

Starr, Ann; Squier, Susan: Speaking Women's Bodies: A Conversation

Literature and Medicine (17:2) [Fall 1998] , p.231-54.

Ann Starr and I met in July of 1997, at a seminar at Northwestern University Medical School, "Case History, Narrative, and the Construction of Objectivity." Neither of us is a physician-I am a professor of English and Women's Studies, and she is an artist-but our shared interest in the embodied experience of medicine had brought us to Chicago. Many of us came from different disciplines, but we had been drawn together by professional interest: the desire to think about the ways that stories shape the practice of medicine, unsettling the familiar notion of clinical objectivity and replacing it with something both more disturbing and more richly complex. And, although I don't know this for certain, I suspect that many of us had also been drawn to Northwestern by a personal encounter with the unsettling impact of medicine on our own lives-an illness, an operation, the shock or reprieve of a diagnosis. For almost a week, we met to share our response to readings in medical ethics, literature, literary theory, law and philosophy. Wending our way across disciplinary divides, through complex thickets of contradictory experiences (doctors and patients, scholars and activists, critics and philosophers), we talked, listened, and arrived at common ground. By the end of that week we shared a set of concerns: that the patient's experience must be voiced, that the power of the story-teller to construct experience must be understood, that the rigidly armored posture of professional medicine needs to relax and to admit the contributions of what we came to call (here revising Donna Haraway) situated subjectivity: the strategic introduction of a subjective perspective into the objective frame of medicine, in order to arrive at a fuller picture of the illness, the disease, and the path to treatment, even cure. 1

A fuller picture. The visual metaphor is apt, for that is Ann Starr's contribution to the cultural studies of medicine: the creation of a powerful, situated subjectivity that reflects medicine back to itself in words and images charged with feminist challenge, critique, life-enhancing anger and humor-providing the fuller picture that clinical objectivity lacks. Whether the subjectivity she embodies so vividly is situated in the life of a child or an adult, in a body part surgically excised, a social ritual experienced, in a wounding or warming event, Starr speaks to us with urgency and directness. And she speaks, significantly, from the disciplinary margins, voicing and visualizing her wary reminder that the professions are suffused by dangerous power relations: not only the profession of doctor but even those of artist and writer.

Ann Starr's art combines line drawings and gouache watercolors with powerful, funny, at times excoriating texts. An ephemeral, ad hoc quality characterizes some of her drawings, which are presented as small flip books or children's books, while others of her works are more highly produced, incorporating fine line drawings, and bound as art books.

When Ann exhibited her art works to the seminar, I was immediately struck by the many interests, indeed obsessions, we share. Starr's intrauterine and fetal imagery seemed a remarkable visual and textual echo of the issues I had explored in *Babies in Bottles*, my study of twentieth-century images of reproductive technology. 2 But the connection was not just intellectual and professional, but urgently personal. A little more than a month before the Northwestern conference, I had undergone an emergency ovariectomy and hysterectomy, and I was still reeling from my first experience of surgery's profound violation of bodily boundaries-and reveling in the relief of the ensuing diagnosis. Starr's visual and textual exploration of the hysterectomy, in *Where Babies Come From: A Miracle Explained*, and her vision of Thanksgiving as an aggressive, even violent ceremony of celebration for women's reproductive potency, in *The Forty-Seventh Thanksgiving*, seemed a cathartic voicing of some of the personal issues I had been exploring in my own life. And I saw in her work a feminist impulse that I recognize in my own: the determination to express society's impact on women's bodies in a medium that combines the intellectual and the emotional, the theoretical and the personal.

When Suzanne Poirier invited us to collaborate on an article to accompany the premiere publication of Starr's drawings, we enthusiastically agreed. Since we met in Chicago, we have been corresponding to that end. Some excerpts from our exchanges follow.

Dear Ann,

What a family, in which Sis, and Granny, and Ma, and Auntie, and Me, and even "little Sniffy" partake in that core fact: not presence-like a shared trait (the Hapsburg nose, or a particularly fetching shade of red hair) or even the fact of having been present in the womb of someone-but instead absence, "none of us have any sex organs."

