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Carol Banks

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Carol Banks

"DEAR MOTHER ENGLAND": MOTHERHOOD AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM OF SHAKESPEARE[1]

This article examines a selection of nineteenth-century appraisals of the mothers in Shakespeare's plays. Nineteenth-century interest in motherhood is hardly surprising, since society at this time regarded the family as the foundation stone of social order, with the mother figure at its ideological centre. The royal family itself set the standard with Queen Victoria, mother of nine, representing the ideal. The significance of motherhood at this time coincided with a rising wave of enthusiasm for Shakespeare's plays and the characters he created, characters that subsequently became role models for real women to emulate. Moreover, where the plays appeared to be wanting in respect of ideal mothers, nineteenth-century critics supplied the void with speculative adaptations and interpretations. In reality, however, notions of the ideal mother were fraught with difficulties and the evidence presented here suggests that whilst many nineteenth-century appraisals of Shakespearean mothers helped to perpetuate notions of the ideal and thereby uphold this significant part of the dominant ideology, others were clearly an attempt to negotiate a place between the real and the ideal.

In 1898, in an article published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Mary Bradford-Whiting expressed with regret that Shakespeare had "left unexplored that mighty power of motherhood which is one of the great elemental forces of the world".[2] She argued that although "Shakespeare is said to have entered into all phases of human experience, and to have depicted all shades of human character [. . .] from his gallery of portraits he has omitted one figure [. . .] the ideal mother".[3] This interest in mothers is hardly surprising, for in the nineteenth century the family was seen as the foundation stone of social order with motherhood at the ideological centre. Samuel Smiles confidently declared that "[i]t is at the sanctuary of the domestic hearth that woman rules the

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world"[4], and from conduct books to popular fiction, myths of the ideal mother informed and perpetuated the notion that motherhood was the "crowning beatitude of the woman's existence".[5] The nineteenth-century ideal mother was, as Bradford-Whiting explains, "tender, constant, and true, sympathetic alike in prosperity and adversity to her children".[6] Her role was to nurture, support and maintain the physical and spiritual well-being of her husband and her children. Indeed, maternal responsibilities were deeply rooted in religious observance (the Mothers' Union, founded in 1876, was first and foremost a Christian organization); both morality and piety were to be learned at the mother's knee. Some took notions of the ideal to exalted extremes: she was an "Angel in the House", according to Coventry Patmore[7], a view endorsed by that eminent Victorian critic John Ruskin, who, in identifying woman's ruling power, likewise limited her terrain to the home.[8] Others were more concerned with practical realities, as exemplified by Mrs Beaton's ever popular *Household Management* (1861) and the numerous books offering advice in matters of health and childbearing, such as W. Buchan's *Advice to Mothers, on the subject of their own Health; and the Means of Promoting the Health, Strength, and Beauty of their Offspring* (1803). Even in these early days of advertising, pictorial images of mother and child were designed, as Lori A. Loeb observes, to "draw attention to the personal emotional gratification derived from maternity" and "the love between mother and child [as] consuming and paramount".[9] Belief in a mother's moral superiority was also widely held and even used to advantage by women in the vanguard of feminism, as Ann Heilmann points out:

> Many feminists and New Woman writers drew on the notion of social purity and women's moral superiority to justify women's claim to political leadership. Social purity feminists thought that [...] women's maternal, self-sacrificing nature secured the interests of the weaker elements in society and thus safeguarded the moral and social health of the nation.[10]

Not surprisingly, motherhood also had a place in the imperial project, with England described as "The Mother Country" of colonial communities and English women "the future mothers of the English race to be".[11] Within such a context, the Bastard's reference to "Dear mother England" in Shakespeare's *King John* (5.2.153) must surely have gained added significance.

