

WINDOWS TO THE WOMB: VISUALIZATION, METAPHOR AND REPRODUCTION

IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND TODAY

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By

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis is a historical and cultural study of how the womb was visualized in Britain circa 1660-1775 as well as during the twenty-first century. Prior to the late seventeenth century, the womb was frequently explained as an occult phenomenon, which is to say, as an enigmatic object with inexplicable powers. Because of the social significance and personal investment involved with reproduction, the womb was continually the subject of speculation and conjecture. Additionally, the womb was considered as crucially influencing female well-being, psychology, and sexuality. Following the prerogative of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century empiricism and human science, the womb was increasingly the subject of inquiry, especially as it had been long perceived an occluded phenomenon that had been rarely examined or described visually. The progression of the visualization of the womb during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century incorporated and instituted certain features in the visual illustrations that continue to act as precedents for medical scientific uterine imaging today.

Having traced the dissolution and influence of earlier occultist beliefs about the womb, I found that a regular set of metaphors were used in explaining the womb during the eighteenth century. These metaphors provided conceptual themes for the anatomical illustrations of the womb that were contemporaneously produced. One such metaphorical understanding was the brain-womb, wherein the brain and the womb were commonly analogized through both literary tropes and medical pathologies. An overarching concept that directed how the womb was understood was the perception that the womb was an autonomous entity within the female body. This precept allowed that the womb could perform various, often malignant, activities that vitally altered the female constitution. The visual images created for anatomical and medical treatises responded to these metaphors and conceptualizations, responses which markedly altered how the womb, reproduction, and the female body were understood. My final consideration relates these metaphorical and conceptual features of eighteenth-century visualizations of the womb to modern-day uterine imaging. Although optical technology has vastly changed between these two eras, many features and conceptualizations have carried forward, crucially informing how we now perceive the uterus.

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## **DEDICATION**

For my mother's womb, where everything really started to come together for me.

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