MOTHERS OF PEARL: AN HISTORICAL AND PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN LITERATURE

A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

For Douglas B. Mac Millan, who shares all my heart's efforts. And for my daughters, Koren Rachel and Glynis Anna, who taught me the truth behind every word.

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My mother, sisters and brother deserve special appreciation for their patience and for never letting me take myself too seriously.

And for Ruth Stemmer, who started this with a very good joke, I hold laughing memories.

ABSTRACT

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MAY 1992

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This dissertation examines canonical female figures throughout Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian and Contemporary British and American literature who are single mothers. Historical research is combined with Freudian, Jungian and feminist psychoanalytic criticism to provide insight into the mythic and subconscious impetus for the creation of these characters as well as a real life context. The purpose of this discussion is to explore the position in society that these women hold, the range of their power, and, if possible, explore the reaction each character has to her position as single parent.

The dissertation works chronologically, beginning in Chapter One with Grendel's Dam in *Beowulf*, Spenser's Errour in *The Faerie Queene*, and Milton's Sin in *Paradise Lost* as examples of monster

mothers spawning illegitimate and unnatural children. Are they are monsters first, or monsters because they reproduce without sanction?

Chapter Two explores the widow's world during the Renaissance and Jacobean period, with a focus on the dramas *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Coriolanus* by William Shakespeare and *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster. Financial power and unleashed sexuality are in conflict with patriarchal laws of inheritance.

Chapter Three promotes Helen Graham of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*, as openly choosing their single parent status. The benefit and cost of their uncomfortable choice is outlined. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* provides a "moral" balance to the rebellion advocated in the previous works.

Chapter Four examines the preoedipal mother and the double bind of the Victorian "angel in the house." Abandonment, murder and baptism appear in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Chapter Five analyzes the voice and power of contemporary single mothers. Works include, Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing", Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The seeming dysfunction of single mother homes and the intrusion of patriarchal institutions are explored.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Climbing the hill
When it was time,
Among sunken gravehouses
I filled my fists with earth
And coming down took river water,
Blended it,
Shaped you, a girl of clay
Crouched in my palms
Mute asking
To be made complete.[1]

Mothers are a cliché. We have to render them as such, because facing them means facing ourselves. They are embarrassing witnesses to our most vulnerable selves, and they are uncomfortable reminders of the potential we have not achieved. We must first break away from them to be solely ourselves, and we must forever return to them in order to understand who we are. Our mother, whether the individual woman who pushed us into life or the Great Mother who presides over our private and collective consciousness, is a force we must struggle with and against. How much more fierce and intimate the battle, then, when that mother wages her parenthood alone. The single mother, Volumnia of Rome, Hester Prynne of the Puritans, or Muriel

Pritchett of Baltimore, is an archetype as well as a peculiarly idiosyncratic woman. Beowulf, Alec D'Urberville and Macon Leary all cajole or throw tantrums to wheedle their desires from her. For centuries we have taken her for granted. She stands immovable, arms extended or folding us to her; her lap forgiving or impenetrable, her eyes now soft as unconditional love, now stern as parental guidance. For ages we have analyzed the relationship we have with her, but always from our point of view; always we see the dance from the foreshortened angle of the child. I would like to ask, and, more boldly, propose what *she* sees. How does a women experience the fact of being a single mother? How does she perceive her relationship to her child? How does she feel when she comes up against the rest of the world? In "The Muse as Medusa," Karen Elias-Button states the importance of acknowledging this experience:

> For, as part of the process of women's self-discovery, we are finding it necessary to reexamine, in both personal and mythological terms, our relationship to the figure of the mother. . . . Thus, some contemporary poets have chosen to focus on the figure of the goddess, so prominent in prehistory, as part of a redemptive enterprise, involving not a relinquishment of ego development in the name of cyclicity and romantic unconsciousness but rather a reaching-back to the myths of the "mother" to find there the source of our own, specifically female creative powers.[2]

Certainly how a mother feels and responds is conditioned by the way the world and the individual feel and respond toward her, but to consider only this side of the relationship is like dancing alone.

Twentieth century culture has coined the term "single mother" out of the necessity to name the seeming increase of women who are raising their children without the benefit of partners. But this

phenomenon is hardly new; only the phrase, the designation, is. Historically, women with children and no husbands were widows, mistresses, prostitutes, or abandoned wives, all terms that first connect them to men rather than to the important and difficult job of mothering. Since motherhood is older than any profession, and since single mothering is just as old, how does literary art reflect this fact? What kind of single mothers do the "classics" offer us?

My questions lead me to wonder what would happen if the modern phrase "single mother" were to be superimposed as it were over some significant characters in Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian, or contemporary fiction. What would be learned by considering Grendel's Dam, Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, or Morrison's Sethe as mothers on their own? My research has given insight into mythic monster mothers, philosophical and physiological notions of women as defective, deformed, and diabolical. Eve's original deception is continually used as a foundation and reference point for negative images of motherhood. I think it fair to make the observation that according to the general era in which these fictional characters exist, and depending on the gender of the author, the "stereotype" of single mother is liable to radical change. The purpose of this discussion then is to explore the position in society that these women hold, the range of their power, the quality of their voice, and, if possible, explore the reaction each character has to her position as single parent.

Though I began my search with Grendel's Dam, and concentrate on those works which follow, the resonance of mythology and literary

history not strictly within the English canon is evident. Sophocles' Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' Medea in the play bearing her name are both mythic examples of the single mother. Their legacies of silence and rage have been interpreted by critics, philosophers and psychoanalysts as examples of weakness, dysfunction and maternal malevolence. These interpretations represent the attitudes and assumptions which mothers have labored under for centuries. Their mythology threads its way through the single mothers of epic, novel, short story, drama, and poetry. By saying this, I don't believe that I am romanticizing this new group of characters, for the single mother, no matter where I find her, tends to have within her some aspect of the Great Mother, the Goddess that originally ruled the psyches and souls of humankind. And by asserting this I am not inferring that all single mothers are patient, pious or pure. Adrienne Rich puts it most succinctly when she says, "Oppression is not the mother of virtue."[3]

The mythology of the Great Mother is not confined to ancient or classic representation. In Christian iconography Christ's mother Mary also fits this "new" category. Mary *is* called the mother of God, conceiving alone her creation; a duplicate of the ancient myths of the Goddess. In *The Chalice & the Blade*, Riane Eisler reexamines the foundations of our patrilineal society:

> The Great Goddess, whose worship was once the ideological core of a more peaceful and equalitarian society, has not completely vanished. Though she is no longer the supreme principle governing the world, she is still a force to be reckoned with--a force that even in the European Middle Ages is worshiped as the Mother of God. Despite centuries of prophetic prohibitions and priestly prohibitions, her worship has not been wholly stamped out. Like Horus and

> Osiris, like Helios and Dionysus, and, long before them, the young god of Catal Huyuk, and like the young goddess Persephone, or Kore, in the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries, Jesus too is still the child of a divine Mother. He is in fact still the child of the Goddess and, like her earlier divine children, symbolizes the regeneration of nature by his resurrection every spring at Easter.[4]

Although blasphemous to Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary reinforces the connection between the collective notion of Great Mother that has run through all religions and the diluted story that we find in our literature from *Beowulf* to *Beloved* when we read about women who create and defend, out of nearly nothing, a life for themselves and their children.

But my purpose in examining single mothers in literature is not merely to identify lingering traces of mythology. It is also to measure the elements of reality that inform these fictional women. By explicating descriptions of characters such as Errour and Hetty Sorrel, and by delving into knowledge of attitudes toward childbirth and care, authors from Spenser to Olsen provide accounts of how women's experiences were and are viewed. Questions of reproduction, infanticide, infant mortality, child education and parental rights were realities of every century. Because women were denied access to education for many centuries, except in very rare aristocratic circumstances, records of women's concerns are rare. Often the glimpses we get are distorted reflections of women's lives through characterizations in literature.

To say that the men writing these works were only working out a representation of mothering is to reduce their images to a simple sketch. Their interpretations of the female process of reproduction

and childrearing often affords a sense of their own revulsion, ignorance, and fear. Ignorance surrounding women's needs along with the overwhelming enforcement of paternal legitimacy inform the fear and rejection that surround many of the characters that occupy this inquiry. From the outset unpartnered female regeneration is viewed as unsavory, dangerous and monstrous. The children produced under these circumstances are "unnatural" or at least "unusual" from Sin's offspring through to Alexander Pritchett. The need to control this generative force is evident in the cultural attitudes that perfect mothers are passive agents of unconditional love, a tenet that imprisons women in an impossible set of role expectations: "It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved"[5]

Aside from the children they bring into the world, the women themselves form an interesting picture of legal sanctions, social and moral attitudes, and rejections of past patterns. The monster-like mothers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance give way to an eerie passivity during the eighteenth century only to reappear during the Victorian Era as pathetically marginal participants in their social sphere. Not until this century do the single mothers of literature again begin to dominate their pages the way that Grendel's mother nearly did. Tillie Olsen's narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing" defies a social worker to reduce her or her daughter to a statistic. And Toni Morrison's Sethe demands from herself the steely edge of murder to protect her children from slavery.

To make sweeping generalities about the characters considered here would be to ignore that in all times and for every author excep-

tions occur, and individuals break with tradition. But by grouping the characters listed into historical categories, one can see emerging patterns. The exception to the patterns does not, in fact, negate the pattern, but highlights the standard all the more acutely. By understanding the historical and psychological background of women's position in various social eras, the question of whether art mimics life, vice versa, or a continuum exists between the two can be more accurately addressed.

How complex the character is, how powerful her status or voice, how sympathetically she is received depends greatly on the era in which she is generated. Many of the Medieval or even Renaissance mothers are shockingly threatening and in some control of their destiny. Social concern for legitimacy and proper deportment are often blatantly disregarded. Even Shakespeare's Countess de Rousillon, although quite within "the law," plots her son's script. This power, however negative, diminishes as I have said as the eighteenth and nineteenth century progress. We move from the mythic mother who challenges the universe to the subjugated woman who is dependent upon male support and legitimacy. Victorian novels abound with outcast, pregnant girls, demure widows existing at subsistence level, and fallen wives eyeing the river Thames as refuge. Fictional single mothers in contemporary literature, however, are now providing this inquiry with an interesting blend of the supernatural and the disparity of power.

In pursuing this examination of characters, I have found no one field of critical approach sufficient to answer all my questions.

Freud's contributions to our understanding of sexual and egocentric motivations certainly play a part in my discussion, but he ignores the intimacy of the pre-oedipal mother/child relationship. Because it affords a more dynamic view of women, I rely more heavily on Jungian analysis, with repeated reference to archetypes and the collective consciousness as it is developed through literature. Eric Neumann, Madelon Sprengnether, Marina Warner, Barbara Walker and Merlin Stone have all provided important interpretations of facets of the Great Mother. Traditional Jungian analysis, too, has its limitations. Though it affords much power to the female archetypes, it is often too willing to set attributes and capabilities into sexual stereotypes. Feminist criticism attempts to work through such problems.

In the realm of women's responses to themselves and their conditions, along with issues of child care, feminist criticism provides a springboard and undercurrent that is essential to this document. Such writers as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and Dorothy Dinnerstein have argued passionately and well the limitations and range of motherhood, its history, its oppression, its idealization and its potential. I chose these women, because they argue for the power of motherhood despite its institutionalization and repression. In many instances they are arguing against other feminists who reject motherhood on the grounds that it stands for subjection and stereotyping. It is true that motherhood is not the definition of feminine creativity or power, but it is a most powerful facet of women. To deny this fact is to abandon a mighty force. Julia Kristeva, in

"Stabat Mater," makes a convincing case for celebrating and exploring motherhood:

> To begin with, we live in a civilization in which the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity. Under close examination, however, this maternity turns out to be an adult (male and female) fantasy of a lost continent: what is involved, moreover, is not so much an idealized primitive mother as an idealization of the--unlocalizable--*relationship* between her and us, an idealization of primary narcissism. When feminists call for a new representation of femininity, they seem to identify maternity with this idealized misapprehension; and feminism, because it rejects this image and its abuses, sidesteps the real experience that this fantasy obscures. As a result, maternity is repudiated or denied by some avant-garde feminists, while its traditional representations are wittingly or unwittingly accepted by the "broad mass" of women and men.[6]

Kristeva accurately points to the misconceptions of motherhood and the abhorrence of it many women have inherited. The heritage of both the fantasy and the disgust are little different than Spenser's or Milton's misogyny. Other feminist critics that were invaluable for their contributions are Jean Baker Miller, Lee Edwards, Nina Auerbach, and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

Historical evidence of social attitudes toward women and individual women's lives lends a backdrop, a touchstone, to the fictional psyches of the female characters I discuss. My interest began with the realization that too much silence surrounds the habits, accomplishments, beliefs and struggles of women from the Middle Ages to this century. Because mothering is taken for granted, and the expression of what it entails seems taboo for "great literature," accounts are lacking and details are sparse. Child birth and child care are perhaps the most glossed over subject in literature. There-

fore, the chronicles of women's lives detailed by such authors as Antonia Frazer, Linda Woodbridge, Mary Prior, Martha Vicinus, Jacqueline Jones and Judith P. Zinsser and Bonnie S. Anderson are important foundations to this dissertation.

But, ultimately, I am attempting to unravel the meaning behind particular characters from a perspective never before explored. I am answering my critical questions by highlighting what is not to be found in any critical discipline. The single mother as character is a first. Though much has been written on the works I have chosen, little is available that considers the characters in these works as mothers, and nothing has been written which considers their depictions and motivations from the angle of single motherhood. The impetus for Errour's rage, the dynamics between Hester and Pearl, and the pathology of Sethe's love for her crawling-already? girl are better understood if we acknowledge the intimate and lonely connection between mother and child.

It must be stated clearly, before any reader plunges into the ensuing document, that all questions and aspects of the overall issue of single motherhood will not be answered within the scope of this dissertation. The more I read, the more I write, the more I question. There is more to this topic than first meets the eye. At times it seemed I was working on a continuously exploding view of what appeared at first a focused vision. The tributaries and peripheral topics that spin forth from my pursuit continue to abound. The list of characters who provide further examples of the themes and issues presented here seems to grow exponentially. Therefore, I have

found it necessary to limit my discussion to the characters that have been implanted in our consciousness through their designation as "classic." I restrict myself to the cannonical works of British and American literature. These provide the basis of myth, of tradition, of collectively agreed upon set types which can be easily dissected as repositories of cultural attitudes and biases. I purposefully chose characters from each era which would best highlight the standards of womanhood and motherhood under which they lived. Most of the characters I chose accentuate convention by defying it. As all vice characters are more interesting than the virtuous moralist, so too the single mothers who work against the grain of social acceptance illuminate more sharply our fears, needs and fantasies.

Notes

[1] Mary Randle TallMountain, "The Figure in Clay," in *The Sacred Hoop*, by Paula Gunn Allen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 173.

[2] Karen Elias-Button, "The Muse as Medusa," in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980) 193.

[3] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) xxxv.

[4] Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 102.

[5] Simone De Beauvior, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953) 171.

[6] Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. Dan Latimer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 581.

CHAPTER 2

MONSTER MOTHERS: UNNATURAL CHILDREN

> Motherhood--unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism--has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism.[1]

Introduction

Mothers are seldom heroes, particularly not if they act according to their own motivations and world view. Mothers are supposed to be self-sacrificing and courageous given that they support a "legitimate" cause; if not, they are considered monstrous. Such views, still espoused today, can be easily traced back to English medieval literature. A woman who chose to defend her children and herself as she saw fit, particularly if those children were born beyond the sanctions of legal and religious custom, would be guaranteed repulsion. Throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods a continuous shift in the role of woman as mother was taking place. The establishment of patriarchy removed a woman's authority over her children, yet as the centuries proceeded, the economic responsibility of

fatherless children fell more and more on the individual shoulders of mothers:

> European patriarchy rested on legal systems and principals developed in classical times and incorporated into law from then on. The Roman law of *patria potestas* or "paternal power" originally gave fathers the right of life or death over their children; a father could also sell his children into slavery. This paternal power extended to control over all members of the household, including wives and slaves, and over all family property. Similarly, the subsequent law of the Germanic tribes in early medieval times developed the concept of *mundium*, a form of guardianship, especially the authority of men over women and children. Finally, the sense of patriarchy was enhanced by the predominant system of primogeniture, which meant that the eldest son inherited the greatest share or even all of the family property.[2]

A woman who in any way challenged the paternal power was considered deviant and dangerous. Illegitimate birth was perhaps the most outrageous of challenges and the mother who performed such an act was afforded little economic support:

> In England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries . . . The problem of preventing bastardy had long attracted the attention of Parliament . . . with what they believed to be both a moral scourge and a financial burden on the community. . . . Particularly in the north of England, the woman convicted of fornication was often whipped in the nearest market town 'as a deterrent to others', while at the second offense she was often committed to the House of Correction for hard labour under the lash. Bastardy cases tended to be treated severely, . . . After the Restoration in 1660, however, . . . they became exclusively preoccupied with the economic problem of transferring the maintenance costs of a bastard child from the poor rate of the parish to the father, or failing that to some other body. . . . further Acts of 1662 and 1733 were exclusively concerned with the economics of child maintenance and no longer with the morality of fornication *per se*. This did not mean, however, that the situation of the unmarried mother improved. Indeed, it may have worsened, as the parish authorities tried desperately to ensure that the baby was not born within their boundaries, and thus did not become a burden on the local rates. There were frequent cases, like that recorded by Oliver Heywood in 1662, in which a pregnant

> mother about to deliver was hastily bundled out of town. In this case, the woman 'was delivered in the town field, in cold frost and snow; the child died, the woman is distracted'.[3]

The stamp of patriarchal legitimacy was crucial, therefore, if a woman was to secure a subsistence for herself and her child. Moreover, all mothers, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, were signified as direct daughters of Eve, the purveyor of sin:

> Before the sixteenth century and the advent of Protestantism . . . exemplary stories, were told in the vernacular. From these a peasant woman learned of her descent from Eve, the first sinner, of the uncleanness of her reproductive organs, and of her divinely ordained subordination to men.[4]

As literary examples show, a woman's relationship to evil was not considered learned but inherent. But if Eve, as less than perfect mother, was the Christian icon of woman's innate connection to moral decay, then the Virgin Mary was a cultural phenomenon which answered the need for a maternal ideal:

> From the twelfth century on, the Church gave authority and validity to the overwhelming popular responses to the image of the Virgin Mary that arose spontaneously throughout Europe. Theologians and popes gradually made dogma of her veneration, accepted the hypothetical recreations of Mary's life, endorsed the celebrations of her festivals and thus made a place for the popular need for a female aspect of the faith.[5]

Unfortunately Mary, however powerfully she affected her devotees, was an example of impossible femininity. As the antithesis of Eve, she only magnifies the cultural straitjacket into which women were being placed:

> By defining the limits of womanliness as shrinking, retiring acquiescence, and by reinforcing that behaviour in the sex with praise, the myth of female inferiority and dependence could be and was perpetuated. The two arms of the Christian view of woman--the contempt and hatred evi-

> dent in interpretations of the Creation and the Fall, and idealization of her more "Christian" submissive nature--meet and interlock in the advocacy of humility for the sex.[6]

The contradictory images of Eve/Ave which faced women provide rich territory for controversial readings of Medieval and Renaissance texts. The gradual shift from pagan warrior traditions to Christian morality also underlies the literary treatment of strong-minded women and dutiful ladies.

During the latter centuries of the first millennium A.D., it was possible, however infrequent, for women in England and on the continent to be warrior queens or simply warriors provided they threw their virtuous energies behind a noble and Christian cause.

> Women even took on roles of military leadership in the early Middle Ages. In England, Aethelflaed, a daughter of King Alfred, led warriors against the Vikings, built fortresses along the Mercian frontier, and repaired Roman walls. Some of her fortresses, like Warwick and Stafford, became centers of local trade and government. By the time of her death in 918, she had conquered eastern England as far north as the Welland River (north of Norfolk), helping her brother Edward the Elder become the most powerful ruler in England.[7]

The key elements of Aethelflaed's identity as explained here are daughter and sister; her adventures and accomplishments are for a "higher" cause than her own glory--substitute "her brother's interests" for "higher". As Jane Chance explains in *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, "Indeed, queens without the 'armor' of spirituality and chastity who behaved unconventionally--that is, who attempted to rule or take over a kingdom--were usually castigated as lascivious, immoral, and even diabolic".[8] Furthermore,

> . . . When queens ruled singly or attempted to rule over their husbands without these qualities of chastity and

> sanctity, they were depicted especially in legendary accounts as highly incontinent and immoral creatures whose excessive sexuality, when linked with warlike or masculine behavior, became a metaphor for unnatural and heathen or devilish proclivities.[9]

A woman's traditional role as peace-weaver was especially manifested in her ability to bring forth children to continue the bonds of kinship and tribe. This Viking tradition is transformed in Christian society with Mary as the symbol of queenly virtue: "She acts positively only through the principal man in her life, who is, in this case of a virgin birth, her son."[10] The responsibility of peace-weaver was entirely connected to her husband, and was not something she took on for the sake of her children or her own needs.[11]

Grendel's Dam - *Beowulf*

Given the above information, it is surprising that discussions of *Beowulf* usually dismiss Grendel's Dam so off-handedly. Inevitably Grendel, and not Grendel's mother, remains the triumph for Beowulf. This is surprising because Grendel's Dam, or the "monstrous hag" (she has no name of her own, not unlike most children's conception of mother as nameless fact), provides Beowulf with the fiercest battle of the epic. Grendel, as child, as resentful outcast, merely whets the reader's or listener's appetite for Beowulf's later adventure and challenge. The fight with Grendel is over with very little exertion and much less suspense. Not only does Beowulf conquer Grendel with

bare hands, but the monster, mortally wounded, retreats home to his mother's lair.

When Grendel's Dam comes forth, "rabid and raging," it is with a fully adult and maternal motive: "revenge for the death of her son!" Chance makes a particularly relevant point concerning this revenge. As peace-weaver, a mother had no right to avenge a child; she is her husband's servant only. "It is monstrous for a mother to 'avenge' her son as if she were a retainer, he were her lord, and avenging more important than peace making".[12]

As in Grendel's nondescription, we are given few physical details with which to picture his mother, but we do learn that these two are a part of the local cultural lore:

> Oft in the hall I have heard my people,
> Comrades and counsellors, telling a tale
> Of evil spirits their eyes have sighted,
> Two mighty marauders who haunt the moors.
> One shape, as clearly as men could see,
> Seemed woman's likening, and one seemed man,
> An outcast wretch of another world.
> And huger far than a human form.
> Grendel my countrymen called him, not knowing
> What monster brood spawned him, what sire begot.[13]

By calling Grendel's Dam an "evil spirit" capable of haunting moors, the Geats, as Hrothgar tells it, are affording her supernatural capabilities. She is also an outcast, a characteristic common to many fictional and real single mothers. The reason for this social ostracism could very well lie in the last line of the above quote: "what monster brood spawned him, what sire begot". With no evidence of a sire, Grendel's Dam has either committed the Christian sin of bearing an illegitimate child, or the powerful miracle of parthenogenesis - "spawning" a child without aid of a partner. One

could argue, perhaps, that Grendel's Dam is single simply because she is subhuman and monstrous, but in a tale fraught with ambiguities, it would be just as precise to read her as monstrous and subhuman precisely because she is single. Is the power of Grendel's mother, and hence the Geat's fear of her and her son that she simply does not play by the social rules of mother and queen as peace-pledge, or is it that she represents the mythic possibility of female sexuality and creation without male control? Because, as I believe, she embodies these latter, more complex threats to Geat social life, she holds more danger for Beowulf than does her son. The question of legitimacy arises then in the very first work of the English Canon. Most explanations relate the importance of legitimacy to land rights and male lines of inheritance, but the issue is more complex:

> The question of "legitimacy" probably goes deeper than even the desire to hand on one's possessions to one's own blood-line; it cuts back to the male need to say: "I, too, have the power of procreation--these are *my* seed, *my* own begotten children, *my* proof of elemental power."[14]

To combat her, Beowulf dons full battle gear, complete with the ritual invocation of the history behind his armor. A compelling description of byrny and helmet are given, culminating in the acceptance of his sword, Hrunting, replete with man-made detailing, the stories of past battles, and the passage down the generations from man to man. Beowulf is prepared carefully, as tradition demands, with all the accoutrements of his culture and manhood to face his most potent enemy - a single mother. From here the difference between his battle with Grendel and that of his mother is marked. Beowulf must fight her on her terms, he must descend through the watery depths of her

eerie, bloody pool and find her undersea cave. By swimming through this womb-like fluid, or back through the birth canal, Beowulf attacks her "illegitimate" sexual creativity. He is working against an image of the Great Mother--she who, by giving mortal life, also gives death. She is to be feared and raged against. Seen in this light, Beowulf is the archetypal son; his masculine pride, his Hrunting, is impotent against her awesome force, and his "battle-flasher" cannot harm her. Grendel's Dam defends herself by grappling and grasping, and by using her "clutching claws"--common stereotypes for women even today. What's evident here is that Grendel's Dam is a keen opponent for Beowulf:

> The Geat-prince joyed in the straining struggle,
> Stalwart hearted and stirred to wrath,
> Gripped the shoulder of Grendel's dam
> And headlong hurled the hag to the ground.
> But she quickly clutched him and drew him close,
> Countered the onset with savage claw.
> The warrior staggered, for all his strength,
> Dismayed and shaken and borne to earth.
> She knelt upon him and drew her dagger,
> With broad bright blade, to avenge her son,
> Her only issue.[15]

How remarkable to see the first great hero, who can swim ocean leagues wearing phenomenal coats of mail, being soundly trounced by a woman! A subtler reading of these lines allows for a more suggestive interpretation. Grendel's Dam has rendered him impotent, thrown him to the ground, mounts him and is ready to rape him with her dagger, which underscores the earlier statement concerning Beowulf's attack against her as woman. She turns the battle around and gives him equal terror. A conventional critic would read *Beowulf* as an inversion of the "feminine role of the queen or hall-ruler by Grendel's Mother".[16] Chance goes on to say:

> This is achieved in three steps: first, the emphasis upon clutching, grasping, and embracing while they fight; second, the contest for a dominant position astride the other; and third, the use of finger, knife, or sword to penetrate clothing or the body, the latter always accompanied by the implied figurative kinship between the sword and the phallus and between decapitation and castration.[17]

I agree with Chance in her sexual interpretation of this episode and her adroit discussion of Geat social norms, but I believe more is going on than simple inversion. This is also a mythic struggle where Grendel's mother *is* the feminine creative force and this is precisely and simply what Beowulf is trying to dominate. Of course Grendel's Dam cannot win, she is the outcast, the evil one, but Beowulf cannot win either without the aid of a power that comes more from her world than his:

> . . . Saw 'mid the war gear a stately sword,
> An ancient war-brand of biting edge,
> Choicest of weapons worthy and strong,
> The works of giants, a warrior's joy,
> So heavy no hand but his own could hold it,
> Bear to battle or wield in war.[18]

With this great sword, which had hung for eons on the wall of the cave hall, Beowulf cuts off the head of Grendel's Dam. The battle is finished, but what else is being told here besides the triumph of brute strength? The sword was waiting for Beowulf, and he needed the power of his foe to overcome her. This is the stuff of myth, the material necessary to explain the "natural" passivity of women and mothers in particular. Further, the sword disintegrates, leaving only the hilt, once Grendel's mother is dead and Grendel's own head has been severed from his body to ward off further evil spirits:

Then the great sword, eaten with blood of battle,
Began to soften and waste away
In iron icicles, wonder of wonders,
Melting away most like to ice.[19]

The magic or "evil" of the sword and Grendel's dam is diminished, her blood and courage softened to a manageable wonder. What remains is the story of the Geats, Beowulf, and our scop all mustering their best talents to tell the tale of the outcast mother of Grendel.

Errour - *The Faerie Queene*

With *Beowulf* the tradition in English Literature is established; the heroic warrior battles evil in whatever form to save himself and his culture. But the *Beowulf* manuscript did not form the cornerstone of the British canon until well into the eighteenth century. Therefore it is surprising to find clear parallels in a fifteenth century work, *The Faerie Queene*, as Spenser sets his Red Cross Knight on a quest for holiness. The compelling similarity between Grendel's Dam and Spenser's Errour cannot be attributed to Spenser having read *Beowulf*, but to a pervasive, societal attitude that views women's sexuality and uncontrolled procreative powers as a threat. Errour is one of the most vivid characters in *The Faerie Queene* probably because she is the most repulsive; Spenser splashes us with her vileness and her gore. And like Grendel's Dam, there may be more to Errour than even Red Cross is consciously aware.

Though Errour is not our hero's most demanding challenge, she is his first, and because of this, nearly his last. As we all know, first encounters are quite powerful and linger in our memories. According to both Freud and Jung, *Mother* is man's first sexual encounter. Errour, a true archetypal mother, is found in a "hollow cave". Eric Neumann in *The Great Mother* explains this mythic imagery:

> The cave is a dwelling as well as a tomb; the vessel character of the Feminine not only shelters the unborn in the vessel of the body, and not only the born in the vessel of the world, but also takes back the dead into the vessel of death, the cave or coffin, the tomb or urn.[20]

Errour does represent evil and death to Red Cross, but perhaps to Spenser she is also a symbol of life or the Great Mother. Una, however, is more sensitive to the complete overtones here than Red Cross:

> 'Be well aware,' quoth then that lady mild,
> 'Lest sudden mischief ye too rash provoke.
> The danger hid, the place unknown and wild,
> Breeds dreadful doubts . . . therefore yourstroke,
> Sir Knight, withhold till further trial made.'[21]

Using the connotations implied in the culmination of phrasing such as "provoking mischief," "hidden and wild dangers," "breeding," and "withholding strokes," it seems evident that Spenser is purposely setting us up to understand Errour as the essence of sexual evil. It may be a man's error to beget children illegally, but for a woman to do so, means utter damnation and rejection. In fact, we learn that Errour is "A monster vile whom God and man does hate".[22] She is spiritually abandoned and socially outcast. Further, Errour is physically horrific:

> But forth unto the darksome hole he went
> And looked in. His glistering armor made
> A little glooming light, much like a shade,
> By which he saw the ugly monster plain,
> Half like a serpent horribly displayed;
> But th' other half did woman's shape retain,
> Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain.[23]

Of course this is perfect metaphor--"loathsome, filthy, foul" to represent rampant immorality. Linda Woodbridge in *Women in the English Renaissance* states, "The unchaste never-married woman was a special sort of monster; her crime was heinous because it disrupted the schematic order of the world, on which so much Renaissance doctrine depended".[24] In fact, and continuing with Woodbridge's discussion, Spenser is pursuing more here than a simple poetic image. During the sixteenth century as Spenser was writing his magnum opus, a spirited, scholarly, and public debate was being waged on the very nature of woman. The question focussed on whether woman was innately good or evil and whether her spiritual life was the equivalent of a man's. To wit, Woodbridge states:

> In considering the multiple genre of *The Faerie Queene*, at once epic and romance, allegory and courtesy book, one should not overlook the fact that while the epic was primarily a masculine genre, romance was by Spenser's day primarily a feminine genre. The majority of contemporary writers who purveyed romance, mostly as prose fiction, were making a special pitch to women readers; like them, Spenser addresses a number of authorial intrusions to women. It is not impossible that the poem's Arthurian framework may have been chosen with an eye to women readers. If that were true, it would be reasonable to suspect that Spenser, like the collectors of prose fiction, had dabbled a bit in the formal controversy.[25]

To underscore the possibility of Spenser's involvement in the controversy, one can easily see the similarity in Errour's description to the following paragraph from Woodbridge where she discusses Tasso's contribution to the fray in 1599:

> Although Tasso claims he wrote out of "a certaine youthfull Caprichious Humour"--the usual "all in fun"disclaimer--the work displays such contempt for women's intellect and disgust with the female body as to make the jest unpalatable. . . . He maintains that "an unworthie and contemptible thing is a woman"(sig. C4); women are no more than receptacles for spent semen: they are not framed for any other respect or vse, then for a receptacle of some of our Excrementall humors: standing vs in the same steed, as the bladder, the Gaull, and such other vncleanly members of our bodie"(Sig. C3). . . . Woman is under the moon's pernicious influence, as evidenced by disgusting physical attributes--menstruation, thick phlegm, "driueling spettle," "smoking vapors comming from the stomack," "scuruy scabe," and "rewmaticke Catars"(Sig. [c4]).[26]

Spenser wasted little time in attaching the most disgusting and offensive attributes and adjectives to his two sexually active females--Errour and Duessa. His groundwork paves an easy way for Milton.

Despite Una's warning, Red Cross is at full heat to enter the "darksome hole." What he finds is a creature that has been cross pollinated in Spenser's mind from the evil serpent of temptation, the physical identification of woman, and the moral decay of sin. Errour is a literal personification of the "Eve syndrome": woman *is* evil. The most telling aspect of Spenser's description is that Errour's upper body is recognizably female, although "filthy" and "foul," while her "nether" parts or reproductive organs are snake-like and vile. It is this nether section of Errour that later nearly gets the best of Red Cross. By creating Errour's lower body as serpentine, Spenser conflates the image of Eve and the Satanic snake in Eden. The two sources of evil become one. However, the use of snake-like imagery to express female power precedes the Christian usurpation of this symbol to depict evil. In ancient religions such as the

Sumerian, Cretan, or even Aztec, the snake which bites its own tale is a symbol of the universe:

> The dynamic movement within this Great Round belongs to the transformative character of the Feminine, . . . for the uroboros of the beginning is not only the Round but also the wheel rolling upon itself and the serpent which at once bears, begets, and devours.[27]

Spenser, like the bards of the *Beowulf* epic, not only depicts the woman who challenges the hero's manhood as physically unfit for society, but her children as well:

> And as she lay upon the dirty ground,
> Her huge long tail her den all overspread,
> Yet was in knots and many boughs upwound,
> Pointed with mortal sting. Of her there bred
> A thousand young ones, which she daily fed,
> Sucking upon her poisonous dugs, each one
> Of sundry shapes, yet all ill-favored.
> Soon as that uncouth light upon them shone,
> Into her mouth they crept, and sudden all were gone.[28]

To breed "a thousand young ones," implies amazing reproductive capabilities, but there is nothing exonerating about Spenser's description. Because Spenser is creating myth it is fair to again quote Neumann:

> The Great Vessel engenders its own seed in itself; it is parthenogenic and requires the man only as opener, plower, and spreader of the seed that originates in the female earth.[29]

These offspring are illegal, beyond the control of social order, "all ill-favored," like Grendel and answering to and being protected solely by this mother. Errour's connection to mythology makes her resonant and colorful, but her connection to actual beliefs about procreation during Spenser's time make her a mirror for the age. In Western culture, Aristotle's belief that men provided the essence of life, while women were little more than incubators was argued against

by subsequent philosophers and scientists. Men such as Hippocrates and Galen came to agree that though the male seed was superior in its spirituality, the female seed was essential for procreation. In *Reproductive Rituals*, Angus McLaren chronicles the popular understanding of fertility, conception and sexuality:

> The semence or two-seed theory was to have a long life in western culture. Thomas Raynald asserted that the woman's seed differed from the man's but was no less perfect and her sensual appetites no less demanding. . . . Although the microscope was to permit in the late seventeenth century the beginnings of a more precise definition of the different contributions of the two sexes in procreation, one still found in the popular literature of the late eighteenth century the assumption that the seeds of the two were similar. . . . From the late sixteenth century onwards, medical scientists . . . were faced with the problem of reconciling their new observations with the models of procreation set out by Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen. The first discoveries were incorporated in the old model, but as contradictory evidence accumulated it became necessary to construct a new paradigm. . . . The real changes in embryological thought came with the emergence of preformation theories in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. . . . "By its very nature the uterus is a field for growing the seeds, that is to say the ova, sown upon it. Here the eggs are fostered, and here the parts of the living [foetus], when they have further unfolded, become manifest and are made strong. Yet although it has been cast off by the mother and sown, the egg is weak and powerless and so requires the energy of the semen of the male to initiate growth".[30]

Errour's ability to reproduce and cultivate her young without apparent sexual partnership undermines the moral order of patriarchy and it contradicts the scientific beliefs held at the time. Spenser's England was still wrestling with the notion that females were only necessary to provide a little matter and some warmth in the production of children. Errour grossly violates such beliefs and would, therefore, have been viewed as all the more monstrous because of her capabilities.

Protection is the motivation that sets Errour into action; she is provoked, threatened, and forced to defend herself and her children. Though Spenser chooses to focus on her frightening appearance and the harm she poses to Red Cross, he does give a particle of the real truth:

> Their dam upstart, out of her den affrayed,
> And rushed forth, hurling her hideous tail
> About her cursed head, whose folds displayed
> Were stretched now forth at length without entrail.
> She looked about, and seeing one in mail
> Armed to point, sought back to turn again;
> For light she hated as the deadly bale,
> Aye wont in desert darkness to remain,
> Where plain none might her see, nor she see any plain.[31]

Errour is quite naturally frightened by this aggressive man, dressed for battle, charging into her home. Not only does she fear Red Cross, she tries to avoid any confrontation, turning about to find protection in the dark cave that affords her safety. It is Red Cross that demands the fight, much like a young man who thinks "no" means a coy "yes" from his date:

> Which when the valiant elf perceived, he leapt
> As lion fierce upon the flying prey,
> And with his trenchant blade her boldly kept
> From turning back and forced her to stay.
> Therewith enraged she loudly gan to bray,
> And turning fierce, her speckled tail advanced,
> Threatening her angry sting, him to dismay,
> Who nought aghast, his mighty hand enhanced;
> The stroke down from her head unto her shoulder glanced.[32]

Again, Red Cross is bullying her with his blade, forcing her to remain against her will, and leaving her with no choice but to defend herself with the only weapon available to her: the sting of her nether parts.

Though Errour is not Red Cross's most difficult opponent, she is a stiff match for him, able to withstand his best blows, and with

her tail she nearly crushes the life out of him. It is important to remember that Red Cross represents death to her and her children; he is the male force that keeps her outcast, sees her as hideous, and in any way possible keeps her power from being used. He is challenging her matriarchy. The question of matriarchy as an historical phenomenon has been explored by scholars of various fields. Eric Neumann explains the possibility in this way:

> . . . the consciousness of man arises in the course of the first years of life, and is in part molded by the social bond of the infant with the group, but particularly with its most prominent representative, the mother.[33]

More eloquently is this comment put forth by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

> In all these incarnations--[ ] the female monster is a striking illustration of Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death. As the Other, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, life that is made to be destroyed. "It is the horror of his own carnal contingence," de Beauvoir notes, "which [man] projects upon [woman]." In addition, as Karen Horney and Dorothy Dinnerstein have shown, male dread of maternal autonomy, has historically objectified itself in vilification of women, while male ambivalence about female "charms" the traditional images of such terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and steal male generative energy.[34]

In order for Red Cross Knight to establish himself not only officially on his way to holiness, but more basically, as a man pursuing manly duties, he must relinquish the hold the "feminine" has on him. Now the use of terms such as "masculine" and "feminine" in relation to other terms such as "ego," "rationality," and "unconsciousness" and "intuition" implies false assumptions, the underlying premise

being that the "masculine" is rational and egoistic, while the "feminine" is "intuitive" and "unconscious." Evidence has been found that ancient cultures adhered to a matriarchal system of government and goddess worship, and these cultures, while celebrating the principles of female creation and transformation, also adorned their images with symbols of power and natural destruction:

> In Neolithic art, neither the Goddess nor her son-consort carry the emblems we have learned to associate with might--spears, swords, or thunderbolts, the symbols of an earthly sovereign and/or deity who exacts obedience by killing and maiming. Even beyond this, the art of this period is strikingly devoid of the ruler-ruled, master-subject imagery so characteristic of dominator societies. . . . the many images of the Goddess in her dual aspect of life and death seem to express a view of the world in which the primary purpose of art, and of life, was not to conquer, pillage, and loot but to cultivate the earth and provide the material and spiritual wherewithal for a satisfying life. And on the whole, Neolithic art, and even more so the more developed Minoan art, seems to express a view in which the primary function of the mysterious powers governing the universe is not to exact obedience, punish, and destroy but rather to give.[35]

The works in question here are adamantly concerned with the promotion of Christian doctrine and, of course a patriarchal system. Spenser, therefore, was comfortably working within the bounds of "feminine" and "masculine" assumptions as well as many others. Also important to our understanding of Errour's place in Spenser's world is her social status within the patriarchy. She is quite different from Grendel's Dam. Where the former was a subversion of the queen, Errour is patterned on more common fare. Errour's territory is limited to her cave, and her resources parallel the poor women who were left to their own abilities and the hand outs of the parish:

> Peasant women without family, without access to enough land, perhaps too old for extra labor, had few alterna-

> tives to choose from in order to survive. A woman alone might be a widow, a wife abandoned by her husband in bad times, a female member of the wandering poor. . . . A harvest code of 1329 for England gave old women the right to "glean," the right to gather whatever they could in the mown fields before the animals were released to graze on the stubble. A landlord's wife appointed an almoner, a member of her household whose job it was to distribute alms and the scraps from the table each day. . . . On the whole, by the end of the 1500s local and royal governments had taken over what charity there was from individuals and religious orders. The English Poor Laws required the poor to petition the quarter sessions. In the seventeenth century this might be more than a woman could manage. The parish records list "a poor walking woman" and "a poor woman name unknown, who had crept into Mr. Miller's barn." Both died of starvation. The eighteenth-century records for the *bureaux de charités* of France give sums to feed a child and an adult woman, but there was not enough to provide for them all. In the village of Mende the records show 1,000 poor but sufficient funds to give only 100 of them one meal twice a week.[36]

The ferocity Errour exhibits is a natural reaction not only to protect her children, but to safeguard the small haven of her cave. Her inability to turn back the attack by Red Cross is further evidence of her affinity with the poor women of the era:

> Much daunted with that dint, her sense was dazed,
> Yet kindling rage, herself she gathered round,
> And all at once her beastly body raised
> With doubled forces high above the ground.
> Tho wrapping up her wreathed stern around,
> Leapt fierce upon his shield, and her huge train
> All suddenly about his body wound,
> That hand nor foot to stir he strove in vain.[37]

Because Errour recognizes that Red Cross represents annihilation for her, she fights back with everything she has, even after receiving a blow that might have been her last. The first two lines of this stanza are particularly interesting. First, Errour's "sense" has been dazed; does Spenser mean her ability to perceive, her sanity, her logic or capability to reason, or does he mean her intuition?

Any and all of these definitions are possible, and since they are - Spenser gives us no reason to rule any out - Errour becomes more human than Spenser would originally like us to believe. The second line of this stanza is quite revealing. Spenser cleverly states that she is piling up her coils, but the words "herself she gathered round," offer a picture of both supernatural power, and a strong sense of the components of self needed to combat a force trying to negate one's existence. By so doing, Errour successfully renders Red Cross impotent, enveloping him rather than allowing him to impale her.

Unfortunately, again, because she is "evil," Errour has to die. We would not have our patriarchal, Christian allegory if she were left to rule her cave. But like her ancestress, Grendel's Dam, Errour too can only be quelled by a force larger than her human opponent. Una calls on Red Cross at this crucial moment to depend on his faith, to ask for help from the Almighty, "Add faith unto your force, and be not faint: / Strangle her, else she sure will strangle thee".[38] This he does, and Errour meets her death, but it's her method of fighting and not his that finally overtakes her.

Sin - *Paradise Lost*

I now move to the later part of the seventeenth century and hold Milton's Sin from *Paradise Lost* up for comparison with the

characters already examined. If Grendel's Dam is terrifying, and Errour is not only horrific but vile, then Sin is ghastly, lurid, and vast. Milton has used well his predecessor's prototypes for single mothers of myth. Milton's talents add dimension and resonance to the character of sinful single mother. The monstrosity of illegitimacy is coupled with the specter of inevitable mortality. Milton's child, Death, however, represents more than simply the human condition.

