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I. CITIZENSHIP WITH A FEMINIST FACE The Problem with Maternal Thinking

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IN THE PAST twenty years, perhaps no other theoretical issue has created as much controversy within the feminist movement as the role of women in the family. First-wave feminists as varied as Kate Millet, Betty Friedan, Juliet Mitchell, and Shulamith Firestone all shared at least one common task: to desanctify the family and demystify motherhood.¹ These first-wave thinkers considered the bureaucratic state, capitalism, and the patriarchal family to be three sides of an iron triangle of women's oppression. By the mid-1970s, later feminists were deepening first-wave criticism by further examining the relations between capitalism and patriarchy, the family and the capitalist mode of production, housework and surplus labor, motherhood and oppression.² Needless to say, the family did not fare well under this withering criticism. Far from being an idyllic haven in a heartless world, the family appeared to reproduce capitalism at home and to subordinate and oppress women on a daily basis.

But the family soon came to have its feminist defenders, and now a battle is brewing between those feminists who stand by the earlier critiques of the family and those who argue that we must reconsider the value of the family and motherhood for feminist consciousness. The "pro-family" feminists' aim is both a practical and a theoretical one: practical insofar as they seek to wrest the defense of the family from the New Right (which they correctly perceive as having distorted and mystified the role of women as mothers and wives); and theoretical

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insofar as they intend to reclaim mothering as a dimension of women's experience and defend it as necessary for both gender identity and feminist political consciousness. Among these "pro-family" feminists, two are particularly important: Sara Ruddick and Jean Bethke Elshtain. Seizing upon the "social practice of mothering" and its attendant virtues and "metaphysical attitudes," Sara Ruddick has sought to promote "maternal thinking" as an antidote to a male-dominated culture and as an alternative vision of a "way to be" in the world.³ Jean Bethke Elshtain challenges what she takes to be the matriphobia of the feminist movement by bringing out the political implications of maternal thinking and by attempting to restructure political consciousness on the basis of what she calls "social feminism."⁴

In this essay, I want to argue against "social feminism" because it harbors some serious problems for feminist political discourse and democratic political action. Despite the best of sentiments in attempting to find something unique in women's identity as (potential) mothers, social feminism distorts the meaning of politics and political action largely by reinforcing a one-dimensional view of women as creatures of the family. But women are not uniquely identified by maternal thinking, nor does maternal thinking necessarily promote the kind of democratic politics social feminism purports to foster. Accordingly, I contend that feminism can only succeed in its political mission by encouraging democratic practices and by nurturing the reality of women as, in large part, citizens. Thus my general intention is to set one possible course for future feminist political thought. Its first movements are presented here by way of critique.

My critique proceeds as follows. In the first section, I briefly reconstruct Elshtain's argument with an eye to its political implications. In the second section, I counter Elshtain's view of the relationship between the public and private realms by way of considering her interpretations of Aristotle and *Antigone*. The result of these interpretative excursions in the history of political thought is developed in the final section where I argue that maternal thinking and social feminism cannot deliver on the kind of politics or feminist political consciousness they claim to underwrite.

I

The hallmark of Elshtain's "social feminism" is her attempt to "make a case for family ties" and the practice of mothering.⁵ Her case proceeds

both historically (by reconsidering episodes in the history of political thought from the standpoint of the treatment of women); and programatically (by criticizing current feminist theories and by offering her own "reconstructive ideal of public and private").⁶ Elshtain wants to show that the family is neither the reactionary and repressive institution of feminist and leftist critics, nor the perfectly harmonious world of Filmerian patriarchs and the New Right. In the face of these critics and apologists, both left and right, Elshtain insists that "the family remains the locus of the deepest and most resonant human ties, the most enduring hopes, the most intractable conflicts, the most poignant tragedies and the sweetest triumphs human life affords."⁷

Making short work of the right, Elshtain levels criticism mainly at past feminist thought. In her view, previous feminism threatens to demean or destroy women's most powerful experiences, perhaps their very identities. What survives the demeaning or the destruction are some unacceptable alternatives: the distortion of identity and the obliteration of the private (the way radical feminists see women as "hags" and "witches"); the juridical levelling of identity and the elevation of the "social" (the way liberal feminists see women and men merely as equal legal entities); or the reduction of identity and instrumentalization of the private (the way Marxist feminists see women as reproducers).