But the ideological positions regarding women in the nineteenth century were equally fraught with tensions, difficulties and contradictions, and none more so than the mothers placed at the pinnacle of womanhood. As Sally Shuttleworth explains: "The angel was shadowed by potent images of disruptive physicality, while [...] motherhood seemed to impose conflicting

demands".[12] Concern over women's rights was already an issue at the start of the century, not least following the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). And as the century progressed, writers such as John Stuart Mill continued to strive for greater equality and to further the debate known as "the woman question"; the purpose of Mill's essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) was to change public opinion and laws regarding women. Furthermore, the efforts fuelled by these inequalities and discontents were not entirely in vain. In 1857, the first divorce courts were established in which women could petition for divorce on the grounds of desertion or cruelty, and in 1873, divorced mothers were granted the right to claim custody of children below the age of 16. London University granted the first degrees to women in 1878 and in the previous year (1877), when Annie Besant was charged over the publication of a book which discussed birth control, the trial itself served to disseminate ideas about birth control and Besant's own defence: that these measures might help the many mothers worn out from childbearing. In 1882, a Second Married Women's Property Act was passed, which entitled married women to own property in their own right, and then the Guardianship of Infants Bill, passed in June 1886, recognized a mother's role in childcare. Female suffrage may not have been granted until the twentieth century, but steps towards female independence were certainly gathering pace throughout the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless, setting the standard for exalted nineteenth-century notions of motherhood, and to some extent bridging the gap between the ideal and the real, was Queen Victoria herself. Victoria was not only sovereign of England and the British Empire, she was the mother of nine, the mighty matriarch who became the "grandmother of Europe", and this mother did, indeed, rule a large part of the world. The image of the royal mother as presented to the general public was one of devotion to her husband, children and nation, of fertility and patience, long-suffering in her labours and very traditional in her attitudes to the social roles of men and women. In *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), the author, Sarah Ellis, not only presented the Queen as the ideal, she praised her good influence on the moral character of English women in general, a view which she further endorsed in her subsequent publication *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence and Social Obligations* (1843), which she dedicated to "Her Majesty the Queen, In whose exalted station the social virtues of domestic life present the brightest example to her countrywomen, and the surest presage of her empire's glory".[13] Numerous painted portraits of the royal family, cosily grouped in happy, idyllic luxury with the mother queen at the centre, illustrated to society at large a blissful picture of ideal family life. One such illustration shows the royal family and attendants seated before a production of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, presented in the Rubens Room at

Windsor in 1848, one of several Shakespeare plays performed at Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace during Victoria's lifetime.[14] Evidently, in Victorian Britain, Shakespeare's plays were considered as suitable family entertainment; but it was in the nineteenth century that the plays also took on a significant role in relation to women.

Long before the publication of Juliet Dusinberre's groundbreaking twentieth-century analysis, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975), nineteenth-century critics were busy analysing Shakespeare's female characters. As Julie Hankey rightly observes: "It was the Victorians who first associated Shakespeare with elevated notions of womanhood";[15] even John Ruskin boldly claimed that "Shakespeare has no heroes; he has only heroines".[16] Anna Jameson was the first to publish a full-length, two-volume study of Shakespeare's heroines in 1832: *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical*; later in the century it became known simply as *Shakespeare's Heroines*. Jameson's aim was to examine women's moral, intellectual and emotional capacities, using Shakespeare's female characters "to illustrate the manner in which the affections would naturally display themselves in women".[17] The book was well received: by 1905, it had run to over 20 editions. *Shakespeare's Heroines* not only helped to establish Victorian concepts of the ideal woman[18], it was instrumental in presenting Shakespeare's female characters as role models for real women to emulate. By 1861, Mary Cowden Clarke confidently explained that "Shakespeare's works are a library in themselves [...] A poor girl, studying no other volume, might become a lady in heart and soul"[19], and she later described the bard as "the Girl's friend" and "a valuable friend of woman-kind".[20] On the general theme of motherhood, Clarke also acknowledged her own mother as an inspirational force behind her writing, stating that it was "she who first inspired me with a love of all that is good and beautiful, and who therefore may well be said to have originated my love of Shakespeare".[21] She likewise credited the mother of Shakespeare's children, Anne Hathaway, with Shakespeare's generous appraisal of women: "the advantage in generosity which he has always assigned to women over men [...] gives us excellent warrant for supposing that he had had reason to know this truth respecting her sex from the mother of his children";[22] and she introduced the mother figure again, as narrator and editor, declaring that: "Happy is she who at twelve or thirteen has Shakespeare's works themselves read to her by her mother, with loving selection of fittest plays and passages!"[23] Indeed, since a mother's role was to offer guidance and instruction, it can be argued that these books in themselves performed the role of surrogate mothers.