We meet Sin as she sits at her station, guarding the gates of Hell:

> Before the gates there sat
> On either side a formidable shape:
> The one seemed woman to the waist, and fair,
> But ended foul in many a scaly fold,
> Voluminous and vast - a serpent armed
> With mortal sting. About her middle round
> A cry of Hell hounds never-ceasing barked
> With Cerberean mouths full loud, and rung
> A hideous peal; yet, when they list, would creep,
> If ought disturbed their noise, into her womb,
> And kennel there still barked and howled
> Within unseen.[39]

The first characteristic that we learn about her is that she is "formidable," powerful, someone to be reckoned with. The next few lines are remarkably familiar; it seems Sin and Error share a lamia resemblance. Sin's upper torso is fair, an improvement on poor Errour's "dugs," but Sin's lower extremity is even more loathsome. Again a female character, fertile and reproductive, is depicted as a serpent, and I don't doubt that Milton's "mortal sting" is a very intentional pun on the severity of the transgression committed in the name of Sin. Milton also creates Sin's children as aberrations of normal offspring, countless, with open, demanding mouths. Both Spenser and Milton create these children as the morally deformed off-

spring of their mother's reproductive transgressions. More, their repulsive reproductive descriptions suggest that these two men find the physical elements of child bearing repugnant; well they might, given the ignorance and pain a woman could expect to face in childbirth. In *A History of Their Own*, Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser recount typical birthing circumstances:

> Historians have tried to compile mortality figures for women of the English nobility in the seventeenth century. Among titled women, 45 percent died before age fifty, of those, one quarter died from childbirth. A strong woman faced many years of childbearing. Seventeenth century women have left accounts of their experiences.[40]

Of the accounts left to us all are from titled or noble women, and although all women risked their lives in giving birth, one can only imagine the added risk a common woman ran. But Spenser and Milton were not consciously providing us with examples of childbirth in their lifetimes. Because these authors are working on epic levels of representation, these mothers come to represent something much more terrifying. Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge this point in their evaluation of Jonathan Swift's character, "Goddess Criticism", in *The Battle of the Books*:

> Like Spenser's Errour and Milton's Sin, Criticism is linked by her processes of eternal breeding, eating, spewing, feeding, and redevouring to biological cycles all three poets view as destructive to transcendent, intellectual life. More, since all the creations of each monstrous mother are her excretions, and since all her excretions are both her food and her weaponry, each mother forms with her brood a self-enclosed system, cannibalistic and solipsistic: the creativity of the world made flesh is annihilating.[41]

In a discussion of these three epic single mothers in chronology, a sequential development takes shape. Grendel's Dam, as the

genre demands, is depicted with little or no physical description, and certainly no personality. We are only told that she is large, terrifying, and very enraged. We are meant to understand her as a two-dimensional symbol of evil. Errour has more character, because Spenser not only paints her form with expert vividness and texture, but allows the richness of his language to explore shades of meaning and subtle motivations. Following this pattern, Sin is portrayed with exacting detail; we know her history, her lineage, and her incestuous relationship to her father and son. Having provided this inside information, Milton adds a further dimension to his "monster." We see Sin confronting Satan, her father, but more importantly to the purpose of this discussion, the "husband" that abandoned her to bear and raise their child. What follows is an account of Satan's non-recognition and disbelief when confronted with the demands of fatherhood and responsibility:

> So strange thy outcry, and thy words so strange
> Thou interposest, that my sudden hand,
> Prevented, spares to tell thee yet by deeds
> What it intends, till first I know of thee
> What thing thou art, thus double-formed, and why,
> In this infernal vale first met, thou call'st
> Me father, and that phantasm call'st my son.
> I know thee not, nor ever saw till now
> Sight more detestable than him and thee.[42]

Satan, as many men might who unintentionally stumble across a past relationship, makes these words sound convincingly real. He works very hard at trying to sound genuinely nonplused and argues that Sin's appearance and voice are "strange." He would have her believe that she is a stranger to him, and also that her "outcry" is irrational - a ploy often used to persuade women that their needs and

thoughts are not worthy of consideration. But Sin, like her forerunners, is a match for Satan. With careful attention to place and time, she insists that Satan hear the truth about their relationship:

> Hast thou forgot me, then; and do I seem
> Now in thine eye so foul? - once deemed so fair
> In Heaven, when at the assembly, and in sight
> Of all the seraphim with thee combined
> In bold conspiracy against Heaven's King,
> All on a sudden miserable pain
> Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
> In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
> Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,
> Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,
> Then shining heavenly fair, a goddess armed,
> Out of thy head I sprung.[43]

Sin's response is inarguable. She has witnesses, and she cunningly plays on Satan's erotic nature with her first question. A question that is wonderfully consistent with her portrayal as temptress, but also is true to the fact that she was created in Satan's image. The choice of words to describe Sin's exact moment of creation are purposefully loaded. Milton weighs the description with the double reference to Athena springing fully formed from the forehead of Zeus and the creation of Eve, formed from Adam's rib. But Sin has her own distinction; it is almost as if she has overtaken Satan, nearly staggering and outshining him. At her birth, Sin is "heavenly fair," with nothing repulsive about her; She is "a goddess armed," a picture of vibrancy and power. Milton continues his description of Sin by informing us, through her, that Heaven's inhabitants feared her and that she tempted Satan - both incredible tributes to her psychological and sexual stature. In fact, as the angels fall, Sin is awarded the keys to Hell; she controls Satan's boundaries. Once

fallen and pregnant, Sin's exuberance is squelched. Through childbirth, not fornication, Sin loses her radiant and alluring beauty:

> Pensive here I sat
> Alone; but long I sat not, till my womb,
> Pregnant by thee, and now excessive grown,
> Prodigious motion felt and rueful throes.
> At last this odious offspring whom thou seest,
> Thine own begotten, breaking violent way,
> Tore through my entrails, that, with fear and pain
> Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew
> Transformed:[44]

Milton wastes no opportunity in forcing us to see the evil in her immoral issue by piling negative adjectives upon disturbing verbs. And there can be no mistake in the sinister implication of "Thine own begotten," as a direct reminder of the true sacrifice to be made by Christ, God's only begotten son in *Paradise Regained*. Of course as a version of the Great Mother Sin gives birth to Death. Rather than let this incident suffice as a lesson to women on the evils of bearing illegitimate children, Milton adds incest to incest, and Death's rape of Sin and her subsequent childbirth makes the previous incident seem mild:

> And, in embraces forcible and foul
> Engendering with me, of that rape begot
> These yelling monsters, that with ceaseless cry
> Surround me, as thou saw'st - hourly conceived
> And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
> To me: for, when they list, into the womb
> That bred them they return, and howl, and gnaw
> My bowels, their repast; then, bursting forth
> Afresh, with conscious terrors vex me round,
> That rest or intermission none I find.[45]

This is clear foreshadowing of the curse to be placed upon Eve once she has "sinned". But what is most uncomfortable about this progression in Milton's logic is that by way of Sin's first transgression with Satan, she is locked into and perhaps even deserving of this

ultimate degradation. In other words, a woman once fallen is irretrievable. Again borrowing from Gilbert & Gubar:

> If Eve's punishment, moreover, is her condemnation to the anguish of maternity, Sin is the only model of maternity other than the 'wide womb of Chaos' with which *Paradise Lost* provides her, and as a model Milton's monster conveys a hideous warning of what it means to be a 'slave to the species.' [Sin's children] remind us that to bear young is to be not spiritual but animal, a *thing* of the flesh, an incomprehensible and uncomprehending body, while their ceaseless suckling presages the exhaustion that leads to death, companion of birth.[46]

The endless round of rape by Death, only to produce Death's offspring adds a further dimension to the inherent sin of reproduction. Sin now lives with the constant plague of pregnancy and delivery, and her suffering is unabated. Though perhaps not obvious, it is logical to assume that she would choose not to bear the hell hounds of her womb. Her terror and sorrow at her condition are the predecessor to infanticide and abortion, the ultimate and desperate choices of women forced to produce. The assumption that only single and widowed women sought such recourse is refuted by Angus McLaren

> This stress on the recourse to abortion of abandoned single women seeking to avoid illegitimate births was based on the assumption of commentators that since induction of miscarriage was dangerous, the risk would deter all but the most desperate. . . . The problem posed . . . is that [this] presented only one sort of woman--the seduced victim--and only one sort of motive--the desire to avoid an illegitimate birth. . . . Since most of the women whose miscarriages came to the attention of the authorities were single, the argument that the practice was the last resort of the unmarried seemed to be confirmed. Upon closer investigation, however, it becomes clear why similar attempts by married women would go undetected. A married woman who miscarried raised few suspicions; with a single woman the chance existed that a master, father or neighbour would discover her condition and demand some explanation. Moreover, in a time of trouble a single woman would have fewer resources at her disposal, she would have fewer people to whom she could turn and the

> likelihood of discovery was therefore all the greater. . . . But why would married women for whom an unexpected pregnancy did not necessarily entail . . . social ostracism and poverty have recourse to abortion? The desire to control their own fertility provided the first reason. . . . Each and every pregnancy was not welcomed by the married. Mrs Alice Thornton, on discovering her pregnancy in 1667, confided to her diary 'if it had been good in the eyes of my God, I should much rather . . . not have been in this condition'. If abortion was frightening so too were 'the Dangers and Pains of a hard Travail, weakness of Constitution, hereditary Miscarriages and such like'. . . . Lady Caroline Fox, finding herself pregnant for the third time in almost as many years, wrote her husband 'I'm certainly breeding, I took a great deal of physic yesterday in hopes to send it away, but it has only convinced me my fears prove true'. Shortly thereafter she found that her tactics had been successful and she proudly informed her spouse that she was now writing 'to tell you I am not breeding (is not that clever)'.[47]

Of course to be redeemed from this into a spiritual life presumes a patristic social order in which to be retrieved. As to the last lines of Sin's quotation, Milton, like Spenser ironically comes accurately close to a single mother's or any mother's overwhelmed feelings about her children's insatiable needs.

Sin, as opposed to Grendel's Dam or Errour, does not die, since her opponent is an evil co-conspirator rather than Moral Good. But she too loses to her male dominator; she relinquishes her one control over Satan and opens the gates of Hell, vanquished by sweet talk rather than force:

> Dear daughter, . . . know
> I come no enemy, but to set free
> From out this dark and dismal house of pain,
> . . .
> And bring ye to the place where thou and Death
> Shall dwell at ease, and up and down unseen
> Wing silently the buxom air, embalmed
> With odors: there ye shall be fed and filled
> Immeasurably; all things shall be your prey[48]

Satan begins the episode by threatening her physically; it was Sin that began the negotiations and the sly cajoling. Satan takes her cue, plying her with promises. His language is in character, seeming sweet yet filled with noxious innuendoes which reveal his intent to keep her in her place: "embalmed with odors," "fed and filled," and "prey" are all phrases that describe her current state. As the poem continues, Sin is left behind, static in her role. The final metaphor of Sin reigning at Hell's brink is telling: "She opened; but to shut / Excelled her power: the gates wide open stood".[49] Milton could not have written a more damning statement on the power of women's sexual and reproductive abilities.

Charissa - *The Faerie Queene*

An elaboration on a lineage of single mothers who represent unrestrained evil and moral decay requires a balance. There are, of course, female characters who bear and nurture children alone within the context of acceptable social and moral bounds. Spenser conveniently provides us with Charissa, the pristine antidote to Errour, and Chaucer's Constance adheres admirably to the strictures of being a "good" lady.

If Errour was Red Cross Knight's first encounter, in many ways, Charissa is his last--another feather in the cap of single mothers. Red Cross is all but lost morally when he is brought to the House of

Holiness wherein Charissa resides, the most powerful of the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Not only is she the greatest of these, she is the most beautiful, regal and commanding:

> She was a woman in her freshest age,
> Of wondrous beauty and of bounty rare,
> With goodly grace and comely personage,
> That was on earth not easy to compare.
> Full of great love, but Cupid's wanton snare
> As hell she hated, chaste in work and will.
> Her neck and breasts were ever open bare,
> That aye thereof her babes might suck their fill;
> The rest was all in yellow robes arrayed still.[50]

Because Charissa is a legitimate daughter of the Church and wedded to its ideals and the God that rules it, her motherhood is used as a symbol of bounty and altruism. Spenser provides us with a foul version of Eve when he created Errour, and though he was virulently anti-Catholic, he also provides us with an example of the Virgin Mary in Charissa. The influence of the Mother of God was by this time solidly infused in the culture:

> While the Vatican proclaims that the Virgin Mother of God always existed, the Jungian determines that all men want a virgin mother, at least in symbolic form, and that the symbol is so powerful it has a dynamic and irrepressible life of its own. Roland Barthes [ ] pinpoints this process with crystalline clarity: "We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature."[51]

Underlying the impossible strictures of virgin birth and chaste motherhood is a deeply embedded recognition of the power of maternity. Mother goddesses, such as Charissa are founded on a strong tradition that culminated in Maria Regina, Queen of Heaven:

> It seems that the epithet "virgin" applied to Mary was an error of translation: for the Semitic word denoting the social-legal status of an unmarried girl the translator substituted the Greek *parthenos*, which denotes a physiological and psychological fact, virginity. It is possible to read this as an instance of the Indo-European

> fascination (analyzed by Georges Dumezil) with the virgin daughter as repository of the father's power. It may also be interpreted as an ambivalent, and highly spiritualized, evocation of the underlying mother goddess and matriarchy, with which Greek culture and Jewish monotheism were locked in combat. Be that as it may, it remains true that Western Christendom orchestrated this "error of translation" by projecting its own fantasies on it, thereby producing one of the most potent imaginary constructs known to any civilization.[52]

But Spenser is not to be congratulated for providing a flip side to the coinage of motherhood. First, women and mothers are more than two dimensional, second, Spenser is merely offering the opposite stereotype. Simply because Charissa is "good" does not make her more palatable; no woman could ever emulate her "goodly grace". As Woodbridge succinctly points out: "Such deification, by making Woman more than human, reinforced the antifeminist contention that she was other than human".[53]

Notice the careful demarcation between love as charity and the pagan form of love Cupid offers. Important too is that even though Spenser creates Charissa as lovely, it is a beauty without eroticism; she has "goodly grace," and a "comely personage," rather than sensuality. She is also bountiful rather than erotic. But even so, Spenser is very careful to cover her "nether" parts; I don't think he is any more enamored of Charissa's genitalia than he was Errour's. Dorothy Dinnerstein's chapter on "The Dirty Goddess" in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* explores cultural attitudes towards characters such as Errour and Sin as opposed to a Charissa:

> The dirty goddess is dirty not simply because the flesh that she represents is the vehicle-saboteur of our wishes, and because its meaning as hateful saboteur--split off from and thus unmodified by its meaning as lovely vehicle--makes our tie to it feel degrading. She is dirty

> also, more deeply dirty, for another reason: the positive side of what she embodies--our old joy in the flesh and the capacity we still have to feel the kind of contact with life that the flesh originally carried--has been largely suppressed.[54]

Spenser's suppression is blatant, but whatever the reasons are for Spenser's reticence here, Charissa is just as prolific as her alter ego Errour:

> A multitude of babes about her hung,
> Playing their sports, that joyed her to behold,
> Whom still she fed whiles they were weak and young,
> But thrust them forth still as they waxed old.
> And on her head she wore a tire of gold,
> Adorned with gems and ouches wondrous fair,
> Whose passing price unearth was to be told;
> And by her side there sat a gentle pair
> Of turtle doves, she sitting in an ivory chair.[55]

The difference between Errour's "offspring" and Charissa's "babes" couldn't be more marked. This is an idyllic scene where mother and children delight in one another, with Spenser's added remonstrance to mother's who may baby their children too long, to "thrust them forth still as they waxed old." One has to wonder where Spenser gained his acute knowledge of child rearing. The resounding moral message seems to be that if the light of societal and patriarchal legitimacy shines on a mother, even a single one, her children will be adorable, loving, and put no taxing pressure on her. Further, as a mother she will be crowned with acceptance as long as she is gently passive, and seated rather than mobile. As a daughter herself, Charissa is perpetuating--to Spenser's approval and obvious delight--the continuum of mothers as sole nurturers and caretakers. No figures highlight this message more than characters who are single mothers. As an archetypal image of Red Cross's mother, Charissa provides him with the perfect nurturance and guidance that he needs:

> The anima is the vehicle parexcellence of the transformative character. It is the mover, the instigator of change, whose fascination drives, lures, and encourages the male to all the adventures of the soul and spirit, of action and creation in the inner and outer world.[56]

Addressing this point in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow takes issue, stating, ". . . women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother".[57] As the daughter of the all-loving and giving dame Caelia, Charissa's constant birthing is a metaphor for precisely this continuance of the "maternal order".

One more observation is undeniable--Charissa does not hold the same power over the reader's imagination or memory as does Errour. She can't possibly; Spenser spends only two or three stanzas in describing her, and he allows her no action. Charissa's only powers are attributed to her influence and are not represented in any direct encounters. There is nothing surprising about where Charissa exercises her power, not only because of her name, but because this is traditionally "women's work." She is one of Spenser's simplest allegorical figures--a virtue attached to a caricature. By reducing her to a nonsexual, nondynamic representation of female morality, Spenser has taken the life out of her. With a placid and pale Charissa next to ferocious and fecund Errour we do not have two halves of a whole, but extreme characteristics of motherhood as depicted by Spenser.

Constance - "The Man of Law's Tale"

As would be expected not only because of the difference in genre, but because of the difference in the author, Geoffrey Chaucer's Constance in "The Man of Law's Tale," is a more full representative of "good" single mothers than is Charissa. Yet, she too draws heavily on this reader's patience. Constance, as her name so clearly implies, is a steadfast adherent to the belief that a woman's purpose is to accept and endure the hardships and cruelties that men can impose. She holds to this because of her firm belief in Christian patriarchy. Constance sees herself and all women as weak vessels to be used by men, and shaped by God, the father:

> "Allas! unto the Barbre nacioun
> I moste anon, syn that it is youre wille;
> But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun
> So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfille!
> I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille!
> Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,
> And to been under mannes governance."[58]

Constance follows the hierarchy of obeying her father by marrying against her wishes, consequently adhering to her husband's demands, and always remembering that her Lord God requires diligent and unflagging service. With three "lords," it seems impossible that this woman could ever be left to parent alone. But no real irony exists here, because women have traditionally shouldered full parental responsibilities. Constance's situation merely highlights the norm. As an all-suffering, madonna figure, Constance shares many of Charissa's physical attributes:

> "In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride,
> Youthe, withoute grenehede or folye;

> To alle hire werkes vertu is her gyde;
> Humblesse hath slayn in hir all tirannye.
> She is mirour of alle curteisye;
> Hir herte is verray chambre of holyness,
> Hir hand, ministre of fredam for almesse."[59]

Constance's great loveliness may be a physical reality, but its true manifestation is in her virtuous demeanor and behavior. Again, we have before us a woman who is humble, kind, pure, and gentle. Because she behaves according to the laws of God and man, Constance is awarded qualities that render her of "heigh beautee." The culmination of Constance's qualities is her self-effacing "femininity". She consents to being the epitome of self-negation. Jean Baker Miller in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* expands on this precise point:

> When one is an object, not a subject, all of one's own physical and sexual impulses and interests are presumed not to exist independently. They are brought into existence only by and for others--controlled, defined, and used. Any strings of physicality and sexuality in herself would only confirm for a girl or a woman her evil state.[60]

She is an emperor's daughter, and Constance in many ways fits the virgin goddess image placed on a throne or pedestal. But unlike many of her ancient counterparts, Constance has no power but in passivity and patience. That fact, however, might not necessarily be negative as Adrienne Rich points out in *Of Woman Born*: ". . . even in her most benign aspect the ancient Goddess is not beckoning to her worshipers. She exists, not to cajole or reassure man, but to assert herself".[61] The narrator of this tale states that Constance is more than an ordinary mortal woman: "This holy mayden, that is so bright and sheene; / And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene".[62] Constance is legitimate in the highest of patriarchal realms; she is both

"doghter" and "queene." To highlight her close affiliation with madonna imagery, Constance chooses the Virgin Mary as her benefactress when she is in despair.

However, as soon as Constance gives birth to a "knave child," the legitimacy is questioned by a woman, Constance's mother-in-law. Donegild, as she is called, fills the role of evil woman, conniver, and usurper of the true faith. She plays a dark foil to Constance's steadfast and trusting nature. Donnegild is the Eve that drives Constance from society and sets her adrift, an outcast mother at sea with her baby son. Constance's husband lacks enough trust in her to even investigate the charges:

> The lettre spak the queene delivered was
> Of so horrible a feendly creature
> That in the castel noon so hardy [nas]
> That any while dorste ther endure.
> The moder was an elf, by aventure
> Yeomen, by charmes or by sorcerie,
> And every wight hateth hir compaignye.[63]

Once again a reputedly illegitimate child is described as unnatural and hideous, and the mother is attributed with supernatural powers. Constance has now become an archetype for single motherhood in "normal" society. Since a woman must be humble, unassuming, and patient, it follows that she can have little control over her own destiny. What better metaphor than a woman at sea with a newborn baby, in a ship she can not steer. Constance is the quintessence of motherhood--forced to shoulder all parenting responsibility in an isolating environment. In her article, "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle," on precisely this point, Coppélia Kahn expands on and discusses arguments put forth by other feminists. Her particular point of departure is the institutionalization of motherhood:

> As a group, they argue that the institution of motherhood is the root cause of the oppression of women and the sexual malaise experienced by men and women. I mean "cause" in an atemporal sense, for of course we don't know whether mothering by women ever "began" at a certain point in history. Rather, motherhood (these authors suggest) is the "cause" of the oppression of women in the sense that it is necessary for that oppression, and the oppression of women is inevitable given the institution of motherhood.[64]

Constance is true to her initial character throughout this tale; she is not transformed. But Constance, in one sense refuses to face her trials alone. When faced with the pain and possible death of her child, Constance finds the determination to call on Mary and pray to her sympathies as a mother. Constance's steady prayers while she is facing the terrors of her voyage bring down upon her a blessing and a protection that carries her eventually home:

> Hir litel child lay wepyng in hir arm,
> And knelyng, pitously to hym she seyde,
> "Pees, litel sone, I wol do thee noon harm."
> With that hir coverchief of hir hed she preyde,
> And over his litel eyen she it leyde,
> And in hir arm she lulleth it ful faste,
> And into hevene hir eyen up she caste.
>
> "Moder," quod she, "and mayde bright, Marie,
> Sooth is that thurgh wommans eggement
> Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye,
> For which thy child was on a croys yrent.
> Thy blisful eyen sawe al his torment;
> Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene
> Thy wo and any wo man may sustene.[65]

Constance calls upon the bond between her and Mary, but by first referring to her bond with Eve. By referring to "wommans eggement," Constance is recalling her earlier words of woman's earned "thraldom and penance." By remaining within the legitimate circle of woman's evil/woman's purity, Constance can humble herself and exalt her similarities to the Virgin Goddess at the same time. Yet she is still caught in the dichotomy of Eve/Ave standards.

Of course Constance and her child can not simply bob uninterrupted on the ocean's currents. She reaches land only to be accosted by a surly heathen who insists she be his lover. Constance now simply calls upon Mary, who becomes for her a kind of higher and more powerful self:

> Wo was this wrecched womman tho bigon;
> Hir child cride, and she cride pitously.
> But blisful Marie heelp hire right anon;
> For with hir struglyng wel and myghtily
> The theef fil overbord al sodenly,
> And in the see he dreynte for vengeance;[66]

With this final test of her virtue and strength, Constance is redeemed and allowed back into society. But her husband first must claim her child for his own, and this is done only after he has heard accolades of his wife's faithfulness. Constance's abiding faith and virtue are rewarded by her reinstatement as earthly queen and member of her people, but her son is not completely claimed as his father's. The boy remains the child of Constance:

> A moder he hath, but fader hath he non
> . . .
> Now was this child as lyk unto Custance
> As possible is a creature to be.[67]

Constance's husband must take it on faith that this is his child, since the boy bears no resemblance to him. Now the issue here could be faith--first Constance and now her husband, since he exhibits faith in her and believes, the son is accepted and "natural". But since the quote explicitly states "but fader hath he non," an ambiguity of legitimacy is left. The son, as the quotation implies, stands as a tribute to Constance's faith, not only in Mary who protected her, but in herself. Constance, then becomes very like the

patroness she prayed to and takes on the near stature of Virgin Mother. The heir to the throne is the child of the "perfect" mother.

Conclusion

The characters explored here afford rich territory for historical and psychoanalytic examination, and this brief discussion offers more questions than answers. The early single mothers of literature who begin the tradition of powerful conflict and reactions range from appalling fiends to beatific presences. At the core of such polarized responses to the notion of motherhood unattached to "normal" conventions is the separation of women into either physical, evil creatures or spiritual, benign beings. The authors of these tales are removed from the actual experience of motherhood, and their wonder and fear takes the form of gigantic blessedness or sin. Rich eloquently captures the essence of woman's split psyche:

> Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, "the devil's gateway." On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood--that same body with its bleedings and mysteries--is her single destiny and justification in life.[68]

Grendel's Dam, Errour, Sin, Charissa and Constance are all characters of myth, larger than the reality of motherhood. But it is through myth that we gain glimpses of the individual and collective

responses to sexuality as it pertains to a woman's ability to create and control. That the "evil" ones are beyond social possibility does not make them powerless, they live on tremendously in our imagination. And though the virtuous may seem weaker than their dangerous sisters, they are at times able to transform their worlds from within. From Renaissance drama through Victorian novel single mothers are extolled and chastised, but a synthesis of motherhood's divided psyche is not easily found.

Notes

[1] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 33.

[2] Bonnie G. Smith, *Changing Lives: Women in European History Since 1700* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1989) 20.

[3] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500-1800* Abridged Edition (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers 1977) 400-401.

[4] Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Volume I* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 147.

[5] Anderson & Zinsser, *Volume I* 215.

[6] Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 191.

[7] Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 23.

[8] Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986) 53.

[9] Chance 55.

[10] Warner 288. "Early Christians portrayed Mary in their wall paintings and statues as a queenly mother, the Virgin enthroned with the holy infant on her lap, his hand held up in blessing"(Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol. I*, 69).

[11] Chance 100.

[12] Chance 101.

[13] *Beowulf*, in *The Oxford Anthology of Enlgish Literature Volume I*. Ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 1232-1241.

[14] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 119.

[15] *Beowulf* 1423-1433.

[16] Chance 102.

[17] Chance 102.

[18] *Beowulf* 1443-1448.

[19] *Beowulf* 1493-1496.

[20] Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) 45.

[21] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene, Book I.* Ed Robert Kellogg and Oliver Steele (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1965) i.12.1-12.6.

[22] Spenser i.13.7.

[23] Spenser i.14.1-14.9.

[24] Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 84.

[25] Woodbridge 120.

[26] Woodbridge 68.

[27] Neumann 30.

[28] Spenser i.15.1-15.9.

[29] Neumann 63.

[30] Angus McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century.* (New York: Methuen, 1984) 16-23.

[31] Spenser i.16.1-16.9.

[32] Spenser i.17.1-17.9.

[33] Neumann 43.

[34] Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 34.

[35] Eisler 18-20.

[36] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol I* 143.

[37] Spenser i.18.1-18.9.

[38] Spenser i.19.3-19.4.

[39] John Milton, *Paradise Lost: Book II*, in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature.* Ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) 648-659.

[40] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol I* 294.

[41] Gilbert & Gubar 33.

[42] Milton 736-745.

[43] Milton 747-756.

[44] Milton 777-786.

[45] Milton 793-802.

[46] Gilbert & Gubar 198.

[47] McLaren 90, 94-95.

[48] Milton 817-844.

[49] Milton 883-884.

[50] Spenser x.30.1-30.9.

[51] Warner 335.

[52] Kristeva 583. "Striking a shrewd balance between concessions to and constraints upon female paranoia, the representation of virgin motherhood seems to have crowned society's efforts to reconcile survivals of matrilinearity and the unconscious needs of primary narcissism on the one hand with, on the other hand, the imperatives of the nascent exchange economy and, before long, of accelerated production, which required the addition of the superego and relied on the father's symbolic authority"(Kristeva 599).

[53] Woodbridge 58.

[54] Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) 147.

[55] Spenser x.31.1-31.9.

[56] Neumann 33.

[57] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 7.

[58] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale" *The Tales of Canterbury*. Ed. Robert A. Pratt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966) 281-287.

[59] Chaucer 162-168.

[60] Jean Baker Miller M.D., *toward a new psychology of women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 60.

[61] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 94.

[62] Chaucer 692-693.

[63] Chaucer 750-756.

[64] Coppélia Kahn, "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle: Recent Gender Theories and Their Implications" in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 73.

[65] Chaucer 834-847.

[66] Chaucer 918-923.

[67] Chaucer 1020-1030.

[68] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 34.

CHAPTER 3

WILY WIDOWS: MEDDLING MOTHERS

> Widows by their very nature presented considerable problems to those pundits who postulated that obedience was the female's essential lot. If unmarried girls obeyed their fathers, and wives obeyed their husbands, whom should a widow obey?[1]

Introduction

A widow's reputation precedes her. She is the black widow spider, a symbol of malicious and self-serving danger. Or she is the merry widow, a symbol of sexuality on the loose. During the Renaissance and the Jacobean period the question of widowhood was of prime social importance, and these were the eras in which the attitudes toward widows and the laws affecting them were depicted, examined and changed dramatically. Sex and power were initially afforded the widow, only to be denied her as the decades passed. Antonia Fraser in *The Weaker Vessel*, describes the initial acceptance of a widow's sexual perspective: "It was axiomatic that a woman who had once experienced sex would wish to renew the pleasure as soon as possible and as often as possible--hence the popular concept of the 'lusty

widow'".[2] Either of the above depictions implies an experienced woman with more power and skill to affect those around her than the never married or the still married woman.

Widows, as opposed to women who bore and raised children without "legitimate" sanctions, possessed a modicum of power compared to their counterparts. A widow was, therefore, legitimately powerful, but with limits to the proper display of these powers: ". . . by the Custom of London a wife had the right to one third of her husband's property at death, and if there were no children, their one third share also".[3] From the literature of the period, it seems evident that a mother was permitted the exercise of power as long as it was in the best interest of her children, particularly a son's.

Even this maternal exercise of power by widows, however, often remained merely a theory for the women in question and a threat for the land-owning male members of her family.

> For most noblewomen from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries, however, becoming a widow, a woman 'sole and unmarried,' as the English called it, meant becoming vulnerable. In theory her husband's family had assumed responsibility for her on her marriage, the obligation to protect her person and to provide for her.[4]

Widows, though ostensibly free to marry as they chose, without parental consent, often found themselves under the severe social constraint to remain single as an expression of fidelity to their departed husband, an idea no where argued so heatedly as in George Chapman's drama, *The Widow's Tears*

> . . . widow's marriages [ ] being but a kind of lawful adultery, like usury, permitted by the law, not approved; that to wed a second was no better than to cuckold the first; that women should entertain wedlock as one body, as one life, beyond which there were no desire, no

> thought, no repentance from it, no restitution to it. So as if the conscience of her vows should not restrain her, yet the world's shame to break such a constant resolution should repress any such motion in her.[5]

Chapman's link between usury and a second marriage is not merely creative cleverness. The simile reflects the attitude that a wife is always the property of the first husband and any subsequent arrangement is a "borrowing" of used goods from that first union. That Chapman defines "wedlock" with such emphasis on the enclosed and limiting second syllable reinforces the belief that marriage is a rigid and boundaried affair. Certainly the tension and central question of Chapman's drama is the refutation of this social attitude through the choices and actions of a very loyal, pious and chaste widow. But the attitude did exist and prevail despite contradicting realities:

> This yearning for fidelity beyond the grave--the ideal of the devoted widow--makes strange reading put side by side with the nature of the society in which these men, women (and widows) lived.
>
> Under these circumstances remarriage, far from being a distasteful aberration, was in fact a very common occurrence. . .[6]

In the case of wealthy widows with children an even more complex consideration might very well stay her decision to remarry. Children from a second marriage could rightly demand her financial support for themselves. "In reality it was more often the question of the children's financial future--the children of the first marriage, that is--which bedeviled the prospect of a widow's remarriage, than the notion of her fidelity to her first husband".[7] More succinctly put is Lady Brilliana Harley's statement: ". . . when one has children, it is better to be a widow".[8]

Livia - *Women Beware Women*

The bulk of literary works addressing the status and choices that were available to widows as well as the cultural repercussions of their choices focus on the widow as temptress, the widow as wealthy prize, or, more comically, the widow as desperate husband-hunter. Few of these texts depict a widow's young children, probably because children and childrearing were not considered relevant topics for the stage or novel. To shift attention away from the widow's sexual and financial power as it relates to adult men would guarantee a sparse audience. A clear example of such simplistic attitudes are found in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. In this Jacobean play, the fantasies for and derisions against a once married woman are given full rein. The two widows of Middleton's drama fit neatly into the standard formula. Livia, the wealthy and twice married widow, diabolically maneuvers the sexual behavior of the other principals. "All lies upon my hands then; well, the more glory / When the work's finish'd."[9] This statement carries sexual relevancy in light of Livia's self-definition in Act I, scene ii. She responds to her brother's patronizing compliment:

> A witty! O the bud of commendation,
> Fit for a girl of sixteen! I am blown,
> man; I should be wise by this time; and,
> for instance, I've buried my two husbands
> in good fashion, And never mean more to marry.[10]

In a brilliantly conceived chess game which is a clever metaphor for the play's action, Livia is the controlling black queen, felling her victims once their erotic usefulness has passed. Leantio's mother is her pale foil; insipidly ambitious both for her son and her own social advancement; this widow is an easy pawn to Livia's cunning. With Leantio's mother unguided by a husband's better judgment or paternal curbs, Livia is free to taint the entire atmosphere of the play as she becomes a bawd to adultery, incest and finally murder.

Livia, in financial terms, is in a powerful position. According to Ruth Perry in *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, women like Livia had legal connections to the land, managing their own inherited holdings and households. Widows from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance were members of guilds, inheriting their husband's membership upon his death, able to hire apprentices, and held some voting power within that guild. A very wealthy, titled widow could expect an autonomy over her affairs so long as she had no father, brothers, or brothers-in-law who deemed it necessary to insure she upheld the honor of her married name.[11] From the Renaissance through the eighteenth century, however, legal sanctions and economic opportunities changed dramatically for women in general and widows in particular.

> . . . Privileged English women from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries were able to enjoy the wealth that came to them as widows. Agnes Paston kept control of the property even after her eldest son came of age. Elizabeth Talbot (b. 1518), known to contemporaries as Bess of Hardwick, survived four husbands, and ended life as a countess with a jointure giving her an annual income of £60,000. She did very well with her properties, including forests and mines, and her business ventures, trading in timber, lead, and coal. Margaret Poultney, Sir Ralph Verney's aunt, spoke for them all when in 1639 she insisted on not remarrying even though it meant a

break with her family. "A widow is free," she explained.[12]

Before Middleton and his counterparts followed the norm in dramatizing stereotypical depictions of widows as either helpless dupes or atavistic lechers, William Shakespeare provided a scant few characters who offer a glimpse into more subtle attitudes toward widows during the seventeenth century. The actual social construct in which literary works were produced during the seventeenth century is a curious and dynamic one. Beneath the actions of characters such as Shakespeare's the Countess de Rousillon of *All's Well that Ends Well* and Volumnia in *Coriolanus* lie curious motivations. Geographically and historically set far from Shakespeare's England, these two plays can be used to gauge the tenor of attitudes and legal restrictions of the time in which they were written. "Widows, indeed, could be held to be technically 'masterless', especially if their jointure or other form of inheritance was free from legal restraint".[13] The poor widow, in contrast, suffered harshly under the standards of her society; "A wealthy widow without encumbrances was a potential independent; a crone without protection was a potential witch".[14] Yet, as stated earlier, even a wealthy widow was fettered in her actions if her father, uncles, or brothers chose to exercise their rights as family guardians. John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* dramatizes the confinement which could be imposed on a wealthy, resourceful widow such as the Duchess. All three works contain elements of myth as discussed in the previous chapter. In order to be compared with any aspect of the Great Mother, a woman must first establish herself as an agent of willfulness. Said more simply, a mother must determine

her own destiny in order to lay a sound path for her children to follow. But more to the immediate point are women's social constructs which help to clarify a single mother's perspective.

Duchess of Malfi - *The Duchess of Malfi*

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess is not in a strict sense a single mother, but she is initially a widowed mother and provides too clear a portrait of how a woman's life could be manipulated and controlled by the male members of her family to ignore her here. The conflict at the heart of the drama rests on her determination to remarry and raise a family on her terms rather than submit to her brothers' restrictions. She knows herself to be a capable and virtuous woman; they view her as subversive and corrupt. At the play's start she is a widow with a grown son by the Duke of Malfi, and we learn quickly that her two powerful brothers "would not have her marry again".[15] They clearly insist that their sister and her property are theirs to command:

> . . . You are my sister,
> This was my father's poniard: do you see
> I'd be loath to see't look rusty, cause 'twas his.
> I would have you to give o'er these chargeable revels;
> A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms
> That were never built for goodness: fare ye well
> And women like that part, which, like the lamprey,
> Hath never a bone in't.[16]

Her brother Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, calls on her obedience to her father, making reference to the patriarchal phallus in the symbol

of the poniard, and he also charges her to beware the heritage of Eve when he likens women's character to the secretive "eel" or serpent. Ferdinand's argument invites an exploration of attitudes concerning how a woman chooses to please herself. The play works on the notion that a woman can be considered unchaste and her children illegitimate simply because her marriage was not approved.

The question of the widow's sexuality is immediately raised when first the Duchess appears. She argues playfully: "Diamonds are of most value they say, that have passed through most jewelers' hands."[17] Whereupon Ferdinand, seeing no humor in her repartee, replies: "Whores, by that rule, are precious."[18] The Duchess, not to be silenced, insists: "Will you hear me?".[19] Her opening lines, along with character references by servants and her lover, Antonio, establish the Duchess as an intelligent, self-directed woman who is determined to shape her own destiny and define her own happiness:

> . . . Wish me good speed,
> For I am going into a wilderness,
> Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clue
> To be my guide.[20]

The Duchess indeed enters a wilderness in the marriage she desires with her steward Antonio and in the independence she desires in her society. The widow says "no" to the legal power of her brother the Duke and to the religious power of her brother the Cardinal. By doing so, by exerting her will in proposing to the man she loves and raising three children by him against her brothers' decree, she establishes herself as an outlaw, a revolutionary character. Her actions also render her children as twice illegitimate in the eyes of the Duke and Cardinal: "I make it a question whether her beggarly

brats were ever christened".[21] The surface question of legitimacy is enhanced by the fact that the Duchess performs her own marriage service in her private chamber with her waiting woman as witness:

> Be not amazed, this woman's of my counsel.
> I have heard lawyers say, a contract in a chamber, *Per verba de presenti*, is absolute marriage.
> Bless, heaven, this sacred Gordian, which let violence
> Never untwine.
> . . .
> How can the Church build faster?
> We are now man and wife, and 'tis the Church
> That must but echo this.[22]

The Duchess here becomes high priestess in her own marriage ceremony, taking on the role of bride, potential mother to Antonio's children and the power bestowing grace and propriety on the union. This attempt to determine the course of her life plays directly into her brothers' desire for control over her property, power and sexuality; they use her actions to implicate her in illicit and immoral treachery. Not only do they suspect her children of being unchristened bastards, they ensure it by removing Antonio from the Duchess' household: "You must see your husband no more".[23]

Once the children are established as illegitimate, they are conveniently viewed as unnatural: "The death of young wolves is never to be pitied".[24] Thus Webster demonstrates inarguably the absolute constrictions on mothers and children not twice blessed by the sanctions of law and doctrine. These families are outcast, or, as with the Duchess and her children, they are put to death. But by sending the Countess to her death, Ferdinand and the Cardinal do not cast her into oblivion: "I am Duchess of Malfi still",[25] she states, and this self-proclamation reverberates through and beyond the lines of the

drama. The Duchess rises in stature by the nature of her rebellion and sacrifice, and Webster means for us to remember her as powerfully haunting.

Indeed Antonio hears his own words repeated chillingly in his wife's voice as he moves by the graveyard. And Bosola fears: "Still methinks the Duchess / Haunts me".[26] The play is fraught with echoes and lingering language. A woman's choice to remarry, bear children and be true to herself is the heroic feat which the Duchess accomplishes. In this she resolutely triumphs, though her brothers place execution in her way. The Duchess, by creating her family in her own image rather than within her brothers' patriarchal definition, becomes one more reflection of the Great Mother.

Countess de Rousillon - *All's Well That Ends Well*

Shakespeare's absent mothers are more evident than the mothers he chooses to endow with life and voice. Lear's daughters live in a motherless universe, as do Perdita, Miranda, Ophelia, and Rosalind. The world of Shakespearian drama is so overladen with powerful paternal images gone awry that the maternal vacuum is painfully felt. When he does provide his characters with active mothers, their overt presence hardly compensates for the wished-for redemption their ethereal counterparts potentially provide.

In the two works where Shakespeare gives active mothers some control, the widow's role as single parent is not immediately evi-

dent. All the children are adults, and the questions and crises they face concern marriage and career. In Shakespeare's two plays, *All's Well That End's Well* and *Coriolanus*, the Countess de Rousillon and Volumnia do manage to influence their children's fates. Dissimilar in personality and method, both the Countess and Volumnia overtly use their power to achieve their ends. The Countess commends herself on this very point when she says: "It hath happened all as I would have had it . . ."[27] The Countess is of course proud of her son, but her interest in his affairs is an interest for his love life, to see that he marries the right girl; she is operating in a maternal realm of peace. Volumnia, on the other hand, vicariously exercises her fierce and bloodthirsty "masculine" spirit through the exploits of Coriolanus. Both meddle and prod unashamedly, and yet the Countess comes off the better for her peaceful, loving heart. More important than their interference, is that both women ostensibly abandon their sons to achieve their own ends. The Countess, for all her good intentions, denies her son and adopts her potential daughter-in-law, Helena. Volumnia never denounces her son's wishes or actions, but nevertheless applies sufficient pressure on him to gain her vision of glory despite the shame and dishonor in store for her son.

What then is Shakespeare working at with these two dominating female figures. Are they merely the butt of the age-old joke of domineering mothers and ineffectual sons? I think not. In the opening line of *All's Well That Ends Well*, the Countess de Rousillon states: "In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband."[28] The line resonates with birth and death, with marriage and incest,

with all the letting go that motherhood entails. More subtly, the line is a recognition of the restrictions placed upon her to maintain her son's best interests and demands while relegating her own agenda to the background. It could, then, read as a recognition, albeit mournful, of freedom. When her son Bertram leaves for court, the Countess, in a sense, has been freed to pursue what she thinks best for her son and for herself.

This explication does not dismiss the possibility of reading that first line as Oedipal. The relationship of a single parent particularly to an only child by its very nature is more intense and complex than is the relationship usually experienced in the "traditional" family. In a single-parent/single-child family needs becomes more intimate--both members of this limited family require and demand this. Like all facets of interaction, this added complexity brings with it positive and negative forces. A parent/child partnership often stretches the boundaries of roles, and may during times of crisis even reverse "normal" behavior patterns. But an Oedipal reading is too obvious, too overworked.

The Countess, apparently, is a wonderful reversal of the patriarch coercing an unwilling daughter into an arranged marriage. I use "wonderful" in its original sense. A woman's responsibility for her children included nurturing and, as the seventeenth century progressed, a form of moral and scholarly education. But questions of a child's future or marriage, particularly a son's, were strictly the province of the father.

> The recognition, in the Renaissance, of the importance of the mother's influence, which today seems obvious and

> even restrictive, must be appreciated as an advance against medieval thinking, which charged the father with the responsibility for the education of children.[29]

For the Countess, then, or any woman, to assume the role of family head, would, indeed be "wonderful". Even as single parent, the Countess would necessarily have to defer not only to her son's wishes, but to any higher authority such as duke or king. In *All's Well*, that is precisely what takes place. The fact that the king provides the Countess with the marital decision she herself has been advocating does not detract from the reality that her words, however persuasive, are simply a mother's wishes to her son Bertram.

Through the course of the play it is Helena who becomes the true child of the Countess, while Bertram becomes a mere pawn in his mother's loving, but determined maneuvers. "But I do wash his name out of my blood, / And thou art all my child."[30] As with many arranged marriages, this one does not sit well either with the groom or the audience. All is not well when the play ends, and we cannot decide whether Helena has finagled too much, or whether Bertram is too spineless for admiration. What remains of worth for me is the Countess's persistence in achieving what she believes best for all parties and her adoption of Helena, not simply as her favorite choice for daughter-in-law, but as true daughter of a mother's experiences and hopes.

> Nay, a mother
> Why not a mother? When I said "a mother"
> Methought you saw a serpent. What's in "mother"
> That you start at it? I say I am your mother,
> And put you in the catalogue of those
> That were enwombèd mine. 'Tis often seen
> Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds
> A native slip to us from foreign seeds.

> You ne'er oppressed me with a mother's groan,
> Yet I express to you a mother's care.
> God's mercy, maiden! Does it curd thy blood
> To say I am thy mother? What's the matter,
> That this distempered messenger of wet,
> The many-colored Iris, rounds thine eye?
> Why? That you are my daughter?[31]

Simply read, the Countess wishes to express her affection for Helena in the most all-encompassing terms she can. Helena's tearful response has everything to do with the fact that she is not even a daughter-in-law to the Countess, not that she fears or denigrates the gesture made to her. The Countess cannily understands this. But this is merely surface material. One has to ask why the Countess is more concerned with Helena's well-being and emotional satisfaction than that of her son. The answer is implicit in the lines above. The Countess is a woman and a mother; Helena is the woman of her choice to succeed the matriarchy she has established.

The tradition at work here, I believe, is closer to the myth of Demeter and Persephone than the tragedy of Oedipus. By forcing her will not only upon her son, but upon the kingdom at large, the Countess de Rousillon challenges the patriarchy. "As the goddess of agriculture and the civilized arts and social order based on it, and as the sister of Zeus, Demeter could lay as ancient a claim to divine provenance as her brother."[32] Helena, in her symbolic death, becomes the next link in the dynastic matriarchy, continuing the ritual of sacrifice and rebirth. The Countess is the all-knowing, benevolent guide; Helena her anima offspring.[33]

The specific language the Countess uses ties Helen to her in a bond stronger and older than the one she has with Bertram. By build-

ing her affection on words such as "enwombed" "breeds" "seeds" "blood" and "groans", and to argue that "adoption strives with nature" more than hints at the blood bond that links all women to their mothers, to each other, and as the Countess so essentially points out, to Eve. She astutely equates "mother" with "serpent", giving compass to the mythology that to be a mother is to have sinned; more fundamentally and archaically, to be a mother is to have power.

But exactly what power does the Countess have? Nowhere in *All's Well* are the Countess' or Bertram's financial status discussed. We assume that their social status and Bertram's acceptance at court place them in a comfortable, privileged echelon. The issues at stake are emotional, personal rather than financial or legal. This level of the universe of *All's Well* is controlled by women. The widow of the tavern is in complicity with the Countess, offering a class depth to the portrait of single mothers. But both women can act only in subterfuge, manipulating the drama with smoke and mirrors. The Countess then, in her drive to marry Bertram to Helena, is expressing subversive control over her family in a society that often disregards a widow's right to determine her children's future. In the end, only the king has the power to ratify justice and make the marriage between Helena and Bertram official.

