2025, Vol. 10, No. 2
ISSN: 2771-3520

Mother Wolf

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On the Sovereignty of Mothers sets out to "think the political otherwise than as paternal or patriarchal, otherwise than as fraternal"; to "think the political *as it has always been: maternal*."[1] Into this project, Anidjar enlists Thomas Hobbes, the only social contract theorist to locate the origin of sovereignty not in the right of the father over the child, nor in the right of the husband over the wife (Pateman, 1989), but in the right of the mother (p. 72). In *Elements of Law*, Hobbes argues that the mother's right derives not from her generation of the child but from her preservation of the child (p. 71). In *De Cive,* he writes that the mother who chooses to raise the child does so on the condition that, "being grown to full age he become not her enemy." Mothers thus suspend the state of nature as a state of "universal enmity" (p. 72), occupying a double function as both "mother" and "lord." In *Leviathan*, Hobbes holds that the mother's natural dominion derives from the fact that it is she who first decides either to "nourish" or to "expose" the child (pp. 73). The maternal contract, Anidjar suggests, is that which "binds mother and child" but also "two mothers, two maternal functions, *two maternal powers"*: the power of preservation and the power of destruction (pp. 73), what Walter Benjamin calls founding or instituting power and divine power. It also marks a form of social life that stands between the undifferentiated multiplicity of the state of nature and the undivided unity of the commonwealth: one (the father), two (the mother), many (the state of nature). It is the sovereignty of the mother that mediates between the state of nature and the social contract. It is mothers who make and unmake the collective. It is mothers who "guard the world…preserve it and also guard us from it" (pp. 84-85). It is mothers who force the recognition that nations, unlike Hobbes' men, are not created equal (pp. 96).

For Hobbes, however, it is not only mothers who bear the power both to destroy and to preserve. All contracts, all corporations, all nation- states are constituted by and around a single figure of sovereignty who, like the figure depicted on the cover of the *Leviathan*, holds a sword in one hand and a bishop's crozier, symbol of pastoral power, in the other. The sovereign, like all mothers, stands in the gap between the social contract and the state of nature. The sovereign must threaten enough violence to hold back both the threat posed by other sovereigns and other nations, which, for Hobbes, remain forever in the state of nature, and the ever-present threat of chaos and rebellion posed from within by subjects who do not fear the sovereign's capacity to enforce the contract (Hobbes, 1991, p. 90). Yet the sovereign must also know when to hold back, to ensure that the threat of violence does not overshadow the promise of preservation. Because, for Hobbes, the one inalienable right is the right to defend oneself against death, no contract can hold in the face of a threat to life.

Preservation, too, can be understood as a balance between the enactment and the withholding of violence. Preservation requires property, possessions, and commodities, which in turn require a kind of truce: a relinquishing of the universal natural "right to all things" which is the source of the war of all against all that

[1] This piece was made possible by my Coombe Trust fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. I am very grateful for the time and space given to me by IASH. Conversations with Anthony Paul Smith helped me work through the ideas and arguments here.

characterises the state of nature (Hobbes, 1991, p. 92). The first two laws of nature, Hobbes says, are to "seek peace" by laying down our right to all things and, second, "to defend ourselves" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 91). The sovereign must not only protect but also nourish. The sovereign nourishes their subjects, here both the sovereign's own body and the sovereign's children, by ensuring the proper circulation and distribution of commodities: both the blood which "nourisheth" the national body and the milk which subjects suckle from " the two breasts of our common Mother, Land, and Sea" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 170). Here again, preservation is not distinct from destructive power. Commodities can be acquired through exchange, labour, or war, and the sovereign must withhold sufficient land to "sustaine the whole expence to the common Peace, and defence necessarily required" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 173-174).