On my first several readings of your book, I find I've skipped right over your first drawing to encounter the fact of that family resemblance, which "a glance will tell." And yet if I go back to the first drawing, it suggests two things to me: hysterectomies often have a motive-which is to make women clean-and that motive is patriarchal. So in the first drawing we see the looming patriarchal father, pointing a blaming finger at his diminutive daughter, whom he wastes endless time on, trying to keep her clean. And for a woman to be clean, the book goes on to suggest, she must be free-innocent of-any sex organs.

What does it mean, not to have any sex organs? Returning to your first drawing, we see that it means to be "clean." Clean in a way that is pleasing to fathers, who want their daughters tidy, innocent, questioning. So we have the making of a strong family resemblance: with the women in that family joined by their lack of sex organs.

The term sex organs itself makes me think about how sex and reproduction have increasingly been separated by science-from the first efforts at contraception through the early experiments with artificial insemination-known as eutelegensis, or reproduction at a distance, in the early years of this century, to our current world of miracle children through in vitro fertilization (ivf). This is a world, it almost goes without saying, in which women seem to have been eliminated as agents of reproduction: by now it's a fait accompli, and we hardly even blink when we hear of people commissioning children one way or another.

But this world of miracle children through ivf or cloning is not precisely the world of your "Miracle Explained," however, because the miracle you're talking about is something different. The family you introduce us to is linked not by genetics, or even merely by nurture, but (can we say?) by a specific lack, caused by patriarchal intervention metaphorically represented as surgical intervention. And the miracle is that without sex organs the women in your (our) family still reproduce. ...But the third drawing in your book clarifies how that can be, because the representative of the family is splayed like the frogs I remember from freshman biology classes. Not pithed though, but hollowed out in the mid-section, with the ominous black void that is reproduced (in the helpful enlargement) in several different linguistic registers from straightforward to breezily colloquial to high-toned: "nothing. zip. rien." That pretty well spells it out...any generation that can take place here needs to be metaphorically independent of sex organs...

Susan

Dear Susan,

Yes, the females are hollowed out as they are scrutinized by males. The act of being seen is searing: within the experience of the narrator, one is cauterized by the fearful hostility of the gaze. One is burnt and scooped out by the heat of the hostile suspiciousness of these men.

I drew all the women in the family hunched over because the removal or absence of the womb has left a space for implosion. The suggestion is that nature has failed to adapt (will continue to refuse adapting) to this absence. Now, the space is-what? Absence of sex organs, certainly. And of Power just as certainly.

Ann

Dear Ann,

You sketch the extraordinary male one-two punch: desexing in order to resexualize under the control of men, exploring a male fantasy of generation, premised on female vacancy and male plenitude. (And here I think of the vision you give us a bit later, of that huge erect penis, its "sperm...compounded of Neptune's foam," toward the end, to be emptied into those female voids.) The clarity of your feminist vision-seeing the absurdity and taking it to the nth extreme, is exhilarating. So despite its difficult subject matter, your book is not depressing, but empowering, cheering.

Susan

Dear Susan,

The belittling hatred is (as always) fear, and that requires reduction of both the women's threatening potency and its symbols. It is a castration. The gaze is an instrument-surgical and cold. To call it the evil eye is too warm. I say that because you can see in the book that its effect is incisive and immediate. Even the swaddled baby (Little Sniffy, in a transference of the prurience) is hollowed out. Did she know to be born without sex organs? (A kind of genetic selection over the centuries?) Or did they shrivel at birth? Already, her smile shows you, she knows how to behave. She will be cheerful, just like Ma and all the other women...the women who miraculously brought her into being?