Is *All's Well That Ends Well* a feminist statement on women's ability to run their family's affairs successfully and with a better eye toward fairness and harmony? Not likely, since, as I've stated, all does not sit well with anyone but Helena and the Countess at the

play's end. Perhaps then this is an anti-feminist exploration of matriarchy (and arranged marriages) as an "unnatural" order of governance. Is the conclusion of this play more distasteful because a woman has arranged it? Helena has gained her desired husband; the Countess her desired daughter. Only Bertram is forced into an unwanted marriage. The women have attained their ends--to remain together; Bertram it seems serves only as the "legitimate" glue. Read in the light of the Demeter/Persephone myth, *All's Well* offers Shakespeare's most ambivalent nod to female as hero. Reinforced by the Countess' maternal values and desires, Helena is able to shape her own ends. Lee Edwards in *Psyche as Hero*, explores and comments on the challenge of the female hero:

> Permitted, like others of her sex, to love and nurture, to comfort, to solace, and to please, the heroic woman specifies these impulses as human, not just female, and endows them with a value that counters their usual debasement. Assuming a position equal to that of the male hero, she challenges the compulsions of aggressivity and conquest, subverts patriarchy's structures, levels hierarchy's endless ranks.[34]

Helena's healing arts at court, followed by her crafty plot to fulfill the demands of Bertram's riddle are all imbued with the potency of the Countess' prayers:

> I'll stay at home
> And pray god's blessing into they attempt.
> Be gone tomorrow, and be sure of this:
> What I can help thee to, thou shalt not miss.[35]

At the play's conclusion, Helena is pregnant with Bertram's child; herein lies the ultimate ambivalence. The Countess has succeeded in recreating Helena in her own image, following the pattern of maternal sacrifice and rebirth. It seems the subversive matriarchy is intact.

But also intact is the overt world of patriarchy where Helena provides the next generation to live in a world of war, kings, and female submission.

> . . . Comedy's requirements will subvert rather than express the claims of female heroism so long as we conceive of comedy as requiring a single gesture which insures the continuation of the species at the same time as it guarantees the present society's survival.[36]

If, perchance, these themes are consciously at work in *All's Well That Ends Well*, we are left with the choice to determine how well all really is. Unlike the myth of Persephone or even Psyche, *All's Well* does not disclose the gender of the Countess de Rousillon's grandchild.

Volumnia - *Coriolanus*

The controlled, gentle, even passive persuasion that the Countess de Rousillon exerts over her son Bertram is likely the reason she is so often viewed as a sympathetic character. Ostensibly she adheres to the motherly virtues of nurturing, affection, and moral guidance. No surprise then that Volumnia, the grand dam of *Coriolanus*, is remembered with derisive commentary and outrage. She is an archetype of the dark side of the Great Mother, and she too is a very solid example of some of England's seventeenth century great ladies.

No other woman, and certainly no mother, on Shakespeare's stage dominates and controls the actions of her fellow characters and the

sentiments of the audience as does Volumnia. The possible exception is Lady Macbeth, but she, unlike the indomitable Volumnia does not survive the play. Volumnia embodies the full power of maternal control, ranging from creating her son in her own image, to waging her own battle of rage against the tide of events for his protection, to ensuring his execution for her own preservation. Like the Hindu goddess Kali, Volumnia is the Dark Mother who provides life and death, wielding those forces with primal control.

But before expanding on the mythic qualities of Volumnia, better to establish her in the soil of England and her "Amazonian" British counterparts. Shakespeare created in Volumnia a female with battle-readiness and courage that is not difficult to match in the British queens that womaned the battlements of their castles. As a "Roman matron," however distasteful Shakespeare may have found her attributes, he nevertheless was unstinting in endowing her with the fierceness of spirit and stoic valor necessary to her stereotype. The tradition of the Roman matron, rather than being antipathetic to British values is, in fact, one of the foundations of the island nation's psychic evolution.

> The stark tale of Boadicea's stand against the Romans 'flashes afresh to hold and horrify' with each generation. Every British schoolchild learns her story. And lest for a moment we forget her, on the banks of the Thames, not far from the Houses of Parliament, she stands aloft in her chariot, knives sprouting from its wheels; and it is in fact those murderous knives which stamp our perception of her indelibly. Hers is a gallant--and a savage--story. Even as we bow the knee, we shudder and step back as the Warrior Queen rides by.[37]

Boadicea's Amazonian presence in British history and consciousness provides a rational as well as curious reason for Volumnia's charac-

ter. Though fighting Romans rather than being one of them, Boadicea's voracity for conflict and stoicism is the active ingredient in the Roman matron's desire for dominance and glory:

> Had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike and none less dear than thine and my good Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action.[38]

Volumnia, barred from entering combat directly, exerts her courage and aggression vicariously through her son. Like the worst kind of stage mother, Volumnia dominates and directs her son's roles, all the while remaining just off stage. "I have lived / To see inherited my very wishes / And the buildings of my fancy."[39] In the actual Shakespearian drama, however, Volumnia, as her name implies, looms large, vocal, and strong at center stage in many important scenes. Volumnia, rather than Coriolanus, is often the character that resonates longest in memory, much like Spenser's Errour.

> Come all to ruin, let
> Thy mother rather feel thy pride than fear
> Thy dangerous stoutness, for I mock at death
> With as big heart as thou, Do as thou list.
> Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'dst it from me,[40]

Unlike the Countess de Rousillon, Volumnia is seldom viewed as a sympathetic character. Although grounded in the British history of a warrior queen, Volumnia is nevertheless an uncomfortable mother. And I believe it is the fact of Volumnia's motherhood and self-motivation that is essential in this discomfort. Antonia Fraser, discussing the attitude that "war is an unnatural occupation for a woman,"[41] embarks on a discussion of motherhood:

> We return to the question of motherhood, at the source of this unease. The idea of female dominion, that authority posed in childhood from which happy infants must one day

> escape for the sake of their own maturity, is surely also at the source of the implicit threat posed by the notion of the Warrior Queen. Many percipient women writers and activists have drawn attention to this phenomenon, from Margaret Fuller in 1843 who wrote, "Man is of Woman born and her face bends over him in infancy with an expression he can never quite forget," to Gloria Steinem in 1987 who suggested that part of the antagonism towards Mrs Thatcher "may be because, in a deep sense, we fear women having power in the world because we associate that with childhood."
>
> Dorothy Dinnerstein, in a classic of feminist psychological analysis first published in the United States in 1976, drew attention to woman's primary role in infant care as being responsible for early memories of her domination. For while woman continues to be the parent who is the "first [remembered] boss" in most societies in the world, her relationship to other adults will be unfavourably affected by these memories. "The right to be straightforwardly bossy - the right to exercise will head-on . . . - cannot reside as comfortably in a woman as a man", wrote Dorothy Dinnerstein.[42]

The fact that Volumnia is a mother is essential, for Elizabeth I had just occupied the British throne, successfully waging war and conquest and gaining the respect and admiration of her subjects. Preceding Elizabeth I in the panoply of English history "female capability was not infrequently tested when ladies had to hold castles against siege in their husbands' absence."[43] More specifically pertinent were Empress Maud, regent to Geoffrey of Anjou, and Queen Matilda, wife of Stephen of Blois. These two women left a legacy of dominion deftly followed by Elizabeth I, and, according to Fraser, "conducted sieges and defended castles":

> [Queen Matilda] first appeared in the field in 1136 and received the surrender of Derby. But there was one obvious difference between the respective images which the two women presented to the world. Queen Matilda was acting on behalf of her husband and her young son Eustace, Stephen's heir; the Empress Maud--"Matilda daughter of Henry"--was basing her right on her father, but claiming it for herself. Just as Countess Matilda of

> Tuscany had a perfectly valid excuse to ride to battle, so did Queen Matilda of England; she could conduct herself as a Warrior Queen, unlike the Empress, without losing her notional femininity or being exposed to accusations of arrogance.[44]

The precedent for Volumnia is set then in Empress Maud's behavior. Volumnia is a mother on the offense, looking to gain what's in her interest rather than defending hearth and children for family's sake. She is void of sentiment or maternal protection: "I have a heart as little apt as yours, / But yet a brain that leads my use of anger / To better vantage."[45] The contrast becomes more glaring under the inspection of Agnes Strickland in her *Lives of the Queens of England*:

> "The good Queen Matilda whose feminine virtues, endearing qualities and conjugal devotion . . . created the most powerful interest in her favour" compared to "reports of the pride and hardness of heart of her stern relative and namesake" (Maud). Above all, with a sublime unawareness of any possible irony involved, Agnes Strickland commended Queen Matilda for avoiding "all Amazonian display by acting under the name of her son".[46]

A mother, widowed or otherwise, is never, as demonstrated by Grendel's mother and now Volumnia, to take matters into her own hands unless the intent and method is to remain a vessel for furthering her children's good.

This clear distinction places Volumnia squarely in the category of Terrible Mother. By creating Coriolanus in her own image and then however innocently or unconsciously maneuvering his destruction, she fulfills the cycle of death and rebirth that is portrayed in the mythologies of countless cultures. Unlike Spenser's Errour or Milton's Sin, Volumnia is a more subtle, conceptualized version of the "deadly devouring maw" of the womb.[47]

> Along with the cave and the body-vessel, the gate as entrance and womb is a primordial symbol of the Great Mother.[48]

Adrienne Rich, expounding on the descent of the Mother Goddess into her various destructive manifestations, relies on sociologist Philip Slater to explain the fear of maternal, mature womanhood. To Slater, our cultural abhorance of domineering, competitive mothers is based on the "sexual politics of fifth-century Greece:

> He assumes the mother to have been filled with resentment and envy of her sons, and, in her own frustration, excessively controlling of her male children in their earliest years. Her feelings would have been experienced by her sons as a potentially destructive hostility which is later embodied in mythology and classical drama.[49]

Volumnia sends her son out as warrior, remaining behind within the portals of Rome. When he returns, changed and no longer loyal to Rome, Volumnia's Rome rejects and slaughters him. Because Volumnia is a humanized primordial form rather than a monstrous one, she shares the powerful and tragic qualities of Medea. Volumnia, like Medea, must sacrifice her child to complete the ritual of birth and death:

> Women, my task is fixed:
> as quickly as I may
> To kill my children,
> and start away from this land,
> And not, by wasting, time,
> to suffer my children
> To be slain by another hand
> less kindly to them.
> Force every way will have it
> they must die, and since
> This must be so, then I,
> their mother, shall kill them.[50]

To further the negative portrayal, Volumnia is rarely, if ever, on stage without Virgilia, Coriolanus' wife. Virgilia delights in

the tenderness of her small boy and her husband's safety at home. She is softspoken and patient, evoking Coriolanus' best attributes beyond his warrior mentality. As the Harrison edition of Shakespeare's works notes, ". . . Virgilia has all the womanly weaknesses so conspicuously wanting in Volumnia."[51] With Virgilia as foil, Volumnia becomes an anti-mother, echoing the mythic presence of Medusa, another Kali-like dark mother:

Joseph Campbell states that Medusa, although never creating children in the literal sense, is also a representation of the Terrible Mother:

> The petrifying gaze of Medusa belongs to the province of the Terrible Great Goddess, for to be rigid is to be dead. This effect of the terrible stands in opposition to the mobility of the life stream that flows in all organic life; it is a psychic expression for petrifaction and sclerosis. The Gorgon is the counterpart of the life womb; she is the womb of death or the night sun.[52]

But this interpretation of both Medusa and subsequently Volumnia is embedded in the notion that any sign of controlling power, especially violent power in a mother figure is suspect and uncharacteristic at best, demonic and perverse at worst. Whatever truth may lie in this reading of the Terrible Mother, it is still reductive. The fact is that this destruction and wrath is a result and manifestation of the full power that is denied the post-patriarchal mother:

> Medusa is the 'dark side of the mother', the 'grasping mother, representative of the entanglements mothers and daughters [and sons] encounter.' But Medusa is also powerful and thus becomes 'a metaphor for powers previously hidden and denigrated, collective powers we are finally beginning to reaffirm and claim for ourselves.'[53]

Or, to phrase the argument from a slightly different perspective, motherhood *is* power, whether manifested tyranically or obliquely:

> The one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense--authority over and control of another--has been motherhood;[54]

By insisting that the perfect mother is less than the Great Mother, and relegating only supportive, passive attributes to her, we are assured of a figure who represents only the partial psyche of womanhood. Those repressed attributes of domination, wrath, and retribution are then deemed antipathetic to motherhood and are exhibited as destructive aberrations. Volumnia, in nearly every word she utters, reiterates the anger and power of both Medea and Medusa:

> Anger's my meat, I sup upon myself,
> And so shall starve with feeding. Come let's go.
> Leave this faint puling, and lament as I do,
> In anger, Juno-like. Come, come, come.[55]

Anger, destruction and violence, so long portrayed as incompatible to a mother's temperament or purpose are here released as an inherent and necessary component of woman as mother. Compare with these lines from Euripides' *Medea*:

> What they say of us
> is that we have a peaceful time
> Living at home,
> while they do the fighting in war.
> How wrong they are!
> I would very much rather stand
> Three times in the front of battle
> than bear one child.[56]

Volumnia is alternately considered mad and the "life of Rome," but always she is feared as more powerful than is "natural":

> Mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the intitution of motherhood.[57]

Volumnia leaves one certain, particularly in contrast to her mechanical son, that she would be the fiercer warrior, the more cunning

strategist, and the more flexible politician. In light of this, her anger and her manipulation can easily be read as symptoms of enormous frustration. Imagine having the intelligence and ambition of a Volumnia, yet only allowed to express these most personal attributes through a son who must be goaded and shaped at every turn. Volumnia is clearly capable of choosing her circumstances to her best advantage: "For myself, son, / I purpose not to wait on fortune till / these wars determine."[58]

And wait she does not. By persuading Coriolanus to retreat from his attack on the Romans, Volumnia ensures as definitively as Medea's knife to her children's throat, that she will survive her son's death.

For all outward appearances, Volumnia is the epitome of the selfish mother, the woman who cares more for herself than her children. This is the greatest perversion of the sentimental, all-sacrificing, unconditionally loving motherhood that humans fantasize for themselves. What is lost amidst the tragedy of Coriolanus the warrior and the iron will of Volumnia is that she saves the entire population of Rome. She is hailed by the citizens: "behold our patroness, the life of Rome![59] Volumnia, like her name, is larger than the mother of one man; she is life-giver to the city--the truest Roman matron.

Conclusion

Both the Countess de Rousillon and Volumnia shape their children's fates according to the needs of their own personalities. Having said this, both are also operating on a grand scale; the Countess to maintain her matriarchy and Volumnia to exercise her potency. Neither character ever indulges in imposing her own particular sexual experiences onto her child's understanding of marriage or ambition. The question of arranged marriages was certainly explored by Shakespeare, but a societal obsession to marry with immediacy and for the best financial and social gain was only in its formative stages.

By the eighteenth century, the realm of women's creative and financial possibilities had shrunk to an alarmingly few choices. Men had increasingly taken over women's jobs. From the medieval terms "brewster," "webster," "baxter," and "spinster," all which signified a legitimate trade, only "spinster" remained to negatively connote the narrow needlework trade left to unmarried women. Women were excluded from nearly all professions with the exceptions of governess, some dress making, and prostitution. Even midwives were being replaced by surgeons. The social pressure on marriage as the only "acceptable occupation" became enormous.[60] Since individual households were no longer self-sufficient, many men now worked out-

side the homes, leaving their wives at home, often with no more status than that of dependent children. The women who did contribute economically were still confined to supporting roles in the world of commerce:

> In both rural and urban areas and over the whole period, women made up between 5 and 15 per cent of the economically active population listed in the directories. However, by mid century the range of their activities had noticeably narrowed. In the 1790s their occupations included gaoler, whitesmith, plumber, butcher, farmer, seedsman (sic), tailor, saddler. Even in the first decades of the new century, male curtain ring, pipe, gun and varnish manufacturers specifically instructed in their wills that their wives should carry on the business. By the 1850s, dressmaking, millinery and teaching were by far the main occupational groupings listed for middleclass women. . . . A comparison of the activities of a farmer's wife in the late eighteenth century and one in the 1820s illustrates the shift. Both women were married with children but the woman in the earlier period spent her time helping to manage the farm and work people, travelling extensively on horseback to markets and the provincial town to shop, visit the theatre or consult her lawyer. She speaks of 'doing my brewing' and records drawing bills of credit and the sale of 'my turnips'. The woman of the later period is caught up in renovations in the farmhouse, including new kitchen equipment and adding a parlour. Her world is confined to church going, social visits, a little church related philanthropy and family affairs, subjects which the earlier diary certainly does not overlook but which form only a part of its interest.[61]

Women could rely only on their dowries, which were determined by a father, uncle, brother or other male guardian; their jointures, which were determined by their husband upon marriage; and their pin money, which was also controlled and manipulated by their husbands through the course of the marriage. A woman generally, with the exception of widows, could enter into no contracts or legal disputes and had no legal right to her children or their estates. Women became then, only useful as breeders.

A further comparison to the mothers of Shakespeare's drama and the characters in eighteenth century fiction lies in Perry's statement:

> During the Renaissance a woman's sexual appetite was recognized and even feared. For once she was introduced to sexual pleasure by her conjugal duties and her natural passion aroused, one could not depend on her chastity. Husbands were therefore advised to limit sexual activity with their wives, "even to the point of deprecating pleasure," and not awaken this dangerous appetite. Certainly the Renaissance conventions of adulterous passion, a system which separated love from marriage, implicitly recognized women's desires. But by the eighteenth century, decent women were no longer expected to enjoy their sexuality. In 1714 a woman, shielded by anonymity, lamented in *The Spectator* "that Men may boast and glory in those things that we must think of with Shame and Horror!"[62]

A fundamental force behind the changing attitudes and laws through the sixteenth century is the Protestant Church. When Henry VIII abandoned Catholicism, women no longer had the refuge and instruction to be found in the convents of England. With the rise of Protestantism, church leaders adopted the Old Testament with literal readings to admonish their parishioners. Eve was held up as the essential female and the Virgin Mary and the saints were abandoned as sympathetic female models.[63] With all these social variables coming into play, mothers no longer held center stage, but as Hazel Mews points out in her chapter "Women as Mothers":

> [they were]. . . figures standing in the wings of their stages where the spotlight was on the woman struggling for identity.[64]

If Shakespeare can be said to have a tradition of absent mothers, eighteenth century novelists learned from his example and used this device to further isolate and imperil their heroines. Few

romantic heroines of the eighteenth century have mothers, allowing them to follow in the heroic orphan tradition with a particularly timely effect. Mothers of this era were counted upon to provide moral standards, social guidance, and modest examples. Without careful molding and restrictions a young lady risked her reputation, her marital prospects, even her chastity. These dangers became the sexual gauntlet each romantic heroine must run. Without a mother to guide her, the young lady must find her own moral touchstone to emerge triumphant.

The eighteenth century offers numerous examples of the tender heroine in moral peril: Richardson's *Clarissa*, Burney's *Evalina*, and Radcliffe's *The Italian* are the obvious tip of the iceberg. A few novels touch on single motherhood, but only from an oblique perspective. Henry Fielding's hero, Tom Jones, discovers that he is the illegitimate son of Bridget Allworthy. But she is an inconsequential character, terrified of discovery and overshadowed by her honorable brother, Squire Allworthy, who adopts Tom as his own and bestows upon the lad legitimacy, wealth and status. Bridget does demonstrate the degree of fear a woman could expect to have when faced with the prospect of public discovery and denunciation. But this is a pale and barely mentioned aspect of the story. Allworthy on his estate is too clearly meant to be the agent of creation, forgiveness and transformation. Bridget Allworthy is merely a plot device. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* offers tantalizing possibilities as a representative of single motherhood, sharing a remarkable similarity to Spenser's Errour. It's difficult to keep track of the number and

location of all her offspring which she seems to produce and abandon with little physical or emotional discomfort. In contrast with the Duchess of Malfi, the Countess of Rousillon or Volumnia, Moll is not the least concerned with the welfare of her children. Her sexuality, then, rather than her children is the focus of the novel.

> It is undeniably true that whenever the novels of the period are about women, they are about the politics of their sexuality: avoiding premarital sexual traps, fencing with suitors, catching husbands, leaving the father's home for a husband's home or, as some of the plots suggest, turning the father's home into a husband's home.[65]

In fact, we are never given the opportunity to observe Moll's mothering capacity beyond her ability to walk away and begin again--a convenience that detracts from Defoe's "realism" and her usefulness to be considered here.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, did not lack for feminists; writers such as Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, Hannah Woolley, Jane Sharp and Mary Astell worked for the education of women, midwifery and various sexual inequalities. Their methods and aims were as diverse as the women who worked for change. But their voices were difficult to hear over the social call for a woman to be diminutive intellectually, politically and economically:

> These seventeenth-century feminists did not have a lasting impact on the lives of women in the following century or a direct influence on feminist writings in the future. Yet it is possible to measure their impact in a number of areas of late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century English society and culture. Women's periodicals were appearing in increasingly large numbers at the turn of the eighteenth century. . . . Also, these learned females often revealed their interest in feminist topics through poems or letters to the editors submitted to the various publications. Further, although not built directly upon feminist principles, the charity schools of the 1690-1720 period took pride in educating poor girls along with their brothers.

> The heroines of Restoration comedy sometimes expressed feminist ideas, and when these heroines did not speak directly in feminist language, they still displayed the independence of spirit that the feminists tried to instill in their sisters generally. . . . This turn of the century feminism was to fade when faced with eighteenth century values that embraced sentimentality and feeling rather than reason. Serious feminist thought did not mesh well with the more subtle and less confrontational advances made by heroines in the early eighteenth-century novels.[66]

The void which the lack of fictional single mothers creates in the eighteenth century is, however, quickly and thoroughly compensated by the decades of the nineteenth century. Pressures of the marriage market, limited financial choices, religious strictures and the rise of a mythology which placed women at the lonely core of an idealized family structure produced real and imagined acts of rebellion against propriety and convention. Doors began slamming, escapes were made and a few voices were even raised in protest.

Notes

[1] Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984) 93.

[2] Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* 4.

[3] Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* 5.

[4] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol. I* 324.

[5] George Chapman, *The Widow's Tears* in *Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*, ed. Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976) II.iv 1129-1138.

[6] Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* 84.

[7] Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* 87.

[8] Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* 87.

[9] Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women* ed. J. R. Mulryne (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1975) II.i 55-56.

[10] Middleton I.ii 47-51.

[11] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., Press, 1980) 27-28.

[12] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol I* 329.

[13] Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* 93.

[14] Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* 104.

[15] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* in *Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*. Ed. Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976) I.i 265.

[16] Webster I.i 337-344.

[17] Webster I.i 305-307.

[18] Webster I.i 309.

[19] Webster I.i 310.

[20] Webster I.i 366-367.

[21] Webster III.iv 63.

[22] Webster I.i 478-495.

[23] Webster III.v 95.

[24] Webster IV.ii 256.

[25] Webster IV.ii 142.

[26] Webster V.ii 342.

[27] William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well* in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) III.ii 1.

[28] Shakespeare, *All's Well* I.i 1-2.

[29] Betty S. Travitsky, "The New Mother of the English Renaissance: Her Writings on Motherhood" in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980) 34.

[30] Shakespeare, *All's Well* III.ii 70-71.

[31] Shakespeare, *All's Well* I.iii 145-159.

[32] Judith Ochshorn, "Mothers and Daughters in Ancient Near Eastern Literature" in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980) 9.

[33] The antithesis to the theme of mother-daughter dynastic claim, or for female unity in general, is the imposition of the Virgin Mary as the model of womanhood and virgin birth as the ideal method of procreation. Julia Kristeva discusses this point in "Stabat Mater": "Also neglected by the virginal myth is the question of hostility between mother and daughter, a question resolved in magisterial but superficial fashion by making Mary univesal and particular but never singular: "unique of all her sex." For more than a century now, our culture has faced the urgent need to reformulate its representations of love and hate, inherited from Plato's *Symposium*, the troubadours, and Our Lady, in order to deal with the relationship of one woman to another. Here again, maternity points the way to a possible solution: a woman rarely, I do not say never, experiences passion--love or hate--for another woman, without at some point taking the place of her own mother--without becoming a mother herself and, even more importantly, without undergoing the lengthy process of learning to differentiate herself from her own daughter, her simulacrum, whose presence she is forced to confront"(Kristeva 601).

[34] Lee R. Edwards, *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1984) 5.

[35] Shakespeare, *All's Well* II.i 259-262.

[36] Edwards 102.

[37] Antonia Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 3. See also Marina Warner's *Monuments & Maidens* which chronicles the use of the female form to represent the virtues and characteristics of nations, institutions and commodities. Marina Warner, *Monuments & Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

[38] William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourst Brace Jovanovich, 1968) I.ii 22-28.

[39] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* II.i 214-216.

[40] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* II.iii 125-129.

[41] Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* 330.

[42] Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* 330.

[43] Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* 158. Later, during the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, women of various social stature stepped into the ramparts of their homes to defend themselves, their children, and their servants from attack: "The Civil Wars threw up a consider able number of 'Great Heroicks' of the theoretically weaker sex: women of the calibre of the Countess of Portland who at Carisbrooke Castle 'behaved like a Roman matron' and rather than surrender 'declared she herself would fire the first cannon'. Or there was the lioness Lady Mary Winter, wife of the Royalist commander Sir John, who declined to give up Lidney House, near Gloucester, to the Parliamentary commander Colonel Massey with some well-turned words on the subject of her absent husband's 'unalterable allegiance to his king and sovereign'. Thus Massey's 'hopes were disappointed by the resolution of a female'"(Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel*, p. 163).

[44] Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* 159.

[45] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* III.ii 29-31.

[46] Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* 159.

[47] Neumann 149.

[48] Neumann 158.

[49] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 122-123.

[50] Euripides, *Medea* in *Foundations of Drama* ed. C. J. Gianakaris (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975) 1236-1241.

[51] G. B. Harrison, "Introduction to *Coriolanus*" in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1968) 1268.

[52] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 166.

[53] Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, Introduction to "Part Five: The Mother as Medusa" in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980) 191.

[54] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 67.

[55] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* IV.iii 50-53.

[56] Euripides 248-251.

[57] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 46.

[58] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* V.iii 118-120.

[59] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* V.vi 1.

[60] Perry 29.

[61] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*. (London: Hutchinson, 1987) 312-313, 306-307.

[62] Perry 150.

[63] Perry 42-43.

[64] Hazel Mews, *Frail Vessels: Woman's Role in Women's Novels from Fanny Burney to George Eliot* (London: Athlone Press, 1969) 167.

[65] Perry 52.

[66] Hilda L. Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982) 15.

CHAPTER 4

PREGNANT PROTAGONISTS: A MOTHER'S PREROGATIVE

> The unmarried mother has borne the most savage excoriations of church and society, and still carries a heavy burden of economic and social pressures which penalize her for her choice.[1]

Introduction

Single mothers don't choose their status, or so we commonly think. This is a concept antipathetic to our standards of social construction. Choosing what kind of single mother to be is an even greater affront to conventional thinking. Once a woman is "made" a single mother, we expect shame, silence and shabbiness from her. We place single mothers in a strict category of expected behaviors, which is one of the most effective ways women real or fictional have been subdued. First, woman's composite nature is divided into specific and limiting roles; women are virgins or whores, extremes of possibility, never allowed to move within the behavioral spectrum:

> This arrangement of opposites is in itself symptomatic of the ambivalent character of the archetype. . . . In so far as the Feminine releases what is contained in it to

> life and light, it is the Great and Good Mother of all life. . . . On the other hand, the Great Mother in her function of fixation and not releasing what aspires toward independence and freedom is dangerous.[2]

Next those specific and limiting roles are further divided. As one of the roles within which women are categorized, motherhood is thus fragmented, causing more severe restraints.

Single mothers, so far in my discussion, are thus divided, appearing as maternal monsters or madonna mothers. These positive and negative extremes make our understanding of the characters simple, but hardly help us to understand the depth of experience implicit in motherhood. From *Beowulf* through *Paradise Lost*, unsanctioned motherhood *is* evil, and we get little indication of what the characters' responses are to being mothers. In the plays by Webster and Shakespeare, we are given some idea of maternal reactions and motivations as well as interactions with their children. But the real focus of the texts is on more "important" things. As the novel gained ascendancy as a genre, single mothers were no longer depicted as literal monsters, spawning offspring and challenging mail-clad heroes. But if they were no longer represented as monstrous, psychic aberrations, they were still depicted as social abnormalities, and reflected real battles with ostracism and penury:

> In preindustrial Europe, peasant and working class couples often had premarital sex in the literal meaning of the words: intercourse occurred after a promise of marriage had been given and accepted. Marriage often took place when the bride was pregnant or after children had been born, and no social stigma attached to this.
>
> But as male mobility increased, this traditional system broke down in rural areas. Couples had intercourse, but faced with fatherhood in a countryside in

> which work was difficult to find, increasing numbers of men moved into the cities, sometimes abandoning the pregnant women. Responsibility for the child increasingly fell on the woman alone. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laws reinforced the man's ability to decline the father's responsibility of providing for his child.[3]

Widowhood too, with its sometime benefits, had become more circumscribed; laws of inheritance, child custody, and estate rights had been ratified into a coherent system of restrictions on single mothers. During the eighteenth century the marriage question dominated the novel-writing consciousness of both male and female authors. The subject of parenting, let alone single parenting was submerged deep below the social currents which bargained and bartered young women into suitable matches. The implications of motherhood whether married or single were seldom addressed in the literature of this period, and certainly no major character portrayed the status of single mother. We have here an excellent case for Patricia Meyer Spacks' comment on "subterranean challenges," or, to use the term of Carolyn Heilbrun and Catherine Stimpson, "the presence of absence". More thorough is Dale Spender's comment in *Mothers of the Novel*:

> Women did write about their anxiety, their anguish - and their resentment: in their diaries [ ]: they did *not* articulate their experience in fiction. . . . Babies are born 'off-stage' and the mental and physical pain endured by mothers does not even waft in as a whisper.[4]

But though single mothers might not appear on the pages where marriageable heroines coyly ran the gauntlet of sly suitors, their presence is not quite beyond perception. The women who penned some of the most popular works of fiction were themselves single parents,

using their writing talents to provide an income for their families. This fact makes it inevitable that eventually women would begin to write fictional "first-hand" accounts of mothering. By the end of the eighteenth century, Mary Wallstonecraft was only voicing what she and her sisters had been living for decades; they had been silent long enough. Tales of how a woman became a single mother were being augmented with the more insightful question of what a woman would feel in this circumstance, and why a woman might choose to stand before the world bearing this stigma.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, much had changed in the depiction of single mothers. Much had also changed in the social climate they faced. Women now wrote more freely of their personal experience with motherhood. This freedom, however, was counter-balanced by a more restrictive attitude toward a woman's position and actions in the world. These restrictions became the focus of an intense struggle by feminists to insure basic rights to women:

> The Divorce Act of 1857 (20 & 21 Vict., c. 85) transferred jurisdiction in all matters relating to the dissolution of marriages from the ecclesiastical courts to a new secular Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes. . . . The Divorce Act was significant as the first recognition by Parliament that in certain cases married women should have control over their property. But the protection order system which it created was very far from being an adequate measure of reform. It did not protect wives whose husbands squandered their property before leaving or stole it when they deserted. It allowed a husband to live apart from his wife, not deserting her within the letter of the law, and to swoop down upon her periodically to take property she had acquired during his absence. It did not apply in the case of a wife who left her husband as it did in the case of a man who left his wife . . . For these reasons, and also because women were too shy or proud to publicize their wrongs by appearing

> in court, few protection orders were issued--only one hundred in the first three years of the operation of the system.[5]

The debate over women's right to property, authority over her children, a complete education and a place in the world of commerce was taken up in the courts, at public meetings, in the pulpit, and, of course, in the literature of the day.

Three remarkable books were published at mid-nineteenth century: Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853). Each one of these texts uses a social outcast as protagonist; more, these heroines do emerge as heroes. But to say that these authors or their characters broke all conventions or established themselves in twentieth century terms as "feminist", would be grossly overstating the case. What's important about these novels is the exploration and depiction of a mother's point of view, the psychological link with her child, and the passage of gestures, values and circumstances to the next generation.

New subject matter was now being depicted in relatively new ways. With the rise and development of the novel as a means to depict "real" people in "real" circumstances, the single mothers of the nineteenth century are more fully realized versions of actual women and the events and feelings they might face. The movement toward realism does not eliminate the possibility of reading these characters in an archetypal light. In fact, physical description,

choice of dialogue, or gesture offer some not so subtle suggestions of mythic lineage.

The novelists of the nineteenth century began to depend upon the inclusion of women, who, by either their behavior and/or intelligence are outside the social strictures set for women. These "marginal" characters in the novels serve to work against the social norms of chastity and subservience, against the Victorian standards for women which were stringently defined. I use the term "marginal" with a particular literary construct in mind, and I defer to Lee Edwards skill in *Psyche as Hero* to explain the implications:

> Heroes are volunteers, part of a category described by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner as "threshold people," "liminars". . . . such figures, . . . "elude or slip through the networks of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" . . . Those persons whom Turner defines as "marginals," are like liminars in that they also dwell betwixt and between existing social groupings, but "unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity". . . . Their situation is more extreme than the liminars, their dilemma more profound. Their absorption by society requires fundamental and permanent changes in the definitions of society or self. In patriarchal circumstances where woman's status is seen as categorically lowly, the tension between this reduction and heroic aspiration marks the woman hero as quintessentially marginal. . . However marginal a male character may seem, however isolated, discontented, oppressed, or enraged, he can never remain male and be more than transiently un-manned. He can thus scarcely be used to pose the deepest threat to patriarchy's authority, to divide power from sex, gender from honor, strength from violence, and society from male supremacy.
>
> This is a job for the woman hero, for in patriarchy, femaleness is the ultimate and ineradicable sign of marginality.[6]

The "fundamental and permanent changes" that Edwards alludes to are precisely what's at issue in the novels discussed in this chapter. Working counter to accepted behaviors, these authors created masterpieces of social controversy. Still in existence from the eighteenth century were a type of "courtesy" or "conduct" book which outlined a code of behavior for young ladies to follow if they were to maintain their respectable position and reputation. Essential to this code was strict chastity, patient servitude toward fathers, brothers, and husbands, and acceptance that a woman's sphere of action was the emotional and spiritual well being of her household:

> One important truth sufficiently impressed upon your mind will materially assist in this desirable consummation [marriage] -- it is the superiority of your husband simply as a man. It is quite possible you may have more talent, with higher attainments, and you may also have been generally more admired, but this has nothing whatever to do with your position as a woman, which is, and must be, inferior to his as a man.[7]

Young women were molded into "the perfect lady," or as Coventry Patmore poetically phrased her, "The Angel in the House". The novels of this age often bordered on the courtesy books in that they too offered correct patterns of action as well as provided examples of women who did not conform and the dire consequences they faced. For the more intrepid authors, however, the angel of the house was deconstructed and re-formed to guide the reader into a very new and highly controversial social order.

The fact that several novelists were willing to take the risk of presenting socially unacceptable women as important or main

characters suggests their need to challenge the confining roles of the "perfect lady" or the "angel in the house". What makes the use of these characters so striking is the way in which they are described, the voices they are given, and, what is most to the purpose, the sympathy they evoke; they are often most alluring when in the full distress of moral failure.

The only way to strain the boundaries of social strictures was to create characters who, even while "falling", were elevated above the common currency. Or to put it another way, it is likely that in order to reach for something more than what was prescribed for women, the characters of these novels had to risk the censure of moralists and exist on the margins of their fictional universe.

Helen Graham - *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has as its protagonist one of the most startlingly articulate women of the nineteenth century. With language as her only available weapon, Helen Graham asserts her mother right. She is created with the details and immediacy which define her as "real," yet she is endowed with a stature and mystery which set her apart as mythic. Helen Graham is remarkable for her insistence on defining her role as mother. But these attributes are not what mark her as unique. She is astonishing

because she denies her husband access to herself *and to her son* and then outlines the means and method with which she chooses to raise the boy, heightening our comprehension of Helen Graham and all the fictional single mothers who follow.[8]

Anne Brontë, with the publication of this novel in 1848, intensified our perception of what's at stake when a woman dares to demand mothering sovereignty over her children. Until *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, female characters of the novel had single motherhood thrust upon them through seduction or widowhood; now, Helen Graham carefully decides to be a single mother. The implication is enormous. The existing standard perceived fathers as the ultimate authority and bastion of well-being for their children:

> As Britain and France gradually instituted civil divorce in the course of the nineteenth century, they retained the double standard there as well. Prior to 1857, each divorce in England required a separate act of Parliament. Thereafter, the husband could divorce on the basis of his wife's adultery; the wife had to prove his adultery plus another crime: desertion, cruelty, incest, rape, sodomy, or bestiality.
>
> The new law codes favored fathers over mothers, as well as husbands over wives. As legal head of the household, the father had sole authority over the children. Alone, he could decide their education, employment, punishment, and give consent to their marriages.[9]

These laws were being questioned and scorned. Helen Graham roars her denunciation of accepted formulae with which children were to be formed into "proper" members of society, and claims her son as hers alone:

> Under English law, the father could take the child from the mother, entrust its upbringing to a third party--who

> might be his mistress--and refuse the mother the right to visit.[10]

In its Victorian context, Helen's announcement of maternal authority is shocking. But the shock penetrates even deeper than nineteenth century sensibilities; legends of rebellious mothers appear in the foundations of our traditions and beliefs. We of course first look to Eve, but lurking behind her is the specter of Lilith, the mother who would usurp the power of God over her children. Helen's vocal denunciation of her husband's demented and debasing use of authority, the secretive flight to her own domain, and the establishment of her own laws by which she raises her son, follow a patterned undercurrent to the Genesis story. Gilbert and Gubar make the parallel quite clear:

> Created not from Adam's rib but, like him, from the dust, Lilith was Adam's first wife, according to apocryphal Jewish lore. Because she considered herself his equal, she objected to lying beneath him, so that when he tried to force her submission, she became enraged and, speaking the Ineffable Name, flew away to the edge of the Red Sea to reside with demons. Threatened by God's angelic emissaries, told that she must return or daily lose a hundred of her demon children to death, Lilith preferred punishment to patriarchal marriage, and she took her revenge against both God and Adam by injuring babies--especially male babies, who were traditionally thought to be more vulnerable to her attacks. What her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and female "presumption"--that is, angry revolt against male domination--are inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic.[11]

The first elements of the Lilith legend are clearly parallel to Brontë's plot; young Helen Lawrence marries Arthur Huntingdon, believing she can reform his wayward tendencies and create a perfect

union with this handsome charmer. Within a year of their marriage Arthur's vices overwhelm Helen and she despairs of salvaging anything but the outward show of their marriage. Giving birth to a son whom Arthur proceeds to corrupt, Helen rebels verbally and dramatically, fleeing with her small boy to Wildfell Hall where she attempts to raise little Arthur according to her personal moral and social order. Helen dares to be spiritually and intellectually superior to her husband, she dares to speak this abomination, and she dares to establish herself in her own kingdom. From this point, Helen's likeness to Lilith becomes more subtle. Helen is out to preserve her son's life, both moral and cultural, not demolish it. What remains of the Lilith story is that Helen is accused of *ruining* young Arthur by making him live up to her standards of conscience and civility. She is told adamantly that she is not "*making a man*" of him; in other words she is destroying the male descendent of patriarchy. Helen, however, unlike Lilith, manages to maintain a matriarchy.

Several references place Helen in the realm of the supernatural, and Brontë repeatedly reinforces the notion that, indeed, there is something extraordinary about this "single lady" who is "tall, and "clad in black":

> Her hair was raven black, and disposed in long glossy ringlets, a style of coiffure rather unusual in those days, . . . her complexion was clear and pale; . . . only there was a slight hollowness about the cheeks and eyes, and the lips, though finely formed, were a little too thin, a little too firmly compressed . . .
>
> 'I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home.'[12]

Helen Graham is lovely, but forbidding. She is physically both translucent and shadowy, a figure which compels scrutiny and repels intimacy. As a representation of the mother goddess, she is both alluring and frightening, inviting question because she refuses to allow close inquiry. She is aloof, self-contained. We soon learn how justified she is in keeping her own company and insisting upon no interference with her son. She insists that her creation remain her own; little Arthur is the male child of the Goddess Helen, continuing *her* line of ascendancy and not his father's:

> Enthroned upon his monstrous steed, and solemnly proceeding up and down the wide, steep field, he looked the very incarnation of quiet, gleeful satisfaction and delight. . . . when I dismounted the gallant horseman, and restored him to his mother, she seemed rather displeased at my keeping him so long.[13]

Earlier, narrator Gilbert Markham's first encounter with this unacceptable woman is even more dramatic as he tries to make himself necessary to her. His obvious ploy is to befriend her son and appear harmless and noble in her eyes. Markham catches the little boy as he tumbles from the garden wall:

> . . . lo! Mrs Graham darted upon me, - her neck uncovered, her black locks streaming in the wind.
>
> 'Give me the child!' she said, in a voice scarce louder than a whisper, but with a tone of startling vehemence, and, seizing the boy, she snatched him from me, . . . fixing upon me her large, luminous, dark eyes - pale, breathless, quivering with agitation.[14]

Mrs. Graham may be mysterious, and her extreme reaction to so innocent, even helpful a gesture certainly adds to her weird aura, but there is no doubt that the protection of her child is uppermost

in her motivations. Like Errour darting from her cave to defend her offspring from Red Cross, Mrs. Graham acts first and asks questions later. The responsibility of parenting affords no accommodating politeness to strangers. And like the Primal Mother, Helen needs no interference or assistance.

Helen Graham displays other propensities for divine interpretation as the anima influence over Gilbert Markham's maturation. She is wiser, more sophisticated than he and her responses to him are often motherly. Brontë establishes Helen as the Angel of both Huntingdon and Wildfell Halls. In young Markham's eyes she is the woman who is too good to be bad:

> Was I not certain that she, in intellect, in purity and elevation of soul, was immeasurably superior to any of her detractors; that she was, in fact, the noblest, the most adorable, of her sex I had ever beheld, or even imagined to exist?[15]

Gilbert Markham is not the only male to recognize and appeal to Helen's supernatural aura. Arthur Huntingdon calls on her "woman's nature" to have some "commiseration" for him in is profligacy:

> . . . you are an angel of heaven; only be not too austere in your divinity, and remember that I am a poor, fallible mortal.[16]

Mr. Hargrave, neighbor to Huntingdon Hall, also recognizes an ethereal quality in Helen:

> I don't know how to talk to you, Mrs Huntingdon, . . . you are only half a woman - your nature must be half human, half angelic. Such goodness overawes me; I don't know what to make of it.[17]

None of this is particularly surprising given the conventions of the times, but the convention of woman as inspirational figure is much more than a Victorian phenomenon. The anima figure of Helen Graham lends wisdom, hope and salvation to all the men around her:

> It is evident that in this phase the woman's pre-eminence--quite aside from her sociological position--is firmly entrenched; for the less developed the consciousness of mankind, the more it is in need of orientation by the unconscious, that is, by the transpersonal powers.[18]

More dramatic, however, is Helen's own participation in this romantic notion of her redemptive powers. She returns to Huntingdon Hall to "save" her husband's soul as he lies dying from excess of drink, gambling, and promiscuity. Though her influence is powerful and awesome, she fails in her duty, but succeeds in her rebellion.

Helen's real test comes in choosing her duty to her husband or to her son. In the chapter entitled, "Parental Feelings," her prayers reflect the intense love and protection a mother feels for a child after the hard work of bringing him into this world, but more importantly, Helen's plea is the first sign of her commitment to raise little Arthur as *her own*. The climax of Helen's decision comes as she confronts Arthur for his behavior. Helen is past trying to reform him; her sole interest and efforts are to remove her son from under the influence of his degenerate father:

> I would leave you to-morrow . . . and never again come under this roof, but for my child. . . . Will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune, and go? . . . Anywhere, where he will be safe from your contaminating influence, and I shall be delivered from your presence - and you from mine. . . . Yet let me remember it is not *I* that am guilty: *I* have no cause to fear; and

> if *they* scorn me as the victim of their guilt, I can pity their folly and despise their scorn.[19]

Helen, finally chooses to abandon her marriage to save her son. To succeed in her choice to be a single parent without social approval or financial resource she must rely on her talents as a painter, the good heartedness of her maid Rachel, and the surreptitious aid of her brother. The tenacity with which she makes and executes her plan is all the more incredible because Helen knows the terrible risk she is taking; she has no right to remove her son from his father's house, and so she must act covertly. This secretiveness will inevitably cast a suspicious and tainted shadow over her character and behavior:

> I am fully alive to the evils that may, and must result upon the step I am about to take; but I never waver in my resolution, because I never forget my son.[20]

Indeed, only the day previous to making her decision, the same Mr. Hargrave beseeches her to take him with her in her flight. His rationale, though specious to his individual case, nevertheless, is sadly to prove quite accurate:

> . . . no one will believe that you go alone - all the world will say, "She has left him at last, and who can wonder at it? Few can blame her, fewer still can pity him; but who is the companion of her flight?" Thus you will have no credit for your virtue . . . even your best friends will not believe in it; because it is monstrous, and not to be credited . . . But what can you do in the cold, rough world alone? you, a young and inexperienced woman, delicately nurtured.[21]

Again, Helen, completely aware of the difficulties and censure that lay ahead of her, makes her decision and her bold move; she leaves her husband, her financial security and her good name behind. Like

Lilith, she has spoken her demands and claims her own kingdom. Now, as matriarch, she must state the rules her children must follow.