Social feminism is expressly designed to overcome these liabilities and to supplant these other feminist alternatives. For the sake of new feminist politics, it seeks to foster the identity of "women-as-mothers" and to establish the moral primacy of the family, and so the private realm of human life. For Elshtain, the family is existentially paramount because humans are "first and foremost not political or economic man, but family men and women." Moreover, because the family has a "trans-historical" existence, it "constitutes our common humanity" and so is the "universal basis for human culture."⁸ This is not just existentially significant, but morally as well. For it is in the family that human beings experience the most ennobling dimensions of existence: long-term ties with specific others, the need for roots, obligation to kin, intimacy, love, and attentiveness. Thus the family makes a morality of responsibility possible. So Elshtain hardly dissembles when she openly declares that, "the feminism I seek is not reducible to a clever strategic move; it is, instead, the affirmation of moral imperatives and their insertion into the heart of feminist politics."⁹

For social feminism, then, the family is the most elevated and primary realm of human life. It has existential priority, and moral superiority, to the public realm of politics. To dramatize the radicalness

of this position, Elshtain contrasts social feminism with the entire 2,500 year tradition of political thought.

Aristotle and all the other political theorists down through the centuries who asserted the primacy of politics and viewed man (the male, at any rate, if not generic humanity) as pre-eminently a political animal even as they downgraded or simply took for granted the private sphere, were guilty of a serious distortion.¹⁰

To remedy this Aristotelian distortion, social feminists not only must reject the political priority of men over women; but they must also reverse the existential priority of the public realm over the private realm.

At least in light of its attempted reversal of the tradition of political thought, social feminism is not far removed from true conservatism. Both emphasize the family, traditional bonds of kinship, the web of relationships that emerge from a respect for and remembrance of past generations, and a sense of rootedness. All of these values are "conservative" in their attempt to conserve or preserve the moral fabric of the family and its cherished privacy, and as such are in sharp contrast to the rational, competitive, atomized world of liberals and so-called "conservatives."

Nevertheless, social feminism does not purport to be a conservative case against liberalism, but rather a feminist one. And what makes Elshtain's argument expressly feminist is her claim that women's experience in the private realm, as mothers, provides the only grounds, indeed the "moral imperative," for countering the prevailing liberal-individualist world view.¹¹ Elshtain explicitly rejects the notion that mothering is simply one "role" among many. Rather, mothering is "a complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous, activity" that "carries profoundly resonant emotional and sexual imperatives."¹² Women as mothers, on Elshtain's account, are the preservers of "vulnerable human life," and the attitude that distinguishes maternal thinking upholds the principle that "the reality of a single human child [must] be kept before the mind's eye."¹³ Accordingly, what counts as failure within the maternal perspective is "the death, injury or damage of a child through carelessness or neglect or the shunting of shaming of a child through over-control and domination."¹⁴

With the reality of a single human child before its eye, maternal thinking entails some striking political implications. In contrast to the kind of bureaucratic-administrative abstractionism that is fathered by

the liberal order, the social practice of mothering generates a mentality that emphasizes attentiveness toward others and is personal, empathic, and loving. The tragedy of the contemporary world is that concrete human lives are in jeopardy. A "technocratic public order," a "socially irresponsible corporate structure," an "unjust economic system that denies families a living," "bureaucratic statism," all militate against the recognition of the "concrete specificity" of human beings and "the needs of children."¹⁵ Thus "seizure," "control," and the "judgment by impersonal standards"—the hallmarks of these supra-human entities—must be rejected. The political point of the criticism is clearly-stated: "Were maternal thinking to be taken as the base for feminist consciousness, a wedge for examining an increasingly overcontrolled public world would open immediately."¹⁶ In this way, maternal thinking can "chasten arrogant public power."¹⁷

Social feminism, guided by maternal thinking, also chastens what Elshtain calls the "article of faith" of the contemporary feminist movement: "the personal is the political."¹⁸ She reads this credo as a theoretical justification to politicize, criticize, and manipulate the private world of the family and personal life. Social feminism would seek to protect the private sphere from this sort of desecration. By preserving and protecting its "moral imperatives," social feminism would purge feminism's soul of its antifamilial and matriphobic spectre and restore an authentic and unique identity to women.

From such an identity would emerge a vital public-moral consciousness and a renewed vision of citizenship. This is the more constructive—or rather, reconstructive—vision of social feminism. Drawing upon the "private virtues" and the "humanizing imperative" that emerge from the social practice of mothering, social feminism forwards a "politics of compassion" and seeks to create an "ethical polity."¹⁹ Although this reconstructive politics is not (yet) fully elaborated, it would appear that an "ethical polity" would embody or forward: (1) privacy and the protection of the private realm from politicization; (2) individual freedom ("from some all encompassing public imperative"); (3) equality (because all individuals are "irreplaceable beings and immortal souls"); (4) pluralism (of "diverse spheres and competing ideals"); (5) non-violence; (6) civic virtue (based on a "devotion to public, moral responsibilities and ends"); and (7) an active citizenry (in which "men and women alike partake of the public sphere on an equal basis for participatory dignity and equality").²⁰

This, in a word, is democracy by social feminist means. Social feminism promises a great deal, then, from the restoration of women's

identities as (potential) mothers, to the creation of a democratic and ethical polity. We must now, in the interest of feminist political consciousness, assess the strengths of these promises.

