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Monstrous Pregnancy, Queer Bodies, and Male Anxiety:

“Bloodchild” and Other Pregnant Men of Speculative Horror

In the Afterword to her short story “Bloodchild,” written a decade after the story’s original publication, Octavia Butler describes the work as her “pregnant man story” (30). The concepts of male pregnancy and male procreation have long been depicted and symbolically represented throughout speculative fiction, particularly speculative horror. Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, widely regarded as the origin of the science fiction genre, is itself a story of male reproduction. In “The Fetal Monster,” Ernest Larsen describes Mary Shelley’s possible motivations in writing *Frankenstein* as trying to illustrate “what a disaster it can be to bring new life into the world ... [by] writ[ing] about a man’s attempt to create life—which couldn’t be anything else but a disaster” (237). The monstrous nature of pregnancy and fetal gestation in general is a common theme in horror (e.g. *Rosemary’s Baby*, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *The Stand*, etc.). This horrific representation of human reproduction is further transformed when housed within the framework of the pregnant man trope, most notably depicted in the film *Alien* (1979) directed by Ridley Scott. This film’s version of the pregnant man invokes male anxieties around the growing gender equality movements of the time, doing so by having him be orally raped and impregnated by one of the alien monsters in the film, the ‘Facehugger.’ The eventual ‘birth’ of this alien’s spawn from the man’s stomach is visceral and nauseating, a violent assault on the male viewer’s sense of comfort and bodily autonomy.

Butler's "Bloodchild," originally published in 1984, takes an uncommon direction with the pregnant man for the horror genre, depicting one who (essentially) consents to his impregnation by an alien being. The convoluted dynamic between Gan, the would-be pregnant man of this story, and T'Gatoi, his alien impregnator, is made all the more complex by the intense body horror of the story's birthing scene, featuring a different man, Bram Lomas, impregnated by these aliens. Butler expresses that "Bloodchild" was an attempt to write about a man "choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties" ("Afterword" 30). Despite the many differing interpretations of "Bloodchild"—a good deal of which go against the explanations Butler offers in her Afterword—"Bloodchild" signifies an evolved version of the pregnant man trope, one that incorporates the male anxieties and abjection of previous iterations, while inviting ruminations on consent, queer parenthood, and exploitation.

The figure of the pregnant man has appeared repeatedly throughout the history of literature and film, and can be traced back to the myths of Ancient Greece, with examples including the skull-birth of Athena, and the thigh-birth of Dionysus, both godly children borne by Zeus (Hamilton 24, 52). In "Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity in Djuna Barnes," Michael Davidson declares the pregnant man to be "the foundation of many western narratives" (210), citing Greek myth as well as Eve being born from Adam's rib in the Old Testament. He also details the pregnant man's impact outside of literature, noting "[e]ighteenth-century molly houses or gay taverns[s] yearly 'festival nights' in which men participated in acts of cross-dressing, birthing, and lying-in as a form of gay parturition camp" (210). In science fiction, the pregnant man has gone from being symbolically represented in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, to being realized in speculative works such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Le Guin's 1969 novel features a planet occupied by a race of humans, similar to

those of Earth in nearly every way, save for their lack of sexual dimorphism. Every ‘man’ on the planet of Gethen is genderless, and possesses the capability to develop either set of genitals during their hormonal phase of *kemmer* (Le Guin 90). This results in the revolutionary sentence, “[t]he king was pregnant” (99); however, despite the transgressive language of *Left Hand*, the book spends very little time with the experience and visual depiction of male pregnancy. In 1979, however, Ridley Scott brings that visceral incarnation of the pregnant man to the screen with *Alien*. According to A. Robin Hoffman in “How to See the Horror: The Hostile Fetus in *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Alien*,” Scott utilizes the ability of science fiction to “exploit the flexibility of an unknown future in order to explore horrific fears about bodily integrity, invasion, and rape in a way that decouples biological sex from reproductive roles” (251). A decade later “*Bloodchild*,” which still explores the body horror of pregnancy and childbirth, showcases a “man becoming pregnant as an act of love” (Butler “Afterword” 30). While the horror of “*Bloodchild*” and stories before it continue in modern portrayals, the pregnant man has also been employed as a comedic device, most notably in the film *Junior* (1994), in which Arnold Schwarzenegger stars as a scientist who becomes pregnant and eventually gives birth via Cesarean section.

In contemporary writing, the pregnant man has become an overwhelmingly popular trope in ‘slash’ fiction, or fan fiction (a form of speculative fiction in of itself), known as ‘mpreg.’ In “The Pregnant Man Story: Echoes of Octavia E. Butler’s Themes of Reproductive Anxiety in Fan Writing,” Heather Osbourne notes that the “emotional tenor of mpreg [fiction] can range from unremitting body horror through saccharine domestic romance” (24), and that, for the genre’s largely female writers, “mpreg stories linger over pregnancy’s horrors and its pleasures in a safely distanced fictional space” (24). Osbourne also argues that in writing “*Bloodchild*,”

Butler similarly uses the pregnant man trope to process more general “[a]nxiety centered on reproduction—from romantic partnerships through sexual relationships, to pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing” that can be found throughout Butler’s works (24).