The question of the relationship between destruction and preservation was woven through Hobbes' own life, as well as through his relationships with fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and children. Hobbes was born in 1588, a year widely prophesied to be a year of catastrophe and destruction, taken by some to be the eventual result of Martin Luther's filial revolt against papal authority (Rogow, 1986, p. 18). 1588 was also the year that the Spanish Armada invaded England in an attempt to force submission to the spiritual authority of the papacy. Where spiritual and temporal authority oppose one another, Hobbes would later write, "the Common wealth cannot but be in great danger of Civill warre, and Dissolution" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 227). The Armada was defeated by Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. Hobbes' mother, he famously said, "brought twins to birth, myself and fear at the same time" (Rogow, 1986, p. 17). Not only Hobbes and fear, but also enmity: Hobbes's "hatred of the enemies of my country" (Martinich, 1999, p. 2). His father was a violent drunk who, not long after Hobbes left home for Oxford, was forced to flee his parish after hitting another man at the door of his church. Hobbes spent much of the rest of his life in the service of more powerful men and women, caught up in both familial and civil conflict. He was employed by both men and women alike, by mothers, fathers, and sons, and he tried at least once, unhappily, to serve two masters, both the mother and the son of the Cavendish family (Martinich p. 87). Hobbes distributed his own property along lines neither straightforwardly filial nor familial. He gave "a little farm" to his brother "because he loved him" while he was alive (Rogow, 1986, p. 22), and, when he died, bequeathing what remained to nieces, including "an orphaned girl, entrusted to his care" as well as "ten pounds to one Mary Dell" (Martinich, 1999, p. 5). Those around him did the same: an uncle took in Hobbes' mother and siblings when their father abandoned them, and Hobbes' childhood home was inherited by one of his sisters.

As *On Sovereignty of Mothers* insists, so too for Hobbes the fact of patriarchy did not erase the power of women or of mothers. Yet, rather than thinking sovereignty otherwise than paternal, patriarchal, or fraternal, Hobbes insists that "although Man may be male and female, Authority is not" (Hobbes, 1680 in Ng, 2012). For Anidjar, the story of Medea, above all, figures the destructive power of maternity which "no collective I know of has delegated, officially delegated, to *mothers*" (81). But for Hobbes, the story is, more than anything, a lesson on the wisdom of *withholding* violence. A translation of Euripides' *Medea* is the first text we know Hobbes to have written, composed as a gift for the tutor of his teenage years. "No other dramatic or literary work," one biographer observes, "is referred to as often in his writings" (Rogow, 1986, p. 38). While it is tempting to read Hobbes' choice of text as a comment on his relationship to his own mother, this analogy may reveal as much as it conceals. The translation was completed not long before his mother, like Medea, was abandoned by her husband, but it might be better understood as a commentary

on his father, already facing social censure for his inability to regulate his rage in the face of perceived insult. Hobbes cites the text three times, not for Medea's act of filicide, but for the patricidal acts of Pelias' daughters who, on Medea's treacherous advice, cut their father into pieces in the hope of restoring his youth. In Hobbes' hands, this episode becomes a warning of the danger that "they that go about by disobedience, to do no more than reform the commonwealth, shall find they do thereby destroy it" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 234). Here, Medea's "eloquence" wins the consent of Pelias' daughters through their "lack of judgment." When Medea appears alone elsewhere, it is as again as a figure concerned with the proper regulation of destructive force: "though Medea saw many reasons to forbear killing her children, yet the last dictate of her judgment was, that the present revenge on her husband outweighed them all, and thereupon the wicked action *necessarily* followed" (Hobbes, 1839 cited in Rogow, 1986, pp. 38-39).[2]

Where social contract theory, in its more fully developed bourgeois forms, valorises self-possession and equality, Hobbes is unusual in identifying submission and subservience as the price of exiting the state of nature. The earliest of the social contract theorists, Hobbes is, as Carol Pateman suggests, almost unique in his recognition that the foundation of contract is not consent between equals but coercion (Pateman, 1988, p. 26). What differentiates servitude from slavery—the social contract from the state of nature—is, again not violence as such but its regulation. The contract emerges in the transition from the immediate coercion of prisons and fetters to a form of agreement in which the vanquished party agrees "not to run away, nor to do violence to his Master" in exchange for "corporall liberty" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 141). Contract, then, makes possible the suspension of violence over time, and it is for precisely this reason that there can be no contract in the state of nature, where the war "of every man against every man" renders meaningless any agreement" wherein neither of the parties performe presently, but trust one another." A contract requires a sovereign, both to suspend the state of nature, and to act as one "over them both, with right and force sufficient to compell performance" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 96).

The prototype of the contract, then, is the covenant God makes with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and also with Hagar. In recounting the story of Hagar, Hobbes makes no mention of her status as a slave, nor of her maternal double, Sarah. Instead, Hagar stands among the progenitors of Israel with whom God covenants directly, and through them, with their seed. Like the temporal sovereign, the sovereign God demonstrates power not through destruction but in rescuing his subjects from destruction. God appears to Hagar to promise survival, "*I will multiply thy seed exceedingly*," just as God intervenes to Abraham, " to stay his hand from slaying Isaac," and "went before the Army of Israel to the Red Sea" to guide them through the desert (Hobbes, 1991, p. 275-276). Where, for Anidjar, Hagar is the double of Sarah, the mother and the slave,