II

Social feminism is open to a number of criticisms, most of which cannot be developed here, and some only mentioned.²¹ Many of these criticisms seize upon the incompleteness of Elshtain's accounts of the family, of the social practice of mothering, or of maternal thinking. There is, for example, the definitional problem of just what sorts of relationships count as a "family." With some justification perhaps, Elshtain does not want "to throw the honorable mantle 'family' over every ad hoc collection of persons who happen to be under one roof at the same time."²² But where legitimately to throw the mantle is not clear. This is especially troubling given the great diversity of what have been and continue to be taken in different cultures and eras as families. Contemporary feminists and women generally may rightly wonder whether an extended nonnuclear family, a kibbutz, an ashram, a cooperative, or a lesbian household display (or do not display) the right sort of "genuine commitment of family men and women who retained their commitments to and for one another."²³

Women with empirical and sociological sensibilities may also call attention to the lack of caring and love often displayed in modern families (however defined). Such lack may range from professional or upper-class families in which children are not in fact "kept before the mind's eye," though they are otherwise well-treated, to those tragic cases of families with battered wives and abused children. Should not actual families be investigated before we place women's and feminists' ideals and hopes on the material basis of the family and the social practice of mothering? Some critics might contend that the family is still generally the scene of women's housework, unpaid labor, or of their second shift. First-wave and socialist—not social—feminists were not, I think, so wide of the mark that these features of family life do not impinge upon what it is to engage in "maternal thinking." Even setting aside the family as an institution, women and feminists may also wonder upon what basis we are "maternal thinkers." Are we that as mothers, as potential future mothers, as women generally, even if, individually, some of us cannot or choose not to have children?

These may or may not prove to be insuperable problems, but until they are addressed and overcome we must judge the case for social

feminism as incomplete, at the least. But there are more serious problems with social feminism, problems that threaten to undermine the political relevance of maternal thinking and so Elshtain's hopes for a new feminist political consciousness. Social feminism reinforces an abstract split between the public and private realms that cannot or should not be maintained; and no theoretical connection is provided for linking maternal thinking and the social practice of mothering with the kind of "ethical polity" Elshtain envisions, namely one informed by democratic thinking and the political practices of citizenship.

I want to begin my criticism of social feminism indirectly by considering what might seem to be two unlikely figures—Aristotle and (Sophocle's) Antigone. I begin here because Elshtain herself considers Aristotle and Antigone to be important episodes in a reconstructed history of feminist political thought. Her interpretations of them—in *Public Man, Private Woman*, and in "Antigone's Daughters"—are illustrative of social feminism: its critical powers in the case of Aristotle; its praise and prescriptions in the case of Antigone. I think both interpretations are misguided, however, and symptomatic of the general difficulties of social feminism, difficulties I will turn to more directly in the following section.

Aristotle can be approached in two very different ways, one we might call "deprecatative," the other "generous." According to the former approach, one that Elshtain endorses, Aristotle consigns the private realm to insignificance. He leaves no doubt as to who occupies the private realm where "mere life" is preserved and who acts in the public realm in pursuit of the "good life." Preserving "mere life" is the task of women, slaves, and certain kinds of laborers. Children also exist in this realm, though young males are liberated from it when they come of age. The private realm is mute: "a modest silence is a woman's crown." It is functional in that it serves to satisfy primary needs: "First house, and wife, and ox to draw the plough." And it is hierarchic by nature: "the relation of male to female is naturally that of the superior to the inferior—of the ruling to the ruled."²⁴ Aristotle allows that rule of this familial sort is of a higher nature than, say, rule over an animal, but the fact that in his view women or slaves rank only slightly above oxen is not particularly comforting. Conversely, women and slaves cannot partake or participate in the "good life" of the polis where Greek males, "naturally fitter to command," bask in heroic admiration of themselves and each other and "aim at being equal" as public citizens.²⁵

In Elshtain's reading, Aristotle is elitist because women are privatized, slaves oppressed, and aliens condemned as barbarians. Here she rightly calls attention to the oppressive institutions that Aristotle

accepts and ardently justifies as "given" by nature. But Elshtain's criticisms go deeper still to Aristotle's theoretical foundations. It is the split between the public and the private realms, and Aristotle's glorification of the former to which she objects. "It is important to remember," Elshtain argues, "that most of the debates in the 'public space' had little to do with great or noble ends, and much to do with jockeying for position and pelf, raising money by any means necessary."²⁶ The "public space," in short, is a deceptive notion, a relic of a distant past, and a way of demeaning the private and familial concerns of everyday life. Conversely, the social feminist response to Aristotelian elitism is to resurrect the family, establish it as the primary realm of human life, and declare that the private virtues of love and humility, for example, are the bases for public consciousness. And when Elshtain accuses Aristotle of distorted thinking and seeks to reclaim the "family man and woman" as primary over "political and economic man," she plainly wants us to reject Aristotle's mute, functional, and hierarchic view of the family and of women, and his adulation and mystification of the polis and of men. In effect, social feminism stands Aristotle on his head. The virtues of private woman are lauded over the vices of public man, but it remains locked in the same public/private perspective that it espies in Aristotelianism.