There are, of course, a number of mothers in Shakespeare's plays from whom real nineteenth-century women may have learned the rights and wrongs of motherhood. Mary Cowden Clarke claimed that: "from his wives and

matrons she [the female reader] can derive instruction in moral courage, meekness, magnanimity, firmness, devoted tenderness, high principle, noble conduct, loftiest speech and sentiment".[24] But, as indicated above, in 1898, Mary Bradford-Whiting, after identifying the many heroines who are motherless in the plays, argued that Shakespearean mothers are far from ideal:

> Juliet has a mother, to whose heart of stone she appeals in vain [...] Hamlet has a mother, each remembrance of whom is a pang to his distressed mind [...] Nor in those mothers who possess more commendable qualities is there that "sweet, attractive kind of grace", and that "continual comfort", which we might naturally expect to find.[25]

Nonetheless, in *Shakespeare's Heroines*, Anna Jameson had already identified several Shakespearean mothers for moral contemplation and analysis: the characters of Hermione (*The Winter's Tale*), Volumnia (*Coriolanus*), Constance and Elinor (*King John*), Margaret (*Henry VI*) and Queen Katherine *(Henry VIII*) are among those examined, interweaving, in the case of the historical characters, historical and dramatic appraisals in an attempt to define ideal womanliness in terms of these fictional characters. For example, she begins her appraisals of historical characters with her own summary of the historical record and of events surrounding those presented in the plays, thus providing a preconceived image to be "fleshed out" in her analysis of the finer Shakespearean representations:

> Constance is certainly an historical personage; but the form which, when we meet it on the record of history, appears like a pale, indistinct shadow, half melted into its obscure background, starts before us into a strong relief and palpable breathing reality upon the page of Shakspeare.[26]

Jameson also sees fit to make a number of omissions. For example, in her accounts of Elinor and Margaret, she makes no mention of them as mothers and she virtually erases Margaret from the canon altogether:

> Among the arguments against the authenticity of these plays, the character of Margaret of Anjou has not been adduced, and yet to those who have studied Shakspeare in his own spirit it will appear the most conclusive of all. When we compare her with his other female characters, we are struck at once by the lack of family likeness [...] she is not one of Shakspeare's women.[27]

Jameson's admiration for a particular character is evident in the number of pages she devotes to each: 8 to Volumnia, 16 to Hermione, 20 to Katherine

and 23 to Constance. Of these appraisals, those of Hermione and Katherine come closest to the nineteenth-century ideal. Hermione is described as being "most distinguished by her magnanimity and her fortitude" and her character exhibits "dignity without pride, love without passion, and tenderness without weakness".[28] Of Katherine she goes even further, presenting her as a gleaming paragon of truth and virtue: "the triumph of Shakspeare's genius and his wisdom".[29] For Jameson, Katherine, like Hermione, fulfils the ideal in terms of "patience, fortitude and [...] justice", and she argues that Shakespeare excels in projecting and enhancing the virtues of the historical queen in the stage character, not least in the closing scene: "Shakspeare has given them [the words of Katherine's dying request] added grace, and pathos, and tenderness, without injuring their truth and simplicity".[30]

