord would in fact not be a good mother, but still venerates Lord as a potential good mother. So is the consciously childless woman labeled a monster while also still in consideration for the role of mother.

Even with the legalization of abortion and the proliferation of birth control, the convention surrounding woman's choice in motherhood is forced. Valenti questions the modern mother-woman relationship: "Despite all of the empowered rhetoric around the new maternal ideal—women's intuition! maternal instinct!—isn't this just a spiffed up version of telling women that their most important role in life is a domestic one?" (21). The woman, however empowered and advanced in today's society, is still equated with the mother. Valenti advocates for the eradication of the ideal mother mold:

> American parents need to support one another—especially those of us who don't fit into the "good" or "perfect" mother model. When one mother is punished, we're all punished. We can fight against policies that criminalize mothers for being mothers and that dictate that women are less than human when they're pregnant. (167)

Understanding the significance of the Medea trope facilitates a more realistic model for motherhood; comprehension and disavowal of the fears surrounding birth control and abortion will lessen the fear of childless women. Under the rule of the institution of motherhood, the woman who seeks to define herself outside of the constraints of

motherhood is a monster. Reproductive freedom can only truly be achieved once a woman is no longer only a mother.

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