The consequences of standing Aristotle on his head are clear. The private realm of the family takes on an aura of holiness—a social feminist holiness—that radiates from loving and attentive mothers who personify specific "moral imperatives." The public realm becomes a dark and ominous antithesis to the virtuous private. Indeed all that is public, in Elshtain's view, is statist, cold, brutal, uncompromisingly arrogant, eminently needy of maternal chastening. The political conclusion is obvious: feminists must embrace "the perspective that flows from their experiences" (that is, family life and mothering) and resist "the imperious demands and overweening claims of state power" and a public life "created by men."²⁷

Nowhere is the impact of Elshtain's commitment to this public/private metaphor revealed more graphically than when she mobilizes a particular interpretation of *Antigone*. Antigone, Elshtain tells us, is the exemplar of the private realm in all its robust strength and familial attentiveness. There is no question as to which of her alternatives Elshtain thinks Antigone chooses. This is the drama of a woman pitted against "the arrogant insidencies of statecraft," a defender of the "domain of women" and "primordial family morality." Antigone defies the abstract obligations of the state and rejects public life as represented

by Creon, the king. Not surprisingly, Elshtain offers Sophocles' heroine as an archetype for a "female identity" and a "feminist perspective."²⁸

It may seem to some that using Antigone—a literary character from a classical Greek tragedy—as an archetype for feminists of the 1980s is odd or anachronistic. But assuming that this use is legitimate, it is not clear that Elshtain has interpreted the meaning of *Antigone* correctly. To appreciate this, let us first consider a more generous interpretation of Aristotle. Aristotle, on this generous reading, is arguing that politics is not an endeavor tied to a particular "realm." Rather, it is a special kind of human activity, an activity that is primary to all other human activities, be they public or private. He thinks this for two reasons. First, Aristotle argues that human existence must be viewed as a complex of diverse practices and "associations" that have distinct natures and ends, but that are integrally connected and aim toward some good. These practices include the provision of necessities of life, procreation, the care of children, the acquisition and exchange of goods, the production of artifacts and institutions, the making of culture—in short, all those things that distinguish human societies. But Aristotle goes on to illuminate one activity or association as existentially primary because it surveys all other particular activities from a more general point of view and determines which will be "private" and which "public." This primary activity is politics, which Aristotle calls "the most sovereign and inclusive" of all associations.²⁹ By this, he means to suggest that politics is an integrative experience; all other human acts and occupations are examined in its light and made its subject matter.³⁰ Thus it was the case in Aristotle's time and is no less true in ours, that family life and privacy, as well as social practices and economic issues, are matters of political decisionmaking. Family practices, control over family property, the rights of children, the nature of schooling and child labor laws, benefits for single mothers, the regulation of birth control—all of those things, whether we like it or not, are potentially open to political control and may be politically determined. Even the decision to allow them to remain "private"—that is, left in the hands of mothers, fathers, and individual citizens—is ultimately a political one. The forms for reaching these decisions have varied from era to era, polity to polity. They have been made by kings, oligarchs, dictators, politburos, parliaments, and faceless bureaucrats. But my point about Aristotle is this: Who we are allowed to be and what rights we are allowed to exercise, even in the supposed sanctity of the family, have always been and will continue to be governed by political determinations. This governance stretches

across the whole range of our lives and sets the conditions for what we consider to be "private" and what we deem to be "public" pursuits. And this is why, according to Aristotle, politics is existentially prior to all other human activities and practices.³¹

There is a second and more moral way in which politics is primary. In this activity, human beings can collectively and inclusively relate to one another not as strong over weak, fast over slow, master over apprentice, or mother over child, but as equals who render judgments on matters of shared importance, deliberate over issues of common concern, and act in concert with one another. As Aristotle puts it, "the members of a political association aim by their very nature at being equal and differing in nothing."³² Aristotle's shorthand for this activity is "citizenship." He calls the experience of citizenship, of simultaneously ruling and being ruled, the good life.³³ For it is when human beings act as citizens that they, and not a king or a parliament or a phalanx of faceless bureaucrats, have the power to determine the conditions of their "mere" lives. Aristotle's point is not that citizens are the warrior-heroes of some fixed public realm, but rather that citizenship is a qualitatively distinct form of activity in which individuals collectively and perpetually determine the forever shifting boundaries of what is private and public. This endless collective self-determination is what it means to be free. Without question, Aristotle was wrong to restrict women to the household and render them eternally subject to natural and familial inequalities. But this forms no necessary part of his argument concerning politics and citizenship. Surely his vision of the good life as one in which citizens relate to one another as equals, collectively determine their lives, and strive to be free remains a compelling one. When compared to fascist terror, communist collectivizations, and liberal interest-group politics, it is a noble vision and one for which democracy still strives.³⁴

What I am suggesting, in short, is that we learn different lessons from Aristotle about the political—not those based on an abstract split between the public and private realms, nor on the necessary consignment of women to the household. These different lessons will help us better understand the nature of a feminist political consciousness than will the deprecatory reading.