More than 50 years after Jameson had published her account of *Shakespeare's Heroines*, Edward Dowden, examining "Shakespeare's Portraiture of Women" (1885), continued to see Shakespearean characters as role models for real women, borrowing Hamlet's mirror metaphor to describe the heroines as "women beheld in the most wonderful of magic mirrors [...] perfectly feminine".[31] Dowden, like Anna Jameson before him, singles out the mothers Hermione (*The Winter's Tale*) and Queen Katherine *(Henry VIII*) as shining examples of Shakespeare's later creations, claiming that Shakespeare's "deep experience and clarified vision of life" produced characters that "conquer" by means of "patience, fortitude, a spirit of justice and long-suffering".[32] This last observation—"long-suffering"—is highly significant because, strange as it may seem, nineteenth-century interest in Shakespearean mothers continued to focus, as Jameson had done in the case of Katherine and Constance, on the suffering, problematic and even absent varieties, the latter resulting in some highly imaginative appraisals and conjectures.

In relation to the nineteenth-century ideal, Constance, the mother of young Arthur in *King John*, certainly falls short of Hermione and Katherine; even so, she was a particular nineteenth-century favourite. Whilst the dowager queen Elinor (the other mother in this play) comes in for surprisingly little attention, the role played by Constance was elevated, enhanced and enlarged. Leigh Hunt, reviewing Sarah Siddons's 1810 portrayal of Constance for the *Examiner*, claimed that: "The Constance of Mrs Siddons is an excellent study for young actresses, to whom it will shew the great though difficult distinction between rant and tragic vehemence";[33] and the "tragic vehemence" in her performance was largely an expression of "the agonising feelings of maternal affection" which Siddons regarded as the motivation for Constance's final distraction.[34] Ignoring the fact that Elinor accuses Constance of shaming her son—"His mother shames him so, poor boy, he weeps" (*King John* 2.1.166)—and focusing instead on female tenderness of the highest patriarchal order (that of a mother for her son), Siddons explained Constance's madness in

distinctly maternal terms, as "a hunted tigress in defense of her young".[35] Yet to fully effect such a portrayal, she found it necessary to make drastic cuts: not surprisingly, the charge of Arthur's bastardy is cut, so too are passages when Constance is not present on stage.[36] By making Constance more maternal, her function as the exposé of the falsehood and failures of patriarchy (the ideological system that eventually fails her in the play) is overshadowed, and nineteenth-century ideologies are upheld.

Mrs Siddons's interpretation of Constance certainly struck the right note with many nineteenth-century critics and, 70 years later, Margaret Isabella Tucker still described Constance in much the same terms:

> Nowhere else has Shakespeare so depicted the maternal character with all its forceful springs of action: its deep tenderness, its loving pride, its self-abnegation, its tenacity of purpose, its measureless indignation, and its passionate despair [...] it is her intense, absorbing devotion as a mother that has immortalized her for all ages. We see her as the wounded lioness, caught in the toils, despairing of escape, yet battling to death in defence of her off-spring. Her one object in life is her boy.[37]

Nonetheless, Tucker, like many other critics of the day, still found Constance wanting, describing her as "highly sensitive, easily moved by external forces [...] with a certain want of wariness and reserve, lacking self-reliance and resource, fortitude to 'underbear' her woes".[38] Mary Bradford-Whiting similarly identified a "want of self-control" in Constance's character, agreeing with Elinor's observation that she is "An unadvised scold" (*King John* 2.1.191).[39] Although "immortalized", this stage mother obviously fails to live up to the nineteenth-century ideal. In trying to analyse the difficulties, Edward Dowden again picked up on maternal "suffering", claiming that "great affairs of State make havoc in the domestic affections, and women are in a peculiar degree the sufferers"[40], and he draws attention to the fact that:

> The historical plays are filled with the outcries of women. Now it is the Duchess of York pleading passionately at King Henry's feet for the life of her first-born [...] Now it is Constance weeping for her Arthur [...] Now it is an antiphony of lamentations, rising from a royal mother, two fatherless children, and their feeble granddame [...] And so the terzett of sorrow goes on.[41]

Motherhood, it would seem, brought with it a weight of troubles.

