

Men and Pregnancy

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A year ago we had supermodel Elle McPherson bringing her five and a half month bump to the opening of her trendy *Fashion Café* clad in a skin-tight black gown. Not wearing a yurt, you notice, but a navel sheath to kill off imagination. Then we had filmstar Elizabeth Shue letting it all hang out across America. There was top model Kristen McMenemy getting married with a four-month bump proudly displayed for benefit of clergy. And old curvy-queen, Pamela Anderson of *Baywatch*, choosing the shrink-wrapped look for her reproductive effort on behalf of husband Tommy Lee. Most recently, Spice Girls 'Posh' and 'Scary' have announced they too are pregnant and the world of fashion bates its breath to see how much more convex skin is to be exposed to the eyes of impressionable boys and girls. Will every female icon soon be wearing combat fatigues at half-mast in foetal solidarity?

I ask the question because the men's magazine industry itself has asked the question. And they should know something about men. Lads' monthly magazines come under different labels, such as *Loaded*, *Esquire* and *FHM*. But it's the one called *GQ* which has broken new ground by printing a full-blown colour photograph of the five-months' pregnant pop singer Melanie Blatt on their September cover rather than the usual, hard-bodied babe in a wet T-shirt.

Will this marketing strategy work? Did it sell well (see last paragraph)? Are men changing? Was it pleasing for lads to be offered a bare belly curved outwards instead of the customary flatness between the skimpy tank top and the clumsy combat culottes? Unkind observers might say the effect is more like a beer belly on a building site but *GQ* must have had its commercial convictions.

Looking at the media, you could be forgiven for thinking we now live in an age of designer pregnancy. Demi Moore bared her bulge for the cover of *Vanity Fair*. But it was one thing to appear in a woman's magazine. That photo was NEVER designed to be consumed between cans of ale by men in pubs watching SKY TV. But now there's this "burgeoning trend" throughout the world of fashion and pop music.

Obviously what's different about this style of child-bearing is the degree of exposure. Mystery's gone missing. Even the year before last, attention-seeking Madonna covered up while she was expecting. But if you have a fashion bulge this season, the style is "obvious" and I sometimes think cosmetic false bulges will be on sale in the shops before Christmas.

The real test is how far can the fashion and pop industry lead? Women like Melanie Blatt and Posh Spice have the power to define opinion. But can this power alter our perception of pregnancy? Have these 20-somethings the abdominal muscle to make men sexually responsive to a bunch of mums?

Men's common response to pregnancy is to run a mile faster than Will Carling. There are sound biological reasons for our cowardice. We are told the male genetic mission is to impregnate as many women as possible. No point, therefore, in cosying up to females with full nests. What's more, as various species of gull have discovered, their partners can turn nasty. You may be pecked to death.

That's the warning from my friend William Sitwell, 29, of the famous literary family. An admitted reader of *GQ*, he's also features editor of *Woman's Journal*, and well-placed to comment: "You can be having a perfectly reasonable conversation with a

husband and you can flirt with his wife who's standing next to him. Then he might be flattered. But if she were pregnant you'd be pushing your luck. To me a pregnant woman says - 'No Flirt Zone'. I think manners impose limits. Pregnancy says: 'Hands off - or else!' It's a sign of commitment".

A chap doesn't want to risk a swift uppercut from a doting inseminator, in other words. But William finds little motivation to flirt with the pregnant. Quite the reverse: "Thinking about planting your seed in someone who's already nurturing someone else's is totally weird", he says. And to put it crudely: "Faced with the choice of looking at a pregnant babe, or a babe being hosed down, I know what I'd prefer". Few votes for bulgy cover girls there.

But biology cuts both ways, and possibly stimulates the younger end of the market. At 19, Chelsea art student Alexander, by contrast, does feel attracted: "Yes, the Melanie Blatt cover is sexy. She's got a strong face, nice cleavage and that pretty tum. You want to get your hands on it. The obvious fact about a pregnant woman is that she's had sex. In this case, some lucky bloke asked and Melanie Blatt said yes. It tells me Melanie isn't a virgin and has little ambition to become a nun. That's got sex appeal".