Related lessons follow if we read *Antigone* differently and more carefully. Rather than viewing the tension in the drama, as Elshtain does, as one of public (male) versus private (female), as one between the vices of public power and the virtues of private familial love, we might read *Antigone* as illustrative of two opposing *political* viewpoints. One

is of Creon, who represents the state and centralized power, and the other is of Antigone, who represents the customs and traditions of a collective civil life, an entire political ethos, which Creon's mandate and he himself threaten. If we interpret *Antigone* this way, the character of the heroine deepens immensely, for she emerges not simply as a "sister" whose familial loyalties pit her against a king, but as a citizen of Thebes whose defense of her brother is rooted in a devotion to the gods and to the ways and laws of her city. Likewise, Creon is not simply a man—a king of the public realm who besmirches a family's honor and trivializes private loyalties. He is the manifestation of a particular kind of politics, authoritarian rulership, to which Antigone, as citizen, is in opposition.

For Elshtain to read Antigone's loyalty as "private" or "familial" is not only anachronistic (for the defense of the "private" against the "state" is a later, liberal construct), but also unpolitical, for she misses the very thing that makes Antigone such a strikingly unusual Greek character (and Sophocles, despite his views on women's silence, such a visionary tragedian). She is a political person (that is, neither a "private woman" nor a "public man"). Antigone transcends the public/private split because she embodies the personal made political. Through her speech and her action, she transforms a matter of private concern into a public issue. In the Aristotelian idiom, Antigone realizes her human and distinctively political potentiality when she refuses to maintain a "modest silence." Indeed, if anyone in the drama symbolizes the sort of commitment to the private that Elshtain would have feminists adopt, it is Ismene, who shares Antigone's horror of the treatment of Polyneices, but nevertheless begs her sister not to challenge Creon, to stay at home and remain silent. Of the two sisters surely Ismene is by far the more fierce defender of *oikos*, for she tries her utmost to preserve the household and family peace between her sister and their uncle. She wants to save her sister from destruction. It is Antigone who insults and then deserts Ismene.

The reason why Antigone is a heroine and Ismene is not has nothing to do with "private" or "familial" virtues, for both sisters loved their brother. The difference between them has to do with political consciousness. Antigone understands that Creon's refusal to allow Polyneices's burial is not just a singular personal insult, but a collective political threat. The former may be countered with a "modest silence" or supplication; the latter demands decisive political action. Antigone takes such action; Ismene does not.

There is more here than mere interpretative disputes in the history of political ideas. Feminist political consciousness, not just Aristotle or

Antigone, are at issue. Because Elshtain envisions a world divided naturally and abstractly into dual realms and human beings as either virtuous private or arrogant public creatures, feminist political consciousness is perilously close to becoming politically barren. To understand more precisely why this is so, we must recall the values of the private realm—intimacy, love, and attentiveness—and the defining aim of social feminism—"the preservation of life"—and determine why these are inadequate bases for feminist political consciousness.

III

Without question, the protection of life is a necessary prerequisite for any political order. Who would not argue that the growth and preservation of children are vital social imperatives, or that the protection of vulnerable human life is important? But surely a movement or a political consciousness committed simply to caring for "vulnerable human existence," as Elshtain's social feminism is, offers no standards—indeed it can only echo the silence of Ismene—when it comes to judging between political alternatives or establishing political values that are worthy of feminist support. An enlightened despotism, a welfare-state, and a democratic republic may all protect children's lives or show compassion for the poor. But what standards for judging further among these political orders can social feminism offer us? Its moral imperative—the preservation and growth of children—has been fulfilled. This should be a matter of considerable concern for social feminists because, as we have seen, Elshtain intimates that social feminists are indeed committed to a particular kind of political order—namely, a democratic community. And in a generous acknowledgement, she applauds "those aspects of Aristotelian thought that turn on the imperative that acting in common together with others to agreed upon ends is a worthy form of human life."³⁵ But Elshtain fails to provide a theoretical argument which links maternal thinking and the social practice of mothering to democratic values and a democratic politics.

In order to link these successfully, she would have to show that maternal virtues are conceptually connected to, or that the social practice of mothering causally brings about, democratic values—particularly active citizenship, self-government, egalitarianism, and the exercise of freedom. But this Elshtain cannot do. Maternal virtues cannot be political in the required sense because, as Elshtain herself

acknowledges, they are connected to and emerge out of an activity that is special, distinctive, unlike any other. We must conclude, then, that this activity is unlike the activity of citizenship; the two cannot be viewed as somehow encompassing the same attributes, abilities, and ways of knowing. Thus to be a mother is not in itself to have the requisite capacity for citizenship. (Good) mothers may also be (good) citizens, but their being (good) mothers does not make them (good) citizens. The two descriptions of women are not interchangeable.