Indeed, Mrs. Graham's philosophy on raising her son is made quite clear on several points, the first and most important is that she never leaves him alone. Helen Graham warms to the inevitable debate. Her presence as a neighbor is questioned, her presence as a tenant in Wildfell Hall is questioned, and ultimately, her presence as a parent, a mother is questioned. Gilbert's mother sees Mrs. Graham as doting, spoiling her son, and Gilbert, a never-married, childless young man, takes it upon himself to set Mrs. Graham straight as to the proper methods with which a healthy, well-adjusted child must be raised. His precept stands on the supposition that making a man of little Arthur means thrusting him onto the rough road of experience and not being led by the hand.

Mrs. Graham speaks the ineffable; she has a mother's response for the insistence on "noble resistance and trials of virtue":

> I will lead him by the hand, Mr Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the *rest* - or walk firmly over them, as you say; - for when I have done my utmost, in the way of clearance, there will still be plenty left to exercise all the agility, steadiness, and circumspection he will ever have.[22]

Helen proves that mothering is a vocal occupation, not only toward her children, but to the world as well. A silent mother is an ineffective mother, a failure. Mothering needs volume, articulation; denying this necessity severs the umbilical guide wire upon which children depend. Voices and demands are weapons crucial to success-

ful mothering. Muffling and scoffing at a mother's words remove her power and control. Silencing Lilith condemns her to being an anti-mother. Helen Graham gets to the heart of the matter, responding to the critical questions of her neighbors. They believe she should protect her child, but never by making a sissy out of young Arthur; for Helen to take it upon herself to instruct him, to instill in him her woman's philosophy is overstepping her bounds. Helen Graham's beliefs in childrearing go beyond her experience with her own boy; she has theories and strong attitudes toward the education of all children:

> . . . and you think that a woman cannot be too little exposed to temptation, or too little acquainted with vice, or anything connected therewith - It *must* be, either, that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded, that she *cannot* withstand temptation, - and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of *real* virtue, to teach her how to sin is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity, - whereas, in the nobler sex, there is a natural tendency to goodness, guarded by a superior fortitude, which, the more it is exercised by trials and dangers, is only further developed - . . . it must be that you think they are *both* weak and prone to err, and slightest error, the merest shadow of pollution, will ruin the one, while the character of the other will be strengthened and embellished - his education properly finished by a little practical acquaintance with forbidden things. . . . You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. . . . I would not send a poor girl into the world unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will, to watch and guard herself; - and as for my son - if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world - one that has "*seen life*," and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it, as to sober

> down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society - I would rather that he died to-morrow![23]

Markham cannot combat this onslaught of words, logic and passion. His response is to project "silent wonder to her incomprehensible discourse". To a Victorian reader, Helen's lecture on child- rearing was "incomprehensible" because of the maternal power which underlie her words. Of course what Markham cannot know is the actual history of little Arthur's upbringing. Helen recounts in her journal how Arthur Huntingdon amused himself with his son, keeping the five-year old awake till two or three in the morning, teaching him to laugh at crude jokes and loud behavior, and forcibly encouraging the boy to drink liquor like "a man".

From these abusive influences, Helen finds refuge for her son in Wildfell Hall. True to her Gothic predecessors, Brontë places Helen in this "superannuated mansion," ancient, grey, cold and gloomy:

> . . . with its thick stone mullions and little latticed panes, its time-eaten air-holes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation, . . . before it . . . was a garden, - . . . now, . . . sprouted into such fantastic shapes as resembled nothing either in heaven or earth, or in the waters under the earth; but, to my young imagination, they presented all of them a goblinish appearance, that harmonized well with the ghostly legends and dark traditions our old nurse had told us respecting the haunted hall and its departed occupants.[24]

We are meant to ask whether Helen Graham is one of the "departed occupants". The "home" she has chosen to inhabit is "dark," "gloomy," "lonely," and "time-eaten". The gardens are "tortured," "fantastic," and "goblinish," the antithesis to Eden before the fall.

All that was once proud and honorable, all the emblems that guarded the old order of respectability have decayed and become perverse. Are we to read this as Helen's destructive influence on the institution of family, or, since the author is sympathetic to the protagonist, do we understand Wildfell Hall to be the decayed family structure within which Helen is compelled to live even though she has done her best to escape? If Wildfell Hall is a refuge from her abusive husband, what does it tell us about the accommodations a single mother can expect if she's not willing to conform to the vows of a debilitating marriage. Another way to phrase the question is whether Helen, in fact, is an exile modelled on the legend of Lilith?

Of course the neighborhood gossips cooperate nicely in the myth making of Helen Graham. Though superficially they are merely smearing her reputation by innuendo and sly conjecture, their words unwittingly convey a legendary implication. Her widow's reputation is impugned. Of course, not only might Arthur be illegitimate, but so might his mother, by way of her behavior, like her parthenogenic predecessors, appearing with a child who has no connection to any male:

> Can you tell me, then, who was her husband; or if she ever had any? . . . but I see no one here that at all resembles that child, except his mother;[25]

Despite neighborhood gossips and the threat of discovery, Helen Graham persists in providing Arthur with the stable, nurturing environment necessary for proper childhood development. But the

occupation is taxing, requiring more than the love and will of one person's capabilities:

> I have often wished in vain, . . . for another's judgment to appeal to when I could scarcely trust the direction of my own eye and head, they having been so long occupied with the contemplation of a single object, as to become almost incapable of forming a proper idea respecting it.[26]

Helen continues to conscientiously apply herself to the rigors of childrearing without the benefit of another's loving intentions toward her child:

> I am not well fitted to be his only companion, I know; but there is no other to supply my place. . . . This disturbs me greatly; not so much for the sake of my son's affection (though I do prize that highly, and though I feel it is my right, and know I have done much to earn it) as for that influence over him which, for his own advantage, I would strive to purchase and retain . . .[27]

These sentiments are not merely dramatic pathos to evoke a reader's sympathy; they are the truth of parenting alone. Implied beneath the surface loneliness and worry is a more pervasive threat. Most women mother alone, even when married. Responsibilities for children fall excessively on maternal shoulders, creating an unbalanced social system:

> So long as the first parent is a woman, then, woman will inevitably be pressed into the dual role of indispensable quasi-human supporter and deadly quasi-human enemy of the human self. She will be seen as naturally fit to nurture other people's individuality; as the born audience in whose awareness other people's subjective existence can be mirrored; as the being so peculiarly needed to confirm other people's worth, power, significance that if she fails to render them this service she is a monster, anomalous and useless. And at the same time she will also be seen as the one who will not let other people be, the one who beckons her loved ones back from selfhood,

> who wants to engulf, dissolve, drown, suffocate them as autonomous persons.[28]

Much attention has been given to the affects of single parenting on children; little has been considered of the overwhelming physical, emotional, and psychic burden placed on those who mother alone. Brontë realistically puts her finger on the cost to both mother and child when they are thus isolated.

Helen of course cannot get away freely with her bold experiment; she must, as the virtuous heroine of the novel, live through hell in order to be the fire-tested angel of any man's house. She must return to Huntingdon Hall to care for Arthur, who is dying at last because of his excessive indulgences. Even on his deathbed he tries to exert his husbandly control over his household. Helen, however, has defined her priorities too clearly; she is mother first, bargaining fiercely for the physical and spiritual life of her son:

> Wherever he is, you will not see him till you have promised to leave him entirely under my care and protection, and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please, if I should hereafter judge it necessary to remove him again. . . . I cannot trust your oaths and promises: I must have a written agreement, and you must sign it in presence of a witness - . . . I was determined my son's interest should not be forgotten; and having clearly written out the promise I wished Mr Huntingdon to give upon a slip of paper, I deliberately read it over to him, and made him sign it in the presence of Rachel.[29]

Helen Graham succeeds in securing custody of her son. Her insistence on a witnessed, signed authorization is no mere whim:

> The Code Napoléon, influential in much of Europe, stipulated that one essential basis of the marriage could not be changed, even by a marriage contract: the husband was by law "head" of the household. In Article 231 of the code, "the husband owes protection to his wife; the wife

> owes obedience to her husband." As "head" of the household, the husband acquired all the traditional legal powers given to married men over their wives; in addition, he alone could decide where they lived, if she could inherit, work, acquire property, give money away, be a witness in a criminal case, or receive official papers. He could read her correspondence and have access to any bank accounts she opened. Until the end of the nineteenth century, she had to have his permission even to open an account. The wife had to obey her husband: living where and how he chose, deferring to him in a conflict, taking his name and giving up her own upon marriage.[30]

Arthur Huntingdon has recourse to restrain her from any personal liberty; but his illness falls too abruptly for him to act upon it:

> And, finally, her deceased husband, with his usual selfishness, might have so constructed his will as to place restrictions upon her marrying again.[31]

What was mere social opinion and debate during the seventeenth century, through more and more confining laws, became a legal and binding threat during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As his widow, Arthur Huntingdon could have established Helen as his eternal property, refusing her the right to remarry, see her son, or enjoy his estate. Helen Huntingdon had every reason to be thankful that she was allowed to live at Gras-mere and make her marriage proposal to Gilbert Markham. Helen Graham is one of the most marginal and heroic of characters. Through Anne Brontë's straightforward, realistic style, powerful language, and choices convincingly made, Helen openly confronts the masculine world of marital and paternal authority. Ultimately, however, I cannot say that the result succeeds; her confrontation changes little in actuality. Most

subsequent female characters are "justly" punished for their misdeeds against "feminine nature", and even Helen, the forthright defender of a mother's right to protect and raise her child, must return to her personal hell before she is allowed the freedom to love again.

Hester Prynne - *The Scarlet Letter*

In the opening chapter to *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne presents his guilty rationale for penning this novel. He will right an ancient wrong committed by his forefathers against women unjustly accused of witchcraft. But Hawthorne does not create a story which immediately parallels the story of trials and execution. He instead "authors" Hester Prynne, a conflation of condemned witch and sinful single mother. Hester *is* guilty, and the Scarlet A which burns into Hawthorne's chest is his guilt too, a guilt which cannot be assuaged by exalting Hester to supernatural status because she has committed womanly "sins". Hester *is* the Scarlet Letter and in Pearl continues the legacy of the blood red *A*.

The issue of witchcraft must be addressed if we are to understand what Hawthorne was about when he created Hester Prynne as a single mother. In *Witch Hunting*, David D. Hall chronicles testimonies by and against those accused of witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England. Before doing so, however, he lays

important groundwork. He points out, as do others engaged in this research, that women were "singled out and punished disproportionately":

> The vulnerability of women stemmed in part from attitudes about women's sexuality and their role as mothers. In the documents that follow, the references to a sexual relationship between women witches and the devil are relatively scant in comparison to those in some of the European witch-hunts. Yet the idea (or image) of women as especially licentious lingers on the edge of these documents. From the vantage of psychoanalytical theory, John P. Demos has proposed that tensions in the mother-child relationship were played out in witch-hunting.[32]

Sexuality and the power of mother right are very much at the bottom of Hawthorne's ancestral guilt. In her chapter, "The Demographic Basis of Witchcraft," Carol Karlsen asserts that of all the types of individuals accused of witchcraft: "Married women predominated, however, both during the Salem events and at other times. Women who were married also made up the majority of women prosecuted, convicted, and executed for witchcraft throughout the century."[33] The authority of the church was being undermined by charismatic speakers such as Anne Hutchinson, and midwives were increasingly suspect because of their power over the birthing process:

> Mrs. Hawkins had been the midwife when Mary Dyer gave birth in October 1637 to a deformed fetus--termed a "monster" by those in power; who cited it as a sign of God's displeasure with the Antinomians. Hawkins and Dyer were friends and supporters of Anne Hutchinson, a woman of remarkable spiritual and intellectual qualities and the lay leader of the Antinomians. Hutchinson was also banished in 1638. Mary Dyer, who left the colony as well, returned in 1659 to witness her faith as a Quaker. She was executed by the government in 1660. Mrs. Hawkins was banished a second time in 1641, . . . John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, kept a journal-history in which he described the "monster" birth and its

> discovery. His journal entry about Mrs. Hawkins connects religious heresy to women's sexuality and witchcraft. These connections, which were traditional in European culture, influenced the response of the Massachusetts authorities to Quaker women missionaries in the 1650's;[34]

By creating Hester as a woman who acts independently of any institutional or emotional paternity, Hawthorne is probing the darkness of psychic fears. By adding Pearl to his portrait, he has plumbed the depths of social denial:

> . . . in the minds of the clergy . . . an unmarried mother was often assumed to be a witch. . . . it has to be emphasized that, historically, to bear a child out of wedlock has been to violate the property laws that say a woman and her child must legally belong to some man, and that, if they do not, they are at best marginal people, vulnerable to every kind of sanction.[35]

Hester, though never overtly accused of witchcraft, endures the branding, ostracism and suspicion that accompanied those thought practicing the occult. And Pearl, dancing tauntingly at the outer margins of social acceptability, is more than suspect.

I began this chapter with the notion of choice; women who select the status of single motherhood. Applying this idea to Hester Prynne may sound quite odd, even absurd, yet isn't that precisely what she does? In fact, isn't that what we want her to do? What alternatives does Hester have, and what does she stand to gain or lose by acknowledging Dimmesdale as the father of her child? Perhaps she can share her shame, but this is a hollow possibility. I doubt whether the town's people would go more lightly with her or accept her indiscretion more humanely. Because of Dimmesdale's stature, Hester may incur more wrath and hatred for defiling this "pure" and

"saintly" man. One could argue that Pearl gains a father, a legitimizing force to make her part of the community. But the assertion must be followed with an examination of what the Dimmesdale family would be like.

If Hester were to give in and confess her sexual partner, would Dimmesdale, in fact, share her ignominy? Would he marry her? Do we want Hester to be married to this man? Do we want Pearl to be Pearl Dimmesdale? The very surname implies the diminished capacity of both Hester and Pearl if they are given over to the bonds of patriarchy. A family headed by this bloodless pastor would become a lifeless extension of the stultifying community. Hester would be sacrificing her daughter, and she herself would have to remove the only living, articulate emblem of her vibrancy and power as a mother; she would have to remove the Scarlet *A*. Further, the reality of colonial life would make it virtually impossible for the community to enforce the same ignominy onto Arthur Dimmesdale:

> Puritans believed that a wife's unfaithfulness was more abominable than her husband's. They defined adultery exclusively as sexual intercourse "with a married, or espoused wife." A husband who had intercourse with a married woman other than his wife was considered an adulterer, but a husband who lay with a single woman was guilty only of the much less serious sin of fornication. A wife was adulterous for any sexual relationship outside of her marriage--regardless of the marital status of her partner.[36]

Hester, by custom, would bear the brunt of shame and punishment that her society thought she deserved. In addition, as an adulteress

giving birth to an illegitimate child, she is vulnerable to the accusation of witchcraft:

> New Englanders associated witchcraft not just with sexual fantasy, fornication, and adultery, but also with bearing illegitimate children, with abortion, and with infanticide--sins attributed to women almost exclusively. . . . Such crimes . . . stamped the witch as guilty of interfering with the natural processes of life and death. A woman guilty of these crimes took it upon herself to decide who should live and who should die, the prerogative of God alone.[37]

Hester knows her neighbors and the laws and beliefs which govern them; she also knows the depth of her own determination and the strange freedom which comes from claiming Pearl.

Hester makes her decision the moment she appears from the jail, choosing to stand fiercely defiant and proud before the world. The significance of her action is a demand to be left alone. Hawthorne is clear on this point:

> Standing alone in the world,--alone, as to any dependence on society, and with little Pearl to be guided and protected,--alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to consider it desirable,--she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind.[38]

Hester becomes the quintessential single mother. Branded and set apart by the closed-minded judgment of her peers, she sets her own unique seal on the verdict by adding more dimensions to the meaning of the *A* than "adultery".

Hester Prynne, begins the novel by rejecting man's laws and insists we come to some decision, some understanding of what she, her baby, and her position signify: " . . . she took the baby on her arm,

and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours."[39] Hawthorne describes this mortal, fallen woman in sumptuous terms, raising her to a supernatural state. Like Helen Graham, Hester's goddess stature coincides with a grace which redeems her own marred spirit and those around her:

> The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. . . . characterized by a certain state and dignity . . . Those who had before known her, . . . were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. . . . Her attire, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity. But the point which drew all eyes, . . . was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself.[40]

Hester immediately draws attention to the real elements of her power, which are also the reasons for her social damnation. Hester is sexual, creative and autonomous:

> Hester's flamboyance signifies her threat. She menaces because she enthralls: beautiful, in a society that inhibits and devalues beauty, she is bold when authority calls for submission, passionate in a world that distrusts such passion as it can remember, and female in a hierarchy that places men on top. Furthermore, Hester refuses to recant. Although compliant with society's punishment of her actions, she holds fast to her own private assessment of her motives and their meaning.[41]

Hawthorne ensures that Hester fits all the permutations of mothering that he can. She is physically beautiful, earthy and sensuous, and she is a representation of redemptive divinity, a symbol of all

things maternal. Hester is encoded with all the significance we desire and inflict on the person of mother; she is made to carry the burden of our hopes and resentments--the embodiment of the Eve/Ave dilemma:

> Had there been a Papist among the crowd . . . he might have seen in this beautiful woman, . . . with the infant at her bosom, an . . . image of Divine Maternity.[42]

He also is careful to damn her with the age-old equation of woman's inherent evil through the connection with Eve. The sexual act of becoming a mother connects women to the first Sinful Mother: "By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil;"[43]

Hawthorne next establishes the psychological link among Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale cannot respond to Pearl, and Hester is acutely aware of the implications: proof of his rejection and her responsibility. The family triangle is painful, tragic and futile. Of the three, Pearl seems the most cognizant of her biological birthright:

> Even the poor baby, . . . directed its hitherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and held up its little arms, with a half pleased, half plaintive murmur.[44]

Hester, recognizing that she and Pearl will receive no protection from Dimmesdale, chooses her course of action. She harbors the child as hers alone, and must defend her decision before the censure of the world:

> I will not speak! . . . And my child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one![45]

With this challenge thrown in the collective face of society, Hester creates a most intimate bond between herself and Pearl, yet removes them both further from any social infrastructure. The danger is clear, and Hester rightfully refuses to sacrifice Pearl to the prurient wishes of the crowd. Yet by claiming the baby as hers only, Hester risks Pearl's right to join the village. Such is the single mother's choice.

Hawthorne, like the scops of *Beowulf*, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton, tries to convince us that Pearl, by reason of her sinful birth, is unnatural, an aberrant creature, created in her mother's image. That he has already alluded to Hester as Divine is worth consideration. That he then creates Pearl as a kind of spectral gargoyle is telling. She is a direct link to Hester's emotional and spiritual being. Like the sea pearl, Pearl is created by her mother's internal irritations, socially abrasive, yet intimately formed and nurtured to a wondrous perfection. Perhaps with this in mind, we can believe Hawthorne when he tells us that Hester's thoughts and emotions while carrying Pearl had a profound bearing on the physical and spiritual development of the little girl:

> The mother's impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life; . . . Above all, the warfare of Hester's spirit, at that epoch, was perpetuated in Pearl.[46]

Hawthorne insists upon Pearl's alien and frightening aspect. Pearl is the enigma of the novel, the symbol most difficult to decipher. Pearl is then the quintessential illegitimate child, born of mother

only. Hester bows her head in penance for her "sin;" she also shoulders the ignominy and responsibility for her action. The scarlet *A* is ambiguous because it stands for so many aspects of Hester, and yet one can choose on which characteristic to focus and proceed. Pearl allows no such clear analysis; she is the embodiment of all the questions, sanctions, freedoms, and answers that Hester's situation inspires. Pearl *is* inspiration; the manifestation of fertile imagination and sensibilities. Such a "creature" would be impossible to dissect:

> Pearl's aspect was imbued with a spell of infinite variety; in this one child there were many children, . . . Her nature appeared to possess depth, too, as well as variety; but . . . it lacked reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born. The child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence a great law had been broken; and the result was a being, whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder; or with an order peculiar to themselves,[47]

Hester herself can hardly be sure what to make of her little girl. Though she recognizes her own moods and attitudes in the child, she succumbs to patriarchal standards and questions whether Pearl is really human. Hester's fear is a recognition of truth: "*It is woman's will that nurtures*--celebrates, stimulates, shelters,--*the growth of the child's own will.*"[48] Hester's ambivalence concerning her own will is reflected in her interactions with her daughter.

But the real crux of Pearl's antisocial nature lies in Dimmesdale's denial of her. She is illegitimate not only in the Christian

context of unmarried parents, but in the biological context of having no father at all. In fact, Hawthorne tells us:

> Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, she had no right among christened infants. . . . All this enmity and passion had Pearl inherited, by inalienable right, out of Hester's heart. . . . Once, this freakish, elfish cast came into the child's eyes, while Hester was looking at her own image in them, . . . she fancied that she beheld, not her own miniature portrait, but another face in the small black mirror of Pearl's eye. It was a face, fiend-like, full of smiling malice, yet bearing the semblance of features that she had known full well, though seldom with a smile, and never with malice, in them. It was as if an evil spirit possessed the child, and had just then peeped forth in mockery.[49]

Like Hawthorne, Hester too doubts the worth of her own creation. Continually questioning herself and God what species of creature Pearl might be, Hester also outright questions the little girl:

> "Child what art thou?" . . . "Art thou my child in very truth?". . . "thou art not my child! Thou art no Pearl of mine!" said the mother, half playfully; . . . "Tell me, then, what thou art, and who sent thee hither?". . . "Thy Heavenly Father sent thee!" answered Hester Prynne. . . . "He did not send me!" cried she [Pearl], positively. "I have no Heavenly Father!"[50]

Pearl, as the conversation progresses, never gets to the bottom of her creation. Hester can't answer, suggesting that Pearl is Hester's child only. Dimmesdale's pathetic lack of participation with Hester is the ostensible point to the novel. Yet Hester's motherhood is the real focus of most of Hawthorne's text. The doubt and discomfort that Hester feels while raising and doting on Pearl, and the curiosity and impulsiveness engendered in Pearl is a response to the social displeasure at this flagrant and self-encompassing act.

Hawthorne wants Pearl both ways, however. He wants her to be "fiendish," inhuman and witch-like and yet he describes her with a "rich and luxuriant beauty;" a beauty that exactly reflects her mother's. Hawthorne's descriptions of Pearl often border on Spenser's and Milton's descriptions of Errour's and Sin's offspring. Hawthorne's language also parallels the ideas of leading Puritan thinkers such as Cotton Mather and Thomas Weld:

> When ministers and magistrates discussed the seductive power of witches they often linked it--albeit covertly--to women's functions not only as midwives and healers but also as childbearers and childrearers. The procreative, nurturing, and nursing roles of women were *perverted* by witches, who gave birth to and suckled demons instead of children and who dispensed poisons instead of cures. . . . Winthrop and others referred to Hutchinson's seduction of other women in terms of her power to "hatch," "breed," and "nourish" heretical opinions much as she (and other witches) hatched, bred, and nourished monsters.[51]

Though Hester questions darkly and often the nature and author of her child, she ultimately claims Pearl over and over as her own. Defend Pearl she must, because, like all illegitimate children, Pearl is subjected to defamation, dissection, and disgrace. It is up to Hester to preserve Pearl's integrity. When pressed to turn the child over "into other hands," Hester rebels:

> "God gave me the child!" cried she. "He gave her, in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness!--she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not take her! I will die first!" . . . "God gave her into my keeping," repeated Hester Prynne, raising her voice almost to a shriek. "I will not give her up!"[52]

Hester's rage is directed at Arthur Dimmesdale, whose faint praise for Pearl's upbringing manages to stave off the dreaded separation. Dimmesdale speaks for both Hester and Pearl, and in response, Pearl caresses his hand tenderly--a natural gesture for a child to extend toward a protective father.

Hawthorne persists in altering Pearl's mood in direct relation to the legitimacy that Dimmesdale is willing and capable of bestowing upon her. Left in the illegitimate motherworld of Hester alone, "the little baggage hath witchcraft in her".[53] In fact, Hawthorne goes further, stating clearly that Pearl is a creature of a very different order than that of men:

> There is no law, nor reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that child's composition. . . . None,--save the freedom of a broken law, . . . like a creature that had nothing in common with a bygone and buried generation, nor owned herself akin to it. It was as if she had been made afresh, out of new elements, and must perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime.[54]

Pearl herself accuses Dimmesdale of denying her. Hawthorne is explicit in making us aware of Pearl's pain at intuitively knowing who her father is, wanting him to acknowledge her and instinctively rebelling against this need for anyone save her mother to establish her presence as legitimate:

> Thou wast not bold!--thou wast not true! . . . Thou wouldst not promise to take my hand, and mother's hand, to-morrow noontime![55]

Pearl's resentment is further magnified by Dimmesdale's paternal impotence; to the Puritans, a father ought to claim sovereignty over his child. Pearl's recognition of Dimmesdale's inability to be a father resonates against what Dinnerstein calls a need for a refuge from "the will that rocks the cradle."[56] Dimmesdale's rejection ties Pearl more tightly to her mother, causing increasing anxiety toward her father:

> What he mainly inspires is not so much ambivalence as a mixture of sentiments. The mixture can be disturbing, but the disturbance cannot come as close to the heart of our sense of existence itself as the ambivalence of the earlier, more vital, maternal tie.[57]

Hester too recognizes acutely the insecure position she holds outside legal or social acceptance. But as this fact becomes more and more the very heart of who she is and what she represents, a part of her recognizes that though she has lost much in the eyes of her seventeenth century village, she stands to gain much in her own esteem, in the upward gaze of her daughter, and perhaps for the women who must follow in the smoldering footprints she creates:

> But, in the education of her child, the mother's enthusiasm of thought had something to wreak itself upon. . . . Every thing was against her. The world was hostile. The child's own nature had something wrong in it, . . . and often impelled Hester to ask, in bitterness of heart, whether it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been born at all.
>
> Indeed the same dark question often rose into her mind, with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? . . . As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other

> difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish.[58]

Hawthorne undermines any praise or respect that he wants us to have for Hester by telling us that she has abandoned her "womanly nature" and now listens to her head. Hawthorne very cleverly continues in this vein with little Pearl. The girl mimics her mother, tries on her mother's behaviors, attitudes, and attire. Pearl and Hester are cut from the same primal cloth, and Pearl amuses herself by adorning herself with pieces of nature, carefully chosen and placed to replicate her mother's image:

> Her final employment was to gather sea-weed, of various kinds, and make herself a scarf, or mantle, and a headdress, and thus assume the aspect of a little mermaid. . . . As the last touch to her mermaids' garb, Pearl took some eel-grass, and imitated, as best she could, on her own bosom, the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's. A letter,--the letter *A*,--but freshly green, instead of scarlet! The child bent her chin upon her breast, and contemplated this device with strange interest; even as if the one only thing for which she had been sent into the world was to make out its hidden import.[59]

Pearl "inherits" from her mother the ability to shape-shift, take on roles as all women must learn to do in order to survive. Pearl also inherits the *A* from her mother, made of "eel-grass" which more than hints at serpents and fecundity. But the very greenness of Pearl's *A* also suggests no shame, no open wound, it is "freshly green," imply-

ing a hopeful change in attitude toward this "sin." Unfortunately, when Pearl questions her mother about the truth of the Scarlet *A*, Hester cannot be candid with her daughter. Like women before and after her, Hester cannot speak the truth, forcing Pearl to suffer for the "mistakes" women have made since Eve's sin. Pearl's questions are astute and appropriate responses to the intensely intimate relationship she has with her mother. All children confront their mothers, girls particularly so, to determine where their parent's identity ends and theirs begins:

> The child's will, then, is poised, for dear life's sake, to confront and resist the will of woman. But to live up to this challenge is to contend with appalling complications. For woman is not merely the first, permanently nebulous, outside "I" and the first, all-giving, provider, not merely the first, all-mighty, adversary and protector, lover and ruler. *She is also the first "you,"* and this "you"ness of hers contributes in a number of ways to the lifelong emotional impact of female intentionality. . . . *In confronting her the child faces an old, devastatingly knowledgeable witness.* It is pitting its young initiative and resolution, testing its young mettle, against the very being in whose consciousness the primitive carnal limits of this initiative, resolution, mettle are most vividly reflected, the being who was most steadily there while the child, in its first enterprises, began to discover these limits.[60]

Hester has not the courage to break the pattern of silence and declare that the *A* stands for "ashamed", "abandoned" and "*angry*"! Further, when Pearl asks if she too someday will receive a Scarlet *A*, Hester tells her no, but Pearl is more astute: "Will not it come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown?"[61] The truthful answer to Pearl's question, given her matrilineage and character is absolutely,

"Yes". More, Pearl *is* the *A*; Pearl is alien, articulate, ambiguous, anarchic, antic, and, like her mother, artistic and azygous.

Though Hester cannot speak the truth to Pearl, her needlework is a compelling statement; she weaves her power into visual Art. Through her "womanly" talents she creates a spell, an aura for herself and Pearl which protects both of them from hunger and abuse:

> She possessed an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. It was the art--then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp--of needlework. . . . By degrees, nor very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion. . . . Vanity, it may be, chose to mortify itself, by putting on, for ceremonials of pomp and state, the garments that had been wrought by her sinful hands.[62]

Hawthorne, albeit very subtly and perhaps without malicious intent, casts Hester's creative powers and its manifestations into the same "worthless" and disvalued category that the Puritan society has cast Pearl. Hester's needlework was sought after and displayed because it *was* inspired genius. Hester's life's work is also Pearl; the needlework and the child are inseparable as manifestations of Hester's highest abilities. Adrienne Rich communicates the power of Hester's artistry both in her needlework and in Pearl:

> To bear an "illegitimate" child proudly and by choice in the face of societal judgment has, paradoxically, been one way in which women have defied patriarchy. Hester Prynne's needlework in which she splendidly dresses her daughter Pearl and decorates her own label of "adulteress" [ ] is a gesture of such defiance. Childbirth, then, may be painful, dangerous, and unchosen; but it has also been converted into a purpose, an act of self-assertion by a woman forced to assert herself primarily through her biology.[63]

Pearl is a very immediate product of Hester's biology. Never called "Pearl Prynne" she is simply Pearl, an entity unto herself, like the act that created her, like her namesake, evolving from within a maternal oyster to emerge fully formed, a world unto itself:

> But she named the infant, "Pearl," as being of great price,--purchased with all she had,--her mother's only treasure![64]

Hester's handiwork, both the embroidery and Pearl, is an expression of the qualities of her soul. And these "sinful" qualities are transformed into powers of healing; she nurses the sick and sits by the dying.

Finally she becomes priestess for the weak-souled Dimmesdale who cannot decipher his own intentions or needs. She, like Helen Graham, is the anima, inspiring Dimmesdale to both look to her for salvation and castigate her as sinning against his God.

> This anima figure, as we can still see in the psychology of modern man, is in large part formed by the woman as young priestess, as Sophia, or as young witch. The more unconscious a man is, the more the anima figure remains fused or connected with the main figure of the mother or of the old woman.[65]

He asserts to Hester in their most intimate moment that: "Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!"[66] Condemning Hester as her minister, her lover, and her daughter's father. Yet ultimately he cannot make this curse stick, and he turns to Hester for strength of decision and conviction:

> Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me! . . . O Hester, thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung myself--sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened--

> down upon these forest-leaves, and to have risen up all made anew,[67]

During the intimate scene in the forest, Hester tries to unify herself, Pearl and Dimmesdale as a family. She calls her daughter "Our little Pearl," whereupon Dimmesdale admits that he's been afraid of her. But Pearl is in her element amongst the ancient trees, the gurgling stream and the lush, shadow-laden leaves; and because of this, Dimmesdale reasserts that "she is mostly thine!"[68] Pearl reinforces this impression by refusing to obey Dimmesdale or to show him any affection. Hester too recognizes that something is seriously amiss; she has allowed an intruder into the mother/child bond that she shares so intensely with this little girl:

> Since the latter rambled from her side, another inmate had been admitted within the circle of the mother's feelings, and so modified the aspect of them all, that Pearl, the returning wanderer, could not find her wonted place, and hardly knew where she was.[69]

Hawthorne gives evidence that all humans' first love is Mother; when that affection is usurped by anyone, estrangement, jealousy and disorientation occur. What differs is the subsequent identification or alienation from the Mother as lover between males and females. Pearl, as we have seen, is learning to be a Hester Prynne. Her mother is for her both a lover and a role model; a double-bind connection both intensely sweet and painful. For males, mother is the lover, first and always; first for real, and then for practice:

> What is salient for the girl at this stage is not so much rivalry as another, more primitive problem: the realization that she must now, in some basic way, start to renounce, let go of, her first, lifegiving love. The boy faces a clear crisis of nerve. She must handle a more

> diffuse, pervasive guilt, a vague sense of disloyalty, an ancient, primal fear of loss.[70]

Though Pearl remains loyal to Hester, her anxiety every time Dimmesdale enters the picture is quite evident and painful. The little girl wants to be claimed, yet the man who should adopt the role of father hardly measures up to the expectations of parent that Hester has provided.

Dimmesdale persists in denying and therefore betraying Pearl. Despite her mother's attempts to forgive and explain his behavior, Pearl recognizes his pathos and inconsistency:

> What a strange, sad man is he! . . . here in the sunny day, and among all the people, he knows us not; nor must we know him! A strange, sad man is he, with his hand always over his heart![71]

Dimmesdale's abandonment of Hester and Pearl when they had agreed to escape and establish themselves in a new order, has a double sting. Hester bitterly recognizes the eternal trap she has sprung, and Pearl begins to realize that the man she should call father is never recognizable as one:

> Pearl either saw and responded to her mother's feelings, or herself felt the remoteness and intangibility that had fallen around the minister. . . . "Mother," said she, "was that the same minister that kissed me by the brook?[72]

Pearl's statement embodies a cultural flaw in our perpetration of family dynamics. Pearl is learning repeatedly that Hester is the only person she can count on, yet that person, as mother, as woman, is less than whole, less than powerful:

> Central to the structural weakness built into our species' life is an imbalance between the overwhelming

> sturdiness of the mother-infant pair and the fragility of the father-infant pair. It is this imbalance--given the mental complexity of human young--that makes the internal stresses of the parent-child triangle so fatefully hard to handle. The special and exclusive bond between women and children underlies the half-recognized monstrosity implicit in the mermaid and minotaur myths. We lean heavily on the reliability of this bond; yet it is part of a congenital deformity that we must now outgrow before it kills us off.[73]

Along with the psychological isolation that Pearl is beginning to recognize and accept is the very real isolation imposed on her mother and herself simply because Pearl exists:

> By the late seventeenth century, the stigma of having an illegitimate child and the difficulty of caring for and maintaining that child were, along with the fines and public degradations, the principal deterrents to sexual misbehavior: all were burdens borne primarily if not exclusively by women.[74]

Dimmesdale, in an "heroic" gesture that grants him salvation in both worlds, finally acknowledges Hester and Pearl as his before the gathered townspeople. By a hug and a meaningful stare, Dimmesdale's sin is lifted, his pain is soothed, and Hester's forgiveness gained. More importantly, he also gains Pearl's tenderness. Hawthorne would have us believe that Pearl is transformed by Dimmesdale's welcoming arms. Pearl, now "owned" by Dimmesdale, is legitimate, she has a father. Pearl's redemption has not been through Christian baptism or the union of her parents, but simply through the acknowledgment that her generation was amniotic *and* seminal. Pearl's acceptance of his embrace accentuates Hawthorne's insistence that she will be her mother's daughter, another acolyte of Eve. Hester, dismayed that Dimmesdale has chosen to confess his sin at her expense nevertheless

acts out her role as high priestess and guides him into the next world:

> Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom. . . . "My little Pearl," said he feebly, . . . wilt thou kiss me now? thou wouldst not yonder, in the forest! but now thou wilt?"
>
> Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled.[75]

Hawthorne, try as he might to sympathize with Hester, is still not comfortable to leave Pearl as the next generation of womanhood. He must legitimize her with a father's kiss and assure us that Pearl will be now a natural child, following the same dull pattern that ensnared her mother. Hawthorne has a right to feel guilty, and his attempt to assuage it is worthy, but we need to be wary of granting him unquestionable success. Lee Edwards in discussing both Richardson's *Clarissa* and *The Scarlet Letter*, comments:

> The authority described in both novels amounts to little more than a system of legitimized oppression and victimization, degrading to all parties. . . . A corrective alternative would have to revise the meaning of the terms "masculinity" and "femininity" and rework their relationship to one another and to society in general. Although the developmental strategies of *Clarissa* and *The Scarlet Letter* suggest and support this hypothesis, neither fiction accomplishes this task completely; neither Richardson nor Hawthorne can give up his limpetlike hold on the rock of Christian theology on which the entire social superstructure rests. Nevertheless, the magnitude and appeal of the opposition that their principal women offer to traditional Puritanic mores is suggested by the degree to which both authors shape their characters into the mold of heroic conflict and endeavor.[76]

Hawthorne dooms Pearl to the same existence that women have lived for centuries. By doing "battle with the world" is Hawthorne referring to his own words of building "society anew," modifying the opposite sex, or evaporating the essence of her own sex? This would be an intriguing career for our Pearl, but alas, Hawthorne backs down.:

> None knew--nor ever learned, with the fullness of perfect certainty--whether the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave; or whether her wild, rich nature had been softened and subdued, and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness.[77]

The lack of sure knowledge around Pearl's subsequent history hints at legend. But Hawthorne hedges this proposal with the safe suggestion that Pearl is capable, now sanctioned, of being happy *because she has been "subdued"*. Pearl ought to remain the angry, rampant vitality that is the illicit, covert essence of Hester Prynne.

Finally, Hawthorne cannot leave Hester in her lonely, sad courage; he must again stretch Hester upon the rack of maternal expectations. Though he protests through Hester's humility, he assures us that by her sin and suffering she will become the redeeming goddess of motherhood:

> . . . the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. . . . She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that . . . a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in her life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even

> burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end![78]

Does Hawthorne protest too much? I think he would like us to believe that Hester has been transfigured into a type of prophetess; she certainly gives witness to the cost of being a single mother. But Hawthorne, as Edwards has stated, cannot free himself from the belief that purity and sanctity are equated only with a worthy woman. Is Hester angel or witch, prophetess or archetype? The ambivelance is overwhelming. Hawthorne is still guilty of condemning Hester as either less than or greater than woman; for that the *A* on her mother's heart continues to burn.

Ruth - *Ruth*

Standing in clear, but meek contrast to Helen and Hester is Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*. Ruth Hilton is more a counterpart to Chaucer's Constance and Spenser's Charissa than she is to her contemporary sisters. Though the novel was considered controversial and even scandalous, because it portrayed a young woman seduced and giving birth to an illegitimate child, Gaskell's message differs little from the traditional wisdom that humility and suffering are

the means to a woman's respectability. Nina Auerbach's description of Ruth in *Woman and the Demon*, is quite apt:

> Gaskell's Ruth is too sublimely innocent to understand the fact of her own fall: through seduction and betrayal, unwed pregnancy and motherhood, she remains the victim of her destitution, her unprotected, orphan state, her sexual ignorance, and the Phariseeism of respectability . . . Until the ending's abrupt reversal, Gaskell practices what liberal reformers preached: she defiantly reclaims this sweet soul for reintegration and respectability.[79]

The innocence Auerbach refers to is presented clearly, not merely in Ruth's naïve reactions, but in the imagery that surrounds her: "It was there, snowy white in her bosom.[80] No one can question the purity of Ruth's heart or the villainy of her seducer. In fact, once the baby is born, Ruth becomes a veritable Madonna, humble to a fault and tearfully embracing the trial of shame and the task of raising her child in grace as a means for her redemption. Ruth, unlike nearly every other single mother discussed, is almost immediately accepted into society. The Benson's are representatives of middle class morality, abiding faith and social propriety, yet they allow Ruth into their home and hearts, because they too see the potential for glory:

> "Think again of her first words--the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him--'I will be so good?' Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking, and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin,--will be purification."[81]

Two things are important in Mrs. Benson's conviction: first that Ruth will be brought out of herself; her evil proclivities (if one can call them that), will be eradicated by her abasement to God, the supreme author of patriarchy; second, and this is intrinsic to the first, Ruth's self-denial is the cornerstone of her success as a fit mother by Victorian standards. Ruth becomes as a result of her fall even more sanctified and perfect, an example of the ideal of true womanhood. Ruth's mothering is perfection itself, living up to the heavenly ideals dictated by nineteenth-century moralists:

> It was beautiful to see the intuition by which she divined what was passing in every fold of her child's heart, so as to be always ready with the right words to soothe or to strengthen him. Her watchfulness was unwearied, and with no though of self tainting it . . . she was insensibly teaching Leonard to conform to the law of right, to recognize Duty in the mode in which every action was performed.[82]

Ruth's ignominy is transformed into near immaculate proportions by the end of the novel. As Auerbach points out, "Gaskell's Ruth seems oblivious of any sexuality . . . her pregnancy seems a miracle of spontaneous generation, so unaware is she (and we) of what led up to it".[83] Auerbach fails to follow through on her own insight; "spontaneous generation" *is* the fantasy of Victorian sexuality, and Ruth's piety achieves a near immaculate conception of her son.

Auerbach refers to Gaskell's abrupt reversal at the end of the novel. I disagree and believe Gaskell is consistent to the end in her treatment of her subject. No real change occurs in Ruth's inter-

nal characteristics. In fact, her inner strengths and values expand, causing outward change even to growing taller!:

> But perhaps in Ruth herself there was the greatest external change; for of the change which had gone on in her heart, and mind, and soul, or if there had been any, neither she or anyone around her was conscious; . . . If her early brilliancy of colour was gone, a clear ivory skin, as smooth as satin, told of complete and perfect health, . . . Her hair had grown darker and deeper, . . . her eyes, . . . had a thoughtful spiritual look about them, that made you wonder at their depth, and look--and look again. The increase of dignity in her face had been imparted to her form. I do not know if she had grown taller since the birth of her child, but she looked as if she had. And although she had lived in a very humble home, . . . now she might have been placed among the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal, although ignorant of their conventional etiquette--an ignorance which she would have acknowledged in a simple childlike way, being unconscious of any false shame.[84]

Ruth does shelter herself and her son under the lie that she is the Widow Denbigh; the Bensons instigate and comply with this fallacy, saving Ruth from much "mortification." But *Ruth*, nevertheless, is a novel which examines the consequences of an unwanted pregnancy and the acceptability of a single mother.

Ruth is put on trial and scrutinized in her behavior. She is forced to walk an excessively narrow path, and only by doing so is she considered fit company. In consequence, Mr. Benson refers to Mary Magdalene in his belief that God's power to forgive extends even to fallen women.[85] Mr. Bradshaw, the minister, violently disagrees and pronounces his sentence on Ruth:

> "If there be one sin I hate--I utterly loathe--more than all others, it is wantonness. It includes all other sins. It is but of a piece that you should have come

> with your sickly, hypocritical face, imposing upon us all."[86]

Bradshaw's allusion, of course, is to Original Sin, which precludes and paves the way for all others. By continuation, Ruth is another Eve, sinning in the "original" way and introducing a canker into the righteous community.

Ultimately, her redemption occurs because she makes the supreme sacrifice. It is not enough for her to be a responsible and loving parent, she must take on the ills of the community, nursing the epidemic sick until she herself is exhausted and infected. Ruth, like Hester, uses her new-found sanctity for healing purposes. She gains a quasi-sainthood in her care for the poor, the ailing and the miserable:

> By degrees her reputation as a nurse spread, and many sought her good offices . . . She went wherever her services were first called for. . . . Her ways were very quiet; . . . And yet Ruth's silence was not like reserve; it was too gentle and tender for that. It had more the effect of a hush of all loud or disturbing emotions, and out of the deep calm the words that came forth had a beautiful power. . . . The low-breathed sentences which she spoke into the ear of the sufferer and the dying carried them upwards to God.[87]

Ruth is the pattern of Victorian womanhood: patient, generous of self, pure of heart, innocent of mind, painfully repentant of any indiscretions and childlike in her beauty. In her death Ruth joins the sisterhood of Victorian purity. Only through complete passivity and negation can Ruth take her place as honorable woman and mother.

But crucial to her salvation is the implied conflict which lies in the ability of Ruth's son Leonard to revere and honor his mother.

Leonard is under a double curse; illegitimacy reflects directly upon him as a result of his mother's defiled state. In rejecting his mother, he condemns himself. Mr. Bradshaw takes it upon himself to make Leonard's social position quite clear to Ruth:

> ". . . Do you suppose your child is to be exempt from the penalties of his birth? Do you suppose that he alone is to be saved from the upbraiding scoff? Do you suppose that he is ever to rank with other boys, who are not stained and marked with sin from their birth? Every creature in Eccleston may know what he is, do you think they will spare him their scorn? . . . Before you went into your sin, you should have thought whether you could bear the consequences or not--have had some idea how far your offspring would be degraded and scouted, till the best thing that could happen to him would be for him to be lost to all sense of shame, dead to all knowledge of guilt, for his mother's sake."[88]

Ruth responds, going over Bradshaw's head to the authority which alone can redeem her in the eyes of the reader:

> "I appeal to God against such a doom for my child. I appeal to God to help me. I am a mother, and as such I cry to God for help--for help to keep my boy in His pitying sight, and to bring him up in His holy fear. Let the shame fall on me! I have deserved it, but he--he is so innocent and good."[89]

By confessing her sin and shame and falling prostrate at the feet of social opinion, Ruth performs the obligatory abject abasement essential for her absolution. Her direct link to God is a sure indication that she is now nearly assured of her place as Mother, with all the pure and deific meaning that implies.