This engagement with the trauma and anxiety surrounding reproduction becomes especially intensified when authors like Butler introduce queer-informed role reversals to the genre. Traditionally, in horror films, “pregnancy is represented in terms of the horrific and the abject,” as Sarah Arnold notes in “Pregnancy in the Horror Film: Reproduction and Maternal Discourses” (10). Similarly, in “Bloodchild,” the “toll of pregnancy and birth on the body” represent “[t]he anxiety at the heart of the story”(Osbourne 24). “Bloodchild” engages this traditional trope but also queers it, participating in what Arnold identifies as “‘invasion’ pregnancy horror.” On one level, this sub-genre depicts “pregnancy [as] monstrous [because] the unborn is not fathered by a (human) male” even while these “invasive beings are signified as male (through voice, or phallic symbolism)” (10). This description applies strongly to “Bloodchild” which contains an especially monstrous ‘fetus’:

[The grub] was fat and deep red with [its host’s] blood—both inside and out. It had already eaten its own egg case but apparently had not yet begun to eat its host. At this stage, it would eat any flesh except its mother’s ... It was limbless and boneless at this stage, perhaps fifteen centimeters long and two thick, blind and slimy with blood. It was like a large worm. T’Gatoi put it into the belly of the achi, and it began at once to burrow.

It would stay there and eat as long as there was anything to eat. (Butler 15-16)

Significantly, T’Gatoi—though referred to as female and not simply inhuman—serves as the head ‘patriarch’ of Gan’s family and is described with notably phallic language: “I undressed and lay down beside [T’Gatoi]. I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life. I felt

the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the blind probing of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing the egg from her body into mine” (Butler 27). The gendered role reversal at play serves to heighten masculine fear; Gan, the vulnerable male, is impregnated by the phallic woman T’Gatoi, complete with her ‘ovipositor’—a deliberately feminized phallus meant to evoke Freudian castration anxiety.

A female-identified/phallic-coded monster that serves to threaten male dominance and comfort is something that “Bloodchild” and *Alien* share. The alien fetus that is orally-implanted into and later bursts out from Kane, a crewman on the *Nostramo*, grows into the Xenomorph: a female alien with a long, phallic shaped head, and a smaller, additional phallic head that protrudes from its mouth. Furthermore, both aliens in “Bloodchild” and *Alien* are insectoid in appearance, bringing to mind the murderous females found in the insect world that consume their mates after copulation. (e.g. praying mantis, black widow). Kane is killed by the ‘Chestburster’ stage of the Xenomorph’s emergence, and Gan would be devoured by T’Gatoi’s young without her intervention, just as would have been the fate of Bram Lomas. Despite the gender reversal of both works, the pregnant men of “Bloodchild” and *Alien* still explore the horrors of pregnancy and childbirth as experienced by women and AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) people, yet present these anxieties in such a way that male viewers and readers will identify with them. Depicting a scenario in which a man is overpowered and forced to carry a fetal body, male audience members are made to consider a scenario in which they cannot rely on their strength and are just as vulnerable as a woman/AFAB person may be to an unwanted impregnation. As Osbourne notes about “Bloodchild”—“[b]y hosting the eggs, by being subservient to T’Gatoi’s interests, Gan’s body is equated with a woman’s marginalized body” (24).

In “Alien Bodies and a Queer Future: Sexual Revision in Octavia Butler’s ‘Bloodchild’ and James Tiptree, Jr.’s ‘With Delicate Mad Hands,’” Amanda Thibodeau posits that “Bloodchild” is an “imagining of ‘otherness’ in the alien body as a site of possibility,” and offers a queer reading of “traditional space exploration and ‘final frontier’ narratives” (263). In “Bloodchild,” humans are not a colonizing force, but refugees, bartering for safe harbour with their utility as incubators—such that the story discomfits masculinity and destabilizes the patriarchal institution of colonization. According to Thibodeau, “[t]he risk each partner accepts in order to reach what Octavia Butler calls ‘an unusual accommodation’ marks the relationship [between Gan and T’Gatoi] as queer” (273). Osbourne’s analysis supports this queer reading of the pair, stating that “[i]n ‘Bloodchild,’ Butler does not reverse or erase heterosexuality but complicates it” (24). Osbourne identifies Gan and T’Gatoi as “superficially heterosexual,” and notes that “[t]heir conflict throughout the story centers on how pregnancy will diminish Gan and benefit T’Gatoi ... [B]ecause the inequality is tilted in the female’s favour, the heteronormativity of the conflict is destabilized” (24).