Perhaps more surprising than the attention paid to distraught and suffering mothers, such as Katherine, Hermione and Constance, are the nineteenth-century interpretations of Lady Macbeth. Again, Mrs Siddons is instrumental in

the century's reappraisal of Macbeth's ambitious wife and accomplice in murder. For example, Siddons saw her as a fair, blue-eyed woman, not of the archetypal raven looks of evil.[42] But her interpretation of the lines "I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me"(*Macbeth* 1.7.54–55) is particularly relevant in terms of identifying the traces of a motherly tenderness in this Shakespearean character. Siddons maintained that: "The very use of such a tender allusion in the midst of her dreadful language, persuades one unequivocally that she has really felt the maternal yearnings of a mother towards her babe".[43] Anna Jameson followed suit, arguing for a more womanly and sympathetic appraisal of Lady Macbeth, in an attempt to counterbalance the views of many earlier male critics who, she claimed, regarded the character as little more than "a kind of ogress", a "female Fury"[44], "*naturally cruel*" and "*invariably savage*".[45] Jameson writes that in spite of her evil actions, Lady Macbeth "remains a woman to the last, – still linked with her sex and with humanity [. . .] so supremely wicked, and so consistently feminine" and, like Mrs Siddons before her, she highlights her maternal capacity:

> If Lady Macbeth had been *naturally* cruel, she needed not so solemnly to have abjured all pity, and called on the spirits that wait on mortal thoughts to *unsex* her; nor would she have been loved to excess by a man of Macbeth's character, for it is the sense of intellectual energy and strength of will overpowering her feminine nature which draws from him that burst of intense admiration –
>
> Bring forth men-children only!
> For thy undaunted metal should compose
> Nothing but males.[46]

Many nineteenth-century actresses—Adelaide Ristori, Helen Faucit and Ellen Terry included—presented Lady Macbeth as a character with powerful maternal instincts. Ellen Terry, as Sandra Richards points out, "became inspired by a reading of Sarah Siddons's views on the part in a *Westminster Review* article of 1843" and the notes she "scribbled into her own working script, betray a search for the essentially feminine in Lady Macbeth".[47] Terry's search for "the essentially feminine" in Shakespeare's female characters would shape her later performances, and her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, immortalized by John Singer Sargent's splendid painting of 1889, certainly established an iconic image that would inform future generations well into the twentieth century. But this trend was already established before Terry took on the role. In an extended essay entitled *Lady Macbeth: A Study* (1884), M. Leigh-Noel continued to engross the maternal in Lady Macbeth, whilst drawing on the emotions in true Victorian melodramatic vein:

> I believe it requires only a little care and patience to discover in Lady Macbeth many true womanly traits and even endearing qualities [...] She had been a mother, nor was she so advanced in years but that she might be again, and of all the pathetic yearnings those of a childless mother are the most touching [...]
>
> Oh, for a child to have nestled to her iron heart – to have unbound the frozen milk of her congealed breasts![48]

From this nineteenth-century perspective, it would seem that a child is all that is needed to save Lady Macbeth from evil.

In addition to the childless variety, mothers who are absent from the plays are repeatedly reintroduced in nineteenth-century criticism, providing a further opportunity to engross the subject of motherhood with considerable speculative imaginings. M. Leigh-Noel, in her talks to the New Shakespeare Society in 1884, highlighted "the absence, with girls, of maternal relations"[49] in the plays and repeatedly reminds the reader of this in *Shakespeare's Garden of Girls*, published in 1885. For example, she is keen to point out that in *The Merchant of Venice*, "Portia's independence of character was in no small degree owing to the position in which, by her mother's death, she found herself placed"[50], and of the sisters Katherine and Bianca (*The Taming of the Shrew*), she blames their extreme personalities on their mother's absence:

> Fortune had [...] been very cruel, for it had taken from them the tender care and gentle overshadowing influence of that richest of all home blessings, a mother's love, [...] Deprived of this mellowing influence, the two girls ran into extremes.[51]

But even more imaginative than critical speculations such as these are the publications devoted to the early lives of Shakespeare's heroines—narratives constructed outside the events presented within the plays themselves—which serve to resurrect so many mothers from the graves to which they are committed by the start of Shakespeare's dramatic productions.