Because Victorian mothers were held up as the supreme example of chastity and virtue, young men were told to expect nothing less of

themselves or the woman they married than the standards set by this pinnacle of maidenly conduct:

> But of all women in the world, the most pure--and the most useful as a sanction for adolescent chastity--was Mother. Every young Victorian heard his father's voice sounding in his conscience, "Remember your dear, good mother, and never do anything, think anything, imagine anything she would be ashamed of." In that way filial love, already increased in the Victorian family by the repression of sexual emotions, was exaggerated in the cause of moral censorship and control. What still exists in the debased form of "mommisms" is found in the Prince's description of his mother in *The Princess*:
>
> No angel, but a dearer being, all dipt
> In angel instincts, breathing Paradise,
> Interpreter between the gods and men,
> Who look'd all native to her place, and yet
> On tiptoe seem'd to touch upon a sphere
> Too gross to tread, and all male minds perforce
> Sway'd to her from their orbits as they moved,
> And girdled her with music. Happy he
> With such a mother! faith in womankind
> Beats with his blood, . . . [90]

Leonard, the male child of this female goddess, is the final judge in Ruth's trial. After much shame and denial, he finally recognizes the honor it is to be her son. In a most sentimental scene, where "there arose a clamour of tongues;" everyone extolling Ruth's virtue and self-sacrifice, Leonard finds the courage to claim her as his own: "'Sir, I am her son! . . . She is my mother.' From that day forward Leonard walked erect in the streets of Eccleston, where many arose and called her blessed."[91] Leonard has become a legitimate human being in the eyes of the town and in his own eyes. More to the point, given the Biblical proportions of Gaskell's language in this passage, he has become a type of male deity. It has taken his mother's life and her life's work to accomplish this.

Conclusion

The forthright treatment of single mothers in the three novels discussed in this chapter sets a precedent for the literature to follow. But what is expressed here in Nina Auerbach's words as "an allegory of the triumph of spirit over life,"[92] is developed in subsequent works as the subjection of spirit to the realities of life. Although the character of Mother is essential to Victorian narrative; she is increasingly diminished. As Marianne Hirsch in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* defines her:

> . . . biographical parallels [with authors] are not enough to explain the thoroughness with which the figure of the mother is silenced, denigrated, simply eliminated, or written out of these Victorian fictions. Maternal absence and silence is too much the condition of the heroine's development, too much the basis of the fiction itself; the form it takes is too akin to repression.[93]

What Hirsch recognizes in the overt treatment of mothers, particularly single mothers in the novels of the Victorian era is an underlying social ambivalence about the power of motherhood. On one hand, woman was the moral guardian of the family, the spiritual influence over matters sexual and emotional, yet she in turn was protected from any worldly influence. Freud's theories of Oedipal complex allow Mother to be a marker in her child's development, but vehemently represses her role as initial and intimately powerful

shaper of the psyche. Eli Sagan's *Freud, Women and Morality* provides a discussion of the origins of morality:

> Traditionally it is the mother, not the father, who presides over the birth of conscience, over the beginnings of morality. The Freudian theory of morality had to repress the memory of conscience in favor of the superego, because it was deeply involved in repressing the remembrance of the pre-oedipal mother and the overwhelming importance she has in the life of the child.[94]

Mothers become merely the object upon which authors explored the limits of immorality. Single mothers, though statistically on the rise in the streets of London, stalk wearily along the periphery of the literary landscape.

Notes

[1] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 107.

[2] Neumann 65.

[3] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol II* 243. Laws pertaining to paternity varied little across Europe during this time: "Under the Prussian Civil Code of 1794, the natural father owed up to one quarter of his income for the mainenance of his child, even if he and the mother were not married and she had had intercourse with other men. In 1854, this law was changed: now the concept of natural fatherhood disappeared, and the conditions under which an unwed mother was entitled to child payments narrowed greatly. The Italian Civil Code of 1866 allowed for *no* paternity suits except in cases of rape or abduction; Italian women did not gain the right to sue for paternity until 1975. The prevailing European attitude was stated by an Irish legislator in 1837: "Irish females should be . . . guardians of their own honor, and be responsible in their own persons for all deviations from virtue"(Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol II* 243).

[4] Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel* (London: Pandora Press, 1986) 262.

[5] Lee Holcombe, "Victorian Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law, 1857-1882" in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) 11-12.

[6] Edwards 7-9.

[7] Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1843) 24-25.

[8] Anne Brontë's novel was an undisputed success despite the eyebrows it raised throughout Victorian England. Her harshest critic may well have been her own sister Charlotte: "Charlotte Brontë made no secret of her dislike of *Wildfell Hall*. Her feeling about it could not be unbiased . . . for to her it evoked too painfully the ruin of a once-admired brother, and its disastrous effects on Anne's health and spirits. She, rightly, ascribed Anne's subsequent death in great part to the burden it laid on her. Respecting Charlotte's feelings, Smith, Elder, waited her own death before finally publishing *Wildfell Hall* in a one-volume edition in 1859"(Winifred Gérin, "Introduction" to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [London: Penguin Classics, 1985] 15).

[9] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol II* 150-151.

[10] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol II* 151.

[11] Gilbert & Gubar 35.

[12] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985) 40.

[13] Brontë 75.

[14] Brontë 47.

[15] Brontë 101.

[16] Brontë 249

[17] Brontë 338.

[18] Neumann 296.

[19] Brontë 315 - 317.

[20] Brontë 368.

[21] Brontë 362.

[22] Brontë 55.

[23] Brontë 57. See *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* by Joan N. Burstyn for a complete description and analysis of the social, economic and moral attitudes and realities which were brought to bear on a woman's ability to attain an education. Joan N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

[24] Brontë 46.

[25] Brontë 99-100.

[26] Brontë 89.

[27] Brontë 334.

[28] Dinnerstein 111-112.

[29] Brontë 431.

[30] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol II* 149-150.

[31] Brontë 454.

[32] David D. Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History 1638-1692* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991) 7.

[33] Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987) 71.

[34] Hall 19.

[35] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 260.

[36] Karlsen 168.

[37] Karlsen 141.

[38] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979) 182.

[39] Hawthorne 80.

[40] Hawthorne 81.

[41] Edwards 55.

[42] Hawthorne 83.

[43] Hawthorne 191.

[44] Hawthorne 94.

[45] Hawthorne 95.

[46] Hawthorne 115.

[47] Hawthorne 114.

[48] Dinnerstein 169.

[49] Hawthorne 117-120.

[50] Hawthorne 121-122.

[51] Karlsen 144.

[52] Hawthorne 135-136.

[53] Hawthorne 138.

[54] Hawthorne 154-155.

[55] Hawthorne 176.

[56] Dinnerstein 175.

[57] Dinnerstein 176.

[58] Hawthorne 184-185.

[59] Hawthorne 195-196.

[60] Dinnerstein 167-168.

[61] Hawthorne 201.

[62] Hawthorne 106-107.

[63] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 160.

[64] Hawthorne 113.

[65] Neumann 295.

[66] Hawthorne 212.

[67] Hawthorne 213-219.

[68] Hawthorne 223.

[69] Hawthorne 225.

[70] Dinnerstein 64.

[71] Hawthorne 244.

[72] Hawthorne 265.

[73] Dinnerstein 77.

[74] Karlsen 201.

[75] Hawthorne 268.

[76] Edwards 31-32.

[77] Hawthorne 274.

[78] Hawthorne 274-275.

[79] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982) 169.

[80] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 17.

[81] Gaskell 119.

[82] Gaskell 366.

[83] Auerbach 179.

[84] Gaskell 208-209.

[85] Gaskell 351.

[86] Gaskell 337.

[87] Gaskell 391.

[88] Gaskell 340.

[89] Gaskell 340.

[90] Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) 355-356.

[91] Gaskell 430.

[92] Auerbach 171.

[93] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 47.

[94] Eli Sagan, *Freud, Women, and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988) 14.

CHAPTER 5

DEADLY HONOR: DUBIOUS LEGACIES

> The preoedipal mother . . . emerges as a figure of subversion, a threat to masculine identity as well as to patriarchal culture. . . . she has a ghostlike function, creating a presence out of absence. Like the spirit of the mournful and unmourned Jocasta, she haunts the house of Oedipus. . . . Whether subversive of male gender identity or the phalocentrism of language, the mother remains marginal to culture.[1]

Introduction

Mothers are subjects, a fact long overlooked by psychoanalysts and feminists alike. Analyzed merely as objects, mothers become shadow figures, backdrops to the world play of the all important and usually male child. She becomes a ghost-figure, or a "specter," to use Madelon Sprengnether's term. As subjects, the impression they leave on *their* objects is tremendous, as witnessed in Freud's pithy and poetic observation:

> The comparison with the way in which the skull of a newly born child is shaped springs to mind at this point: after a protracted labour it always takes the form of a cast of the narrow part of the mother's pelvis(SE 11:169). . . . no one possesses more than one mother, and the relation to her is based on an event that *is not open to any doubt* [italics mine] and cannot be repeated(SE 11:169).[2]

The surety of the event means that to a mother there is no such thing as an illegitimate child, and the imprint Freud refers to is mirrored by the mother's body. But the experience of motherhood, of having the power to influence another indelibly, has been virtually ignored:

> . . . one looks in vain to Freud's case studies for insight into mothers and their problems. It might seem as though maternity were a remedy for neurosis which *ipso facto* eliminated the need for a woman to seek that other remedy, psychoanalysis. . . . Broadly speaking, the only thing that Freud has to say about maternity is that the desire to have a child is a transformation of penis envy or anal compulsion, which led him to discover the equation child = penis = faeces. . . . about the complexities and difficulties of the maternal experience Freud has absolutely nothing to say . . .[3]

What happens to a woman's sense of self when this remarkable event and impression is negated and even made a source of shame. What hope does she have of exerting her influence on any endeavor when her best work is denied because of social stigma? What reactions and choices does she make when faced with social castigation? What kind of mother can she possibly be?

Freud's "discoveries" are particularly relevant at this point, because his work was very much a product of the Victorian period, with its schizophrenic adoration and condemnation of women. Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* provide rich material to explore the questions above. But it is first important to remember the realities of nineteenth century life for the women whose lives parallel the characters in these novels. Philosophies of behavior and psychoanalytic probing only have meaning in the context of the actual approbation or denunciation women faced.

Lurking behind Helen Graham, Hester Prynne, Ruth Denbigh, Honoria Dedlock, Hetty Sorrel and Tess Durbyfield is the perceived threat of prostitution. In *Suffer and Be Still*, Helene Roberts outlines what Victorians assumed was the path of dishonor, from economic hardship, to seduction, to motherhood, to prostitution:

> The appalling conditions of female employment pushed many young girls into still another grim harsh world, the world of prostitutes, mistresses and unwed mothers. The double standard and the stern unforgiving attitudes toward unwed motherhood frequently left no other choice to a woman than to sell herself on the street. Using the census figure of 42,000 illegitimate children born in the year 1851, William Acton estimated that one-twelfth of the unmarried women in England and Wales must have "strayed from the path of virtue." Police files in 1850 listed 8,000 known prostitutes in London and more than 50,000 in England and Wales. The fallen woman, as Victorians liked to call the victim of seduction, though she represented a large and functionally important segment of Victorian womanhood, was hardly deemed an appropriate subject for art.[4]

The fallen woman may not have been acceptable for visual representation, but she abounded in the literature of the period. Ultimately, artists such as Augustus Egg, G. F. Watts, Richard Redgrave and Ford Madox Brown did depict these women on canvas. Most renditions played up the moral depravity of the woman's actions as in Egg's, *Past and Present* series or Watts' *Found Drowned*, which Dickens cleverly refers to in his novel. But none have the power and truth of Ford Madox Brown's, *Take Your Son, Sir*, which portrays a towering woman, whose head is haloed by a domed mirror, thrusting a naked infant toward the viewer with outstretched arms. It seems quite appropriate that the painting is unfinished; this is indeed unfinished business (the artist abandoned it due to social outrage).

Though much of nineteenth-century society believed that a seduced woman was automatically inducted into the ranks of prostitutes, economic conditions rather than moral failure was the real impetus for prostitution. Judith Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, carefully documents the legal, social and economic aspects of these women's lives:

> The stereotyped sequence of girls seduced, pregnant, and abandoned to the streets fitted only a small minority of women who ultimately moved into prostitution. In general illegitimacy seems to have been a social problem distinct from prostitution. According to the testimonies before the Infant Life Protection Commission, most unwed mothers were servants who were not prostitutes. Moreover, from the limited historical evidence available, unwed mothers were in their early and mid-twenties, hence several years older than newly initiated prostitutes. . . . Of course, some women had children after they entered prostitution, and older women in their mid-twenties--often deserted wives or widows--were known to go on the streets to support their children. But such women were a minority.[5]

The path of "destruction" was a much more complex and individual series of factors than the simple equation of seduction and immoral consequences.

Motherhood, following the social pattern set for the "angels of the house," is positive and worthy only when the ego and will of the mother is repressed and the "good" of the child is given paramount consideration. A single mother, first damned by her lack of virtue, and twice damned by her practical inability to raise a child alone, was considered the worst of mothers. But underneath the moral and economic sanctions against a single mother lies a more disturbing fact. The single mother represents most clearly the intimate, paternally unchallenged time in the mother/child relationship. Precisely because of this, she is the most disruptive element of

society. Perhaps this is why the mother/child relationship which Freud chose to examine was a post Oedipal one; the relationship founded on the child's rejection of the mother. Freud barely touches on the preceding relationship in his later writings, where the mother is the primary influence and shaper of the child's experience, where the child and mother are an inseparable dyad. Denying this element of mother/child development is cutting the primal force of motherhood off at the root. The preoedipal mother, ignored by psychoanalysts and relegated to a nonentity, becomes a death-mother, a representative of the Terrible Mother:

> Because, as Dorothy Dinnerstein has proposed, male anxieties about female autonomy probably go as deep as everyone's mother-dominated infancy, patriarchal texts have traditionally suggested that every angelically selfless Snow White must be hunted, if not haunted, by a wickedly assertive Stepmother: for every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called the "Female Will." . . . assertiveness, aggressiveness--all characteristics of a male life of "significant action"--are "monstrous" in women precisely because "unfeminine" and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of "contemplative purity."[6]

The preoedipal mother has been banished to the nether world of destructive forces and is represented in literature as the mother who presides over the grave containing either her infant, herself or both. At some level Freud knew the repercussions of forcing her into this compromising position, yet he persistently chose not to examine it:

> This complex compromise formation produced in turn its own symptoms of unease, which appear in the guise of Freud's inability to account for the role of the preoedipal mother. Her functions are, in Freud's texts, marginalized, divided, suppressed, or transcended, yet

> always problematic and thus in need of continuous reformulation. As an object of both fascination and dread, she is the specter that drives him forth and that compels his return. Late in his career, she will begin to evoke thoughts of death.[7]

The Victorian novel plays out the psychology and repression of women as mothers, offering many examples of the overt, positive values society placed on these women, as well as the latent, mutinous potential with which these "angels" of the home were inspired. The multi-layered dynamics put forth by the authors of this age are a testimony to the social struggle to define and contain the phenomenon of single motherhood:

> The Victorian angel's scheming, her mortal fleshliness, and her repressed (but therefore all the more frightening) capacity for explosive rage are often subtly acknowledged, even in the most glowing texts of male "angelographers".[8]

The female characters discussed in this chapter are single mothers, but their mother/child relationship is severed at the infant stage. Each of these women represents the preoedipal mother in the unesteemed light both society and psychology place her. But the "spectral mother" will begin to take shape and have a voice as we increasingly acknowledge her presence.

Lady Dedlock - *Bleak House*

The Bantam Classic edition of *Bleak House* begins with excerpts from Nabokov's lectures on Dickens.[9] As Nabokov's specific

lecture on *Bleak House* unfolds he maintains that Esther Summerson's tragic search for her mother, Lady Dedlock, is irrelevant to the main thrust of the novel. He asserts that the sentimental plot is mere sugar coating for the manly and logical attack on the British Court of Chancery:

> In discussing *Bleak House* we shall soon notice that the romantic plot of the novel is an illusion and is not of much artistic importance. There are better things in the book than the sad case of Lady Dedlock.[10]

The fact is, without the sentimentality of Esther or the tragedy of Lady Dedlock, we would have very dry reading, indeed. We would also have only the outline of the argument. More to the point, Lady Dedlock's existence provides the reality of flesh; she is the catalyst and focus for the principals and their actions. Lady Dedlock, in Nabokov's eyes, is like the Sphinx, participating only peripherally in the myth:

> A whisper still goes about, that she had not even family; . . . But she had beauty, pride, ambition, insolent resolve, . . . My Lady Dedlock, having conquered *her* world, fell, not into the melting, but rather into the freezing mood. . . . If she could be translated to Heaven to-morrow, she might be expected to ascend without any rapture.[11]

Lady Dedlock becomes static, and, to Nabokov, uninteresting because she seems emotionally set in stone. To critics like Nabokov, she is like Jocasta or the Sphinx, a necessary incident in the plot, but hardly the main focus.

Nabokov is not alone; many critics such as Kate Millet ignore Lady Dedlock as a major player in this novel:

> It is one of the more disheartening flaws in the master's work that nearly all the "serious" women in Dickens''s fiction, with the exception of Nancy and a handful of her

> criminal sisters, are insipid goodies carved from the same soap as Ruskin's Queens.[12]

I argue that Lady Dedlock's maternal frigidity is central to the meaning of the novel. She appears bereft of emotion, language, left only with a static "presence," because she has been denied the power of her motherhood. Her child and her mothering are unacceptable and lifeless in the eyes of the world. Her silence, with its underlying rage should have the same attention we afford Bertha Masons' "madness":

> The weight of the "non-said" (*non-dit*) no doubt affects the mother's body first of all: no signifier can cover it completely, for the signifier is always meaning (*sens*), communication or structure, whereas a mother-woman is rather a strange "fold" (*pli*) which turns nature into culture, and the "speaking subject" (*le parlant*) into biology. . . . These peculiarities of the maternal body make a woman a creature of folds, a catastrophe of being that cannot be subsumed by the dialectic of the trinity or its supplements.
>
> Nor is there any less silence concerning the mental and physical suffering associated with childbirth and, even more, with the self-denial implicit in making oneself anonymous in order to transmit social norms which one may disavow for oneself but which *one must* pass on to the child, whose education is a link to generations past.[13]

Lady Dedlock's silence speaks volumes and continues to resonate meaning just as the stone-faced Sphinx persists in offering riddles for our comprehension. Nabokov's argument, then, is not original in its pattern. In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch analyses Teresa de Lauretis' questioning of the Oedipus story:

> Medusa and the Sphinx, like other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed . . . in someone else's story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions--places and topoi--through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning.[14]

The first indication that Lady Dedlock is more than "marker" is that Esther Summerson is our hero. Esther as daughter has much more at stake with such "tropoi" to decipher. The second is that the plot's search for mother underscores the entire novel. Lady Dedlock, as absent, denigrated mother, is inextricably linked with the failure of motherhood in an institutionalized world, where natural parents are replaced by courts of law and ladies auxiliary leagues:

> . . . My Lady's eyes are on the fire. In search of what? Of any hand that is no more, of any hand that never was, of any touch that might have magically changed her life? Or does she listen to the Ghost's Walk, and think what step does it most resemble? . . . The pattering of a little child's feet, ever coming on--on--on? Some melancholy influence is upon her; or why should so proud a lady close the doors, and sit alone upon the hearth so desolate?[15]

The novel's first chapter does introduce us to the Court of Chancery where we are acquainted with the fog of Jarndyce & Jarndyce, the suit which is in the capable hands of dozens upon dozens of bewigged gentlemen, all fatherly in their wisdom, protection, caution, and advice. Dickens has quietly made us aware that fathers are even more absent than any maternal influence in these pages. The wards of Jarndyce & Jarndyce are parentless, and Esther never really considers who her father might be. When we discover him, he is near death and has renamed himself from Captain Hawdon to Nemo, Latin for "No One". Gridley dies, leaving three orphans to care for themselves; Richard Jarndyce follows closely in his footsteps, leaving Ada to raise his namesake alone. The fathers that do exist in the novel are pervasively ineffectual or detrimental to their children's well being. Mr. Jellyby's principal occupation is to sit silently

with his head against a wall, a "nonentity" as Richard calls him and "merged in the more shining qualities of his wife".[16] And Mr. Skimpole leads his family down a destructive, amoral path: "It is said the children of the poor are not brought up, but dragged up. Harold Skimpole's children have tumbled up somehow or other . . . [17]

Dickens does establish Chancery as a primary force in motivating the actions and attitudes of his characters, but he also quickly establishes Lady Dedlock as the parallel, stultified parental figurehead:

> My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight . . . and seeing . . . a child, chased by a woman running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock says she has been "bored to death".[18]

Chancery has everything to do with the dry, unfeeling methods that are applied to the inheritors of English society; like Richard Jarndyce, they will wait their lives into dust before a shred of real parenting is bestowed upon them. This novel, whether analyzing the illogical courts of law or the intimate lives of children and mothers, provides the same conclusion, because the two correspond.

As in all Dickens's novels, this one is heavily peopled with vivid characters who provide varying commentaries and insights into the particular themes addressed. *Bleak House* affords an array of mothers that is hardly equalled in any other novel. The novel *is* bleak because we enter a seemingly motherless narrative. But the mothering shadow looms so large and so dark from the very start that our eyes eventually adjust to this gloom, and we begin to make out the shape of Mother nearly everywhere we look. Esther herself

becomes a "little mother" to her surrogate father and to the young litigants of Jarndyce & Jarndyce. Mrs. Jellyby, with her innumerable children, is prolific in her ability to produce offspring even to the far reaches of Borrioboola-Gha. As to the care of her natural children, her daughter Caddy is quite eloquent:

> O don't talk of duty as a child, Miss Summerson; where's Ma's duty as a parent? All made over to the public and Africa, I suppose! Then let the public and Africa show duty as a child; it's much more their affair than mine. You are shocked, I dare say! Very well, so am I shocked too; so we are both shocked, and there's an end of it![19]

The brick maker's wives are the pathetic mothers of hopeless, dead babies, who become mirror images of Lady Dedlock and Esther. Mrs. Bagnet is the fearless, capable, world traversing mother. Mrs. Rouncewell is the aged mother, patient, suffering and forgiving. Caddy Jellyby also becomes a mother, tenuous and unpracticed, but sincere. Even little Charley mothers little Emma and Tom when her father dies, only one of many examples of children mothering children. And finally there is Lady Dedlock, the Medusa, the shadow that stretches her wings across the novel's pages from the outset, and wraps them around every child that moves within the plot:

> "I must travel my dark road alone, and it will lead me where it will. From day to day, sometimes from hour to hour, I do not see the way before my guilty feet. This is the earthly punishment I have brought upon myself. . . . If you hear of Lady Dedlock, brilliant, prosperous, and flattered; think of your wretched mother, conscience-stricken, underneath that mask! Think that the reality is in her suffering, in her useless remorse, in her murdering within her breast the only love and truth of which it is capable! And then forgive her, if you can; and cry to Heaven to forgive her, which it never can!". . .[20]
>
> Where is she? Living or dead, where is she? . . . On the waste . . . there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself, pelted by the snow and driven by the

> wind, and cast out, it would seem, from all companionship. It is the figure of a woman, too . . .[21]

Lady Honoria Dedlock is aptly named. Her honor, the honor of the women of England, is at stake, and it fails. Because her virtue is of prime importance beyond any human relationship or encounter, she is frozen, dead, and bound into the most circumscribed of attitudes:

> She supposes herself to be an inscrutable Being, quite out of the reach and ken of ordinary mortals--seeing herself in her glass, where indeed she looks so . . .[22] Weariness of soul lies before her, as it lies behind--her Ariel has put a girdle of it round the whole earth, and it cannot be unclasped--but the imperfect remedy is always to fly, from the last place where it has been experienced.[23]

Even when Mr. Guppy brings the full force of the truth of Esther's relationship home to Lady Dedlock she remains for all outward appearances unmoved. Yet the static palor covers a most violent, turbulent explosion of emotion. By its absence, we feel the presence of Lady Dedlock's catastrophic shock, grief and shame:

> Lady Dedlock sits before him, looking him through, with the same dark shade upon her face, in the same attitude even to the holding of the screen, with her lips a little apart, her brow a little contracted, but, for the moment, dead. He sees her consciousness return, sees a tremor pass across her frame like a ripple over water, sees her lips shake, sees her compose them by a great effort, sees her force herself back to the knowledge of his presence, and of what he has said. All this, so quickly, that her exclamation and her dead condition seem to have passed away like the features of those long-preserved dead bodies sometimes opened up in tombs, which, struck by the air like lightning, vanish in a breath.[24]

Lady Dedlock is set, again like the Sphinx, into a labyrinth of mythologies. She is both haunted by and haunts the Ghost Walk of her own estate, Chesney Wold. Legend has it that one of her noble

predecessors betrayed the Dedlock family, was made lame in a fit of rage by her husband, and paced the Ghost's Walk until she fell dead, first threatening to walk there whenever disgrace was to fall on the Dedlock name. Lady Dedlock becomes both the ghost and the woman threatened by the curse: "But the step on Ghost's Walk will walk my Lady down . . . it has been many a day behind her, and now it will pass her, and go on."[25]

Another layer is placed over this fable when Tulkinghorn, the family lawyer, presumes to threaten Lady Dedlock with a story of a proud lady who is in peril of disgracing the family honor through her own ignominy. Lady Dedlock becomes a stock figure in her own set of legends. And she responds in character: "By the moonlight, Lady Dedlock can be seen in profile, perfectly still."[26] "She stands looking out at the same stars without a word. They are beginning to pale, and she looks as if their coldness froze her."[27]

The desperation and anger locked away in her breast give her the Medusa's gaze, turning her own daughter into stone:

> Lady Dedlock looked at me, and I looked at her, . . . All at once she turned from me with a hasty air, almost expressive of displeasure or dislike, . . . With her air of superiority, and power, and fascination, . . . she was as self-possessed, and as free to occupy herself with her own thoughts, as if she had been alone.[28]

Esther is understandably confused by Lady Dedlock's gaze. From it stares the mystery of Esther's life:

> Shall I ever forget the manner in which those handsome proud eyes seemed to spring out of their languor, and to hold mine! . . . but, I knew the beautiful face quite well, in that short space of time. . . . But why her face should be, in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances; and why I should be so fluttered and troubled . . . by having

> casually met her eyes; I could not think. . . . And yet *I-I*, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing--seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady . . .[29]

For me the most electrifying words of this passage are "like a broken glass to me". Esther gazes into her mother's face, and it is a mirror of her own face. Esther's recognition of herself in her mother is crucial because it is an essential formative stage in the mother/infant relationship:

> An important stage in this process of separating out involves the reflection that the infant receives of itself from its mother's face. Winnicott includes here the mother's entire manner of relating to her infant as expressed in her gaze. "What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there*"[112]. The mother's role as an agent in the process of reflection means that her responsiveness to her infant has a profound influence on its subsequent development. . . . Winnicott's disarmingly simple statement that "the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face"[111] performs a significant transformation on the concept of the mirror stage. . . . The mother is as essential to Winnicott's account as she is irrelevant to Lacan's.[30]

Esther's mother represents layer upon layer of enigmatic significance. Like a cipher in a fairy tale she is at once the severe, stultifying face of condemning stepmother, the sin and shame of fallen womanhood, and the heartfelt desire and love for her lost child. All these are in Lady Dedlock's passionate cries and embrace. The young woman desperately tries to decipher the dual message of love and rejection, pride and shame that her mother sends:

> I could no more have removed my eyes from her pale face, than I could have stirred from the bench on which I sat. She gave me her hand; and its deadly coldness, so at variance with the enforced composure of her features,

> deepened the fascination that overpowered me. I cannot say what was in my whirling thoughts . . .[31]

For Esther the mystery only deepens. To all little girls, as both Freud and Jung would have it, their mothers are inscrutable, the most desired object of their infant lives, yet the most forbidden territory of their expected adult behavior. Taught by society to reject the mother as valueless, yet expected by the same society to emulate her role, Esther is unexceptional in her inability to read her mother's or her own desires:

> I turn your face around! It is my face.
> That frozen rage is what I must explore--
> Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!
> This is the gift I thank Medusa for.[32]

Honoria Dedlock's abasement exemplifies the attitude all women are supposed to feel given their sinful lineage. Esther, as dutiful daughter, would be expected to accept the simultaneous challenge of degradation and exemplary virtue:

> I looked at her; but I could not see her, I could not hear her, I could not draw my breath. The beating of my heart was so violent and wild, that I felt as if my life were breaking from me. But when she caught me to her breast, kissed me, wept over me, compassionated me, and called me back to myself; when she fell on her knees and cried to me, "O my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! O try to forgive me!"--when I saw her at my feet on the bare earth in her great agony of mind, I felt, through all my tumult of emotion, a burst of gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed as that I never could disgrace her by any trace of likeness; as that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us.
>
> I raised my mother up, praying and beseeching her not to stoop before me in such affliction and humiliation.[33]

Lady Dedlock and Esther are set in a tragedy as old as mother/daughter love in a patriarchal society. Esther finally hears

her mother's guilt and shame. What she never sees or hears is her mother's rage. This justified anger is turned violently inward and expressed in nearly silent screams:

> Words, sobs, and cries, are but air; and air is so shut in and shut out throughout the house in town, that sounds need be uttered trumpet-tongued indeed by my Lady in her chamber, to carry any faint vibration to Sir Leicester's ears; and yet this cry is in the house, going upward from a wild figure on its knees.
>
> "O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me; but sternly nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name! O my child, O my child!"[34]

Ironically, the one person who does recognize the full power and rage of Lady Dedlock is her adversary, Tulkinghorn. He, as representative of the paternal establishment of the law, is the most appropriate agent to keep this mother confined and stifled. He is effective, hut he is also awed by Lady Dedlock's ferocity:

> "The power and force of this woman are astonishing!"[35]
>
> He would know it all the better, if he saw the woman pacing her own rooms with her hair wildly thrown from her flung back face, her hands clasped behind her head, her figure twisted as if by pain. He would think so all the more, if he saw the woman thus hurrying up and down for hours, without fatigue, without intermission, followed by the faithful step upon the Ghost's Walk.[36]

The passion that Lady Dedlock expresses in her own chamber is what kills her. It is the impetus of her "sin" and the agent of her desperate flight across the landscape. But Lady Dedlock's death is not enough to assuage propriety. Esther too must pay for the sin of her mother. I speak here of Esther's scarred face after her illness. The scars have a twofold meaning: the first is the obvious stigma inherited through her mother from Eve. And second, what daughter would not be blighted in her vision of what she might become if she

stood in the gaze of a mother so wasted of maternal experience and so rigid in social potential. Though Esther valiantly denies the charge that the sins of the "father are visited upon the son," she is incorrect because she has misnamed the gender.

Esther's story initially parallels the Cinderella tale which begins with a wicked stepmother. Indeed, this god mother is quite evil, but the words she imparts to Esther are both vindictive and profound:

> It would have been far better little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born! . . . Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come--and soon enough--when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can. . . . For yourself, unfortunate girl, orphaned and degraded from the first of these evil anniversaries, pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written. Forget your mother and leave all other people to forget her who will do her unhappy child that greatest kindness. Now, go![37]

The sins of her mother are most certainly visited upon her in a most unsightly manner. Dickens will not entirely forgive either Lady Dedlock or Esther for following Eve's example. Esther cannot remain as beautiful as her sinful mother, she must be reduced, burned in fever and humbled by self-doubt, before she can be assured of her place as virtuous heroine of *Bleak House*:

> In falling ill, I seemed to have crossed a dark lake, and to have left all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore. . . . the way in which these divisions of time became confused with one another, distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman . . . it seemed one long night . . . when I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again . . .[38]

Having found her mother, Esther assumes the role her mother designates for her. She participates in the silence that has condemned her mother and which will condemn her to a life of limited experience. The emotional power which is evident in their relationship cannot be acknowledged even to themselves:

> It matters little now, how much I thought of my living mother who had told me evermore to consider her dead. I could not venture to approach her, or to communicate with her in writing, for my sense of the peril in which her life was passed was only to be equalled by my fears of increasing it. Knowing that my mere existence as a living creature was an unforeseen danger in her way, I could not always conquer that terror of myself which had seized me when I first knew the secret. At no time did I dare to utter her name. I felt as if I did not even dare to hear it.[39]

Esther has taken on her mother's Medusa abilities. She holds the power to freeze her mother's life into misery too, remaining silent and upholding the legacy her mother has left. Lady Dedlock of Chesney Wold, the grand dame of Victorian Society is regenerated into simple Esther Summerson of the quaint village homestead.

Before this transformation can occur, Esther must search for and find her mother through the underworld of London and its outlying areas. Esther finds her mother by first traversing the river, the brickyard and then Chancery Lane, only to find a fragmented message and a corpse:

> "I came to the cottage with two objects. First, to see the dear one, if I could, once more--but only to see her--not to speak to her, or let her know that I was near. . . . Do not blame the mother for her share. . . . You remember her dead child. . . . "I have wandered a long distance, and for many hours, . . . Cold, wet, and fatigue, are sufficient causes for my being found dead; but I shall die of others, though I suffer from these. It was right that . . . I should die of terror and my conscience. . . . "I have done all I could do to be lost.

> I shall be soon forgotten so, and shall disgrace him least. I have nothing about me by which I can be recognized. This paper I part with now. The place where I shall lie down, if I can get so far, has been often in my mind. Farewell. Forgive."[40]

In this often cryptic letter, Lady Dedlock refers to the "dear one," the "mother," and the "dead child." On a literal level we know that the first refers to Esther, the second to Jenny of the brickyard, and the third to Jenny's baby. But on an emotional, interpretive level, the elements interchange, and the message takes on mythic meaning, particularly when coupled with Esther's initial confusion and language when she finally locates her mother at the gates of the graveyard:

> The gate was closed. Beyond it, was a burial ground--a dreadful spot in which the night was very slowly stirring; but where I could dimly see heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, . . . On the step at the gate, drenched in a fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everything, I saw, with a cry of pity and horror, a woman lying . . . the mother of the dead child. She lay there, with one arm creeping round a bar of the iron gate, and seeming to embrace it. . . . She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature. . . . she lay there, and they stopped me! I saw, but did not comprehend . . . I passed on to the gate, and stooped down. I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. And it was my mother, cold and dead.[41]

Esther finds her mother on the verge of the literal underworld. Lady Dedlock is about to claim the territory which she has unwittingly presided over throughout the novel.

The fact that Esther mistakes her mother for Jenny, the mother of the dead child, is no mere melodramatic trick on Dickens' part. Lady Dedlock *is* the mother of the dead child, Esther. Honoria thought her baby was dead: Esther was told she might as well have

been dead, and must remain the non-child of Lady Dedlock. Lady Dedlock is superb in her role as spectral mother, fulfilling her duties even beyond her temporal ones:

> It is known for certain that the handsome Lady Dedlock lies in the mausoleum in the park, where the trees arch darkly overhead, and the owl is heard at night making the woods ring; but whence she was brought home, to be laid among the echoes of that solitary place, or how she died, is all mystery.[42]

Of course the haughty vacuousness and severe distance of the wealthy are here criticized and put into clear contrast with the homely virtue and warm connections of the middle class. Yet Esther's reward is dubious at best considering the nomenclature of the house over which she presides. How glorious it would be to see Honoria Dedlock welcome Esther into the power and glory she has earned with her hard, lonely years of grief and fear. Why couldn't the truth give Honoria voice and power rather than kill her? But that is not a question for Victorian England. The question of whether a woman once dishonored can regain her virtuous stature in the eyes of Victorian England is answered unequivocally in *Bleak House* and in the other novels addressed in this chapter.

Hetty Sorrel - *Adam Bede*

George Eliot was heavily influenced by Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, and this influence is particularly evident in *Adam Bede*.[43] Arthur Donnithorne is British cousin to Arthur Dimmesdale and Hetty

Sorrel is a distant relation to Hester Prynne. But though the names are varied only slightly and the essential ingredient of illicit love is the impetus, the flavor and judgment of this novel are unique. Where Hawthorne is purging his soul and exorcizing legendary guilt, and Dickens is weaving tales out of archetypal fabric, Eliot is crafting a story that fits real life very like a glove. The tragedy of Hetty Sorrel is based on a true account of a young woman who was accused, found guilty, and hung for the crime of infanticide[44]. Hetty's experience, though extreme, is a representation of the real life consequences of becoming a single mother:

> Throughout history numberless women have killed children they knew they could not rear, whether economically or emotionally, children forced upon them by rape, ignorance, poverty, marriage, or by the absence of, or sanctions against, birth control and abortion. . . . Under Christianity, infanticide was forbidden as a policy, but it continued nonetheless to be practiced as an individual act, in which women, raped or seduced and then branded with their "sin," and under pain of torture or execution, have in guilt, self-loathing, and blind desperation done away with the newborns they had carried in their bodies. . . . The Victorian period abounds with cases of the seduction (read "rape") of servant girls by their employers; if they refused sex, they would be fired, and many were fired anyway for getting pregnant. Disraeli admitted in 1845 that "infanticide is practiced as extensively and as legally in England as it is on the banks of the Ganges."[45]

Through Hetty Sorrel we can experience the social wall of blame and ostracism that faces an illegitimately pregnant woman. She therefore becomes another specter, wandering forlornly until she too finds the grave she is meant to tend.

Although Hetty shares Hester Prynne's physical luxuriousness, her beauty is coy and tender where Hester's was radiant and mature. Eliot is working at a different version of the anima, and Hetty,

because she is allowed no control, comes off much worse than her namesake. Eliot treads a fine line with her characterization of Hetty. Like many of her Victorian contemporaries, Eliot wants Hetty more ways than one; the young woman is both infantile and seductive, innocent and provocative. Eliot, albeit working toward a realistic approach, infuses Hetty with such sensuality and earthiness that she turns her into a little goddess of fertility. The implication sits waiting for our judgment; *is* Hetty guilty, and if she is do we condemn her? Her shallow, materialistic desires make her more than silly coquette. But are we meant to believe that she is atavistic enough to be willing to sell her favors? Prevailing attitudes of the day would not be sympathetic as E. M. Sigsworth and T. J. Wyke demonstrate in "A Study of Victorian Proastitution and Venereal Disease":

> It was not only the equation of poverty with prostitution which was stressed, but the "love of vanity" was sternly denounced: "If I seek to number the operative courses other than passion of the woman, I am met on the very threshold of the task by vanity, vanity, and then vanity--for what but this are love of dress and admiration and what sacrifices will not tens of thousands of the uneducated make to gain these?"(Acton, 1857, p.21.)[46]

Hetty is certainly vain, but Eliot persistently informs us that she has reason to be. Further, Hetty's vanity is of a certain unselfconscious type; Hetty is not particularly conniving or deeply disingenuous. Most intriguing are Eliot's lush descriptions of Hetty, so that we too want to spoil her a bit, find the dimples of her arms delicious, and wouldn't mind seducing those lovely lashes and stray tendrils falling on her neck. Eliot herself confesses that Hetty puts her in a turmoil:

> . . . there is one order of beauty which seems made to turn the heads not only of men, but of all intelligent mammals, even of women. It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief--a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you. Hetty Sorrel's was that sort of beauty.[47]

All the imagery here is innocent, callow and provocative in the unconsciousness with which it draws the observer in and the desire it inspires.

But the kittenlike beauty with which Eliot imbues Hetty is a trap set to spring on Victorian sensibilities. The imagery is all about newness and new birth, a particularly circular kind of language describing a young girl about to give birth herself. A woman's innocence was a part of her innate being, not a stage through which she passed to maturation. The question then becomes whether Hetty is an unwitting participant in her downfall or a premeditating flirt, who deserves the repercussions:

> Femina Sensualis, like her masculine counterpart, Homo Sensualis, was an inarticulated but real model of feminine human nature . . . Unlike Homo Sensualis, in whom the conflict of . . . antagonistic sexual motives was always conscious and intense, Femina Sensualis was a dual model, either innocent or tainted, in whom the conflict took place unconsciously for the innocent or consciously for the tainted. . . . According to respectable theory all women had "mercifully" bestowed upon them "a remnant of the innocence of Paradise." . . . Innocence as the respectable state of womanly consciousness as sustained through innocence as the respectable mechanism of repression. Repressive innocence created psychological resistance to the conscious acknowledgment of sexual realities unpalatable to the world of respectability in its mindless innocence.[48]

Hetty *is* a child. A child of Nature, a butter-maker, innocent and beguiling. On the farm she is in charge of the most evocative of

tasks, and she is set in the cool, shaded and moist recesses of the barn. Of course she is susceptible to the influences of sweet affection, she is a fecund deity herself. Eliot takes great pains to then release her into the dangerous, unmanicured woods, making her akin to the nymphs that haunt the place. Hetty is unable to recognize the "fall" imminent in such a place, because she innately belongs there.

> It was a wood of beeches and limes, with here and there a light silver-stemmed birch--just the sort of wood most haunted by the nymphs: you see their white sunlit limbs gleaming athwart the boughs, or peeping from behind the smooth-sweeping outline of a tall lime; you hear their soft liquid laughter . . . It was not a grove with measured grass or rolled gravel for you to tread upon, but with narrow, hollow-shaped, earthy paths, edged with faint dashes of delicate moss-paths which look as if they were made by the free will of the trees and underwoods, moving reverently aside to look at the tall queen of the white-footed nymphs.
>
> It was a still afternoon . . . an afternoon in which destiny disguises her cold awful face behind a hazy radiant veil, encloses us in warm downy wings, and poisons us with violet-scented breath.[49]

Eliot has placed Hetty in forbidden territory, the garden of Eden, but Eden after the fall. Knowledge and time do exist in this wood, but even though Hetty has not eaten of the fruit and is still the innocent, she is also Eve, the "queen of the white footed nymphs":

> As for Hetty, her feet rested on a cloud, and she was borne along by warm zephyrs; she had forgotten her rose-coloured ribbons; she was no more conscious of her limbs than if her childish soul had passed into a water-lily, resting on a liquid bed and warmed by the midsummer sunbeams.[50]

Because Eliot allows Hetty a "childish soul," Arthur's culpability becomes even more repugnant. Yet in the final judgment and resolution Eliot allows him far more moral leeway than she does Hetty, following social standards that have changed little: "The

initiative for seduction was entirely the seducer's own although the seduced woman paid the inexorable penalty of social ostracism for her seduction".[51] Arthur is forgiven in the end by Adam, the moral touchstone of the novel, but more important is the general acceptance of Arthur's behavior. Again, Sigsworth and Wyke quote Acton:

> It cannot be denied by anyone acquainted with rural life that seduction of girls is a sport and a habit with vast numbers of men, married . . . and single, placed above the ranks of labour . . . Many such rustics of the middle class and men of parallel grades in country towns employ a portion of their spare time in the coarse, deliberate villainy of making prostitutes . . . Men who themselves employ female labour, or direct it for others, have always ample opportunities of choice, compulsion, secrecy and subsequent intimidation, should exposure be probable and disagreeable . . . With these and with the gentlemen whose *délassement* is the contamination of town servants and *ouvrières*, the first grand engine is, of course, vanity . . . (1875, p. 175).[52]

Once Hetty is seduced, Eliot's interest in her increases, allowing her more and more room to play on the emotions and reactions of her Victorian readers. Eliot's benevolence toward Hetty is muted; she spares no details of Hetty's crime in order to shock her audience.[53] The prurient, tabloid nature of Hetty's story allows Eliot to veer little from the flavor of popular interest in such a "case". But pity Hetty she does:

> Hetty seemed unhappy sometimes. . . . a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge from swift-advancing shame, understanding no more of this life of ours than a foolish lost lamb wandering farther and farther in the nightfall on the lonely heath, yet tasting the bitterest of life's bitterness.[54]

But Eliot also is quick to carefully inject certain attitudes and postures of Hetty's that would be hard evidence against her if a jury were to know of them:

> Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again; they were worse than the nasty little lambs that the shepherd was always bringing in to be taken special care of in lambing time; for the lambs *were* got rid of sooner or later.[55]

Anyone registering a protest that this is a child's attitude about other children would be shouted down by the good, honest folk of Hayslope.