I think at the same time that there is something of the Green Knight in this book, some idea of frightening, raw, natural resurgence in the face of inevitable sterilization/decapitation. The women are perennially desexed, yet they deliver-even if the fact is "accountable" only by rehearsing the absurd fantasy about the sufficiency of male potency. Throughout the book, the female narrator, so personal and so disengaged, chirps off all these nutty ideas as if they are, of course, quite right-that they all add up. But what she knows is the knowledge of matruschka dolls: open one, and its hollowness is in fact filled with another female-and another, and another, and another! (I think of the "family picture" (p. 234) as the separated nesting dolls that drop succeeding new generations on the last page.) The pure, corporeal energy of feminine nature is troubling. They never cease being women, no matter what fantasies or constraints may rule socially. They will conceive and bear; they will carry on in some way. They are wonderfully enduring.

And terribly enduring too. Little Sniffy and "I"-children-know neither how to avoid or transform or stand up to the gaze, how to escape the knife. The story is a child's story-the narrator is confused and hurt and not entirely able to sort out the fantasies, even at the very end. She can see things that happen, yet she has almost no interpretive powers and no one assisting her in acquiring them. She endures, quite simply.

This child narrator cannot distinguish at all between sex and reproduction because she has no alternative to the sadistic point of view of the women-fearing men in her family. Perhaps she cannot separate the two because the threat of being perceived as unclean is such a controlling force. It is safe to be seen if one is productive. It is not safe to be seen if it leads to experiencing a pleasure that satisfies the man physically but simultaneously reinforces his idea of the degraded female. How can she reconcile enjoying what her body could feel, independent of her will, no matter what the male considers himself to be doing. So maybe it comes down to a distinction between what the mind allows the body to do and feel and what it can't prevent, rather than sex v. reproduction? Or rather, I think both distinctions are operating.

In this book I also raise the issues of rape and incest. The looking, the gaze, the prurience may themselves substitute for the physical violence. (Here I need to interject, too, that the repression and violence of prurient hostility is not merely a feminist issue. It reaches across all distinctions of gender and age.) Within our more

limited context here, though, I think we need to discuss questions of violence, both men against women and women's complicity in so expecting the violence: they allow themselves a comfortably psychotic outlook in order to avoid it. Violence can be perpetrated without physical expression, and it can be created by women (the objects of the gaze) against themselves, in the name of self-protection.

Ann

Dear Ann,

I agree with your discussion of the Gawain-ish resurgence or natural powerful regeneration of the women in response to that horrible male fantasy of self-sufficient (Aristotelian) potency. And your comments on the female narrative voice (personal and disengaged, chirping off nutty ideas) seems completely right to me. That female narrative voice almost seems like the cheery companion to the terrible male will. Sarah Ruddick calls it the "cheery denial" that is part of female complicity with war-making, in her book *Maternal Thinking*. Here is the passage I'm thinking about, which for me makes the link between the sexual violence that your cheery child narrator denies and the broader violence-of-all-kinds that Ruddick's volume analyzes:

[F]or mothers, cheerfulness threatens to break down into cheery denial, its degenerative form....In the interests of protection, they are tempted to assume a false cheerfulness in front of their children, whose sharp eyes must ferret out and interpret, often fantastically, the troubles hidden from them....Cheerfulness that encourages children to deny their sadness and anger or that protects them from truths they will have to acknowledge only confuses and inhibits them; cheerfulness that allows a mother herself to mystify reality drains her intellectual energy and befuddles her will. 3

So, the narrative voice of cheery denial also gives us that fantastically-expressed, ferreted out, complicity in self-desexing that is the symbolic resolution to the impossible contradiction posed by sexual violence and incest: women manage to remain generative while desexing ourselves.

Susan

Dear Susan,

I think I'd go a little further than Ruddick: that women/mothers, while trying to protect their children from the world by cultivating the enduring cheeriness, not only give the kids places where their "sharp eyes ferret out and interpret, often fantastically, the troubles hidden." I'd say that the process of cultivating cheerful self-protection, between mothers and daughters at least, is the passing along of patent craziness, a psychotic view of the world in which Reality is cheerful affect: what floats (the "non-real") is event, persons, places. That is, there's one response to everything, so everything has to become equally charged. Cheeriness is phenomenally reductive and devaluing.