We must press this point further by considering the actual relationship between a mother and her child. It is not analogous to the relationship among citizens even when (and that is, as yet, empirically undetermined) it displays the ideal virtues Elshtain praises. The mother and the child are in radically different positions in terms of power and control. The child is subordinate to the mother, and the need relations are highly differentiated as well. The infant's is absolute; the mother's relative. A mother experiences her infant as continuous with self, not separate.³⁶ In other words, the special and distinctive aspects of mothering emerge out of a decidedly unequal relationship, even if benign or loving, in which one person is responsible for a given period of time for the care and preservation of another. This is an intimate, exclusive, and particular activity, and mothers preserve their children, not mothering itself. Following Elshtain, we might call this the condition of attentive love.

Democratic citizenship, on the other hand, is collective, inclusive, and generalized. Because it is a condition in which individuals aim at being equal, the mother-child relationship is a particularly inappropriate model. For citizenship is an active condition in which many persons share the responsibility of ruling and concern themselves not only with matters of general public policy, but also with perpetuating the very activity of citizenship itself. Following Aristotle, we might call this the condition of freedom.

Furthermore, the bond among citizens is not like the love between a mother and child, for citizens are not intimately, but politically involved with each other. Looked at in this way, social feminism commits a version of one of the ideological extravagances of the French Revolution, namely, the demand that democratic citizenship reflect the "brotherhood of man." But citizens do not, because they cannot, relate to one another as brother does to brother, or mother does to child. We look in the wrong place for a model of democratic citizenship if we look to the family (even when we have carefully defined the family).³⁷ We

would do better to look at friendship in Aristotle's sense, or better still, at mutual respect in Hannah Arendt's sense for a model of the kind of bond we might expect from, or hope to nurture in, democratic citizens.

To argue, then, that the virtues that arise in the social practice of mothering must be or give rise to the values that inform the political practice of citizenship misperceives the meaning of political life and misconstrues the "metaphysical attitudes" that mothers are said to experience. Intimacy, love, and attentiveness are precious things in part because they are exclusive and so cannot be experienced just anywhere or by just anyone with just any other. That is why love and intimacy, if they are to remain pure and sustain women's identities in the way Elshtain wants, must not be made the basis of political action and discourse, for intimacy loses its meaning, and love its "concrete specificity," when they are applied to a people as a whole or marshalled for political ends. The outside world can only taint or break, it cannot share, these bonds.

When Elshtain reminds us of the fragility and the resiliency of family life and the special knowledge of women-as-mothers, she seems to admit all this. But when she urges us to make maternal thinking a "wedge" for examining the public world and to see it as a way of "diffusing" attentive love throughout society, she is undermining precisely what is most valuable about maternalness and love—their deeply personal and intensely intimate natures.³⁸ Perhaps this is why Elshtain's language always sounds so strained when she attempts to make maternal virtues the basis for political discourse and action. The very impossibility of such a task reveals itself in a rhetoric of sharp-edged words like "wedge" or "insert," or words of craftily instrumentality like "template," or words that expose the diminution of the intensity of maternal thinking, as when it gets "diffused" over the members of political society as a whole. The rhetoric belies the argument.

Thus in her determination to revive the family and maternalize feminist consciousness, Elshtain strains a distinctive social practice—that of mothering—to its breaking point. In the end, all women-as-mothers can do is to chasten arrogant public power; they cannot democratize it. Women who do not venture beyond the family or participate in practices beyond mothering cannot attain an adequate understanding of the way politics determines their own lives. Nor can they—as mothers or creatures of the family—help transform a politics that stands in conflict with maternal values. The only consciousness that can serve as a basis for this transformation and so for the sort of active citizenry that Elshtain wishes to promote is a distinctly political

consciousness steeped in a commitment to democratic values, participatory citizenship, and egalitarianism. Likewise, the only practice that can generate and reinforce such a consciousness is not mothering, but the practice of acting politically, of engaging with other citizens in determining and pursuing individual and common interests in relation to the public good. In sum, the political practice of citizenship must not be forsaken for the social practice of mothering, if feminism is to succeed.