Hetty is presented as unnatural in her reaction to children, and certainly monstrous in her rejection of her baby. Maternal instincts are expected to run deep in every woman. In *The (M)other Tongue*, Susan Rubin Suleiman examines the destructive projection onto women that normal mothers are self-effacing:

> According to Helene Deutsch, the sine qua non of normal motherhood is "the masochistic-feminine willingness to sacrifice"--a sacrifice made easy by the impulse of maternal love, whose "chief characteristic is tenderness. All the aggression and sexual sensuality in the woman's personality are suppressed and diverted by this central emotional expression of motherliness."[56]

Hetty's lack of maternal impulse brands her as unwomanly and prepares the way for the atrocity that she eventually commits. The rejection she faces is exacerbated by everyone's perception of her as unfeeling. Possibly the Poyser family could in time have accepted her child, but Hetty is the first to recognize the anger and rejection she would initially receive even from those closest to her:

> The sense of family dishonour was too keen even in the kind-hearted Martin Poyser the younger to leave room for any compassion towards Hetty. . . . and Hetty had brought disgrace on them all--disgrace that could never be wiped out.[57]

Hetty rightly assumes that her pregnancy is the end of any future for her, the end of any control she has over her life, and the end of any

improvement she could have hoped for in her domestic situation. Hetty, the childish, wishful thinker, becomes a realist. Hetty becomes a woman:

> There was nothing but immediate beggary before her. She thought of a young woman who had been found against the church wall at Hayslope one Sunday, nearly dead with cold and hunger--a tiny infant in her arms.[58]

Any empathy Eliot displayed fades rapidly and turns to a guarded sympathy as she reveals the "true" nature of Hetty's heart and mind. If we believed that Hetty was an innocent before, Eliot assures us that Hetty was a pagan innocent before, and is increasingly turning a hard face to any Christian god:

> She went more slowly than she came, often getting over the stiles and sitting for hours under the hedgerows, looking before her with blank, beautiful eyes; fancying herself at the edge of a hidden pool, low down, like that in the Scantlands; wondering if it were very painful to be drowned and if there would be anything worse after death than what she dreaded in life. . . . You would misunderstand her thoughts during these wretched days, if you imagined that they were influenced either by religious fears or religious hopes.[59]

Having carefully placed Hetty outside the realm of patriarchal Christianity, Eliot continues, at times with almost an air of surprise that Hetty's childish pouting has turned to a more mature and bitter despondency:

> Poor wandering Hetty, with the rounded childish face and the hard, unloving, despairing soul looking out of it--with the narrow heart and narrow thoughts, no room in them for any sorrows but her own, and tasting that sorrow with the more intense bitterness! . . . What will be the end, the end of her objectless wandering, apart from all love, caring for human beings only through her pride, clinging to life only as the hunted wounded brute clings to it?[60]

Hetty now takes up her adult role as single mother on the edge of the social fabric. The blushing, child goddess of fertility has been

deflowered and becomes the scorned and avenging deity of the underworld.

She passes through villages, towns and homes with her obvious pain and fear, yet no one takes the time or has the courage to acknowledge Hetty's plight and give her uncompromising, nonjudgmental help. Hetty sees herself reflected in the rejecting eyes of her community:

> And yet, even in her most self-conscious moments, the face was sadly different from that which had smiled at itself in the old specked glass, or smiled at others when they glanced at it admiringly. A hard and even fierce look had come in the eyes, though their lashes were as long as ever, and they had all their dark brightness. And the cheek was never dimpled with smiles now. It was the same rounded pouting, childish prettiness, but with all love and belief in love departed from it--the sadder for its beauty, like that wondrous Medusa-face, with the passionate, passionless lips.[61]

Gilbert & Gubar remarking on Hetty's transformation, see in her the outcast woman of the Lilith legend with whom Hetty shares the crime of infanticide. But their discussion moves further into the subversive nature of Eliot's Eve/Ave narrative:

> . . . yet, even in books dedicated to dramatizing the discrepancy between the antithetical faces of Eve, Eliot seems to provide subversive evidence that the fallen murderess is inalterably linked to the angelic Madonna. In *Adam Bede*, for example, the two Poyser nieces are orphans, occupying neighboring rooms, and Hetty actually dresses up as Dinah, even as Dinah seems to haunt Hetty.[62]

Hetty's beauty and her poignant trek across a wasteland of despair does have a parallel with Mary's flight into Egypt. The spoiling of innocence is avenged, albeit poorly, by the Madonna-like Dinah. In fact Dinah is the only one who can make Hetty confess the truth: "Dinah did not seem to belong to that world of Hetty's whose glance

she dreaded like scorching fire."[63] Hetty and Dinah are the antipathetic halves of woman's nature. Hetty's sin damns her socially and morally, yet Hetty's intentions are not so clearcut as to allow Eliot to be comfortable seeing her hanged.

On reading the "transcript" of the trial, Hetty's confusion and dilemma are evident; denying and discarding a child who is valueless to society, yet allowing its cry to instigate everything she is and does. In a panic she abandons the baby, but does not destroy it, and in an intuitive, emotive fashion hopes for the child to be spared, and wanders back to see how it is doing. Hetty's actions once the baby is born are a condensed metaphor of a single mother's ambivalent passions toward her child. To keep her child would be flying in the face of social conduct; for all other humans consider it a bastard. Her choices are virtually nonexistent.

> "I don't know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it--it was like a heavy weight hanging round my neck; and yet its crying went through me, and I daredn't look at its little hands and face. . . . And all of a sudden I saw a hole under the nut-tree, like a little grave. And it darted into me like lightning--I'd lay the baby there and cover it with the grass and the chips. I couldn't kill it any other way. And I'd done it in a minute; and, oh, it cried so, Dinah--I *couldn't* cover it quite up--I thought perhaps somebody 'ud come and take care of it, and then it wouldn't die. And I made haste out of the wood, but I could hear it crying all the while; and when I got out into the fields, it was as if I was held fast--I couldn't go away, for all I wanted so to go. And I sat against the haystack to watch if anybody 'ud come. I was very hungry, and I'd only a bit of bread left, but I couldn't go away. And after ever such a while--hours and hours--the man came--him in a smock-frock, and he looked at me so, I was frightened, and I made haste and went on. I thought he was going to the wood and would perhaps find the baby. And I went right on, till I came to a village, a long way off from the wood, and I was very sick, and faint, and hungry. I got something to eat there, and bought a loaf. But I was

> frightened to stay. I heard the baby crying, and thought the other folks heard it too--and I went on. But I was so tired, and it was getting towards dark. And at last by the roadside there was a barn . . . and I thought I could go in there and hide myself among the hay and straw . . . And I made myself a bed, . . . and I was so tired and weak, I went to sleep . . . But oh, the baby's crying kept waking me . . . But I must have slept a long while at last . . . when I got up . . . it was morning, . . . and I turned back the way I'd come. I couldn't help it, Dinah; it was the baby's crying made me go--and yet I was frightened to death. I thought that man in the smock-frock 'ud see me and know I put the baby there. But I went on for all that. . . . and I could hear it crying at every step. . . I thought it was alive. . . . I don't know whether I was frightened or glad. . . I don't know what I felt. I only know I was in the wood and heard the cry. I don't know what I felt till I saw the baby was gone. And when I'd put it there, I thought I should like somebody to find it and save it from dying; but when I saw it was gone, I was struck like a stone, with fear. I never thought o'stirring, I felt so weak. I knew I couldn't run away, and everybody as saw me 'ud know about the baby. My heart went like a stone. I couldn't wish or try for anything; it seemed like as if I should stay there for ever and nothing 'ud ever change. But they came and took me away."[64]

Hetty's impulse to do away with the baby comes after a protracted struggle over whether to commit suicide before she gives birth. She does not drown herself, but the Hetty left roaming the fields is a much diminished woman. She is less than ideal as a woman and as a mother. Suleiman continues her discussion of the traditional view of motherhood, working against such psychoanalysts as Alice Balint, Melanie Klein and Nancy Chodorow:

> Let me return, however, to the psychoanalytic view of motherhood as it exists in the traditional literature. . . . "The ideal mother has no interests of her own. . . For all of us it remains self-evident that the interests of mother and child are identical, and it's the generally acknowledged measure of the goodness or badness of the mother how far she really feels this identity of interests." . . . "analysts do not consider their prescription difficult for most 'normal' mothers to fulfill." Melanie Klein speaks with great sympathy and understanding about

> the murderous impulses that every child feels toward its beloved mother; she does not speak about the murderous impulses that a mother may feel toward her beloved child.[65]

Hetty's rage, which first inspires her to drown herself in a lonely pool turns to a sudden impulse to rid herself of her baby. The isolation in which Hetty searches for Arthur to help her in her condition, contemplates her own destruction, and then abandons the infant is a metaphor for the nonsupport to be expected from such fathers and social constructs. Hetty Sorrel correctly assumes that she "couldn't wish or try for anything . . . and nothing 'ud ever change".

Consistent with Hetty's recognition of isolation is her distrust of everyone from the farmer to Dinah Morris. Dinah can get Hetty to express her pain, but she is impotent to assuage it or prevent it from happening again. The moral universe in which Hetty exists is unambiguous in its righteous determination that such evil must be punished. In *Abortion, Choice and Contemporary Fiction*, Judith Wilt begins her discussion of choice with a look at Victorian values:

> If motherhood is the type of Eliot's major moral principle, "life in another life," infanticide is the type of minor principle that also informs all her work--irrevocableness. . . . the ultimate embodiment of the deed that cannot be undone, the last "word" that cannot be unspoken, is the dead body of Hetty's child, denied but born, buried but found. Here, where the refusal of life in another life meets the denial that acts have irrevocable consequences, is the heart of Eliot's moral universe. "Nature" and culture, too, "irrevocably" give this primary role, representing life in another life, to the female. Eliot's art tries to extend it to Adam and to all humanity, though the price here is the erasure of Hetty's female nature in the masculinized "hardness" of her "culprit" face, the face that denies irrevocableness.

> Here, too, is the heart of nineteenth-century narrative, which moves ever to the speech that shatters the veils of concealment, the detailing of the "irrevocable."[66]

Hetty's verdict is based on fact. But Eliot softens the blow by transmuting the sentence. Importantly, Dinah cannot save Hetty from the scaffold. Dinah's purity is antipathetic to Hetty's tarnished "nature," and as a woman she has not the social power to absolve her. It takes the father of the child, Arthur Donnithorne, to rush in melodramatically with a stay of execution. Hetty is then merely transported to a life of hard labor. If we are meant to feel eased by this ending, it hardly works. Hetty and her baby become little more than a statistic:

> Once the child was a living reality, the mother who could not raise it herself had three options. She could pay another woman to nurse and raise it, she could abandon it, preferably to a foundling hospital, or she could let it die or kill it. Hundreds of thousands of European women resorted to these methods, usually to ensure the survival of themselves or their older children. . . . [In] 1870, there were 276 dead babies found in the streets of London.[67]

The desperate, angry Terrible Mother does have choices, but god help her if she acts on them.

Tess Durbyfield - *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a transition book in both its placement in history and its treatment of the protagonist. Published in 1891, the novel tries to work against Vic-

torian notions of morality, yet decidedly exhibits the values and perspectives of the age. Hardy's depiction of Tess uses the elements of realism in conveying her psychological motivations as well as the surrounding atmosphere which influences her. Yet Tess is also an archetypal figure in whom Hardy has infused so many elements of myth, legend, fairy tale and Christian and pagan religion, that she becomes a perfect anomaly of characteristics. Tess is a character that beseeches compassion from her readers, though she gets none on the road Hardy makes her walk. In Tess, Hardy provocatively combines the fertile and transgressing Eve with the all-suffering and transformative Madonna.[68] Tess' female "nature" exhibits so many facets that she is a woman both malleable and mutable: "She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman - a whole sex condensed into one typical form."[69] Underlying the sexual allure of Tess is the predominant theme of death. Tess, as single mother, transforms herself into Great Mother who exists in the beginnings of all cultures, and so takes her place presiding over the grave:

> The goddess Nut, represented on the top of the sarcophagus as taking the dead man into her arms is the same mother of death as the Christian Pietà, the Madonna, holding in her lap the dead Jesus, the child of death, who has returned to her. And she is identical with the primitive vessel and urn that shelter both child and adult.[70]

Tess's feminine beauty, as with Hester Prynne's and Hetty Sorrel's, is of extreme relevance to the outcome of the novel. Hardy poses the question of whether we are to read Tess as beautiful because she is inherently innocent and virtuous, or whether her beauty is the fatal flaw in her spiritual existence:

> She had an attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now . . . It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fulness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother . . . [71]

The tainted legacy of primal attraction and insecure morality is evident in Hardy's lines, despite his insistence on fate and Alec's culpability. Do we assign any blame to Tess or her malefactors, or does Hardy assert that her allure is an element of fate? To compound the question, Hardy injects Tess' real mother as the purveyor of doubtful knowledge. The legacy Tess inherits from her mother is not only fatal beauty, but fatal ignorance as well:

> "Why didn't you tell me there was danger in menfolk? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me!"
> "You ought to have been more careful if you didn't mean to get him to make you his wife! . . . Tis nater, after all, and what do please God!"[72]

But Hardy doesn't play fairly, participating in the undoing of Tess in the way he positions and highlights her against the scenery. Hardy himself then rapes Tess; performing vicarious sexual advances on her every time he creeps on her unawares and describes in sumptuous detail the curve of her lips, or the heave of her bosom:

> The outskirts of the garden in which Tess found herself had been left uncultivated for some years, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of pollen at a touch; and with tall blooming weeds emitting offensive smells - weeds whose red and yellow and purple hues formed a polychrome as dazzling as that of cultivated flowers. She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made madder stains on her

> skin; thus she drew quite near to Clare, still unobserved of him.[73]

Hardy, like Alec and Angel, cannot let Tess determine her own way; he must conquer her with his prose. Placed repeatedly in gardens which bode her ill, Tess is than smeared with seminal goo. The fact that the once snow-white apple blossoms turn to "madder stains" is at once evidence of the corrupting atmosphere of the garden and the stealthy, seductive influence of Tess herself.

Tess enters our vision as a virgin offering to the gods of fertility, dressed in white with one unique mark of sexual potential, the red ribbon in her hair. Tess, is also set up as the family matriarch; she is expected to maintain the family honor and restore the family fortune and pride. This feat is to be performed by dint of her beauty. She is both the virgin sacrifice and the maternal protectress.

Tess, like the death-mother, Kali, is associated over and over with the dead and its territory. From the D'Urberville tomb where she and her family sleep after her father's death to the tomb upon which Angel Clare places her on their wedding night Tess finds herself ever associated with symbols of death: "The tombstone . . . is the sacred emblem in the cult of the overlooked."[74] In fact, Tess is quick to call herself a murderess, because she is either an active agent of death or casts a very frequent shadow over the grave. Though she is the protagonist of the novel, she is indeed socially "overlooked," and cast aside. More than any other woman examined in this discussion, Tess exists only on the extreme periphery of accepted society.

Before she can take her place as guardian of the underworld, Tess, like a primordial Eve, must advance the family hopes at the D'Urberville estate:

> . . . a truly venerable tract of forest land, one of the few remaining woodlands in England of undoubted primaeval date, wherein Druidical mistletoe was still found on aged oaks, and where enormous yew-trees, not planted by the hand of man, grew as they had grown when they were pollarded for bows.[75]

Alec D'Urberville appears as the lord of this estate, and is quick to spy vulnerable prey. He is the satanic seducer, and Hardy makes this obvious at his every appearance:

> . . . a figure came forth from the dark triangular door of the tent. It was that of a tall young man, smoking.
>
> He had an almost swarthy complexion, with full lips, badly molded, though red and smooth, above which was a well-groomed black moustache with curled points, though his age could not be more than three- or four-and-twenty. Despite the touches of barbarism in his contours, there was a singular force in the gentleman's face, and in his bold rolling eye.[76]

But one has to wonder if Hardy is purposefully obvious. Alec, with his curled mustache and smoke issuing from his person is a kind of tongue-in-cheek vice character. Certainly we are meant to see him as dangerous, but because we needn't see through him, he becomes patently entertaining. Alec proceeds to seduce her, and Hardy parallels faithfully the serpent enticing Eve to sin:

> D'Urberville began gathering specimens of the fruit for her, . . . presently, selecting a specially fine product of the 'British Queen' variety, he stood up and held it by the stem to her mouth.
>
> "No - no! she said quickly, putting her fingers between his hand and her lips. "I would rather take it in my own hand."
>
> "Nonsense!" he insisted; and in a slight distress she parted her lips and took it in.[77]

What could be more erotic and suggestive of the first Sin than Tess's parted lips? Hardy adds insult to the injury by suggesting coyly that Tess was doomed to fall, not because of Alec D'Urberville, but because Tess is Woman. Hardy follows in the tradition of Hawthorne and Eliot, creating Tess as Nature itself, solitary, untamable and mysterious--a sexual stereotype that Hardy revels in:

> She knew how to hit to a hair's breadth that moment of evening when the light and the darkness are so evenly balanced that the constraint of day and the suspense of night neutralize each other, leaving absolute mental liberty. . . . She had no fear of the shadows; her sole idea seemed to be to shun mankind . . . On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene. . . . by reason of the charm which is acquired by woman when she becomes part and parcel of outdoor nature, . . . a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it.[78]

In keeping with the association of Tess with her surroundings to the point where distinctions fade, the actual rape becomes an abstract gesture toward an ideal:

> The obscurity was now so great that he could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. . . . Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primaeval yews and oaks of the Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap . . . Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; . . . An immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine's personality thereafter from that previous self of hers who stepped from her mother's door to try her fortune at Trantridge poultry-farm.[79]

Tess becomes the most passive of female forms, a sleeping virgin who exhibits no initiative in the sexuality perpetrated upon her. Yet

Tess has the same potential latent in a Sleeping Beauty, a delicious and troublesome icon of the Victorian era, outraged and dangerous when awakened:

> As a traditional legend adapted itself to popular mythology, it told of terror as well as safety in sleeping womanhood, who as a vehicle of violent change implies her own explosive arousal.[80]

Indeed, Tess is aroused and transformed. Although she remains the pathetic victim of Alec, Clare, her father and the hand of Hardy's "purblind doomster," she rouses herself from this oppressive stupor and voices the disbelief and rage in the anguish and esteem their acts have caused her. In confronting Alec with his behavior Tess displays her sense of the truth and her ability to dispense her own brand of justice:

> "I didn't understand your meaning till it was too late."
> "That's what every woman says.'
> "How can you dare to use such words!" she cried, turning impetuously upon him, her eyes flashing as the latent spirit (of which he was to see more some day) awoke in her. "My God! I could knock you out of the gig! Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?"[81]

Along with the Victorian penchant for passive heroines, Alec's rape of Tess and his subsequent hold over her were rather stock material for the era. Very like the morality plays of medieval times, the audience would have enjoyed hissing at Alec as well as vicariously urging him on:

> In the nineteenth century, as today, unreported and even unremarked upon assault against women too inured or too intimidated to risk further attack was a frequent incident among the lower classes. . . . Further down the rungs of connubial sensibility: "the vilest malefactor has some wretched woman tied to him, against whom he can commit any atrocity except killing her, and if tolerably

> cautious, can do that without much danger of the legal penalty." Such occasions were a favorite Victorian theme, particularly in the melodrama. The treatment afforded this subject matter, then as now, is often a curiously hypocritical mixture of prurient delight and moral compunction.[82]

Tess, once raped, allows Alec to take liberties with her for four months, an indication that Hardy is playing on the accepted notion that a woman once fallen is forever prone. But Tess becomes more complex as the story unfolds. She analyzes her options and questions her ability to choose. She accepts the burden of single mother, readily suffering the consequences:

> Get Alec D'Urberville in the mind to marry her! He marry *her*! On matrimony he had never once said a word. And what if he had? How a convulsive snatching at social salvation might have impelled her to answer him she could not say.[83]

For my purposes, the real climax of Tess' story occurs shortly after she denounces Alec for the first time and arrives back in the bosom of the Durbyfield home. Tess had accepted the burden of upholding the honor and continuation of the family name, become the matriarch of the Durbyfields, and she now solidifies herself in this role with her pregnancy. The importance and power of her maternity, however, is undermined by the patriarchy and Tess' own belief in it. Her behavior toward the child is again Hardy's subtle mixture of realism and myth. Tess is at first naturally ambivalent about the baby's presence. Like Hetty, Tess is both repulsed and obsessed with this child that has been thrust upon her:

> Tess, with a curiously stealthy yet courageous movement, and with a still rising colour, unfastened her frock and began suckling the child. . . . When the infant had taken its fill the young mother sat it upright in her lap, and looking into the far distance dandled it with a gloomy

> indifference that was almost dislike; then all of a sudden she fell to violently kissing it some dozens of times, as if she could never leave off, the child crying at the vehemence of an onset which strangely combined passionateness with contempt.[84]

The "passionateness and contempt" that Hardy describes is more natural than not, but Hardy fails to recognize the truth in his portrayal. Instead he proceeds to psychoanalyze this very young single mother, deciding that she misreads the truth of her situation:

> She might have seen that what had bowed her head so profoundly - the thought of the world's concern at her situation was founded on an illusion. She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. . . . Moreover, alone in a desert island would she have been wretched at what had happened to her? Not greatly. If she could have been but just created, to discover herself as a spouseless mother, with no experience of life except as the parent of a nameless child, would the position have caused her to despair? No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasures therein. Most of the misery had been generated by her conventional aspect, and not by her innate sensations.[85]

Had Hardy remotely understood the predicament Tess is in, he would have recognized that she might as well be on a desert island. Society ostracizes its "spouseless mothers," and the "nameless child" is nameless because the world concerns itself to erect social barriers; Tess' unwanted pregnancy is made a shared experience by those who make social laws. With his seeming sympathy Hardy very adroitly makes Tess the agent of her own misery, a very specious argument, which smacks of Eve, Eden and the snake. Unfortunately, Tess buys the argument fully.

Once sinned upon and then sinning herself, Tess tries to absolve her baby from sin by asking for its baptism. The question of baptism becomes crucial in Hardy's treatment of Tess as

"illegitimate" mother and her baby as usurper of the Durbyfield name. Tess desires the ceremony of the Father to legitimize her baby but must perform the rite herself. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly refutes the belief that reconciliation with the father is the path for a woman's spiritual salvation:

> Women who are willing to make the Journey of becoming must indeed recognize the fact of possession by the structures of evil and by the controllers and legitimators of these structures. But the solution is hardly "rebirth" (baptism) by the fathers in the name of male mating.[86]

Although Hardy's irony is evident in his description of Tess' trauma, he nevertheless pushes the Victorian point too heavily that the child had little right to exist in "proper" society: "The baby's offense against society in coming into the world was forgotten by the girl-mother; her soul's desire was to continue in that offense by preserving the life of the child."[87] Short of saving the baby's life, Tess, agreeing with Hardy that she would probably, and rightly, burn for her sin, at least tries to stave off eternal punishment for her child's "offense".

Inspired by fear of condemning her child to hell fire, Tess asks her father to go for the parson. But Hardy allows no patriarchal sanction to be bestowed on Tess or her child:

> The moment happened to be one at which her father's sense of the antique nobility of his family was highest, and his sensitiveness to the smudge which Tess had set upon that nobility most pronounced, . . . No parson should come inside his door, he declared.[88]

Social shame and her father's injured pride removes even the dubious Durbyfield legitimacy from the baby. Tess must now work within her own sense of sanctity to fight the "double doom for lack of baptism

and lack of legitimacy . . ."[89] Tess literally rises to the occasion both physically and spiritually by baptizing the child herself. In a scene that lifts itself from the page, Tess rouses her young siblings and transforms herself before them into a Madonna of redemption and piety:

> She lit a candle . . . Tess then stood erect with the infant on her arm beside the basin, the next sister held the Prayer-Book open before her, as the clerk at church held it before the parson; and thus the girl set about baptizing her child.
>
> Her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white nightgown, a thick cable of twisted dark hair hanging straight down her back to her waist. The kindly dimness of the weak candle abstracted . . . her form and features . . . her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with a touch of dignity which was almost regal . . .[90]

Mimicking the ritual which legitimizes children in the Christian community and marks the infant as paternal property, Tess becomes a high priestess and blesses the baby's birth. The most presumptuous act Tess performs in this ceremony is naming the baby herself:

> The essence of human society and communication is language, which is name-giving. Naming things is the very process of creation in many archaic myths. Naming people often meant bestowing life or soul upon them. . . . The privilege of naming children was one of the first privileges coveted by patriarchal groups because it was so important in maintaining the matrilineal succession of the earlier matriarchal clans. Mothers gave life and also souls represented by the names they handed down to their descendants.[91]

Casting about for a name which suits the conditions of birth, Tess knowingly anoints the child as a product of God's wrath: ". . . a name suggested by a phrase in the book of Genesis came into her head . . . SORROW, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the

Son, and of the Holy Ghost."[92] Having called upon the paternal trilogy in naming her baby, Tess proceeds to draw on her mother right to bless the baby:

> Here she dipped her hand into the basin, and fervently drew an immense cross upon the baby with her forefinger, continuing with the customary sentences . . . then [she] poured forth from the bottom of her heart the thanksgiving that follows, uttering it boldly and triumphantly in the stopt-diapason note . . . The ecstasy of faith almost apotheosized her; it set upon her face a glowing irradiation, and brought a red spot into the middle of each cheek; while the miniature candle-flame inverted in her eye-pupils shone like a diamond. The children gazed up at her with more and more reverence, and no longer had a will for questioning. She did not look like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering, and awful - a divine personage with whom they had nothing in common.[93]

Hardy's description of Tess is notable because Tess virtually grows and levitates, having been imbued with the supernatural ability to bestow eternal life. The ecstasy and awful divinity which Tess evokes is a mere glimpse at the emotional sea motherhood commands, particularly in the heightened passion of giving one's newborn over to death:

> A mother's identity survives only thanks to the well-known fact that consciousness is lulled by habit, wherein a woman protects herself along the frontier that divides her body and makes an expatriate of her child. A kind of lucidity, however, might restore her, cut in two, one half alien to the other--fertile soul for delirium. But also, and for that very reason maternity along its borders destines us to experience a frenzied ecstasy to which by chance the nursling's laugh responds in the sunlit ocean's waters. What is the relationship between him and me? No relation, except that abundant laughter into which some sonorous, subtle, fluid identity collapses, gently carried by the waves.[94]

Tess has carefully, beautifully, under the guise of Christian authenticity, played out the ritual of taking back to herself the child no one would or had a right to claim but herself. Of course,

Tess returns to her original, earthly status, but Hardy's desire to celebrate Tess by combining earthly beauty with heavenly designs is a measure of his own adoration for his creation.

The reality of Sorrow's weak constitution is a metaphor for its unwanted status. The baby has little life support, and Hardy underscores not only Tess' culpability but the baby's as well in the act of production. Again we are meant to understand Hard's ironic stance in this passage, yet the language has both a familiar and truthful ring. Sorrow's death begins to sound very like Sin's delivery of Death in *Paradise Lost*:

> Poor Sorrow's campaign against sin, the world, and the devil was doomed to be of limited brilliancy - luckily perhaps for himself, considering his beginnings. . . . So passed away Sorrow the Undesired - that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects not the social law . . .[95]

Sin's legacy continues, through Eve down to Tess. The implications and interpretations for and of women's existence reverberate endlessly throughout our culture. Perhaps the question of illegitimacy is precisely the reason Freud chose to ignore, or could not bring himself to face the preoedipal mother. It would mean acknowledging that children don't need the sanctioning of their fathers. Ironically, in our emotional development, we *do* need our fathers, someone who can counterbalance and increase the depth of parenting, but not as distant authoritative stampers of our birthright. We need them as parents who fulfill as intimately as mothers the role of primal caregivers and nurturers. Freud's relegation of the mother to a rejected, repressed status, binds us all to a stunted version of

parenting potential. Tess' child has to be named Sorrow, and it cannot survive.

In a more immediate sense childbirth was very much the expression of sorrow. One only has to visit eighteenth- and nineteenth-century graveyards to see the rows of small, white stones marking the repeated losses a woman faced:

> Death still threatened where it always had: in childbirth, in infancy, in childhood, and in old age. Nursing the dying remained women's province until the growth of hospital care in the twentieth century, and the death of a child retained its devastating force. A few weeks after Elizabeth Gaskell wrote her description of busy family life, her baby, Willie, died at ten months from scarlet fever. Three years later, she wrote a friend about the effect of his death on her:
>
> "I used to sit up in the room so often in the evenings reading by the fire, and watching my darling, *darling* Willie, who now sleeps sounder still in the dull dreary chapel-yard at Warrington. That wound will never heal on earth, although hardly any one knows how it has changed me. I wish you had seen my little fellow, dearest dear Annie. I can give you no idea what a darling he was--so affectionate and reasonable a baby I never saw."[96]

Even after death, however, neither Tess or the baby are relieved of their punishment. Castigated to the most neglected corner of the churchyard, Tess must resist those forces which would deny her experience:

> So the baby was carried in a small deal box, under an ancient woman's shawl, to the churchyard that night, and buried by lantern-light . . . in that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid. In spite of the untoward surroundings, however, Tess bravely made a little cross of two laths and a piece of string, and having bound it with flowers, she stuck it up at the head of the grave one evening when she could enter the churchyard without being seen . . . [97]

As in the baptism of Sorrow, Tess performs the necessary ritual to acknowledge her baby's existence and her own experience. Unwilling to disavow her connection to the little one she created, Tess follows her instincts. The "ancient woman's shawl" which drapes the coffin, the burial by night, and the jar of flowers are elements which bespeak female authority. Sorrow returns to the womb of death which is a type of maternal protection.[98]

Like Sin, Lilith and Eve, Tess is made to suffer the consequences of transgression. And although Hardy continues to toy with her stature, he ultimately subjects her to moral failing and execution. But through her persecution, Hardy persists in hinting that she belongs to the realm of nonChristian deities. Hunted now as an actual murderess, Tess comes to rest at Stonehenge, the Druidical temple of sacrifice and worship:

> "One of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it. And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home."
> ". . . I think you are lying on an altar."[99]

After her life's pilgrimage as a woman raped, scorned, shunned, abused, and disavowed, Tess finds herself at the ancient seat of nocturnal ritual. As Tess sleeps in the Temple of the Winds, the representatives of law and patriarchy partake in the ritual by keeping vigil until the priestess or goddess awakens: "All waited in the growing light, their faces and hands as if they were silvered, the remainder of their figures dark, the stones glistening green-gray, the Plain still a mass of shade."[100]

Tess' vigil at Stonehenge is more evidence of Hardy's essentially Victorian ambivalence toward her. She is dwarfed and made

pathetically insignificant by the enormity and timelessness of the ancient pillars among which she takes a dubious shelter. Yet by placing her on an altar of primordial significance, and allowing the powers of man to stand at bay as the sun rises over her, Hardy allows a hush to fall with the reverence due a high priestess or even a goddess. Neumann, in his chapter "Spiritual Transformation," associates the powers of the feminine in just such a setting as Stonehenge:

> Not only temple, tomb, and house but also the central pillar supporting the structure of the house is a symbol of the Great Mother. The earliest houses, in Mesopotamia, for example, consisted of mats supported by pillars, from which Levy derived the pillar symbol of the Great Mother.[101]

Tess has returned to her temple, although only temporarily. She resumes too quickly her place as fallen goddess. Unfortunately her ending resembles closely that of Lady Dedlock's and Hetty's. Lady Dedlock falls prone and ragged at the gates of death; Hetty is ignominiously sentenced to a life of hard labor, and Tess is captured and hung. Still, Tess does embody an enticing array of mythic and cultural symbols, and we are left to maneuver them into a semblance of meaning which possibly mitigates her suffering. Ultimately, though, she vividly enacts her role as Death Mother, and participates in the social denial of the power of the mother/infant bond.

Conclusion

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the force of the primal mother was denied and repressed. Single mothers were portrayed as dangerous or pathetic. At best they were sweet widow-women who subjugated their will to the needs of their children. Through the decades of the Victorian era, the fallen woman emerged in countless numbers both on the literal streets of England and the United States as well as in the pages of literature.

Although virtual shadow figures in their social landscape, these women held the fascination of the public. The phenomenon of single motherhood was beginning to vibrate and shake the assumptions of the status quo. Her connection to the monstrous mothers of medieval literature is the connection of potency. Allowing her a voice, no matter how small or stilted, meant listening to the Other. It becomes inevitable that Jocasta's or the Sphinx' version of the story would soon be told:

> The preoedipal mother, as Freud portrays her, refuses to stay in her place, creating a level of persistent, low-level disturbance that problematizes his attempts to theorize her subordination.[102]

As the nineteenth century closed and the theme of single motherhood grew stronger during the course of the twentieth century, the "low-level disturbance" increased to a social crisis. Like Lilith speaking the Ineffable, single motherhood was named. With this baptism, single mothers were recognized if not yet "legitimized".

Notes

[1] Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 5-8.

[2] Sprengnether 1.

[3] Kristeva 596.

[4] Helene E. Roberts, "Marriage, Redundancy or Sin: The Painter's View of Women in the First Twenty-Five Years of Victoria's Reign" in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) 63.

[5] Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Vicorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 18.

[6] Gilbert & Gubar 28.

[7] Sprengnether 39-40.

[8] Gilbert & Gubar 26.

[9] Nabokov prefaces his insights with a rather disparaging remark on Jane Austen's writing style. This strikes me as unnecessary since Dickens' tenacious claim on the canon requires no need to put him in a good light by casting a bad one on a predecessor. It seems a shabby means of criticism.

[10] Vladimir Nabokov, "Excerpts from *Lectures on Literature*" in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens (New York: Bantam Books, 1983) ix.

[11] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980) 9.

[12] Kate Millett, "The Debate over Women" in *Suffer and Be Still* ed. Martha Vicinus. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) 122.

[13] Kristeva 600.

[14] Hirsch 2.

[15] Dickens 372.

[16] Dickens 32.

[17] Dickens 63.

[18] Dickens 8.

[19] Dickens 44-45.

[20] Dickens 475-476.

[21] Dickens 714.

[22] Dickens 11.

[23] Dickens 143.

[24] Dickens 377-379.

[25] Dickens 734.

[26] Dickens 535.

[27] Dickens 540.

[28] Dickens 238.

[29] Dickens 232-233.

[30] Sprengnether 185.

[31] Dickens 473.

[32] May Sarton, "The Muse as Medusa" in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 477.

[33] Dickens 473.

[34] Dickens 381.

[35] Dickens 536.

[36] Dickens 541.

[37] Dickens 16.

[38] Dickens 453.

[39] Dickens 549.

[40] Dickens 752.

[41] Dickens 755-756.

[42] Dickens 811.

[43] "George Eliot had read *The Scarlet Letter* when it came out, and . . . expressed a great admiration for Hawthorne. The idea that Hawthorne's influence can be discovered in *Adam Bede* was

prompted, as it came to me, by the name Hetty. Once one thinks of Hester Prynne, the effect of the suggestion has its compelling significance, even if one is at first inclined to dismiss the echo as mere chance. The treatment of the agaonized conscience in Arthur Donnithorne convinces one before long that in the treatment of the seduction theme *The Scarlet Letter* has told significantly . . . For a writer in George Eliot's position, with no obvious model to start from, a congenial hint tht goes home deeply as a creative impulsion or reinforcement may have a disproportionate momentousness. And we have observed that Arthur Donnithorne opened for George Eliot a series of intensely charactaeristic studies: Hawthornes's influence, then, was at the centre and deep down. Since Hawthorne himself, we know, was a major influence on James, the three novelists together offer a suggestive illustration of the intimate cretive relations that may exist between artists of widely different genius"(F. R. Leavis, "Introduction" to *Adam Bede* by George Eliot [New York: Signet, 1961] ix-x).

[44] "There was, however, at this Nottingham assize, one case of child murder. The perpetrator was Mary Voce, a girl of only nineteen years, although married to a bricklayer and the mother of two children. In the Nottingham public journals of the day it was said that she was given to irregulariteis of life which led her husband to forsake her, and, being left with two young children, she administered poison to the younger of the two, was arraigned before judge and jury, and sentenced to be hung. Her case excited much compassion"(William Mottram, *The True Story of George Eliot; In Relation to "Adam Bede," Giving the Real Life History of the More Prominent Characters* [Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1906] 191).

[45] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 258-262.

[46] E. M. Sigsworth and T. J. Wyke, "A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease" in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana Universtiy Press, 1973) 82.

[47] George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York: Signet Classic, 1981) 90.

[48] Peter T. Cominos, "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict" in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) 156-157.

[49] Eliot 132.

[50] Eliot 133.

[51] Cominos 165.

[52] Sigsworth and Wyke 87.

[53] Dorothea Barrett accurately discusses Eliot's ambivelance toward Hetty as a kind of subconscious subversion: "Hetty, it seems to me, became a kind of Frankenstein monster for George Eliot. Created for a specific and limited purpose, Hetty breaks her confines and threatens to take over the novel. The narrator's lack of sympathy for Hetty defeats its apparent purpose--it wins readers to Hetty perhaps more than a gentler treatment would have done. Hetty is a thoroughly subversive figure: at odds with her community, disliked by her narrator, and ultimately evicted from the novel of which she threatened to become the unquestionable centre, her strength and stature are a victory of what can be seen as the subconsious subersive in George Eliot"(Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* [London: Routledge, 1989] 43-44).

[54] Eliot 346-347.

[55] Eliot 155. Barrett continues her discussion of Hetty, making the valid point that as a "tolerated, penniless relation," Hetty has no reason to love the dairy, the animals or the children of the Poyser family as they do. She also vindicates Hetty's "selfishness" by contrasting it with Dinah Morris' "egoism of the martyr"(Barrett 46).

[56] Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood" in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 353.

[57] Eliot 393.

[58] Eliot 361.

[59] Eliot 366.

[60] Eliot 371.

[61] Eliot 367.

[62] Gilbert & Gubar 496.

[63] Eliot 363.

[64] Eliot 429-431.

[65] Suleiman 355.

[66] Judith Wilt, *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: the Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 28-29.

[67] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol II* 245.

[68] ". . . in 1854, . . . the Virgin was a contradictory model: the human female honored above all other mortals that women could aspire to, but conversely an unreal being whose unique experiences implied condemnation of women's sexuality and ringed their lives with implied prohibitions in the name of purity"(Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol I* 251).

[69] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 187.

[70] Neumann 222.

[71] Hardy 82.

[72] Hardy 130-131.

[73] Hardy 178-179.

[74] Gilbert & Gubar 25.

[75] Hardy 77.

[76] Hardy 79.

[77] Hardy 81.

[78] Hardy 135-138. Because of her empathic relationship to nature, Tess becomes all the more a symbol of divine reproduction, and Hardy places her in what seems an odd and frequent proximity to birds. Tess, as a strange and reconstructed goddess grooms chickens, whistles to bullfinches and performs euthanasia on wild pheasants: "The community of fowls to which Tess had been appointed as supervisor, purveyor, nurse, surgeon, and friend, made its headquarters in an old thatched cottage . . . This cottage was once the nursery, where "dozens of infants had wailed at their nursing . . . "(Hardy 99). Many ancient religions associated birds with aspects of the next world, and these birds were usually represented as female: "Nekhbet or Mut, the archaic vulture mother of Egypt, represents "an ancient matriarchal stratum." The Egyptian word for *mother* was the sign of the vulture. A hieroglyph for *grandmother* was the vulture bearing symbols of royal authority. It used to be generally believed that all vultures are female, and that they conceive offspring from the air, without male assistance. In fact, early Christian fathers cited the example of the vulture mothers to defend the doctrine of the virgin birth"(Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols & Sacred Objects* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988) 411-412.

[79] Hardy 119.

[80] Auerbach 42-43.

[81] Hardy 125.

[82] Millet 132-133.

[83] Hardy 130.

[84] Hardy 410.

[85] Hardy 140-141.

[86] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) 39.

[87] Hardy 142.

[88] Hardy 142-143.

[89] Hardy 142-143.

[90] Hardy 144-145.

[91] Walker 147.

[92] Hardy 145. Note #39: Genesis iii, 16: "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"(Hardy 527).

[93] Hardy 145-146.

[94] Kristeva 596.

[95] Hardy 146.

[96] Anderson & Zinsser, *Vol II* 136-137.

[97] Hardy 147-148.

[98] Though a small detail, Hardy's inclusion of the marmelade jar in his imagery, is worth noting. Walker's *Woman's Dictionary* describes the use of oranges in bridal customs, fertility rituals and witchcraft: "The orange represented simultaneuous virginity and fruitfulness--like virgin-mother-hood . . . Inevitably, the orange was also associated with the Virgin Mary"(Walker 491).

[99] Hardy 484.

[100] Hardy 487.

[101] Neumann 283.

[102] Sprengnether 85.

CHAPTER 6

MOTHERS' MILK: NURTURING NO

> One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears: the child is pain's representative and once delivered moves in for good. Obviously you can close your eyes, stop up your ears, teach courses, run errands, clean house, think about things, about ideas. But a mother is also marked by pain, she succumbs to it. "And you, one day a sword will pass through your soul."[1]

Introduction

Single mothers head dysfunctional families. Or so much of society believes; such families begin with this stigma rather than slowly earning it through destructive behavior patterns. Mothers of these families often comply, internalizing this view and accepting tremendous guilt for heading such "imperfections". This guilt wears heavily on women and is coupled with the compulsion to over-compensate, to fix the brokenness and fill the lack that may or may not exist for the child. The intimate, intense relationship created by these burdens makes and breaks both mother and child. As metaphor, the single mother is a Great Mother in all her aspects, in reality she's usually stretched beyond her capacity.

A mother's job goes on forever, into every crevice of her being, like it or not. There is no point in pretending to separate what's mother and what's woman. Once you become the first, you permanently alter the second. The notion of separate spheres is a particularly wry joke for single mothers. Grocery shopping, health insurance, sick days and school lunches all have heightened meaning to the woman who carries the responsibility of parenthood alone. Yet the sense of isolation is ironically surrounded by a multitude of institutions, social services and community committees. All have opinions and programs that officially guide the raising of children, but few government or state agencies bolster the confidence of parents coping with the subtle day-to-day shifts in the private world of parent and child.

With the turn of the twentieth century single motherhood exploded onto the social horizon. Although it existed before in prodigious numbers, it now had a quasi-respectable name, even if the indifference at best, punishment at worst continued unabated. The number of women parenting alone does increase as one counts through the decades of the present century. The liberalization of divorce laws alone made the increase inevitable:

> Most significantly, the rising divorce rate has greatly increased the number of female single heads of households; from 1970 to 1978 alone, the numbers of female heads of households increased by 46 percent; from 1980 to 1985 this figure rose by another 16.4 percent. Over 90 percent of all single-parent households are headed by women. Knowledge of the high divorce rate has made it impossible for young women to plan their lives in the expectation of being permanently supported by a husband.[2]

But more disturbing and dangerous than the rise in single mothers is the double bind which imprisons the family, whether that family is

"traditional" or not. In the nineteenth century the family was held as the sacred sphere where young individuals were nurtured and raised to the moral and cultural standards which mothers upheld. Respected and cherished as the cornerstone of civilization, mothers at least held dominion over their hearths, and the rough and unfeeling business of commerce was understood to have no rights within the small boundary of the family circle:

> The nineteenth century was a time of transition in social conceptions of the family. Two developments are primarily responsible. First, lower infant mortality rates led to a greater emotional investment in children. Second, the industrial revolution led men away from home to the workplace, which increasingly segregated women at home to manage household responsibilities and childrearing. What followed was the progressive separation of a man's public, ambitious world from a woman's private, nurturing world.[3]

With the rise of industrialization, however, the integrity of the separation of family and industry eroded rapidly. Giving only lip service to the sanctity of the nuclear family, industry did little to uphold this ideal. In reality, the disintegration of the family was aided by corporate bosses viewing individuals as mere work units, allowing no leeway for the needs of families. Since stay-at-home motherhood was considered the norm, but not supported financially or emotionally, the boundaries between work and home were confusedly drawn by parents and social services:

> Throughout the twentieth century, the irreversible intrusion of the market into the so-called private sphere has steadily eroded marriage as a career. There were nineteenth-century precedents but never of sufficient magnitude to challenge decisively the myth of separate spheres, which captured the realities of economic changes by associating women with the home and men with the market; . . . By 1985, more than half of all women with children under six years of age were participating in the labor force. Obviously, the wages of single mothers were

> necessary to support their households, but the wages of married women increasingly proved necessary for the maintenance of their family's standard of living. Thus in 1985, in nonelderly households, wives' earnings accounted for a 42.1 percent increase in family income since 1950.
>
> In practice, women's increasing participation in the labor force decisively undermined the distinction between public and private spheres, pushing women into the public world and drawing the public world into the home. The collapse of those distinctions in practice did not suffice to destroy them in ideology or at law and initially resulted in an increase in legal barriers, notably protective legislation.[4]

With the boundaries fading between public and private realms, institutions were increasingly relied upon as social caretakers. The work place group became an artificial support and connection for individuals. Yet the myth of the nuclear family and its ideological place in society persists. If mothers can't or don't adhere to this ideal, they are blamed for creating less then perfect children:

> Although mother blaming is very ancient, and continues to be prevalent today, the 1950s may have been its peak period. At the end of the war, the family was much romanticized. Soldiers who had been away from home for years returned and mother was encouraged to leave the factory and return to full-time homemaking. The American dream reappeared. Father, living at home, would be employed, and mother no longer needed at the factory, would stay at home in the suburbs, having and mothering three or four children.
>
> Of course, not all Americans shared this experience. For those who did, "mother love" was the prescription of the time. In the conservative 1950s, as mothers were told of the joys of housewifery, they were also vilified for providing either too little or too much love. The most vituperative image of the mother was drawn by Phillip Wylie in *Generations of Vipers* (1942). He claimed that a whole generation of American men were infantilized and grew up to be army rejects because of their self-indulgent and nagging mothers. His writing heralded the mother blaming of the 1950s.[5]

Along with the belief that mothers were by nature most fit to be primary care takers in the home, came the belief that social agencies

could provide necessary information and advice to ensure that the mothering was up to the most modern standards. To bolster public belief in these methods, it was necessary to undermine the worth of individual parenting. A mother's worth as "perfect parent" was seriously questioned. The most profound and obvious evidence of this is the nearly uncriticized insistence that infant formula was scientifically better for children than breast milk. Regimes for feeding, sleeping, bathing and developing the child were imposed on mothers in all the "best" literature that purported to have the baby's interest at heart. Trying to follow such artificial schedules caused pain, anxiety and doubt on both sides of the mother/infant relationship. A single mother trying to make her way both at home and in the work world found little understanding and virtually no approval. As a woman she was still held by society's love affair with the Victorian fantasy that she should remain home, crooning lullabies, while she was also caught by the twentieth century reality that little practical support was forthcoming. Libba Moore's dissertation, "Mothers' Pensions," follows the history and ideology of women's relationship to state family support:

> The administrative procedures that grew up around the mothers' pensions laws reinforced the state's purpose of promoting proper home life. Their most striking feature, however, was their intrusive and domineering quality. The state presumed unlimited access to the inner workings of families receiving pensions, and gained control over some of the families' most elemental decisions. The principles that underlay these methods set the state up as the father of the household and in this way encroached upon mothers' most basic authority in their homes.[6] By controlling *women's* primary associations and activities, the state was able to regulate the gender order without infringing on male rights or undermining the patriarchal system of authority. Mothers' pensions gave the state the preroga-

> tive to intrude on the homes of poor women and demand that recipient mothers rearrange their lives and patterns to conform to middle class American notions of motherhood. Furthermore, since the state's conception of motherhood equated women's mothering role with personhood, in its regulation of motherhood the state dictated the details of women's sex lives, work lives, and the way they managed their household affairs.[7]

Undervalued as a mother, and underpaid as a worker, the single mother continues to be stretched on the rack of sentiment and necessity. The expressions of frustration and rage performed by such women, whether they be life-sustaining or life-denying, are evidence of the corners into which they have been pushed.