A very popular contribution in this category was Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines in a Series of Tales*, being 15 short narratives first published between 1850 and 1852. These *Tales* are openly didactic, aimed at instructing Victorian girls and women in their wifely duties and in how to avoid the many dangers to which they may fall prey. Indeed, in the words of George C. Gross: "sex education is the most important subject on the curriculum she offers".[52] To this end, several absent mothers are reintroduced into the lives of Shakespeare's heroines. In "The Magnifico's Child", we learn that Desdemona and her mother share "the same exquisite gentleness" and that "Desdemona [...] never voluntarily quitted her mother's side". But

Desdemona's mother is remiss for failing to teach Desdemona how to protect herself from malignity:

> Could the lady Erminia have taught her the unflinching candour which ought to belong to goodness and greatness, – have inspired courage of transparent truth, she would have invested her daughter with a panoply that would have proved her best protection against the diabolical malignity by which she was one day to be assailed.[53]

In these tales, it is clearly a mother's duty to open the eyes of her daughter to the perils that lie in the way of virtue. Thus, Ophelia engages in long conversations with her mother on the evils of men, and the bond between mother and daughter is again reinforced as the "Rose of Elsinore" is introduced as "Mother's own treasure! Mother's little tender one!"[54] The reader is even subjected to a virtual eulogy on "mother-love":

> Holy mother-love! Nearest semblance vouchsafed to mortals of Divine protection! Benignest human symbol of God's mercy to man! There is a blessed influence, a sacred joy, a plenitude of satisfaction, in the very presence of a mother, that plainer speaks the mysterious beatitude of Heaven itself to earthly intelligence, then ought else in existence.[55]

When it comes to the girlhood of Lady Macbeth, Clarke does not resurrect the mother figure but, in returning this character to her premarital years, she implies that the absence of the mother figure was partly to blame for her more masculine tendencies. In "The Thane's Daughter", this "motherless infant" is drawn into male affection by a devoted father. She goes on to show a manly interest in the martial arts, which she eventually shares with her baby son, holding him over the castle battlements to watch the men fighting below, of which Macbeth remarks: "You breed our boy well, sweet wife, in teaching him thus to look upon the battlefields betimes. Thou art truly fit to be mother of a race of heroes!"[56] But when her child, Cormac, is "carried off in his infancy"[57], Lady Macbeth, once a motherless child herself, becomes the childless mother and her fate veers from a potential "mother of a race of heroes" towards the murderess in Shakespeare's play.

When critics identified and engrossed ideal motherhood in Shakespeare's plays, the "great poet-teacher"[58] appeared to endorse nineteenth-century values in this respect. Furthermore, if, as Bradford-Whiting observed, the ideal variety are "singularly few in number"[59], then absence itself was both a *tabula rasa* upon which the ideal could be inscribed and an opportunity to highlight the important role of the mother in a child's development. This interest in a mother's guiding influence continued to inform Alice Edwards' early

twentieth-century speculations relating to Shakespeare himself. In *My Thoughts on Shakespeare* (*c.*1920), she likens Shakespeare's mother to a "good woman in the Proverbs", noting that "she bore the holy name of Mary" and arguing that "he had her in his mind when he drew Volumnia", on the grounds that "his mother died in September 1608, and *Coriolanus* is assigned to late in that year".[60] Edwards further claims that references in the plays to the Old and New Testaments are "undoubtedly his mother's teaching", and that Mary Arden was a virtual co-author of the early plays which, she claims, "were talked over, and were helped by his mother in the Henley Street house", further arguing that:

> Shakespeare seems by many to be regarded as a miracle, but nothing comes of nothing [...] Surely his mother, descended from the ancient family of Arden, would naturally be a cultivated woman in the Elizabethan age, when all loved to be learned, and Warwickshire was the most literary county.[61]