Ann

Dear Ann,

I see both a similarity and a difference in your metaphoric use of hysterectomy and my actual experience of it. If the patriarchal father in your book subjects his daughters to a psychic hysterectomy because he wants them clean, my female surgeon also operated in order to render me clean-of the possibly cancerous cells that had clustered in a painful ovarian tumor, of the still suspect growths on the other ovary, the fibroids in my uterus. But while the young girl in your first drawing, faced with the looming power of her blaming father, saw no alternative to her psychic hysterectomy, I-as the patient of a feminist woman surgeon-was carefully, even lovingly, introduced to a full range of other possible responses to the medical crisis I faced. After a long and satisfying conversation with my surgeon, I chose the hysterectomy and ovariectomy as the best possible

option for the whole person she understood me to be. So, I experienced the surgery not as a castration, but as a liberation from the pain and anxiety I had struggled with for months.

Yet there is one important place where my actual experience of hysterectomy crosses with your metaphorical representation of it: that is in the symbolic significance it holds in the public eye. Since my surgery, countless women have asked me "Did they have to take it all out?" Each time I'm asked the question, I see myself, for a sudden, infuriating moment, through their eyes, as the helpless pawn of patriarchal medical violence, rendered sexless, evacuated, impotent by this inevitably disfiguring operation. The contrast with my experience-having recovered from surgery and celebrated the relief of finding that the tumor was benign-could not be more stark.

Here we seem to have a collision between two views of medicine: the old view, in which patriarchal doctors preyed on helpless women, issuing edicts to which they were forced to submit, and a new kind of medicine, in which physicians (both women and men) listen to their patients, and medical decision-making is arrived at jointly, through conversation. Certainly in those days gone by it was important to work against the inevitability-the inescapability-of hysterectomy. But now it may be important to combat two equally damaging assumptions currently in circulation: that any woman who chooses hysterectomy is engaging in an act of unenlightened self-mutilation, and that to lose one's uterus and ovaries is to lose not only one's reproductive capacity, but also one's sexuality.

And that brings me back to the question with which I began: the assumption that not to have reproductive organs is to be desexed. Your women are "clean": without reproductive organs, they're also without sexualities. They conceive as virgins, without sex organs, having been lucky enough "to marry really strong men, whose sperm must be compounded of Neptune's foam." We're back with the complex double-ness of "clean" again. Whether in your metaphoric use of hysterectomy, or my actual experiencing of it, any cheerful complicity in desexualization is a major part of the problem. And once again, that is something that good physicians (both male and female) will address.

Susan

Dear Susan,

Women's 'dirtiness' consists in their ability to accept all the ways they (we) know physical reality: menses, childbearing, nursing...all those uncontrollable, sloppy, but generative body processes. The cleanliness that is insisted upon by the father/males acknowledges obliquely how dirtiness is equated with uncontrollability, which sensation and physicality really are!

Ann

Dear Ann,

As we explore the questions of violence in all this-both men against women and women's complicity in expecting the violence, trying to get around it with mental tricks or secret knowledge, I see the link to your second book, *The Forty-Seventh Thanksgiving*. I see this book as mingling, wonderfully, the cheery denial of a motherly ceremony (the Thanksgiving dinner) with the violently creative and also destructive experience of female reproductive physicality. The activity of preparing for Thanksgiving all seems so gendered to me: the women all squeezing tomato pulp, groping in the butterball cavity, pulling out entrails (while refusing the phallic tasks for sausage squeezing!) and-all the while-praying, yearning, longing? for the return of menses which is the overarching premise for all feasts-the praise of sheer generativity.

When I was responding to your earlier piece, I was thinking about this in terms of a refusal of the Aristotelian male-sufficient model of generation based on sperm just coming into being in the nourishing catamenia.

Instead, I saw this as being about a forceful female model of nourishment, powerful, violent, beautiful, and repulsive simultaneously, that is anything but the passive receptacle for male potency. And I guess I still see this, but now would also want to argue that in this book you link Thanksgiving of all kinds to the ur-Thanksgiving, which is for female generativity.