[2] As Rogow notes, "In the light of what we know, admittedly too little, of the family history, particularly the history of Hobbes's "collirice" father, we may wonder about the private meanings or resonances of Euripides' tragedy for the elder Hobbes's second son, who could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old when he presented his translation to the schoolmaster Latimer. Did he see in Jason's treatment of Medea and their children some elements of his father's treatment of the family, and did he observe in Medea's maniacal rage something of the temper that, in 1604, had led his father to assault Richard Jeane? Was Hobbes himself, and his siblings as well, the occasional target of that anger, thereby leading him to identify to some extent with the victims of Medea's fury? Or did Medea, who had sacrificed much for the husband who ultimately betrayed her, and whose lust for revenge was insatiable, arouse complicated emotions in the youthful Hobbes similar to those ambivalent feelings he may have been experiencing in connection with his mother, left behind in 1603 or 1604 with three adolescent children to support? In Medea, Hobbes perhaps also saw certain images of himself, for he too, as we shall see, could give expression to aggressive anger and even rage, albeit not in the forms preferred by the jilted, venomous sorceress." (1986, pp. 39-40).

the Jew and the Arab, Israel and Palestine (96), for Hobbes Hagar stands alongside the patriarchs, the fathers of great nations, bringing with her into the covenant all her "seed" precisely through her motherly, her "paternall" right of generation (Hobbes, 1991, p. 139). Hagar "is not called mother" (29), but is she not, for Hobbes, a father? If "the slave is granted *neither gender nor maternality*" (29), can the same not also be said of the sovereign?

In *Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes that "there be three titles only, by which one man may have right and dominion over another; whereof two may take place presently, and those are: voluntary offer of submission, and yielding by compulsion; the third is to take place, upon the supposition of children begotten upon them" (Baumgold, 2017, p. 280). Consent, coercion, or generation. But by *Leviathan*, these three have become two: Dominion Paternall, and Despoticall, "acquired either by Generation" or "by Conquest" (Baumgold, 2017, p. 280, 286). What distinguishes the maternal—the "Paternal"—contract, for Hobbes, is not the power of the mother but the impotence of the child. This matters less because of what it implies for the child's ability to resist domination by the mother—there are many ways to find oneself in a position where submission becomes necessary for survival without the helplessness necessarily implied by infancy—than because it is not clear what the mother stands to gain from this exchange. All contracts, for Hobbes, are founded on a mutual agreement to suspend the war of all of all against all; to lay down arms, at least temporarily. In a standard contract, the victor's primary gain is relief from the fear that the defeated party will continue to attempt to kill them. In the maternal contract, by contrast, the only benefit Hobbes seems to identify is a promise of future amnesty—a promise which, as he makes clear elsewhere, can only be guaranteed by the existence of a sovereign power capable of enforcing contracts. If the only contract that exists in the state of nature relies on a promise of future good behaviour, and future good behaviour can only be enforced by a sovereign power, then Hobbes' vision of the state of nature as a condition of "warre" interrupted only by "the government of small Families" does not quite cohere (Hobbes, 1991, p. 89). The trick, of course, is to realise that the state of nature does not exist except as a fantasy within the social contract. The threat of violence more terrible than that exacted by the collective is the only way to ensure that the collective holds together. Only against the backdrop of the state of nature does the brutality of the social contract appear as peace; only by contrast with Behemoth does Leviathan appear as a nurturing mother rather than a terrifying monster.

Time is precisely what cannot exist in the state of nature, what cannot be allowed to exist. The construction of the state of nature relies on the fantastical image of time and world held in suspension. In the state of nature, we "consider men" "as if they were but even now all at once created male and female" (*Elements of Law*), "as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms;" as a condition in which "all men of riper years are to be accounted equal" (*De Cive*). That is, we could consider one another as though our gestation and preservation, our care and feeding, made no difference between us (Baumgold, 2017, p. 276). Only natural equality can justify artificial brutality. What *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* evades in emphasising the duality of mothers is the same thing Hobbes erases in the years between *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*: the question of the mother in relation to the father.[3]

[3] As Su Fang Ng notes (1989), Hobbes' preference for the image of the wolf seems to reflect a preference for the story of the wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus over the rape of Lucretia as the founding myth of Rome. But this shift in Hobbes' language between *Elements of Law* and

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Leviathan does not only (as Ng argues) relegate sexual difference to the state of nature, but renders the only natural inequality that Hobbes will acknowledge (that of parent and child) foundational, suggesting that the myth also functions to further legitimize Hobbes' insistence on the impossibility of mutual love between equals.