Hand in hand with the isolation a single mother lives is the reality that she must be everything both for her child and for herself. Therefore, she must try to become the fantasy super mom, the woman who maintains authority, balances the books, provides the hugs and bed time stories, monitors sugar intake, and shows up for every parents' day at school. She needs to be a shape-shifter, capable of unflinching discipline, malleable understanding, fierce protection and objective judgment. Of course *all* parents alter their roles this way, but a single mother must do it alone, without the support of consensus, the second opinion, the balancing other. She becomes and enacts the many facets of the Great Mother. The literature of the twentieth century, particularly that written by women, reflects the anxieties and confidence that single parenting creates. Never before have so many voices been raised telling the experiences of mothering in detail, however graphic or poetic. As with any other human endeavor, each story is unique. Every mother is a woman whose variables of temper, patience, humor, endurance and courage are individu-

ally blended. And the children she bears arrive with their own set of variables to create a whole new chemistry. Twentieth century literature reflects the realistic panoply of experiences, and yet there is much common ground. Certain realities hold true for each single mother, and certain mythologies resonate in each telling.

With Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," in her collection of stories, *Tell Me A Riddle*, the voice of single motherhood is heard most passionately. Previously, only Helen Graham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has expressed her emotional reaction to parenting alone so articulately and extensively. With the ice broken, two contemporary authors who best examine the realities and mythologies of single mothering are Anne Tyler and Toni Morrison. Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* and Morrison's *Beloved* explore in very individual ways the bare ground single mothers are given to work and the fertile emotional soil underneath.

What strikes me most in considering the fictional women of these novels is how much they share despite their apparent differences. All three are low on the economic scale, and all show tremendous resourcefulness at providing for their children's needs, whether it be through sacrifice, hard work, or an ability to use what's available. This is particularly intriguing when one considers not only the differing backgrounds or the unique voices of these characters, but the individual style used to render them. Tillie Olsen plunges deep into memory, guilt and practical need to explain the impossibility of her mothering. Anne Tyler compiles the details of canned goods, allergies and frayed bathrobes to give us strength

and dreams that rest on truth. Toni Morrison, by creating a fabric of improbable resurrection, suggestive retribution and atonement, presents the reader with a truth and belief that transcends logic.

Narrator - "I Stand Here Ironing"

In "I Stand Here Ironing," Olsen uses direct address for her narrator's expression, but the question is, to whom? We understand that some external agent has entered her kitchen or living room and is asking for background on the daughter. We can surmise that this person is probably a social worker, most likely a guidance counselor. But as we read on the narrator seems to be speaking directly to us, the reader. The impetus for the narrator's lengthy response is a simple question: "I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter. . . . who needs help."[8] But the narrator's answer, nearly the entire text of the story, is not surrounded by quotation marks. I believe this is an important clue to both Olsen's sense of realism and the emotional content of the story. The narrator is talking *to herself*. What we are witnessing is an internal dialogue, prompted by a rather innocent and well-meaning question from a school official. It strikes a deep and vibrant chord in the mother, and, in what may actually take only seconds, the mother's memory and emotions are catapulted into a distinct reverie of the mothering she gave her daughter. Her first response is a

sense of overwhelming futility: "You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? . . . there is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me."[9] The narrator is angry at the question; along with the assumption that as a mother she should know everything is also the assumption that she is not the expert: "Social workers were presumed to be the "experts" on family problems and on that basis assumed an authoritative posture towards their clients."[10] But the anger is also turned inward. The narrator is too willing to acknowledge her failings as a mother.

The narrator stretches her memory back to the beginning of the girl's life and the abandonment both child and mother experienced. For a mother the abandonment is twofold; first in not having anyone to share with difficulties or enjoy the wonders, but second and more painful in knowing the loss and self-doubt the child feels at being left behind. The child's doubt also encompasses the mother's ability to be "worthy" of the father's company: "Emily's father, who 'could no longer endure' (he wrote in his good-bye note) 'sharing want with us'."[11] The narrator is left "sharing want" more acutely with her daughter.

She takes up her responsibilities as head of an abandoned family and is branded: single mother. With the stigma of "broken home," the single mother must attempt to repair the family; she has to "make do" rather than simply doing and must recognize that even with her best efforts she is already failing in society's eyes. So she strives for the experts' perfection:

> I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays. I nursed all the children, but with her, with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said. Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed.[12]

The confidence a first mother lacks is magnified in the isolation of single motherhood. This woman places herself in the comfort of prescribed methods, rather than relying on what her ears and heart tell her she and her baby need:

> Another assumption apparent in recent feminist literature is that mother and child are an isolated dyad. Mother and child are seen as both physically and psychologically apart from the world, existing within a magic (or cursed) circle. Sometimes . . . the isolation has a physical boundary to it. The woman's home is her castle, in which she is isolated and all-powerful in motherhood. . . . More often the isolation is psychological. Rich talks of the isolation that comes from responsibility, that of the single adult woman who, though physically surrounded by others, bears the total task of mothering. The successes, failures, and day-to-day burdens of child-care are particularly hers.[13]

The isolation is not often mitigated by supports society offers. Choosing to use such supports is accompanied by severe self-recrimination and a foreboding sense that the health and safety of the child is at risk. Having to place a child in such an institution becomes a double-edged sword. In order to provide for her family, the narrator must work and place the little girl in a child-care facility:

> She was two. Old enough for nursery school they said, and I did not know then what I know now--the fatigue of the long day, and the lacerations of group life in nurseries that are only parking places for children.[14]

Day care accommodations do exist, but the road to making them viable alternatives to at-home care has been tedious and slow. Initially

stark and inadequate, they have grown to be only slightly less so, with the cost and transportation being the most prohibitive factors for quality facilities. Parents are given no alternatives, neither a means to stay home longer, with parental leaves, or work-place child care which allows children and parents the comfort of proximity:

> . . . it is important to remember that parents who use child care are largely on their own. No public effort has been made to accommodate their need to combine parental and work responsibilities. Only 2,500 companies from a possible 400,000 large businesses and 6 million companies nationwide provide any form of child-care support. Although the dependent care tax credit maintains strong support, it largely benefits the middle-class and it reimburses these families for at most 30% of their child-care expenses.
>
> To summarize, mothers who use child care have been characterized as inadequate . . . deprived, and now, conflicted. These portrayals have carefully protected our deeply held belief that children fare best when they are reared exclusively by their mothers.[15]

The women who push for child care reforms are often severely criticized for not behaving as perfect mothers, rocking their babies, and filling their homes with the aroma of wholesome and fresh cooked meals. The available help is usually meant for a story book mom:

> Officials found, then, that mothers to whom they were offering pensions did not necessarily embody the self-sacrificing, naive, sentimental picture of motherhood around which the program was designed. Instead, mothers were practical and had a clear understanding of their choices and how to meet their obligations of child rearing.[16]

This "surprising" competence is evident in Olsen's narrator. Ground down by the expectations of perfect parenting, yet persisting in her efforts, she expresses both defeat and determination. The metaphor embodies this conflict; the mother is both the iron and the dress underneath it, the controller and shaper, and the one being pressed into defeated postures:

> I put the iron down. What in me demanded that goodness in her? And what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness? . . . What *was* in my face when I looked at her? I loved her. There were all the acts of love.[17]

Such mothers show their children the tense, worried, careworn face instead of the happy, all-loving Mommy face. This mother's face reflects serious love, and she is made to regret it. The guilt of knowing she has passed on the fear of life, the struggle of life, rather than the shining excitement and potential of life that a mother is supposed to imbue in her children, lingers in the back of the narrator's mind. She is the cause of her daughter's inability to thrive in the early years. This mother is aware that her face is the mirror of her daughter's self-esteem and picture of the world.

Again the parenting institution intervenes, superimposes its theories and methods, and all is "in the best interest of the child:

> They persuaded me at the clinic to send her away to a convalescent home in the country where "she can have the kind of food and care you can't manage for her, and you'll be free to concentrate on the new baby." They still send children to that place. I see pictures on the society page of sleek young women planning affairs to raise money for it, or dancing at the affairs, or decorating Easter eggs or filling Christmas stockings for the children.[18]

Told that professionals can care for her daughter better than she, the narrator is convinced that nutrition and schedules are better than haphazard care. Only in retrospect does the mother realize how much her belief in her own abilities were undermined by these modern methods. Having first felt guilty for providing inadequate care, she now feels enormous guilt at having provided no care at all. She recognizes that the child can't know the struggle her mother faces every day, knowing only that her mother, her only parent, has left her.

With this tremendous burden, the narrator is being asked to shed some light on her daughter's development. How does one explain one's parenting to an outsider? How do you define yourself, your family, its history and emotional content? Olsen uses the essence of realism to stimulate understanding of this woman's particular situation. Her frustration at beginning with specific facts, explaining details, and falling back on generalizations is a recognition that no one depiction is going to create truth:

> What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent? . . . She had to help be a mother, and housekeeper, and shopper. She had to set her seal. . . . but without money or knowing how, what does one do? We have left it all to her, and the gift has as often eddied inside, clogged and clotted, as been used and growing.[19]

But the most important truth, the one that is the solid fact of her mothering, that saved both her daughter and herself, is the belief in the child. Believing in one's child's ability to survive, grow and achieve is a crucial element in giving a sure foundation and creating a child that is strong:

> Because the conditions of life for many poor women demand a fighting spirit for sheer physical survival, such mothers have sometimes been able to give their daughters something to be valued far more highly than full-time mothering. But the toll is taken by the sheer weight of adversity, the irony that to fight for her child's physical survival the mother may have to be almost always absent from the child, as in Tillie Olsen's story, "I Stand Here Ironing," For a child needs, as that mother despairingly knew, the care of someone for whom she is "a miracle."[20]

The narrator has instilled that belief in her child, knowing she will blossom: "She will find her way."[21] The mother trusts the daughter's ability to survive even thrive, and this is the

undercurrent of love that probably did show in her face. Children intuitively grasp this truth.

The condemnation of single mother households is quickly internalized by the women who head them. They are often quick to believe that they are the factor that causes pain. They see themselves as the "lack" not realizing that often their struggle to overcompensate makes them more concerned, more aware:

> . . . all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me. I cannot endure it tonight. I will never total it all. . . . She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. . . . I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. . . . My wisdom came too late. . . . she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.[22]

By the end, the mother presents the only sum of motherhood: the ambivalence and contradictions. Again the metaphor of the title is called into play; the action of ironing, like mothering, is demeaning and empowering. But the iron is also a kind of life force or fate, and the mother's last gesture is to relinquish her daughter to the world outside the shelter of home. The daughter appears at the end of the story with a great deal of energy and affection, proving that she has not been helplessly maneuvered by the inadequacies or the competence of her mother. The fact that the narrator recognizes her daughter as as an active agent is the saving grace of their relationship; this mother respects the integrity of the child. "Sharing want" becomes sharing the resources they do have, causing the relationship to become particularly "heavy and meaningful".

Muriel Pritchett - *The Accidental Tourist*

With new ground broken by the resonant voice of Olsen's narrator, the way is both easier and more complicated for an author such as Anne Tyler who creates single mothers that are distinctive, outspoken, and curious. Muriel Pritchett in *The Accidental Tourist* commands the reader's attention much in the same way she commands the dogs she trains, and she is the first character in this discussion to be divorced. Muriel's material circumstances follow faithfully the financial expectations divorced women with children can expect. In *Mothers and Divorce*, Terry Arendell interviewed sixty divorced mothers in 1963:

> The majority had net incomes of between $800 and $1,200 a month, or $9,600 to $14,400 a year. This range was not unusually low: among heads-of-household in 1983, the median income for women was $11,484. It was $26,019 for men.[23]

Both the reader and Macon Leary are dumbfounded by this outrageous woman. Though she is not the main character, her actions and words are the ones to watch most closely, because she propels the novel forward. Muriel has the added qualification of making the reader wary of her; she is odd, unpredictable, even dangerous. Tyler uses the ordinariness of day-to-day details to bring Muriel to life, depending on part time jobs, disobedient pets, and frustration.

Perhaps Pearl Tull in Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is to some a more interesting, psychologically complex version of the mature single mother, but I chose Muriel Pritchett, because she

affords a necessary note of levity. Not all single-mother stories are grim. I also believe that Muriel's zany methods are a reflection of the complicated means by which single mothers survive. The comedy Tyler uses thinly veneers the struggle and loneliness of Muriel's life. Muriel's common sense and sense of humor buoy her in a drowning set of circumstances. She faces reality with an aplomb that gets her through the grit of pedestrian days.

Although not an overtly inspiring queen of her own legend, Muriel is a household goddess of dishes and burnt dreams. She knows how to put up a tight defense against her circumstances, and she does know how to create a sensation. Tyler's descriptions of Muriel are curiously familiar, despite the fact that Macon finds her quite odd:

> Behind the counter stood a thin young woman in a ruffled peasant blouse. She had aggressively frizzy black hair that burgeoned to her shoulders like an Arab headdress. . . . Her eyes were very small, like caraway seeds, and her face was sharp and colorless. . . . She had painted her nails dark red, Macon saw, and put on a blackish lipstick that showed her mouth to be an unusually complicated shape - angular, like certain kinds of apples.[24]

Lurking in Tyler's details of Muriel are intriguing glimpses of a possible witch: "Muriel wore truncated black suede boots with witchy toes and needle heels. Her legs rose out of them like toothpicks. The leash trailed from her fingers."[25] Add to that her "sharp, pointed index finger," and the uniquely penetrating sound of her voice: "She had a voice that wandered too far in all directions. It screeched upward; then it dropped to a raspy growl,"[26] and you have a pretty standard depiction of the Halloween hag. Muriel is enchanting, because she is drawn from our childhood, cartoon images of what

women should never be. What I find even more appealing about Tyler's depiction of Muriel is Macon's amateur portrayal of her temperament:

> It emerged that she had a nasty temper, a shrewish tongue, and a tendency to fall into spells of self-disgust from which no one could rouse her for hours. . . . She was obviously intelligent, but she counteracted that with the most global case of superstition Macon had ever witnessed. . . . She believed in horoscopes and tarot cards and Ouija boards. Her magic number was seventeen. . . . she was religious in a blurry, nondenominational way and had no doubt whatsoever that God was looking after her personally--ironic, it seemed to Macon, in view of how she'd had to fight for every little thing she wanted.[27]

She sounds to me for all the world like the wicked step-mother of so many fairy tales. And yet Muriel is not wicked or crazy. She is a concoction of her own devising, hitting on the most benign of occult powers and artifacts to lend power to a powerless situation. Because of Muriel's astounding appearance and behavior, she is remarkably eye-catching. In fact, when she takes center stage, neither Macon, his family, nor the reader can take their eyes from her. This insistence on Tyler's part to depict her as bony, sharp, and non-voluptuous, is at once pathetic and endearing. In her own way, Tyler is playing a game with tradition: all mothers are not dimple-chinned, soft-bosomed cookie bakers. Muriel defies any attempt to classify her as a homemaker in the Betty Crocker mold.

Muriel, with her ever changing wardrobe, is a kind of chameleon or shape-shifter and quite difficult to categorize or pin down. She, not Macon, is the perfect accidental traveler, lightly packed and accepting the trip blithely. Her home is an extension of how she views life, seeming to be a tourist in her own bedroom. Macon is puzzled by the inadequacy of her surroundings to divulge her personality.

> It occurred to him . . . that the house reflected amazingly little of Muriel. She must have lived here six or seven years by now, but still the place had an air of transience. Her belongings seemed hastily placed, superimposed, not really much to do with her.[28]

The "air of transience" has very much to do with the insubstantial resources Muriel has to create a full-bodied home for herself and Alexander. The metaphor of a broken, or incomplete home is nicely portrayed by Tyler in Muriel's constant attempts to make herself over. Yet Macon misses the real substance of Muriel's apartment. In scenes where Muriel's sister is flipping pancakes, a neighbor lounges against the counter, and Muriel and Alexander sit with legs curled around the chrome table legs, the kitchen is solidly filled with the coziness of shared crises and maple syrup.

If her house gives no hint at what motivates her, Muriel's interior is also as mysterious and alluring as any siren: "It seemed she had webbed his mind with her stories, wound him in slender steely threads from her life . . ."[29] At first reading this could be interpreted as the stereotype of the divorcee who slips the tender noose around the unsuspecting male, much like the stereotype of the black widow. But Tyler's character commands much more integrity and respect as Macon comes to learn: "He had to admire her. Had he ever known such a fighter? . . . He felt awed by her, and diminished."[30] Muriel's affinity with the goddess is painted with a light and wry touch, but a discerning eye can find it, even if she herself doesn't always. What Muriel recognizes is her illegitimacy, the improper, imperfect qualities that make her unique. Like the wicked witch of *Sleeping Beauty*, Muriel tells her mirror: "I look like the wrath of

God".[31] She may very well evoke the wrath of a patriarchal god, and she is certainly living her penance in a universe which is ruled by one.

Even Macon's dog Edward is enamored of Muriel. Before Macon comprehends the force that is enveloping him, Edward prostrates himself before this divine vision. And Muriel is able to control all dogs, even the most vicious and dangerous:

> "Got knocked off a porch by a Doberman pinscher. . . . Came to to find him standing over me, showing all his teeth. . . . So I tell him, 'Absolutely not.' . . . and my right arm is broken so I hold out my left, hold out my palm and stare into his eyes . . . and get to my feet real slow. And durned if that dog doesn't settle right back on his haunches.[32]

Though her telling of these stories is comic relief for the anguish Macon is experiencing in his loneliness, they are serious examples of the extent of Muriel's power. She is no ordinary woman, and I would go so far to suggest that Tyler gives enough evidence to claim her as an example of the Lady of the Beasts:

> Another essential aspect of the Great goddess is her relation to the world of animals. As "Lady of the Beasts" she was worshiped at the matriarchal stage from India to the Mediterranean . . . But what does it mean that the Lady of the Beasts--even when her deadly character is accented; even when, for example, she becomes Gorgon, the strangler of animals--not only dominates but also protects the animal kingdom? . . . Her image in the human psyche manifests the unconscious and unwilled, but purposive, order of nature. Cruelty, death, and caprice stand side by side with supreme planning, perfect purposiveness, and immortal life. Precisely where man is a creature of instinct living in the image of the beast or half-beast, i.e., where he is wholly or in large part dominated by the drives of the unconscious, the guiding purpose, the unconscious spiritual order of the whole, appears as a goddess in human form, as a Lady of the Beasts.[33]

Indeed, Macon's real problem lies in his inability to tap into his instinctive, capricious potential. Muriel demonstrates repeatedly

that as a single mother, juggling absurdities, she can be both supreme planner and arbitress of nonsequitur.

Muriel Pritchett is extraordinarily resourceful and her list of inventive and ridiculous self-employments and ways to stretch her limited finances and time is proof that she can withstand any obstacle:

> "I make a little extra money running errands. . . . George. It's the name of my company. I stuck a flyer under your door. *Let George do it*, it says, and then it lists all the prices: meeting planes, chauffeuring, courier service, shopping . . . gift shopping's most expensive because for that I have to use my own taste."[34] "I've *had* to be inventive. It's been scrape and scrounge, nail and knuckle, ever since Norman left me," she said. . . . "I've lain awake, oh, many a night, thinking up ways to earn money. It was bad enough when room and board came free, but after Mrs. Brimm died it was worse; her house passed on to her son and I had to pay him rent. . . . I said, 'How's about this? You leave the rent where it is and I won't trouble you with maintenance. I'll tend to it all myself,' I said. 'Think of the headaches you'll save.' So he agreed and now you should see what I have to deal with, things go wrong and *I* can't fix them and so we just live with them. Leaky roof, stopped-up sink, faucet dripping hot water so my gas bill's out of this world, but at least I've kept the rent down. And I've got about fifty jobs, if you count them all up. You could say I'm lucky; I'm good at spotting a chance. Like those lessons at Doggie, Do, or another time a course in massage at the Y. The massage turned out to be a dud, seems you have to have a license and all like that, but I will say Doggie, Do paid off. And also I'm trying to start this research service; that's on account of all I picked up helping the school librarian. Wrote out these little pink cards I passed around at Towson State: We-Search Research. Xeroxed these flyers and mailed them to every Maryland name in the *Writer's Directory*. *Men and Women of Letters!* I said. *Do you want a long slow illness that will effectively kill off a character without unsightly disfigurement?* So far no one's answered but I'm still hoping. Twice now I've paid for an entire Ocean City vacation just by going up and down the beach offering folks these box lunches me and Alexander fixed in our motel room every morning. We lug them in Alexander's red wagon; I call out, 'Cold drinks! Sandwiches! Step right up! And this is

> not even counting the regular jobs like the Meow-Bow or before that the Rapid-Eze.[35]

Her untiring ability to maneuver within an exhausting schedule of part-time jobs, babysitters, and volunteer errands leave me in laughing admiration. Tyler has created a fictional, modern day single mom who epitomizes the bare-bones, frenzied determination of her real life counterparts. Muriel's poverty shows itself in endless variety, but is particularly self-creative in her devotion to second-hand gaudy clothes and her clever arrangement with the neighborhood mechanic which enables her to have a car:

> "Only two hundred dollars. That's because it needed work, but I took it to this boy down the street from where I live. I said, 'Here's the deal. You fix my car up, I let you have the use of it three nights a week and all day Sunday.' Wasn't that a good idea?"[36]

Muriel, in such "deals" manages to carve out a haven for herself and Andrew, but she also unstintingly shares in her "good fortune". Her bargains are not founded on conniving others out of their needs, but on using resources with a community spirit. Muriel's imagination and genius vent themselves on practical ways to fulfill everyone's fantasies. She has rapid-fire delivery and a dizzying train of thought, but these belie a steady, unswerving purpose to take care of herself and her son:

> Because the state measured the special needs of dependent mothers in terms of a strict gender code and a romanticized ideal of motherhood, the mothers' pensions program denied women's real role in family support. It focused almost exclusively on cultivating women's maternal qualities and home-making skills and insufficiently addressed single mothers' more pressing problems and concerns about support. Single mothers' daily experience taught them a more comprehensive sense of responsibility for family care than the model promoted by social workers which saw breadwinning and mothering as separate

> activities. Very few mothers could rely on the amount or permanence of their mothers' pension to support their family. The vast majority had to supplement their grant. Yet, there was no attention in the mothers' pensions program given to jobs or day care programs or other support systems that acknowledged single mothers' *real* responsibilities that spilled over their artificially sexually assigned tasks. Ironically, then, the range and nature of mothers' pensions services inhibited rather than facilitated single mothers' ability to adequately care for their families.[37]

Muriel seems to ignore the illusion of a government safety net for support, and depends on herself. This, of course, leaves her with little to work with. But there is nothing shabby about Muriel, except of course her bathrobe; she is endowed with a richly enterprising mind, and a most defiant and protective spirit: "I'm not scared of a thing in this world."[38] Muriel proves her statement by being the aggressor: she calls Macon, sets up the dog training, establishes herself as a necessary part of his life. And Macon is helplessly drawn in by Muriel and included in her protection. She fends off a would be mugger with a casual rebuke to "go home." And she appears in his dreams, communicating with him on a level which awakens his intuitive side:

> There was no room in his life for anyone as unpredictable as Muriel. Or as extreme. . . . Yet she could raise her chin sometimes and pierce his mind like a blade. . . . Then he knew that what mattered was the pattern of her life; that although he did not love her he loved the surprise of her, . . . [39]

More than any other quality, Muriel's confidence and optimism attract both Macon and this reader to Muriel Pritchett: "Macon, don't you know Muriel can always take care of herself? . . . Don't you know she could find another job tomorrow, if she wanted?"[40]

Muriel's curious mixture of tacky exuberance and gritty determination is coupled with her ability to experience Alexander with love, regret, and confusion. Muriel perpetrates no violence against her son Alexander, but she is also an odd kind of mother when set against the stereotype of motherly warmth and undivided attention. Alexander does not even enter the novel as a character until half way through, and when he does make his appearance, he is overshadowed by the aggressive concern his mother shows him. Alexander is frail and pinched, because his mom is bony and pinched. She's not the full-bosomed, expansive mother that produces apple-cheeked babies. Tyler uses their physical deficiencies as a metaphor for the dysfunctional family:

> "My son's name is Alexander,". . . He was never an easy baby. For starters something went wrong while I was carrying him and they had to do a Caesarean and take him out early and I got all these complications and can't ever have any more children. And then Alexander was so teeny he didn't even look like a human, more like a big-headed newborn kitten, and he had to stay in an incubator forever, just about, and nearly died. . . . I hung around the hospital nursery . . . [41]

Muriel, then, is not the overabundant mother, like Errour or Charissa, producing quantities of offspring. She is an obviously human mother. Her expressions of mothering, however, are direct expressions of who she is and how she sees the world; she shows little interest in conforming to standard mothering qualities. In this way, she is representative of single mothers; Arendell's interviews also revealed a reevaluation of a mother's relationship to their children:

> All but two of these mothers said that their experiences during and after the divorce had brought them closer to

> their children. Without a father sharing the parental role in family life, they could be more open and direct with their children. They said there was less sense that two opposed subgroups, adults and children, made up the family. Some mothers deliberately changed patterns of communication with their children. . . . In the shift to single parenting, these mothers had to redefine their own roles. Because they had married expecting to share the parental role with a spouse, their long-held expectations and time-tested approaches had to be changed.[42]

Despite Muriel's seeming incapacity for being a bountiful mother, her devotion and concern are manifested in the most obvious of ways. Muriel's response to Alexander's need, and her rejection of Norman's desires, is evidence that she is recognizing her emerging role as single parent even before the fact:

> Norman couldn't understand why I was all the time at the hospital visiting Alexander. . . . I'd go early in the morning and just hang around . . . and I'd stay till night. . . . It's like I only had room in my mind for Alexander. And he was in the hospital for months, for really months; there was everything in this world wrong with him. You should have seen our medical bills. We only had partial insurance and there were these bills running up, thousands and thousands of dollars. Finally I took a job at the hospital. I asked if I could work in the nursery but they said no, so I got a kind of, more like a maid's job, cleaning patients' rooms and so forth. Emptying trash cans, wet-mopping floors . . . They finally did let Alexander come home. But he was still no bigger than a minute. All wrinkles like a little old man. Cried like a kitten would cry. Struggled for every breath. And *Norman* was no help. I think he was jealous . . .[43]

Muriel is quite willing to accept the responsibility of Alexander, recognizing too soon that Norman is more a hindrance than a help in raising their son. His inability to respond to either the baby's needs or Muriel's from the very beginning make his departure something of a relief to her. In the same way that Muriel shares her clever bargains with her neighbors and friends, she also shares her get-well prayers and compassion:

> All that time Alexander was in the hospital . . . there was something cozy about it . . . I think about those nurses gossiping at the nurses' station and those rows of little babies sleeping. It was winter and sometimes I'd stand at a window and . . . look down at the emergency room entrance and watch the ambulances coming in.[44]

Muriel becomes a veritable madonna in this scene, protecting and appreciating all the hurt and care that the hospital represents. One would think she is primed to shelter and nurture Alexander into a buxom babyhood. But Alexander doesn't thrive under the particular brand of primary care that Muriel has to offer.

> She was talking about a small, white, sickly boy with a shaved-looking skull. He didn't appear to have quite enough skin for his face; his skin was stretched, his mouth was stretched to an unattractive width, and every bone and blade of cartilage made its presence known. His eyes were light blue and lashless, bulging slightly, rimmed with pink, magnified behind large, watery spectacles whose clear frames had an unfortunate pinkish cast themselves. He wore a carefully coordinated shirt-and-slacks set such as only a mother would choose. . . . His fingers felt like a collection of wilted stringbeans.[45]

Muriel, at first glance, has reproduced an image of the self she desperately tries to alter and enhance. She has not been able to "flesh out," her creation. Alexander's frail constitution could be interpreted as an appropriate metaphor for the common assumptions about children of divorced parents:

> Divorce research has always stressed the psychological effects of divorce and single parenting on children. In the 1950s and 1960s many researchers argued that divorce and the subsequent mother-headed family fostered juvenile delinquency, homosexuality, and neuroses in children. Although most scholars and clinicians have now abandoned such arguments, they remain embedded in popular notions about the fate of the child from a "broken home." In fact, much contemporary research continues to assume that the female-headed single-parent household is a "deviant pathological" form.[46]

The "pathology" of Muriel's relationship with Alexander is quite curious. If Tyler is advocating the common assumptions discussed in the passage from Arendell, she is also working at a metaphor that more accurately illuminates the interactions and needs of single mothers and their children. The sin of overprotection has a long tradition, and is more readily forgiven than neglect. But here too, Muriel is suspect; she commits the cardinal sin of motherhood:

> Muriel had often stayed in bed while Alexander woke on his own and got ready for school. Sometimes he left the house while she was still asleep. Macon thought that was shocking.[47]

More than shocking to Macon, Muriel's behavior is unpredictable to him in regard to her son: "She was inconsistent with Alexander to the point of pure craziness--one minute overprotective, the next minute callous and offhand."[48] And there is a strange pride or smugness in Muriel when she talks of Alexander's ailments:

> "He's allergic to shellfish, milk, fruits of all kinds, wheat, eggs, and most vegetables, . . . He's allergic to dust and pollen and paint, and there's some belief he's allergic to air. Whenever he's outside a long time he gets these bumps on any uncovered parts of his body."[49]

The question remains whether Muriel has destructive tendencies toward her boy by trying to keep him small, weak, and dependent on her. Macon intelligently questions Muriel's assessment of Alexander: "Sometimes Macon wondered if Alexander's ailments were all in Muriel's head."[50] Is Muriel a smothering mother? Or is she, in Tyler's reverse logic, ensuring his survival by nurturing his sickliness. Both Muriel and Alexander respond quite matter-of-factly to the wheezing, rashes and listlessness that may be either physical or psychological reactions to exterior stimuli. The hospital, with all

its extended support of doctors and clinics, is the first and strongest safety net Muriel knows, the institution that never fails her. And Alexander's idiosyncratic needs guarantee that Muriel must frantically maneuver several part-time jobs rather than one, all-consuming, full-time position. Sick days and child care are cost prohibitive:

> Children's illnesses created major problems for these single working mothers. Child care facilities are not prepared to deal with sick children, and most employers do not consider a day spent caring for sick children a legitimate absence from work. "With three children, five days off for illness is nothing. And doctors and dentist's appointments are supposed to be taken out of that."[51]

Macon in particular is initially put off by, and then drawn to, Alexander's unhealthy demeanor. Macon is intrigued and challenged by a child who never extends himself and exhibits no exuberance for life:

> He was not a stupid child but he was limited, Macon felt. Limited. Even his walk was constricted. Even his smile never dared to venture beyond two invisible boundaries in the center of his face.[52]

Macon Leary, who has headed the standard version of family, cannot fathom how Muriel and Alexander exist. He tries to penetrate the meaning of their lives and only succeeds when he sees a photo Muriel has had taken as a Christmas gift to her mother:

> It was a picture of Muriel and Alexander--a studio portrait in dreamy pastels, the lighting so even that it seemed to be coming from no particular place at all. Muriel was seated and Alexander stood beside her, one hand resting delicately upon her shoulder. Neither of them smiled. They looked wary and uncertain, and very much alone.[53]

Macon has finally discerned the truth of their lives. Like a portrait of the reigning queen with the heir apparent at her side,

Muriel and Alexander command attention. Unfortunately, as the lighting suggests, the effect they hope for is a fantasy. No one is paying much attention at all. In fact, Muriel's mother is not much impressed with the portrait, and Alexander is ignored by most everyone. At the very bottom of Muriel's courage and effervescence is simple loneliness: "Sometimes late at night when I get desperate for someone to talk to I call the time signal . . . "[54] But Muriel is not one to use this fact, although Macon assumes incorrectly that this is her sole motivation in pursuing him.

Even though Muriel explicitly warns Macon that she is aware of the assumptions and expectations people use to stereotype divorced mothers, Macon doesn't hear:

> "You think it's weird I didn't mention Alexander, don't you? . . . You think I'm some kind of unnatural mother." . . . You're not going to give me another thought, are you, now you know I've got a kid. You're like, 'Oh, forget it, no point getting involved in *that*,' and then you wonder why I didn't tell you about him right off. Well, isn't it obvious? Don't you see what happens when I do?"[55]

Muriel has a right to be defensive and wary. Rejection isn't new, but worse than realizing that the fact of her motherhood is considered a severe drawback to her sexuality is knowing that allowing someone to become semi-involved with Alexander is a concrete threat to her son's well being. Although Macon, at one point, is simply teaching Alexander to subtract, the metaphor is clear to Muriel. Macon first promises to be a part of Alexander's future and then subtracts himself from the boy's life. Muriel warns Macon that he's on dangerous ground: "All *I'm* saying," Muriel told him, "is take care what you promise my son. Don't go making him promises you don't

intend to keep."[56] Muriel welcomes the interference and can allow the criticism, in fact she likes Macon's attempts to flesh out Alexander's wan life. What she cannot abide is the intrusion into their life, having faults pointed out (which she is aware of) and then having Macon back off, refusing to take part in the hard work, the real reconstruction of a family:

> "Criticize, criticize! Tell me Oodles of Noodles is not a balanced meal and then go off and desert him and then have the nerve to call me up and tell me I'm not a good mother!"[57]

Criticism is standard fare for a single mother. One gets used to public parenting, and it usually begins with the inevitable question of "whose baby is it?" Muriel, like many of the single mothers discussed has the very origin of her motherhood questioned, and takes her place alongside Grendel's Dam when her mother-in-law curses Alexander with real illegitimacy:

> 'Not his baby!' I said. 'Whose, then?' 'Well, that I couldn't say,' she said, 'and I doubt if you could either. . . . you're a known tramp and that baby could be any one of theirs.'[58]

Not only does Muriel have to live down the stigma of "illegitimacy" for herself and Alexander, her poverty places her into the category of "unacceptable" for "proper," people to associate with. Muriel's scrimping on clothes by relishing second hand shops, her no nonsense approach to any demeaning job which affords a paycheck and flexible hours make her appear "unconventional" to people who inhabit lives prescribed by Dr. Spock. Macon is warned by his neurotic family that association with Muriel is likely to result in some form of contamination:

> She'd be lucky to find anyone. Why, she doesn't even speak proper English! She lives in that slummy house, she dresses like some kind of bag lady, she's got that little boy who appears to have hookworm or something.[59]

But the most relevant question posed to Macon comes from his wife Sarah: "Was the fact that she had a child what attracted you to that woman?"[60] Macon never answers her, and I, for one, immediately assumed the answer was "no". But one has to look again at Muriel and Alexander's relationship to do the question credit. It may be the most important line in the novel. In fact, Alexander is the hook which captures Macon, and Alexander is a particularly appealing lure precisely because he is so needy. One has to wonder if this is indeed the answer to Macon's previous musings on Muriel's need to keep Alexander sickly. More to the point, however, is that Alexander is actually created in Macon's image rather than Muriel's. Muriel, despite her boniness, is dynamic and vital; Macon, despite his apparent good health, is emotionally anemic. Alexander, like Macon, exists without leaving his internal arm chair. The reflection Macon sees when he looks at Alexander is his own bloodless plea for a hug: Macon desperately needs Alexander to ease the loss of his own son, Ethan.

With this rather unconscious recognition, Macon effects a near miraculous transformation of Alexander. Teaching him how to fix the kitchen plumbing, allowing him to eat pizza with all the rash-inducing toppings, and buying him t-shirts and dungarees, Macon turns Alexander into a regular little boy:

> His face, Macon saw, had somehow filled out in the past few weeks without anybody's noticing; and his hair--which Macon had started cutting at home--had lost that shaved

prickliness and grown thick and floppy.
"I look *wonderful*!" Alexander said.[61]

How are we to read this? Is Tyler presenting a moralist tale of a boy needing a father and merely subsuming it with Macon's need for a son? Or is she performing a kind of legitimizing act such as Hawthorne performed with little Pearl and Dimmesdale? Alexander cannot be a "natural" child until blessed with the sanction of a "normal" father. The connection is there, but Tyler is working on a more full-bodied version of child-care and nurturing than Hawthorne could have ever imagined. The truth is that children *do* need their fathers. The white knight to the damsel's rescue is a trite story, but the man bending to hug a frightened child is irresistible. Both Tyler and Muriel are astonishingly incisive. The wonder of Tyler's tale is that fathers need their children too and neither can be made whole until the family is allowed to nurture itself in a less role-restricted manner. Alexander finally blossoms when Macon permits himself to do the things that he formerly could not bring himself to do with his own son. The fact that Ethan, his son, is dead is also part of the metaphor of a father who does not know how to nurture.

Macon is the hero of this novel, and his ability to resurrect a son redeems him from his own stultifying life. But Macon is incapable of recognizing his needs, fears and abilities until Muriel inspires in him his own capacity for courage and faith. When Macon finds himself overwhelmed at the idea of being at the top of a skyscraper, suffering from severe vertigo, he turns to Muriel and she talks him down: ". . . let's fling ourselves out on thin air and

trust it."[62] Slowly, he begins to trust Muriel and then himself; she is the model for life. Muriel goes at it head on: "Muriel Pritchett, was how she was listed. Brave and cocky: no timorous initials for Muriel."[63]

Even as he tries to shake her at the novel's end, she haunts him:

> In the window of a restaurant, a black cat closed her eyes at him. She seemed to be gloating. She was so much at home, so sure of her place. . . . he thought he saw Muriel, her white face glimmering in the crowd, but he must have been mistaken. . . . Muriel stood there with her arms full of clothes. . . . She held them up one by one: a shiny black cape, a pair of brown jodhpers, a bouffant red net evening dress sprinkled with different-sized disks of glass like the reflectors on bicycles.[64]

Her shape-shifting ability to meet failure, never say "die," and continuously accept the overflow of life as her bounty, inspires Macon to regard her as the most perfect and foolproof of guides. In her search for love and for someone to help her comfort and support Alexander, Muriel is unerring in choices: "Have you ever met with a failure?" . . . "Not a one," she said.[65] Muriel Pritchett is perhaps the most resounding success in this list of single mothers.

Sethe - *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* continues the mothering tradition begun in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. Eva Peace and Pilate Dead are matriarchs of their families, priestesses to the households and

traditions they serve. Their magic is overtly stated and their powers clearly awe the other members of their tribes. While Eva weaves her spell from a chair, giving the impression of sitting on Olympian heights, Pilate casts her charms from a stature that equals the most powerful man her nephew knows, his father.

Each mother also turns a dark side to her children, showing them the face of rage and the force that opposes creation. I find this exhilarating and honest. It has everything to do with the power of creation and its reverse, but it also has much to do with powerlessness and frustration, which is best described by an entry from Adrienne Rich's 1960 journal:

> My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness.[66]

Beloved, unlike the two previous novels, begins with rage: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."[67] But Morrison has added incredible depth and understanding to a most complex perspective. The protagonist, Sethe, is a full depiction of the mothering spectrum, capable of extending her maternal experience over her surroundings. Written about the indelible scar of slavery, *Beloved*, in more detail, is also about motherhood oppressed under this most appalling of patriarchal institutions.[68] But the "baby's venom" is not directed at a slave holder or a father, but at Sethe, the mother. Beloved and Sethe breath poisonous air. The question throughout the story is whether Sethe deserves the rage, can it be reconciled, and whether Beloved is actually Sethe's mothering guilt sitting in venge-

ance on her conscience. Sethe's babies are everything to her; the house, 124, is like her womb. "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be."[69]

Sethe is graphically the full embodiment of the Great Mother, giving bountiful life and extinguishing that life when she sees fit. Sethe, herself is beautiful and frightening in her aspect:

> Halle's girl--the one with iron eyes and backbone to match. . . . A face too still for comfort; irises the same color as her skin, which, in that still face, used to make him think of a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes. . . . Pregnant every year including the year she sat by the fire telling him she was going to run. . . . Even in that tiny shack, leaning so close to the fire you could smell the heat in her dress, her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light. They were like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held.[70]

Sethe's eyes mark her as a woman who possesses the goddess's gaze; austere and petrifying, yet so deep they are filled with all experience: ". . . the quiet, queenly woman Denver had known all her life. The one who never looked away . . . "[71] And Sethe never does flinch from anything that her responsibility as mother calls on her to do.

I am particularly wary of casting Sethe's actions in a simple, mythological light. To do so would diminish the integrity and enormity of the real Margaret Garner's actions. Morrison defines her portrait this way: "I tried to describe characters as large as life. Life simply is that large."[72] Beyond the mythos of motherhood, however, is the reality that black slave families depended on women for continuity because the "father" was the slaveholder. The dismembering of slave families is exemplified by Baby Suggs: ". . . in

all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. . . . so Baby's eight children had six fathers."[73] As Morrison herself said: "The destruction of the family was essential, and to make sure those men [male slaves] were not feeling at all responsible for those wives and children."[74] The notion of black matriarchies survives because the American culture refuses to support the black family's cultural needs for education, health care and basic survival. Black single mothers continue to struggle against the government's persistent policies which ignore them. The paucity of government aid for black mothers is pointed out by Libba Moore:

> In order to win legislative support for this experimental program, leaders in mothers' pensions administration strategized that only the most "respectable" and "high-type" women should be granted aid. Just as immoral women, if included, were thought to degrade the program, so too would black recipient women lower the standards and alienate the intended "higher quality" mothers in need. Consequently, black women--as a category--were virtually excluded from this chance at public assistance.[75]

The *parens patriae* forced single black mothers to construct their own version of family and power by removing all sanctions and support. By ignoring the needs of black women, the government's policies have had disastrous effects:

> The Children's Defense Fund (1985) reports that, compared with white mothers and children, twice as many black mothers die in childbirth and twice as many black infants die. One in eight black babies is born underweight compared with one in 18 white babies.[76]

From the pattern of slavery through to the neglect and racism of the twentieth century the black woman has had to fashion a means to salvage her family.

Morrison uses this history, giving Sethe two powerful examples of motherhood to follow, the first is her own mother and the second is Baby Suggs. Sethe tries desperately to understand and follow her own mother's example. This is a particularly difficult model, because on the plantation all the mothers are "ma'am" and virtually indistinguishable:

> Patiently Sethe waited for this particular back to gain the row's end and stand. What she saw was a cloth hat as opposed to a straw one, singularity enough in that world of cooing women each of whom was called Ma'am.[77]

Sethe can make little sense of the history her mother gives her: a few weeks of nursing; handing Sethe over to Nan, the woman who breast feeds all the plantation babies; and a strange mark under her mother's breast, which identifies her in some mysterious and forbidden way:

> Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. . . . I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' . . . 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said, 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.'. . . She slapped my face.[78]

The mark of slavery is also the mark of motherhood to Sethe, and she wants to be identified with her Ma'am. In *Claiming the Heritage*, Missy Dehn Kubitschek points out the impossibility of defining motherhood within slavery:

> Although the decision not to mother could be simple and unequivocal, slavery constantly circumscribed or outright denied the decision to mother one's children . . . Any practice of mother love, however, relies on contact, on having children remain with their mothers. The major means of protecting children from slavery is to value them and to communicate this value to them . . . In the twilight area of an illegal freedom, Sethe has

> immediately, upon being summoned back to slavery, acted on a slave definition of mothering: presence is all.[79]

Sethe's haunting and poignant "How will you know me?" is echoed in Beloved's pleading and adoring recognition of Sethe's smile. Sethe wants the mark to be the unifier in the same way Sethe and Beloved have the same face. The description of the mark leaves room for interpretation; is it a cross within a circle? Or is it a circle next to a cross, like the female symbol? If the latter then Sethe is correct to want to be marked as one of the initiated. But Ma'am is also right in her furious reaction to see her chosen baby girl marked as female chattel. In her confusion, Sethe correctly realizes she must improve on her mother's mothering. To Sethe the milk she has for her children becomes the standard she will live and die for.

The legacy of protecting the chosen children is carried on by Sethe, but she reverses her Ma'am's actions by necessity. But the reasons, as Nan explains, behind the opposite actions are the same:

> But the message . . . had been there all along. . . . she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. Night time. Nan holding her . . . She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe."[80]

Sethe learns that she is beloved of her mother, the only baby to be saved, kept and specially named. Her mother is handing her a tradition of maternal authority. But the tradition of infanticide is also lurking in the undercurrent of Ma'am's story. Ma'am has left a powerful example of omnipotent decision making.