Susan

Dear Susan,

A note: I do think that *Babies* is indeed from a child's point of view, or of a woman who is incapable of becoming a woman. Thanksgiving is the book for and about women as distinct even to girls. NB: the females who seed the tomatoes and are disgusted with the other unpleasant tactile business are the girls-I try to make that pointed distinction through the drawing as well as use of that word, and of women later on, in distinction. The girl of *Babies* maybe has finally worked it out, grown up to stuff the turkey?

Everybody pretends Thanksgiving is a "virginal" celebration. But the women know what it's really about-and it's a kind of raw physicality/sexuality that no man would ever have a part of. When it comes to cleaning and stuffing a naked bird, the men are separated from the women! So one irony in the book is that the women, behind the cultural veil of "virginity" have a ritual bacchanal-and certainly no one wants to look in to see how it's going. Your analysis is right: we're talking about both Thanksgiving and the "ur-Thanksgiving" and its other (secret) "female rites."

Ann

Dear Ann,

But I have one pretty simple question: is that Thanksgiving for our power to procreate, or (in a more familiar, local and pedestrian sense) for the way that a return of the menses signals the fact that NO baby is coming that month?

Susan

Susan,

In fact I made this book while I was awaiting my overdue period at Thanksgiving time. I was rattled to be "dry" when I wanted both the relief from premenstrual torments and equally the expression of amplitude I've always felt my period to be. The idea of being left in life with turkey-at-room-temperature instead of my own warm fluids and personal rites seemed particularly grievous. Until my flow began, I was prone to feel more like the prickly broad-breasted hen!

There is a broader point though: "dry" is what I was as a girl and what I one day will be, as a crone. So this is a Thanksgiving not so much for reproduction or relief from it but for simple presence, for the here-and-now. The importance of the period's coming is in the symbolism of being able to choose how to use my body's power-and to choose every four weeks, yet. It's Thanksgiving for being alive to the reality of mess, of sensation, of physicality. In relation to *Babies*, it's being able to go all the places cheeriness forbids.

The greatest wonder of our bodies is their being at once our histories and our futures. But in this Thanksgiving kitchen the body is the present. The woman is active-not waiting for the future, nor dwelling on the past (represented by the girls). Whatever happens-if we are splashed by hot grease, or are given globs of cold fat as our creative materials-we recover quickly, or make something of it.

Ann

Dear Ann,

And so then the question of women's complicity in expecting the violence (as well as our complicity with the violence through adopting that voice of cheery denial) might be worked through in this second book this way: women counter male violence with our violent generative power, expressed throughout life even in such (seemingly sanctioned) rituals as Thanksgiving. So your book explores that subversive female power, all violence and physicality, which resists male power (forcemeat, that sausage casing) with its plural, sputtering, swelling force.

Which explains, too, the pleasurable, almost violent mess of the Thanksgiving preparations: hysterectomized or not, these women are not clean, any more than they are desexed, in the way the patriarchal fathers require. A wonderful messy sexualized subversive ceremony.

And in fact, I still want to come back to the question I asked earlier, that I don't think you've answered yet. I wonder whether your Forty-Seventh Thanksgiving isn't a doubled celebration: not only for reproductive power, but also for the different kinds of power that women have when we are freed from reproductive work, through contraception or through menopause, whether "natural" or surgical-power for work; power for non-reproductive sex; power for self-creation. That seems to be the powerful implication of your last picture, of the bloody tampon: a picture that is so powerful that I couldn't see it on my first several readings of your book. That taboo picture-isn't it still a real taboo in the academic and art worlds to represent menstruation?-sums up an exhilaration that many women have shared: no baby this month, and thus the energy is free for other things.

But I'm still troubled about whether this celebration excludes infertile women, who will not feel the same lift of the heart at the sight of menstrual blood. What does the onset of menopause mean to those women? Can there be a Forty-Seventh Thanksgiving that includes infertile women, as well as fertile women, and women who are postmenopausal, either naturally or surgically?