In this speculative appraisal, Alice Edwards is also evidently drawing on the nineteenth-century belief that intelligence was inherited from the mother, as an article on "Mothers", published in *All the Year Round* in 1865, points out:

> The theory that we derive our intellectual qualities from our mothers, while we are indebted to our fathers only for our physical attributes, is most agreeable to all the natural instincts of man [...] It is upon this theory that we trace the genius of our great men to the influence of their mothers. [...] Genius is not hereditary through the fathers, but through the mothers.[62]

According to this theory, a son could inherit his mother's intelligence, even when her intelligence was not obvious, as Jill L. Matus explains: "The mother may be a bearer of intelligence, which lies latently or recessively in women and manifests itself only in their male offspring".[63] When little or nothing is known of the mother, in life or fiction, such ideas can be supported by speculation—speculation that serves to perpetuate dominant ideas about motherhood. But if the interest in ideal and absent mothers in Shakespeare is straightforward enough, the nineteenth-century preoccupation with the problematic, tormented and suffering varieties is more complex.

One explanation for the focus on characters such as Constance and Lady Macbeth has to be that critics were aware that in reality, motherhood was not what the writers and illustrators who promoted the ideal would have us believe. For some, ideal motherhood was veiled in mystery, a divine quality, beyond reason:

> Maternal love is a mystery which human reason can never fathom. It is altogether above reason; it is a holy passion, in which all others are absorbed and lost. It is a sacred flame on the altar of the heart.[64]

But for others, the ideal simply did not match up to reality. Queen Victoria lamented the lack of her own mother's love: "To miss a mother's friendship – not to have her to confide in – when a girl most needs it, was fearful";[65] and in her private correspondence, she makes it clear that motherhood was not all it was made out to be. She complained to her eldest daughter, Vicky, about childbearing: "I think [. . .] of our being like a cow or a dog at such moments; when our poor nature becomes so very animal"; and her status as a wife conflicted with that of sovereign queen when she engaged in fierce arguments with Albert over which doctor to trust when the children fell ill.[66] Mary Anne Lamb, who with her brother Charles wrote the very popular children's book *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), actually murdered her own mother in 1796, stabbing her to death in a fit of insanity, for which she spent only three years in an asylum before her brother was able to secure her release.[67] This nineteenth-century "mad woman" was certainly not confined to the attic—the brother and sister writing duo went on to publish several highly successful children's books and Mary lived to the ripe old age of 83. The actress Ellen Terry was another contradiction, as Elaine Aston observes, for she was "fêted as 'an icon of Victorian femininity' despite being a mother of two illegitimate children".[68] Statistics themselves reveal that, in reality, many nineteenth-century mothers were less caring than the ideal would have us believe. For example, baby farming was commonplace, particularly amongst the working classes, and some surrogate mothers so neglected their charges as to lead to the infants' deaths. The situation was such that in 1872, an Act for the Protection of Infant Life was issued, to keep a check on such establishments.[69] Interestingly, it is the presiding image of Lady Macbeth who provides the stereotype for "aberrant maternity" in a nineteenth-century article on infant mortality, published in the *Lancet* in 1859.[70] Yet, like Lady Macbeth herself, mothers accused of infanticide were not without pity. Paradoxically, they were, as Jill L. Matus points out, "objects of considerable public sympathy in mid-Victorian England", where "none of the thirty-one women convicted of infanticide between 1849 and 1864 was executed".[71] So, in focusing on problematic mothers, Shakespearean critics may be highlighting wider concerns surrounding the mother figure and women in general.

Of course, in a patriarchal society, difficulties surrounding the mother figure are also intrinsically linked to the question of female authority—the mother being the first power source experienced by all human beings and from whom each individual seeks to escape in order to gain independence; a general condition exacerbated in a patriarchal society when a woman, Queen Victoria,

holds the supreme position of power. The centrality and spiritual elevation of mothers in this period was undoubtedly confounded by both the harsh realities of maternal responsibility and the voices that cried out for change in relation to woman's social position. So, on the one hand, Shakespeare's characters were analysed and explained in the light of dominant ideologies, whilst, on the other, they provided a fascinating and highly revered source for further analysis and consideration.