The notion of being the beloved one also runs a strong course through Sethe's interaction with Baby Suggs. If Sethe's Ma'am is forced to be distant and enigmatic, causing Sethe to yearn after the lost connection, Baby Suggs is the immediate and enveloping matriarch, who has enough generosity of spirit and guidance for an entire community:

> Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. . . . she became an unchurched preacher, . . . opened her great heart to those who could use it. . . . Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. . . . took her great heart to the Clearing--a wide-open place cut deep in the woods . . . After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. . . . Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" . . . "Let your mothers hear you laugh," . . . Finally she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just cry." . . . She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. . . . "Here, . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. . . . *You* got to love it. . . . Flesh that needs to be loved."[81]

The message that both mothers pass on to Sethe is love, but it becomes cryptic and difficult to use because the motherhood is fettered. Sethe is not the only one to misunderstand or find difficult the pattern of mothering left for her to decipher. Years of white misinterpretation of the function of motherhood in the black family has led to a pervasive mythology that black women have a firmly established and self-sufficient matriarchy:

> The general lack of understanding about black women's work and family roles is particularly significant because it has had such disastrous consequences for federal social policy. It is a cruel historical irony that scholars and policymakers alike have taken the manifestations of black women's oppression and twisted them into the argument that a powerful black matriarchy exists. The persistent belief

> that any woman who fulfills a traditional male role, either as breadwinner or household head, wields some sort of all-encompassing power over her spouse and children is belied by the experiences of black working women. These women lacked the control over their own productive energies and material resources that would have guaranteed them a meaningful form of social power. Though perhaps "freed" or "liberated" from narrow sex-role conventions, they remained tied to overwhelming wage-earning and child-rearing responsibilities. As spiritual counselors and as healers black women did exert informal authority over persons of both sexes and all ages in their own communities. Yet when measured against traditional standards of power--usually defined in terms of wealth; personal autonomy; and control over workers, votes, or inheritances--black wives and mothers had little leverage with which to manipulate the behavior of their kinfolk.[82]

Black mothers do have to count on their own resources and strengths to provide for and protect their families, but the resources are grossly limited and their strengths are taxed beyond reason. Their determination to salvage their families is grounded in the traditions of their original culture. African mothers enjoy and expect the power of their maternity to be revered. In *Ar'n't I A Woman?* Deborah Gray White explains in rich detail the lives of women slaves, the cultural basis of their actions and beliefs and the stress that slavery placed on them:

> Many slave mothers adhered to mores that made motherhood almost sacred, mores rooted in the black woman's African past. In traditional West Africa, mothers, by virtue of their having and nurturing children, ensured the survival of the lineage, the consanguineal corporate group that controlled and dictated the use and inheritance of property, provided access to various political and/or religious offices, regulated marriages, and performed political and economic functions. In matrilineal societies it was through the mother that affiliation to the lineage was established. Mothers were the genetically significant link between successive generations. Her line determined her children's succession, inheritance, rights, obligations, and citizenship.[83]

Based on such a tradition, the slave mothers, more often separated from their partners, worked to uphold the continuity of their families. Sethe does decipher enough to know that she is solely responsible for her children, and that somehow she must find the strength and courage to protect them. She learns that she must be everything to her babies.

The first fact we learn about Sethe is how she provides the gravestone for Beloved and how the baby is named. Sethe redeems the death of Beloved with sex, trading her sexuality for a proper burial and performing a circular ritual, encompassing birth and death:

> No more powerful than the way I loved her, . . . the welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. . . . Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered.[84]

The one word - beloved - [be loved] is critical. It is the word Baby Suggs has insisted that Sethe hear, but Sethe applies it to her child and not to herself: "Dearly Beloved, which is what you are to me and I don't have to be sorry about getting only one word, . . . I thought you were mad with me. . . . How bad is the scar?"[85] The dialogue here is very like the "dialogue" in Tillie Olsen's story. Sethe could very well be posing the question to herself.

Most curious is that this baby has no name prior to her death. Her brothers are Buglar and Howard, her sister is Denver. But this most loved child, the crawling-already? girl, is not named until after death. And the act of her death is the proof that she truly is beloved; she is taken back into the mother's womb for protection. At the end, Beloved appears pregnant - Sethe relives the way it ought to have been. Beloved is hers, and she is Beloved's.

By opening the novel with words of venom and the indirect knowledge of a dead child, Morrison would have us nearly fall into the trap of seeing only Sethe's dark side, of seeing her falling prey to the forces she so cleverly escapes. Sethe is balanced between the two worlds of creation and destruction. This balancing act is typical of parenthood in general, but becomes more precarious when the weight of responsibility rests on a disadvantaged woman. The emotional expression of the balance is ambivalence, as Adrienne Rich has pointed out, and Seth's delivery of Denver in a river that divides slavery from freedom is a perfect metaphor for the impossible choices she must make:

> As soon as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke loose to join it. The break, followed by the redundant announcement of labor, arched her back. . . . She waited for the sweet beat that followed the blast of pain. On her knees again, she crawled into the boat. It waddled under her and she had just enough time to brace her leaf-bag feet on the bench when another rip took her breath away. Panting under four summer stars, she threw her legs over the sides, because here come the head, . . . as though the rip was a breakup of walnut logs in the brace, or of lightning's jagged tear through a leather sky.
>
> It was stuck. Face up and drowning in its mother's blood. . . .
>
> "Push!" screamed Amy.
>
> "Pull," whispered Sethe.
>
> And the strong hands went to work a fourth time, none too soon, for river water, seeping through any hole it chose, was spreading over Sethe's hips. She reached one arm back and grabbed the rope while Amy fairly clawed at the head. When a foot rose from the river bed and kicked the bottom of the boat and Sethe's behind, she knew it was done and permitted herself a short faint. Coming to, she heard no cries, just Amy's encouraging coos. Nothing happened for so long they both believed they had lost it. Sethe arched suddenly and the afterbirth shot out. Then the baby whimpered and Sethe looked. Twenty inches of cord hung from its belly and it trembled in the cooling evening air. Amy wrapped her skirt around it and the wet

> sticky women clambered ashore to see what, indeed, God had in mind.[86]

Birthing in a leaky boat on a marginal river to freedom is very like Constance in Geoffrey Chaucer's "Man of Laws Tale," set adrift with her baby. With her children on one shore and husband on the other, Sethe is an outlaw, dangerous, pathetic and powerful. With every action, Sethe places herself on the margins of society. A run away slave, a single mother, and finally a murderer, Sethe strains the sensibilities and conventions of social fabric to place herself and her children beyond the strangling, subjugating pale of patriarchy.

But Sethe believes in her ability to provide for her children. She crosses the river with new life in her arms and her breasts aching with fullness. Sethe bequeaths her memories to Denver and Beloved of the kind of bountiful mother she fully and capably is:

> There was no question but that she could do it. Just like the day she arrived at 124--sure enough, she had milk enough for all.[87]

But Sethe not only provides nourishment for her children, she provides safety, courage and independence:

> "I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doin it; me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, . . . and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love.[88]

Sethe is rightfully proud of saving them, of living up to the responsibility she took on. Making decisions on her own, she also realizes she must live with her actions, and the claiming of her children becomes a fiercely permanent fact to her. Although she had loved her babies at Sweet Home, they are more than a miracle to her when she arrives and sees them thriving at 124:

> It was not real yet. Not yet. But when her sleepy boys and crawling-already? girl were brought in, it didn't matter whether it was real or not. Sethe lay in bed under, around, over, among but especially with them all. The little girl dribbled clear spit into her face, and Sethe's laugh of delight was so loud the crawling-already? baby blinked. . . . She kept kissing them. She kissed the backs of their necks, the tops of their heads and the centers of their palms, . . . She lifted their shirts to kiss their tight round bellies. . . . Finally she lay back and cradled the crawling-already? girl in her arms. She enclosed her left nipple with two fingers of her right hand and the child opened her mouth. They hit home together . . . [89]

The abandoned joy is contagious, but the real power is in the last words. Sethe's mission to get her milk to her baby has been accomplished, and Morrison has rightfully chosen the nine-month baby to be her mother's lure. Beloved and Sethe become one, and it is evident here if not before that breast feeding is more binding than pregnancy. The baby girl Sethe knows is more precious to her than the one just arrived:

> "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. . . . they [don't] know what it's like to send your children off when your breasts are full." . . . "And they took my milk." . . . "And they took my milk!"[90]

For Sethe, worse than being beaten was having her baby's milk stolen. The Schoolteacher and his pupils at Sweet Home had violated her motherhood.

The nine-month baby is also the one who begins to recognize absence most acutely and painfully. Morrison cleverly uses separation anxiety as Beloved's infantile motivation. And the nine-month mother may very well be the most attached; the anxiety ricochets between mother and infant.

> . . . she felt Beloved touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire. Sethe stirred and looked around. First at Beloved's soft new hand on her shoulder, then into her eyes. The longing she saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control.[91]

The love and desire between Sethe and Beloved is palpable. Beloved's need for her mother and Sethe's response is the answer to both the mother's and the daughter's separation anxiety: "I have your milk / I have your smile / I will take care of you / Your are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?"[92] Sethe's fierce determination to reunite her family and bring them their life-giving milk is evident from the first moment she decides to run, but the primal power of her motherhood appears when she is lying in the field, dying as Denver is ready to be born:

> She told Denver that a *something* came up out of the earth into her--like a freezing, but moving too, like jaws inside. "Look like I was just cold jaws grinding . . . Like a snake. All jaws and hungry."[93]

Sethe embodies both death and birth at this point, and she chooses life. The transformation is significant, Sethe begins to draw on all her resources, even the most "animal" to create her version of family. The imagery Morrison chooses links Sethe not to the Christian,

patriarchal serpent that was imposed on Eve, but to the serpent creator of Egyptian mythology, all encompassing:

> The uraeus was the Egyptian cobra symbol of the Goddess as Creator. The symbol was worn on the foreheads of deities and rulers in the position of the "third eye" of insight. It stood for royal spirit, healing, and wisdom.
>
> The uraeus was a hieroglyphic sign for "Goddess," derived from one of Egypt's oldest deities, the Serpent Mother variously called Uatchet, Uachit, or Ua Zit. . . . Together with the Vulture Goddess Nekhbet, she represented cycles of birth and death, beginning and ending. These archaic Goddesses were known as the Two Mistresses, by whose authority all pharaohs ruled and the cycles of nature were constantly renewed.[94]

The hungry jaws here don't devour its own young, they are brandished at the menacing world that threatens its creation. But the grinding jaws also connect Sethe to the mortal side of her maternal psyche. She can now move into the persona of death mother. After twenty-eight days of peace, bounty and joy in her children, Sethe finds she has not escaped, and must decide how best to fight her enemy. Sethe tries to take her children back, devouring them and herself into the sanctuary of death. Morrison builds the tension and horror of Sethe's predicament and her decisive act by first bluntly telling it from the perspective of the patriarchal slave owner, the Schoolteacher:

> Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere . . . the old nigger boy . . . snatched the baby from the arch of its mother's swing.[95]

These are the facts of Sethe's abominable act, unbelievable and disgusting. The bare "facts" of the story leave little room for mitiga-

tion or comprehension. Our first attempts to understand are little removed from the Schoolteacher's dismay at this scene. From his point of view this is incomprehensible: "It's the outrageous claim of a slave; the last thing a slave woman owns is her children."[96] The easiest way to explain is to distance oneself and analyze Sethe as a sociological example, rationalizing that the burden placed on Sethe to birth and nurture her children within the cruelty of slavery has pushed her beyond sanity. Her oppression can only find an outlet in repeating the pattern on her children:

> Motherhood contributes to the violence she feels: She is supposed to be the "responsible" adult with her children, in a situation where she has little power, and she visits her rage and frustration on one of them. The victim-mother creates a victim-child. . . . Thus, . . . we find the notion that having a child is enough to kill a woman or make a woman into a murderer. Being a mother is a matter of life and death; having a child destroys the mother or the child. If anti-feminists have tended more than feminists to blame the mother, feminists tend to blame the child, or the having of children.[97]

Chodorow's analysis is chillingly accurate for Sethe and many single mothers. As with Hetty Sorrel, Lady Dedlock and Tess Durbyfield, motherhood in these circumstances is unbearable and impossible. But Sethe's action in the woodshed is a more powerful statement than a simple response to victimization. And it takes several more tellings of the scene before the full impact of Sethe's intentions are felt. Morrison uses her craft to perfection by then overlaying the stark details with Stamp Paid's perception of Sethe's actions. As the black man who ferried hundreds of slaves to freedom, he recognizes in her the desperation to shelter her children and phrases it in mythological terms:

> . . . she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way: one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed filled with just sunlight and shavings . . . Nothing else was in there except the shovel--and of course the saw.[98]

As a bird, Sethe becomes the vulture, the Egyptian symbol of eternal mothering protection. Scooping each child like a baby bird under a mother's wing, Sethe surrounds her babies and tries to put them beyond the veil, out of pain, out of degradation. But still, this version leaves her as the nearly incomprehensible arbitress of destruction: "The hot sun dried Sethe's dress, stiff, like rigor mortis."[99] And as Morrison, herself, acknowledges, "as an expression of affection, it's extreme."[100] Sethe is more, however, than destruction; she is the family pride, the keeper of her mothering tradition, and she is the source of unconditional love. Although Sethe tries to kill all her children she only succeeds with Beloved, the crawling-already? girl. As Mother of death, Madonna of final protection, Sethe only succeeds in the cycle with her favorite creation.

Sethe tries to explain her motivations to Paul D, to Beloved and most importantly to herself. It was an act of resistance, of defending her children's lives; it was an expression of love. The "No" that Sethe thinks and acts is the most positive thing she can imagine:

> "I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out." . . . And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried

> pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. "Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. . . . I took and put my babies where they'd be safe."[101]

The crescendo of "No" is the only correct response. Sethe's violent revulsion of oppression prepares her to push her babies "through the veil" to the dark womb of death. But Sethe's explanation falls short of fully convincing the people who must be convinced. Paul D cannot forgive her, because he fears her maternal force:

> This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked abut safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. . . . "Your love is too thick," he said. . . . "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all." [102]

Sethe's response to Paul D's accusation is her way of stating that motherhood, particularly single motherhood, is a territory which requires extraordinary vision and a capacity for making brutal decisions. Loving her children means being willing to let them go, even if that means pushing them off a precipice with her own hands to escape the degradation, suffering and separation she and her mother had experienced: "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is."[103] Killing her babies was the only way she could keep them together.

Paul D is also incapable of understanding Sethe, because his jealousy gets in the way. The absent and surrogate fathers of the novel exclude themselves and are excluded from the established line of maternal love, beginning with Sethe's husband, Halle: "He wasn't there. He wasn't where he said he would be."[104] Having succeeded in freeing her children, escaping herself, birthing her fourth baby on

the margins of freedom, and then performing the most difficult act of motherhood, Sethe has learned the depths of her own resilience and pain: "All she wanted was to go on. As she had. Alone with her daughter in a haunted house she managed every damn thing."[105] For nineteen years Sethe has allowed the love, fear and rage to swirl gently around her, Denver and the baby ghost. Not until Paul D arrives to disrupt the mother-headed household does Beloved emerge. Paul D brings the past with him, stirring up memories by asking for the truth. He also expects a place to be made for him in this house where all important places have been filled by women for so long: "It took a man, Paul D, to shout it off, beat it off and take its place for himself."[106] More important than wanting Sethe's love, Paul D wants to be the head of the house, the father that Beloved and Denver never had or can recognize:

> . . . she was frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, *that* caring--again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer. . . . No. He resented the children she had, that's what. . . . Hearing the three of them laughing at something he wasn't in on. The code they used among themselves that he could not break. Maybe even the time spent on their needs and not his. They were a family somehow and he was not the head of it.[107]

Paul D forces Sethe to choose, as though a mother of nineteen years sorrow and guilt can choose to put it aside for the momentary warmth of an embrace. Much as Sethe is lured by Paul D's sincere desire for her, she has little faith in his promises and places little store in a future without her Beloved:

> And stepping away and in front of Paul D, Sethe took the shawl and wrapped it around Beloved's head and shoulders .

> . . she enclosed her in her left arm. . . . Paul D felt icy cold in the place Sethe had been before Beloved came.[108]

Paul D also fails to realize that Sethe does and does not need him: she is both grateful to him and resentful of him. He represents the way her husband Halle abandoned her when she most needed him. When Paul D tells Sethe that Halle witnessed her violation and whipping, causing him to lose his sanity, Sethe both grieves for his pain, and rages at his ability to let go of the burden of reality:

> Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle. And how sweet that would have been: . . . What a relief to stop it right there . . . but her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio . . . [109]

Paul D assumes Sethe was crazy too when she killed Beloved. But such a convenient outlet is not possible for a mother who must be on the edge of truth for the sake of her children. Good parenting allows no such release. In his assumption, Paul D comes to pity Sethe for committing murder, but supporting her in her method is beyond his capacity.

Complete understanding still does not come until Denver recognizes that the fear she has harbored of her mother's "killing tendency" is instead a willingness to give everything to her children. Denver's doubts vanish when she witnesses her mother's willingness to die for Beloved. At this point, Denver moves to save the legacy of strength, hope and integrity that Ma'am, Baby Suggs and Sethe have given their lives for:

> Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw: Beloved was making her pay for it. But there

> would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. Yet she knew Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning--that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant--what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life--Beloved might leave. . . . The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing--the part of her that was clean. . . . Sethe had refused--and refused still.
>
> This and much more Denver heard her say from her corner chair, trying to persuade Beloved, the one and only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love.[110]

This is the heart of maternal darkness, yet it is also the heart of maternal light. *All* the most powerful emotions of motherhood collide and roar in this excruciating instant of unconditional love. "What it meant" is that Sethe is willing to sacrifice her sanity, self-worth, maternal integrity and her desperate love for this child in order to put it out of harm's way. As Morrison states: "It is the ultimate gesture of the loving mother."[111] Sethe will pay for this perfect act of motherhood forever, because in this moment Sethe and Beloved are joined; Sethe absorbs the life of her baby, so that it will continue to live within her. Sethe allows the memory, the essence of her best loved girl, to grow inside her again. Unfortunately, Sethe's guilt also grows so that the nineteen-year Beloved that Sethe rebirths is a confused amalgam of vengeance and tenderness. With the arrival of Paul D and the resurgence of past experience, Sethe's incubation of Beloved surfaces:

> A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. . . . Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. . . . for some reason she could not immediately account for, the

> moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. . . . like flooding the boat when Denver was born. So much water . . . but there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now.[112]

As Sethe absorbed her crawling-already? girl's life back into her own, the two psyches were inextricably linked. The nine-month separation anxiety becomes a permanent characteristic of both mother and child, and neither can let go:

> They changed beds and exchanged clothes. Walked arm in arm and smiled all the time. . . . Dressed in Sethe's dresses . . . She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighted through her nose, held her head. Sometimes coming upon them making men and women cookies or tacking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs's old quilt, it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who.[113]

The mother/daughter dyad that Sethe and Beloved comprise is also a duet of self-remonstrance, accusation, penance and undying devotion:

> Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. . . . And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to--that she had to get them out, away, that she had the milk all the time and the money too for the stone but not enough. That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever. Beloved wasn't interested. She said when she cried there was no one.[114]

To read Beloved as only a force of vengeance and rage against her mother is to misinterpret Morrison's scenes where the two engage in mutual and necessary affirmation of their shared pain. The pain is assuaged by acknowledgement and released and lessened by the recognition of the love they share:

> Beloved's fingers were heavenly. Under them and breathing evenly again, the anguish rolled down. The peace Sethe had come there to find crept into her. . . . Beloved watched the work her thumbs were doing and must have loved

> what she saw because she leaned over and kissed the tenderness under Sethe's chin.[115]

Sethe has taken on the scar, like a stigmata, her "tenderness" is a reminder of the moment of betrayal and claim. Though nearly strangled in this scene, one has to question whether it is Beloved or Sethe's own guilt which nearly squeezes the life out of her. In this moment Beloved takes Baby Suggs' place in loving the flesh that Sethe cannot bring herself to love. She allows both forgiveness and blame.

But as Beloved takes over more and more of Sethe's internal and external world, Sethe is overwhelmed by the enormity of her actions. For nineteen years she managed to hold the actuality and finality of the death she caused at bay for the sake of Denver. With the telling of the story out loud, by finally hearing herself try to explain, she also hears the futility of making such horror sound reasonable. The guilt becomes more than she can bear:

> Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears. . . . Beloved denied it. . . . Denver saw the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe's eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved . . . [116]

Sethe needs to give everything, sacrifice herself to assuage Beloved's anger. If the two lives become one as Beloved matures, they are now changing places. Sethe is retreating under the power of her need to see her baby's life grow and develop before her. In "normal" parent/child relationships role reversal often takes place as the parent ages and becomes infirm or incapacitated. But in this instance, the impetus for role reversal is Sethe's resignation that her actions were wrong, that, as Paul D says, she could have done

something else, and her growing conviction that her action was an animalistic abomination:

> Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child . . . The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved' eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur.[117]

The question of maternal sacrifice arises in every mother/child relationship. The balance of power is a difficult one to maintain, because it is virtually impossible to consistently determine equity for both parent and child. With the territory of parenting comes necessary authority. But infants are the most unreasonable of tyrants by necessity:

> If having a child makes a mother all-powerful or totally powerless, if women's maternal potential requires the desexing of women or enables fully embodied power, then the child who evokes this arrangement must also be all-powerful.[118]

Beloved's demands and selfish needs are justified in the instincts an infant demonstrates to secure its survival. The subjugation of the parent to the will of the child is the first-year sacrifice that must be made. The real difficulty lies in readjusting the balance as the child becomes more and more accomplished at providing for herself: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out."[119] Sethe's guilt incapacitates her from reestablishing her authority.

"What it meant" is true love--unselfish, enormous, courageous love. Denver is the one to recognize this and to save her mother.

Denver, who was born in freedom, is able to hear the coded message of her grandmothers and her mother and honor and respect the sacrifice of gaining freedom for their children. Denver is Sethe's medium to be-loved grace. Denver, who drank her sister's blood, is able to keep her alive without the guilt. Denver is the connection between her mother and her sister. She witnesses both death and survival, and although seemingly passive, is the agent of both. She is a conduit for the negative, dark emotions, giving them life, but she is also a medium for the healing, understanding emotions which allow the past to live *and* rest:

> ". . . Nothing bad can happen to her. Look at it. Everybody I knew dead or gone or dead and gone. Not her. Not my Denver." . . . As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered.[120]

Sethe believes she can protect Denver from the past. What she doesn't realize is that Denver needs the past in order to step into her own future; otherwise Sethe's belief will come true. The connection between Denver's birth and Beloved's reemergence is important. Sethe's detailed memory of her youngest baby's birth merges with the death of the next oldest. Sethe births Denver in the river and Beloved's ghost emerges from the river, and the obvious connection is that both baby girls shared the amniotic fluid of their mother's womb; the two births are conflated.

Beloved is a necessary part of Denver's past, and Denver is necessary to absolve the destructive cycle between her sister and her mother. The two sisters are linked in their mother's giving and taking, in the witnessing of abandonment and need and rejection and

embracing. Denver has lived in fear of her mother's rage and her sister's ability to leave, interpreting both as a rejection of herself. She now realizes that she is a crucial part of the cycle. Like Beloved, she is the inheriting daughter of Sethe, and she is linked to Beloved by blood:

> Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. . . . So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister . . .[121]

Denver the only one capable of having both a life within the family, understanding the pain and connection of violence and love that binds them, and is also able to move outside its boundaries to the external world and into the future. Her determination to save her mother and pick up the burden of caretaking ensures the continuation of life at 124 without the venom. Sethe and Beloved remain one and the blood sacrifice is the connection of love:

> Beloved, She my daughter. She mine. . . . my love was tough and she back now. . . . I'm here. I lasted. . . . Because you mine and I have to show you these things, and teach you what a mother should.[122] . . . I am Beloved and she is mine. . . . I am not separate from her . . . she is the laugh I am the laugher I see her face which is mine . . . Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me she is my face smiling at me a hot thing[123]

The anxiety is gone, because the separation of guilt and resentment is gone. The resurrection of Beloved culminates in a threnody of song, of ancestral memories, and a balancing of conviction, explanation and love. The anger, self-recrimination and internalized bitterness have been assuaged. Sethe can acknowledge her loss openly and finally hear's Baby Suggs' word, and can apply it to herself:

> "She left me." . . . "She was my best thing." . . . "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." . . . "Me? Me?"[124]

Like Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman," this story is too wrenching to forget, even though Morrison disingenuously tells us that it is forgotten. The struggle between Sethe and Beloved is exactly the story to pass on, and Morrison has:

> Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. . . . This is not a story to pass on. . . . Beloved.[125]

But Beloved *is* named and claimed, and Sethe finds the courage to tell her story. By remaining silent she risks the chance of it happening again. Sethe knowingly tells Denver that pain is eternal, that experience is fixed and only needs to be stepped into again to be relived:

> The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there--you who never was there--if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. . . . Because even though it's all over--over and done with--it's going to always be there waiting for you.[126]

The difficulty in going to that place again to relive and understand is that we must experience all the sensations and emotions in order to go forward in full knowledge of our past. Avoidance has its reasons, as Amy Denver prophesied: "Anything dead coming back to life hurts."[127] Whether speaking of abominations such as slavery, or the dynamics of parent/child relationships, it is necessary to carry our heritage with us intelligently and cognizantly. Some of our mothers' stories are not meant to lull us to sleep.

Conclusion

These three treatments of motherhood by twentieth-century authors illuminate the power and powerlessness that woman attain when they parent alone. Olsen's Narrator expresses the internal language of motherhood, releasing a current of emotions and reactions to single motherhood. Tyler's Muriel persists in recreating herself and carving out a haven for her little family, but the struggle is fraught with much doubt and little real power; Morrison's Sethe is a woman richly endowed with an impossible heritage of motherhood.

All three mothers are embedded in institutions which uphold and oppress their styles of mothering, whether they be social services or slavery. These institutions are founded on patriarchal beliefs of how women ought to be treated when performing the job of parenting. The major presumption which motivates all such agencies is that ultimately mothers aren't capable, aren't reliable to care for children, yet the support provided is grossly inadequate. Mothers, then, are simultaneously intruded upon and abandoned.

The exciting variety that these authors have used to portray the experience of single motherhood is what ultimately brings all these women together. Their lives are each unique, depending on cir-

cumstance and personality, but their motivations are very often shared. Whether in their insistence on bringing their shattered families back together, or in making sure that their children have what they need to survive, every one of these mothers works upon common impulses. Without doubt these women are performing the job of motherhood with utmost seriousness. The soft laps or careful chicken soups may be missing, but each mother lives up to her responsibilities as completely as her individuality allows.

> Those interested in what maternity is for a woman will no doubt be able to shed new light on this obscure topic by listening, with greater attentiveness than in the past, to what today's mothers have to say not only about their economic difficulties but also, and despite the legacy of guilt left by overly existentialist approaches to feminism, about malaise, insomnia, joy, rage, desire, suffering, and happiness.[128]

Kristeva's point needs to be taken with extreme gravity if this "women's work" is ever to be valued. Further, the cost of ignoring or dismissing the results of placing this stress on mothers will be paid for ultimately by the children. Alexander and the crawling-already? girl are doomed from the outset in a culture and society that views them as pathologically aberrant.

Notes

[1] Kristeva 587.

[2] Ellen Boneparth and Emily Stoper, ed., "Introduction to Public Policy on Women and Production" in *Women, Power and Policy, Toward the Year 2000* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1988) 89.

[3] Kathleen McCartney and Deborah Phillips, "Motherhood and Child Care" in *The Different Faces of Motherhood*. ed. Beverly Birns and Dale F. Hay (New York: Plenum Press, 1988) 159.

[4] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 63-64.

[5] Beverly Birns and Niza Ben-Ner, "Psychoanalysis Constructs Motherhood" in *The Different Faces of Motherhood* ed. Beverly Birns and Dale F. Hay (New York: Plenum Press, 1988) 58.

[6] Libba Gage Moore, "Mothers' Pensions: The Origins of the Relationship Between Women and the Welfare State," diss., University of Massachusetts, 1986, 162.

[7] Moore 212.

[8] Tillie Olsen, "I Stand Here Ironing" in *Tell Me A Riddle* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961) 1.

[9] Olsen 1.

[10] Moore 163.

[11] Olsen 2.

[12] Olsen 2.

[13] Nancy J. Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 87-88.

[14] Olsen 3.

[15] McCartney & Phillips 162-163.

[16] Moore 186.

[17] Olsen 4.

[18] Oslen 5-6.

[19] Olsen 10-11.

[20] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 247.

[21] Olsen 11.

[22] Olsen 12.

[23] Terry Arendell, *Mothers and Divorce: Legal, Economic, and Social Dilemmas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 56.

[24] Anne Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 28-41.

[25] Tyler 106.

[26] Tyler 99.

[27] Tyler 236.

[28] Tyler 235.

[29] Tyler 192.

[30] Tyler 279-280.

[31] Tyler 212.

[32] Tyler 114-115.

[33] Neumann 268-278.

[34] Tyler 96-97.

[35] Tyler 189-190.

[36] Tyler 188.

[37] Moore 217-218.

[38] Tyler 42.

[39] Tyler 211-212.

[40] Tyler 279.

[41] Tyler 170.

[42] Arendell 82.

[43] Tyler 176-177.

[44] Tyler 179.

[45] Tyler 194-195.

[46] Arendell 4.

[47] Tyler 233.

[48] Tyler 236.

[49] Tyler 195.

[50] Tyler 213.

[51] Arendell 62.

[52] Tyler 237.

[53] Tyler 224.

[54] Tyler 103.

[55] Tyler 121.

[56] Tyler 281.

[57] Tyler 313.

[58] Tyler 177-178.

[59] Tyler 250.

[60] Tyler 349.

[61] Tyler 265.

[62] Tyler 164-165.

[63] Tyler 197.

[64] Tyler 332-333.

[65] Tyler 115.

[66] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 21.

[67] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: New American Library, 1987) 3.

[68] Morrison bases her story on a true account of Margaret Garner, in her 20's, who escaped from slavery in Kentucky to Cincinnati. In 1855 she tried to murder her four children rather than see them returned to slavery. Morrison's depiction of the actual attempt is parallel to Margaret Garner's: She hit the two boys in the head with a shovel, cut one baby's throat, and tried to smash the youngest baby against the wall of the woodshed. When caught, Margaret Garner said: "They cannot live like that, I will not permit them to live like I did"(Toni Morrison, from a PBS interview on *Beloved*, WGBY-TV Springfield, Producer Alan Benson, 1990).

[69] Morrison 183.

[70] Morrison 9.

[71] Morrison 12.

[72] Morrison, PBS interview, 1990.

[73] Morrison 23.

[74] Morrison, from PBS interview, 1990

[75] Moore 114.

[76] Valora Washington, "The Black Mother in the United States" in *The Different Faces of Motherhood* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988) 196.

[77] Morrison 30.

[78] Morrison 61.

[79] Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991) 166-167.

[80] Morrison 60-62. Kubitschek develops the thread of this message from Ma'am through the agent of Nan to Sethe, and then from Baby Suggs to Denver, who then repeats the interpreted and clarified message to Sethe once again. The importance of language, which also manifests itself in the female crowd "restores the primacy of African and African-American women's knowledge despite the obliterative overlay of European cognitive structures"(Kubitschek 174).

[81] Morrison 87-89.

[82] Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 7.

[83] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985) 106.

[84] Morrison 4-5.

[85] Morrison 184.

[86] Morrison 83-84.

[87] Morrison 100.

[88] Morrison 162.

[89] Morrison 94.

[90] Morrison 16-17.

[91] Morrison 58.

[92] Morrison 216.

[93] Morrison 31.

[94] Walker 109-110.

[95] Morrison 149.

[96] Morrison, PBS interview, 1990.

[97] Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* 86-87.

[98] Morrison 157.

[99] Morrison 151-153.

[100] Morrison, PBS interview, 1990.

[101] Morrison 163-164.

[102] Morrison 164-165.

[103] Morrison 202-203.

[104] Morrison 68.

[105] Morrison 97.

[106] Morrison 104.

[107] Morrison 132.

[108] Morrison 130.

[109] Morrison 70-71.

[110] Morrison 251.

[111] Morrison, PBS interview, 1990.

[112] Morrison 50-51.

[113] Morrison 241.

[114] Morrison 241.

[115] Morrison 97-98.

[116] Morrison 242-243.

[117] Morrison 250.

[118] Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* 85.

[119] Morrison 252.

[120] Morrison 42.

[121] Morrison 151-152.

[122] Morrison 200-201.

[123] Morrison 210-213.

[124] Morrison 272-273.

[125] Morrison 274-275.

[126] Morrison 36.

[127] Morrison 35.

[128] Kristeva 597.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Woman and child running
in a field . . .

Two hands one long, slim one
small, starlike clasped
in the razor wind

Her hair cut short for faster travel
the child's curls grazing his shoulders
the hawk-winged cloud over their heads

. . .

the air through which child and mother
are running the boy singing
the woman eyes sharpened in the light
heart stumbling making for the open[1]

Every woman mothers her children uniquely; each mother feels that experience individually. And the single mother recognizes the heightened intimacy between her and her children with all its power and futility. The richness of mothering makes its history and psychology ancient and profound. Yet trapped within expectations and blame, mothers' stories have been muffled, losing much in translation to patriarchal prescriptions. Understanding motherhood from a mother's perspective seems an obvious way to address not only women's

needs, but child development as well. Family dysfunction begins with unresolved parental pain. A single mother's struggle, initiated by social disfavor, is paid for by the woman and her children. Every mother's story needs to be told so that women can listen:

> Patriarchal man created--out of a mixture of sexual and affective frustration, blind need, physical force, ignorance, and intelligence split from its emotional grounding, a system which turned against woman her own organic nature, the source of her awe and her original powers. In a sense, female evolution was mutilated, and we have no way now of imagining what its development hitherto might have been; we can only try, at last, to take it into female hands.[2]

The themes and patterns that emerge from this investigation reflect the complex and varied real life attitudes and concerns about and by women. The particular time in which the works are written has much to do with how they reflected women's lives.

In early British literature the single mother was portrayed either as a direct descendant of Eve or with parthenogenic abilities. Her children were equally monstrous because they were illegitimate and therefore unnatural. Patriarchy, fully established, diminished mother-right in its legitimacy and power. Despite the Protestant rejection of the Roman Catholic Church and the icon of the Virgin Mary, virgin maternity was still held as an impossible ideal. Set against this perfection, depictions of child birth often paralleled scatological descriptions, following abhorrent understandings of the female body and its functions. In *Beowulf*, "The Man of Law's Tale, *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, maternity is divided into the monster and the madonna. The archetype of the Great Mother is dissected and defeated; either castigated as vile or reduced to passivity.

Through the seventeenth century laws were enacted which greatly affected the ability of a woman to support her family. The Poor Laws of England along with laws restricting her ability to enter into business or control her inheritance lessened the power a single mother could demonstrate. The Marriage Act of 1753 further established the paternal and propertied order of family. Even as widows with more power than their "illegitimate" counterparts, women were still subject to paternal sanctions and some financial and familial control. Prevailing attitudes and derisive stereotypes concerning widows undermined their integrity, and often their power was severely constricted by male rights to decree how that power was wielded. These issues were examined in dramas such as *Women Beware Women*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Coriolanus*. Even a widow with the right to self-control was suspect if she displayed her authority too confidently.

By the nineteenth century the voice of female experience was being heard through the popular novels of the day. Though most novels maintained their propriety by providing examples of proper womanly decorum, a few offered heroines who veered from the course of approbation. The shocking notion of choosing to be a single mother rather than live within abusive conditions was met with dubious praise. By further voicing subversive beliefs in child raising methods and controlling the next generation's values, women were treading on sacred ground. The single mothers of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Ruth* were pinioned between the ideology of the angel in the house and the superstition of witchcraft. As controller

of the stifling sphere of the hearth she must produce either perfect or unnatural children. Severe penance and death were the only possible ways to redeem the "sin" of single motherhood; the stigma remained forever.

The Victorian obsession with static female images is expressed in the inability of female characters to transcend or transform their situations. The mothers in *Bleak House*, *Adam Bede*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are a metaphor for the pre-oedipal mother who has been given little attention, surfacing only peripherally in literature. She must appear, because she is of primary importance to our development. But she is shunted into the shadow world of death. The fictional destruction of mother or child is a result of denying this crucial developmental stage. Rage, denial and infanticide are all explored as maternal responses to single motherhood.

With the dawn of the twentieth century the heterogeneous quality of single mothering began to be recognized. But the modern mother still faces institutions and experts who claim superiority in defining the child's best interests. The monster mother reappears, but more often under her own definition. This century's single mother of fiction is a more full-bodied version of the goddess. She often doubts her worth, because guilt is the serpent that tempts her to disbelieve herself. And murderous impulses still arise, but they are as likely for protection as destruction. A perspective on the construction of patriarchy and the destruction of maternal independence is now possible. One forceful example is the institution of slavery and how black women's mothering is decimated by this extreme

form of patriarchy. In works such as "I Stand Here Ironing, *The Accidental Tourist* and *Beloved*, women's voices are more abundant on the subject of parenting. Mythic elements are reintroduced and the details of reality are the fabric of the telling. Writers are able to acknowledge maternal imperfections while still celebrating the female body, its functions and the beauty of its creative ability. Life is reaffirmed in the telling of particular births, and common ground is revealed as the singular mother recounts her differences.

In reality, this dissertation cannot be concluded. Too many questions are still unanswered. This work is a preliminary investigation, not a definitive assessment on the state of single motherhood through the ages. I purposefully chose easily recognized characters and literature to spark the research, and was met with myriad tributaries and diversions along the way. The canonical list presented here only scratches the surface of historical beliefs and psychological assumptions. The alternative, perhaps subversive texts which would counteract these works are yet to be examined in this light. George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Henry James' *The Ambassadors* are tantalizing examples. And many of the texts presented here carry their own germ of dissension within their righteous arguments. Certainly Anne Brontë, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Thomas Hardy presented tales which gave their readers considerable pause.

The eighteenth century needs exploration, with its telling absence of strong, positive mothers. This century is perhaps the era when the values, laws and attitudes that we live with today were

first being forged as the agricultural enclave gave way to the urban, industrial family. Daniel Defoe's title character in *Moll Flanders*, Henry Fielding's Bridget Allworthy in *Tom Jones* and Mary Wollstonecraft's Mary in *The Wrongs of Woman* are all necessary additions to this work. Jonathan Swift's scatological approach in such works as *The Battle of the Books* has already been introduced and needs to be more fully considered.

Also not considered here is the issue of women who are not biological mothers, but who nevertheless nurture and discipline children. Surrogate motherhood, adoption and relatives who assume parental responsibilities are areas which relate to the subject at hand and need to be examined. James' *Portrait of a Lady* and Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping* are excellent examples of birth mothers disappearing and substitute mothers stepping into the maternal role:

> She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished. . . . [Sylvie] swayed us to some slow song she did not sing, and I stayed very still against her and hid the awkwardness and discomfort so that she would continue to hold me and sway.[3]

Robinson's Sylvie literally treads the waters of her family's emotional sea. Questions concerning adoption, surrogate mothers and homosexual parenting are further extensions of the work begun here.

Single fathers are, of course, another obvious outgrowth of my topic. Like single mothering, that phenomenon is not new. Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* sets a sturdy precedent as does Silas Marner in Eliot's novel of that title or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Negative examples exist as well, and *King Lear* comes quickly to mind. Perhaps the most striking difference between the

treatment of single mothers and single fathers is the grand and noble attitude with which fathers are so often portrayed. The successful father is honorable, often bestowing his paternal largess on the community. The failed father is no less grand, being allowed the heights of tragedy and the full resolution of contrition. Single fathers also share an ability to use external resources which usually means they have some female help.

European and other non-English fiction affords a wider, vaster array of cultural dimensions to the subject of mothering. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Bertold Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable* are classic examples of the work begun here. They are also compellingly different in their treatment, and would add a richness to our understanding of assumptions and expectations for the role of mother.

Popular culture, particularly film, is an intriguing avenue for exploration. The 1940's film, *Stella Dallas*, along with its 1980's counterpart might be a good place to begin. The monster mother certainly achieves popularity in this medium with such films as *Alien*, *Aliens* and *Alien 3*. With *The Grifters*, *Mermaids* and the PBS Mystery *Mother Love*, the classical themes are reproduced with very dark, contemporary overtones. Sacrifice, betrayal and all-consuming devotion are components of these films which reflect our desire for and abhorence of powerful mothers.

For me, however, the most exciting and compelling omission here are the works which tell the stories of mothering from diverse cultural perspectives. African-American writers have displayed their

powerful story-telling abilities with veracity and legend. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, preceded by *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, is part of the heritage begun by Harriet Jacobs and continued by authors such as Zora Neal Hurston and Paule Marshall. Native American authors weave their stories with myth, song and painful detail. In novels such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, the mother goddess reemerges and beckons to those who are willing to be healed and participate in the regeneration of the land and community: "He had not dreamed her; she was there as certainly as the sparrows had been there, leaving spindly scratches in the mud."[4] And Michael Dorris' *A Yellow Raft in Blue Waters* follows three generations of dysfunction and faith: "She had a kind of authority, a woman's strength, and in her strength, there was irresistible pain."[5] The matrilineal connections are lacerated with suffering and upheld with stoic dignity. These works contribute amazing characters; Thought Woman, Christine and Ida all hold delicious possibilities for analysis. Also intrinsic to further investigation are the Chinese-American novels of which Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* offers a many-layered presentation of monstrous and model motherhood. The impossibility of maintaining the continuous fabric of culture and family through war and dislocation are presented. Yet the mothering does continue: "This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions."[6] Issues of cultural stability and assimilation are necessary components of all ethnic literature.

Of the works, authors and themes I have discussed, each needs to be taken individually and explored in more detail. The warrior

who combats a monster mother is a common theme in many stories and in nearly every culture. Connections and variations would provide interesting study. The widow's reputation and power as depicted during the Renaissance and Restoration says much about women's changing value during these times. Witchcraft and its association with motherhood is a territory that also deserves much consideration. The "fallen women" of the Victorian age are given ample room in the novels of that day, but are they meant as negative moral examples or opportunities for vicarious transgression? Divorced mothers certainly must experience single motherhood somewhat differently than a widowed mother; is there important information to be gleaned? Ethnic cultures also differ in their attitudes toward single motherhood. Points of contrast and similarity surely would lend understanding to biases and beliefs. Perhaps an author's gender is relevant to their treatment of motherhood; descriptions of childbirth, breast feeding and even infant death could allow insight into gendered assumptions. Finally, the works of women writers who were and are single mothers themselves could be analyzed for their particular perspective.

My own thoughts move on to an idea that has continued to press itself forward as I worked through each mother presented here. I am intrigued by the notion of betrayal, that every mother, by necessity, must betray her child. Letting go or pushing the child away is perceived as abandonment, neglect and rejection, yet the child will not become the adult without this. Psychoanalysis is filled with the angry, forlorn child's response to this "betrayal," yet nowhere is there research into a mother's response to her experience or a place

where the voice of the mother is heard. What is the psychic cost of being the betrayer, the trusted caretaker who must choose the moment to let the scaffolding fall? Knowing that the child may fall, must fall at least once before learning the strength of her own self? We view this betrayer as "angry," "violent," and "destructive." Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, Ida in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, Ruth Foster in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Eva Peace in *Sula*, and, of course, Sethe in *Beloved* are all examples of the maternal strength which provides unshakable support and withholds that support at the moment of determination. The respect due such awful responsibility has been subverted in much of our culture into shame and blame. Parenting alone, as is the reality for most women, has its costs both psychically and culturally:

> Feminine psychosis today sustains itself through passion for politics, science, art, in which it becomes engrossed. The variant of that psychosis that accompanies maternity may be analyzed, more easily perhaps than other variants, in terms of its rejection of the other sex.
>
> What purpose does this rejection serve? Surely it does not allow any sort of pact between "sexual partners" based on a supposed preestablished harmony deriving from primordial androgyny. What it does allow is recognition of irreducible differences between the sexes and of the irreconcilable interests of both--and hence of women--in asserting those differences and seeking appropriate forms of fulfillment. . . . If it is true that an ethics for the modern age is no longer to be confused with morality, and if confronting the problem of ethics means not avoiding the embarrassing and inevitable issue of the law but instead bringing to the law flesh, language, and *jouissance*, then the reformulation of the ethical tradition requires the participation of women. Women imbued with the desire to reproduce (and to maintain stability); women ready to help our verbal species, afflicted as we are by the knowledge that we are mortal, to bear up under the menace of death; mothers.[7]

Kristeva's argument against feminists who reject maternity as less than womanly is necessary, but also fundamental to the reconstruction

of the female psyche is the recognition that mothering cannot and should not be provided in isolation. The "menace of death" as well as the hope of birth should not be born by one sex or one individual. Cultural attitudes that place the mortal extremes of our existence in capable, but overburdened hands, leave little room for emotional and psychological growth as we move from one end of life to the other.

Women have lived the divided roles of monster and madonna for too long, with the belief that motherhood is either the saving grace or the downfall of the sex. For centuries women have imitated the fragmented aspects of the Great Mother, carrying a stunted matriarchy forward into our own age. The single mother of fiction personifies the cultural inclination to eternally capture the goddess and impose on her our fears and hopes. As long as paternal sanctions are held in greater esteem than maternal, and as long as her potential is confined by impossible expectations, she will continue to be a Sphinx, an obvious and oblique reference point for understanding ourselves.

Notes

[1] Rich, "Mother-Right," in *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978) 59.

[2] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 126-127.

[3] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980) 160.

[4] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 222.

[5] Michael Dorris, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (New York: Warner Books, 1988) 370.

[6] Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Ivy Books, 1989) 3-4.

[7] Kristeva 601-602.

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