When Thibodeau suggests that Gan has a “queer desire to create something comprehensible, even normal, out of something abject” (270), this suggestion reveals a fundamental function of the pregnant man trope—to create a space in which abjection towards pregnancy and childbirth can be safely explored and processed. Women and AFAB people are taught unrelentingly to accept and normalize the terrifying ordeal of pregnancy, despite historically being largely uninformed about the process itself. Osbourne points out that “in mpreg stories, even male characters who are aware of their own reproductive capacity are often blindsided by the pregnancy itself... [and] slowly grow[] to realize the enormity of [their] choice” (24). As an example, Gan is unprepared for the reality of his impending pregnancy, despite

knowing it would happen his entire life: “I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something worse. And I wasn’t ready to see it. Maybe I never would be” (Butler 16-17). By mapping the pregnancy experience onto a cis-gendered male body, the AFAB experience of abjection towards reproduction can be expressed in such a way that a male audience can empathize with the rational fear, as opposed to just condemning it as a rejection of ‘natural purpose.’ Queering the experience of pregnancy through gendered role-reversal elevates the rhetoric surrounding pregnancy beyond easily dismissed ‘women’s issues.’

In addition to exploring and validating fears surrounding the mutilation of the AFAB body during pregnancy—in part by allowing male readers to share in the trauma and abjection—male reproduction stories can also express anxieties about the removal of AFAB bodies from the birthing process through advancements in reproductive technologies such as artificial wombs. These anxieties would seem to justify why male reproduction stories so often serve to condemn male reproduction. Arnold argues that “[w]hile [science fiction horror] films undoubtedly evoke the monstrous feminine and speak to fears of the monstrous fecund body, they are often contradictory and speak equally to fears of paternal reproduction” (10). The stories of men taking reproduction into their own hands often end in monstrous results, and, even in narratives where a woman is forcibly impregnated by a monstrous ‘other’ father, it is firmly established that “the progeny are a product of the father” (Arnold 10). Severing this resemblance to the maternal host serves to condemn the idea of solo male reproduction. This notion of the monstrous act of male reproduction, originating in *Frankenstein*, is present across Ridley Scott’s filmography, namely in the *Alien* and *Blade Runner* franchises. In “‘We Were So Wrong’: The Perversion of Male Creation. Motherhood, Fatherhood and Birth in Recent Incarnations of the Alien Series,” Amanda DiGioia purports that “*Prometheus* (2012), *Alien: Covenant* (2017) and *Alien: Isolation*

(2014)” are all unified by “the perversion of male creation” (10). DiGioia identifies examples of this perversion “in three male or male-presenting creators in the *Alien* universe: the Engineers, Peter Weyland and David” (10). These solo fathers that DiGioia presents are all “hurt or hated by their offspring” and “are quickly punished by the natural world with disaster or death when they attempt to usurp the natural order of things” (10). We can see the pregnant men of *Alien* and “Bloodchild,” Kane and Bram Lomas, also suffer these consequences of male reproduction, both enduring fatal or near-fatal bodily damage at the hands of their alien offspring.

DiGioia compares the unnatural fathers of the *Alien* franchise to Victor Frankenstein, noting the characters’s shared positions as ‘mad scientists’—an explicitly masculine archetype that aims to conquer the powers of creating life, and by extension remove the female body from the birthing process. Another notable mad scientist found in Scott’s work is Eldon Tyrell, the creator of the replicants in *Blade Runner*, who plays out his own Victor/The Creature dynamic with his creation Roy Batty, the primary antagonist of the film. When being confronted by Batty about the exceptionally short lifespans of replicants, Tyrell audaciously dismisses Batty’s grief, referring to him as “the prodigal son” (01:25:15). Batty then takes Tyrell’s face in his hands, kisses him, and, in a symbolic act of castration, crushes his eyes (Freud 231). These depictions of male reproduction as a corrupted act—resulting in violent and monstrous progeny— can point to the anxiety around AFAB people being removed from pregnancy, and about the potential corruption of a child exposed to exclusively patriarchal influence. Such narratives operate within a traditionally heteronormative viewpoint, yet offer a larger condemnation of the patriarchy in relation to child rearing and thereby advocate feminist and queer approaches to parenting. As noted by Larsen, “it is precisely the enlightened rational patriarchal system as personified by

Frankenstein that itself produces monstrosity, which lays the ground for its own deconstruction (238).

As a transgressive work of speculative fiction, “Bloodchild” is informed by a wide variety of genre conventions—namely the trope of the pregnant man, which has inhabited speculative fiction as long as the genre has existed. Yet “Bloodchild” situates itself as a wholly unique manifestation of the pregnant man trope, by employing the pregnant man as a vessel for the female abject and the anxiety surrounding pregnancy, as a queer critique of issues surrounding intimacy, and as a male identifier for bearing the experience of horrific penetration and forced impregnation. In Gan, Butler has created a pregnant man, which is both an object of horror and a queer exploration of love and sacrifice, that has seeded its influence into the modern era of mpreg fan fiction. Between the works of speculative horror that inform ‘Bloodchild,’ and the ones that follow, it is apparent that the pregnant man trope is so frequently utilized due to its ability to bring AFAB abjection towards pregnancy into the realm of fiction, thus making it empathetically accessible to non-AFAB experiences. Furthermore, as a queering of pregnancy and childbirth, the trope of the pregnant man serves not only to allow AFAB authors to contend with their own abjection, but also invites readers to consider experiences of “having children” beyond heteronormative structures, removing the concept of reproduction from patriarchal influence.

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