Susan

Susan,

I don't know whether I am odd or quite representative in experiencing menstrual blood not only as a part of sexual function, but as a fascinating body fluid-a creation of my being, like urine or feces, but not so easily dismissed as "bad." It's a complicated outpouring that gives rise to myriad fantasies. It's excess capacity, not the leftovers. So, in my book, anyone who has a flow is in this creative mode: menses is the result of gratuitous feminine creativity. I didn't make the book with much thought to fertility difficulties or losses. It's a rejoicing for the little girls who were dry and clean and have come into their own, have become realists, can live in the world as the women they are.

I think Thanksgiving is hardly dismissable by women who do not choose to or cannot reproduce, who do not experience flows. I think the power to stick your hand into the squeamish body or to produce a feast out of a cavity is powerful on many levels. The kind of power I am referring to, wishing for, is available to any person of courage.

So, on the one hand, yes, this is a book about a specific physical production I delight in; but, yes, too, it is available for broader interpretation-again, I hope the book can be useful broadly, can transcend age and gender.

Ann

Ann,

...Well, let's sum up: So, what do these two books suggest about (and to) medicine? If you're looking back to medicine, I see you demonstrating that medicine, like Thanksgiving, is a ritual, a set of ceremonies, that can work either to affirm or to expunge the power of female bodies: our creativity; our energy (sexual and emotional); our nurturance and our joy. I like thinking of these two books in the order that we've discussed them, in fact, because the hollowed-out woman (pithed frog) on the operating table in your first book is succeeded (repaired, in fact) by the joyously full image of stuffing the butterball hen in the second. The evacuated image of female self and sexuality with which medicine collaborates, in that first book, is replaced by an image of full female embodiment subverting a domestic ritual, in the second, for its own arcane and profanely celebratory purposes. We want a medicine more like cookery, then? Not exactly that, but we'd want a medicine that women can subvert, arrange, speak through, collaborate with in the way that your women take over and assert themselves through the Forty-Seventh Thanksgiving.

Susan

Dear Susan,

We started out long ago discussing the "power of the story-teller to construct experience," and how "the strategic introduction of a subjective perspective into the objective frame of medicine, in order to arrive at a fuller picture of the illness, the disease, and the path to treatment, even cure." These books relate to medicine in very much those ways. What I imagine my work offering to any reader, I see doubly as an offering to doctors. I want my work to have a broad audience, but I feel acutely the desire to enter it into medical discussion. For the medical readers of this journal, this is information about rarely articulated aspects of the soul that affect illness and health. I don't think they are unknown, but certainly not often explored outside of clinical study and language. I want my books to be helpful and liberalizing in the way that new information will always be for people who wish to use skill in the service of compassion-the goal, certainly, for the excellent doctors I know. Perhaps we can reaffirm to attentive physicians that when they reflect about their patients and try to imagine their stories, it is indeed medical observation of the greatest importance to their art as sustainers of the lives of fully-realized people.

Love,

Ann

Footnote

Notes

1. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 188.
2. Susan Merrill Squier, *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth-Century Visions of Reproductive Technology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1994).
3. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1989), 75.

AuthorAffiliation

Ann Starr holds an A.B. from Kenyon College and an M.A. in English from the University of Virginia. Her artist's books have been shown at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington and the Center for Book Arts in New York. She has lectured about her art and its medical sources at the Northwestern University Medical School and the Kauai Conference in Williamstown, Mass. Starr will be a panelist at the Society for Literature and Science in November and will present a paper at the "Women, Science, and

Health..." conference at York University in 1999.

Susan Squier is Brill Professor of Women's Studies and English at Penn State University. She is co-editor, with E. Ann Kaplan, of *Playing Dolly: Technocultural Formations, Fantasies, and Fictions of Assisted Reproduction*, forthcoming from Rutgers University Press, and author of *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth-Century Visions of Reproductive Technology*.

Copyright © 1996-2016 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.