Women, of course, may be motivated in the first instance to enter politics because of special interests they have as mothers or potential mothers. The examples we now have are plentiful and important (for example, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, Mothers of Love Canal, mothers who protest nuclear war or the installment of missiles). But we must not mistake the nature of these enterprises either in the context of contemporary politics or in the context of Elshtain's own argument. Elshtain is not just forwarding "women's issues" or counseling women-as-mothers to organize as pressure groups in the political arena of the liberal capitalist state. Quite the contrary. Her vision vehemently opposes this conception of politics and all its competitiveness and marketeering. Women or mothers may, of course, in instances like those above, be awakened to the necessity of becoming active citizens because of the particular interests they have as women and mothers. But, as I have been arguing, being a citizen is not (the same as) being a mother, nor vice versa. These different social descriptions of women entail different virtues and ideals, and are founded on different material practices. If we are to have the kind of democratic—and ethical—polity Elshtain desires, then women who become motivated to enter politics in their role as mothers must remain in politics as citizens, and act with and toward other citizens as citizens do—and not as a mother does toward her child. And if women retreat to their homes after a periodic—and rare—victory, they will never contribute to a democratic and ethical polity, and—worse still—they will recapitulate the worst features of political participants in the liberal-capitalist state.

The matter hinges, then, not on the "victory" of one "realm" of human life over the other, but on the nature of human action and the meaning of "politicization." Indeed, to press the issue, to establish maternal thinking as the basis for feminist political consciousness is to get matters precisely backwards, for it is only when mothers become politicized and, in particular, when they act collectively as feminists, that they can secure public policies that, among other things, protect children. In the process, they begin to realize that they are not just

mothers, but women who share a common political situation with other women, some of whom are mothers, some of whom are not. Accordingly, the values that they must defend are not as such maternal (the growth and preservation of children) but political (freedom, equality, community power). For it is only once these political values have been realized that specific issues, including maternal ones, can be pursued with determination and imagination.³⁹ Generously, that is why Aristotle said that the polis was prior to all other associations and activities, not that "the public" was a superior realm of male virtues. And that is why the goal of feminism must be to politicize consciousness, not to maternalize it.

This goal is programmatic in the face of the future. But it is not without its historical roots. Feminist historians have begun to recover and reclaim women's experiences long ignored by generations of male historians. The reclamation has revealed not only women's private lives, but also their political lives. Their politicalness has most assuredly not been of the sort Elshtain describes as "embracing a public life...created by men."⁴⁰ Rather, it has often been in opposition to injustice, oppression, and institutionalized systems of power. Feminist historians have discovered that women develop distinctive organizational styles and generate reform movements, act collectively and in distinctively democratic ways, agitate for social change and challenge political corruption.⁴¹ One of the most interesting aspects of current studies in American women's history concerns the politicalization of women's social and community associations. We are discovering that women have been and remain eminently capable of politicizing themselves without losing their souls. Thus if we are to locate a dimension of women's experience that is unique to us as women, we would do well to look to our history, our organizational styles, and our distinctive modes of political discourse—but not to our role as (potential) mothers.⁴² The latter collapses our identity into a single dimension, however nurturing and loving that may be in some possible world.

The need to challenge "arrogant public power" and an "amoral political order"—to use Elshtain's words—remains a crucial feminist task. But the only effective challenge to a corrupt or unjust state is one that is itself expressly political. Not the language of love and compassion, but only the language of freedom and equality, citizenship and justice, will challenge nondemocratic and oppressive political institutions. Accordingly, what feminist political consciousness must draw upon is the potentiality of women-as-citizens and their historical reality as a collective and democratic power, not upon the "robust" demands of

motherhood. In practice, we might expect such consciousness to take shape not in the silent procession of empty baby strollers, nor in acquiescence to interest-group and party politics, but in public speeches and debates, organized movements with expressly political goals, and democratic activities in which feminist citizens challenge the "givens" and seek to revitalize democratic values with a view toward the generations of citizens to come.

NOTES

1. See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963); Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); and Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

2. See, among others, Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution: A History of Women and Revolution in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 1972); Zillah Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Mariarosa Della Cosa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (Bristol: Falling Water Press, 1973); and Wendy Edmond and Suzi Fleming, eds., *All Work and No Pay: Women, Housework and the Wages Due* (Bristol: Falling Water Press, 1975).

3. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer, 1980), pp. 342-367; "Pacifying the Forces: Drafting Women in the Interests of Peace," *SIGNS* 8, no. 3 (Spring, 1983), 471-489; and "Preservative Love and Military Destruction: Reflections on Mothering and Peace," *Mothering: Essays on Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (Totawa, NJ: Littlefield Adams, 1983).

4. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); "Feminists Against the Family," *The Nation* (November, 1979), pp. 497-500; "Feminism, Family and Community," *dissent* 29, 4 (Fall, 1982), pp. 442-449; "Feminist Discourse and Its Discontents: Language, Power and Meaning," *SIGNS* 7, 3 (Spring, 1982): 603-21; "Antigone's Daughters," *democracy* 2, 2 (April, 1982): 46-59; "On Feminism, Family and Community" (response to Ehrenreich), *dissent* 30, 1 (1983): 103-109; "On 'the Family Crisis'," *democracy* 3, 1 (Winter, 1983), pp. 137-139; and "On Beautiful Souls, Just Warriors, and Feminist Consciousness," *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, 3/4 (Winter, 1982), pp. 341-348.