So pregnancy becomes a subliminal advert for sexual intercourse! But how successfully? What *does* go through the minds of men when faced with the mystery of the female organism? At the deeper levels, I suggest we're rather jealous. Here's something the most macho male cannot do. Climb Everest? That's easy. Walk on the moon? No problem. But give birth to your own young? Not even with implants!

Lots of men tell me they are *humbled* by the ability of women to conceive but others are clearly disturbed by the pregnant female form. Their sexual interest evaporates. They feel cheated by the transformation of breasts into foodstores, stomach into nursery, woman into mother. Such males feel manipulated. The female has a hidden agenda. It's like she's smuggling in an illegal immigrant. When it comes to sex, there's always someone present at his feast. The baby's a voyeur. So these men refrain from making love for nine months to "protect baby" from the perils of orgasm when what I suspect they're really protecting is themselves.

Whisper it softly, but women may be MORE prone to orgasm during pregnancy than at any other time of their lives. According to Anne Hooper, author of the best-selling *Ultimate Sex Guide* (Dorling Kindersley), expectant mums can enjoy a phase of rampant sexuality once the first trimester and early morning sickness is over. Reporting on the findings of the world-famous sex researchers Dr William Masters and Virginia Johnson from St Louis, she says: "Of the pregnant women they tested, as many as 82 per cent in the middle three months reported a marked increase in eroticism and satisfactory love-making". But that's not all, oh no. "During the final three to four months, erotic tension can reach such a pitch of congestive arousal it's practically impossible for some pregnant woman to be sexually satisfied by anyone". You'd have thought one or two members of the opposite sex would have picked up on this stimulating detail!

In fact, there's a whole scrum of jealous men who react to the pressures of fatherhood by pushing off. Sometimes they do it in phases by starting their own affair on the side. Or they go into therapy with people like me to air their dissatisfaction first. But when two become three they regard the new born as a rival, as distraction, as competition. Another of my clients became so convinced his unborn son meant to hurt him that he stopped having sex during pregnancy in case he was bitten in a

tender position! Ignorance of anatomy was added to emotional blindness. I don't myself picture such men flocking to buy publications which remind them of grief.

In fact I was confused about this new enthusiasm for babes with bulges altogether until I remembered a passage from one of those lurid paperbacks you get excited about in teenage but never read again. From memory, *The Woman of Rome* by an author called Alberto Moravia contains the following phrase about fifteen lines down on page one: "She had an unfashionably prominent abdomen like that of a mediaeval nude..."

And that's what we're talking about. It's another change in tummy fashion. The problem for people like Melanie Blatt is that the attractions of the pregnant form don't know where to stop. Expectant women just get bigger. Sometimes too big for anything but bed-rest and a marquee. The fashion is restricted to the lesser bulge, the smaller pot, a tiny tum.

Furthermore, I've traced this fashion back to its true origin - not in mediaeval nudes or *GQ* - but in Quentin Tarantino's influential movie *Pulp Fiction*. In this film, the character "Maria", musing on her body shape to boyfriend "Butch", reinstates the "cult of the prominent abdomen": "I wish I had a pot belly... On a woman a pot belly is very sexy. The rest of you is normal. Normal face. Normal legs. Normal Lips. Normal ass. But with a big, perfectly rounded pot belly... it's sexy. If I had one I'd wear a T-shirt two sizes too small just to accentuate it".

And there you have it. Melanie of the pop group All Saints may insist: "I'm very happy with my pregnancy. It's not a fashion statement. I'm a woman. Women get pregnant..." But beauty's in the eye of the beholder. In order for thousands of men to fork out £2.70 for that "one sexy mother" cover of *GQ*, they first have to overcome years of conditioning and about 26 volumes of Freud. And they can only do this, I suggest, because the ground has been successfully prepared by the Hollywood Dream Factory and Bruce Willis playing "Butch".

If I'm wrong, let's see if any lads' mag will go all the way and show a truly gravid female to the masses. About eight and a half months gone, for instance? In a pre-nursing bra? Wearing varicose-support stretch pants? And Damart socks? Face contorted by the urge to pee? Stomach craving another portion of tuna and custard? I don't think so. Pregnancy isn't that sexy.

PS - the September issue of *GQ* was "selling as well as can be expected" at the time we went to press.