5. Elshtain, "Feminism, Family and Community," p. 447.

6. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, pp. 337, 343.

7. Elshtain, "On 'the Family Crisis'," p. 183.

8. Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters," p. 56; and Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, p. 327.

9. Elshtain, "Feminism, Family and Community," p. 447.

10. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, p. 327.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

13. Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters," p. 55.

14. Elshtain, "On Beautiful Souls, Just Warriors and Feminist Consciousness," p. 346.
15. Elshtain, "Feminism, Family and Community," pp. 448.
16. Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters," p. 49.
17. Ibid.
18. Elshtain, "Feminists Against the Family," p. 1.
19. This may account for Elshtain's extremely curious statement in *Public Man, Private Woman*: "I shall spend somewhat less time discussing a reconstructive notion of the public because it stands in less need of a defense and reaffirmation within feminist political discourse than our besieged sphere of the private," p. 337. This is surprising for at least three reasons: first, because we have been led to believe that one of Elshtain's major goals is the reconstruction of the public; second, because she has argued that previous feminist discourse has been woefully inadequate in its attempt to formulate a political (public) consciousness; and third (and most important), it reconfirms that Elshtain thinks the "public" and "private" are distinct entities that can be split apart and examined separately—as if changing or "reconstructing" one has nothing to do with the other.
20. This is a reconstruction of Elshtain's very brief sketch in the final chapter of *Public Man, Private Women*, esp. pp. 349-353.
21. See, in particular, Barbara Ehrenreich's comments in *dissent* 30, 1 (Winter, 1983); and Marshall Berman, "Feminism, Community, Freedom," *dissent* 30, 2 (Spring, 1983).
22. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, p. 448 and p. 322, n30 where Elshtain acknowledges, but does not pursue, the problem of defining "family." For an analysis that captures the conceptual and material complexities of the family, see Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).
23. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, p. 441.
24. Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. E. Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962): I, xiii, p. 36; I, ii, p. 4; I, xiii, pp. 34-36.
25. Ibid., I, xii, p. 32. See discussion in Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, p. 346.
26. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, p. 346.
27. Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters," p. 56; "Feminism, Family, and Community," p. 447.
28. Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters," p. 55.
29. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, i, p. 1.
30. See Aristotle's remarks on the *essential* difference between the *politikos* and other persons in other associations, *Politics*, I, i, p. 2.
31. Ibid., I, ii, p. 6.
32. Ibid., I, xii, p. 32.
33. Ibid., I, ii, pp. 4-5; and III, vi, pp. 110-113.
34. For a "generous" view of the *vita activa* that has none of the sexist characteristics of Aristotelian thought, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
35. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, p. 351.
36. For a more detailed analysis of the mother-child relationship, see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). For an analysis of mother-child relations that acknowledges the problems of maternal authority, see Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977). Dinnerstein's conclusion implies that we should be concerned not with "familizing" the polity, but with

democratizing the family. Hence she argues for "dual parenting," a subject neither Ruddick nor Elshtain address. Nor do they consider, as does Dinnerstein, the possibilities and meaning of "fathering."

37. Though this issue cannot be discussed here in the detail it deserves, familial metaphors are inappropriate for understanding political arrangements. Those who are tempted to think otherwise would do well to return to Locke's arguments against Filmer's *Patriarcha*. For a modern view, see Martha Acklesberg, "'Sisters' or 'Comrades'? The Politics of Friends and Families," *Families, Politics, and Public Policy: A Feminist Dialogue on Women and the State*, ed. Irene Diamond (New York: Longman), pp. 339-356.

38. For a discussion of why love, goodness, and intimacy (and the Christian virtues in general) are "anti-political," see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 51-56, 75-78. Arendt would agree with Elshtain's premise that love is a "private" thing, but emphatically object to Elshtain's attempt to make it "public."

39. I do not think feminists pursue these expressly political goals forcefully enough in theory, though they certainly do in practice. Despite its cogent exposure of patriarchal power, feminist theory has yet to develop its own political theory in opposition to forms of political power it finds objectionable. Feminist theorists need to do more by way of integrating feminist goals with specific political values. I am suggesting only one possible set of such values here—those that constitute democratic citizenship.

40. Elshtain, "Feminism, Family, and Community," p. 447.

41. See, for example, Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte, "Schools for Action," *democracy* 2, 4 (Fall, 1982), pp. 55-65, for a view of "women's historical social identity" that, unlike Elshtain's, is not a privatized one. See also Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). Also see Louise Tilly, "Paths of Proletarianization: Organization of Production, Sexual Division of Labor, and Women's Collective Action," *SIGNS* 7, 2 (Winter, 1981), pp. 400-417, for a discussion of women's collective action outside "formalized" political structures.

42. See, for example, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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