When Mary Bradford-Whiting questioned the seeming absence of "the ideal mother" in the plays, she considered the possibility, albeit inconclusively, that this may be due to Shakespeare's own real-life relationship with the mother figure. But, unlike Alice Edwards, she avoided speculation:

> Whether the circumstances of Shakespeare's own life account in any way for his unusual treatment of the maternal character can be now but a matter of conjecture. Of Mary Arden we know too little to determine what she was in herself, or what effect she produced upon her poet son; while, though it is clear that there was a close tie of love between Shakespeare and his daughters, there is nothing to show what terms existed between them and their mother.[72]

Laura Stubbs, also writing in 1898, similarly looked to real life when she put forward the argument that the absence of the ideal was because Shakespeare's characters are "one and all too true to humanity".[73] Of course, these nineteenth-century interpretations pre-date Freud's work on the Oedipus complex, which was to influence many twentieth-century interpretations of familial relationships in Shakespeare's plays, and it was not until the 1990s that views of Shakespearean mothers would be completely reappraised in Janet Adelman's impressive psychoanalytical study, in which Shakespearean mothers are no longer "suffering" but "suffocating"—*Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays,* Hamlet *to* The Tempest (1992). But back in the 1800s, whilst some critics were very obviously attempting to uphold the dominant, elevated and very demanding views of motherhood by recourse to Shakespeare's characters, others were evidently more sensitive to the inherent problems. In her study of *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (1997), Natalie J. McKnight argues that: "Victorians seemed to be split by the angel/bitch dichotomy, unable, in most cases, to deal with women – and mothers in particular – in any other way".[74] Yet, in the case of Shakespearean mothers, some attempts to negotiate a place between the two are in evidence: softening the "bitch"—Lady Macbeth with explanations of her childless state and identifying the less than angelic qualities of a seemingly devoted mother in Constance. In terms of actual performances, Gail Marshall's recent study goes so far as to suggest that the nineteenth-century touring actress actually

"challenged concepts of femininity as given and natural [...] and her performances threw light upon the construction of theatrical and social concepts of gender".[75] Certainly, by the end of the century when Laura Stubbs and Mary Bradford-Whiting note the failure of Shakespeare to present the ideal and look for explanations in real life, these critics are clearly aware of a discrepancy between the real and the ideal. In praising Shakespeare's ability to create characters that are true to life, inevitably the ideal nineteenth-century mother remains very much an ideal.

Acknowledgement

I should like to dedicate this article to the memory of Sasha Roberts, a brilliant young academic, author and mother who died tragically on 7 September 2006. Extracts from several of the texts mentioned here are reproduced in the excellent anthology she co-edited with Ann Thompson: *Women Reading Shakespeare, 1660–1900: An Anthology of Criticism* (Manchester University Press, 1997).

Notes

1 William Shakespeare, *King John*, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 5.2.153. Subsequent references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
2 Mary Bradford-Whiting, "Mothers in Shakespeare," *Gentleman's Magazine* 285 (1898): 33–41 (41).
3 Bradford-Whiting 33.
4 Samuel Smiles, *Life and Labour: or, characteristics of men of industry, culture and genius* (London: John Murray, 1887) 386.
5 Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (1911; London: Virago, 1978) 127.
6 Bradford-Whiting 34.
7 The title of Coventry Patmore's long poem originally published between 1854 and 1862. Dedicated to Patmore's first wife, it celebrates their 15 years of married life.
8 John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (London: Smith Elder, 1865); rpt. in Harold Bloom, ed., *The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin* (1965; New York: De Capo, 1987) 182–219.
9 Lori A. Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 139.
10 Ann Heilmann, ed., introduction, *The Late Victorian Marriage Question. Volume 1: Marriage and Motherhood* (London: Routledge, 1998) ix–xxxi (xxii).

11 Julia Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (London: Leicester UP 2000) 166.
12 Sally Shuttleworth, "Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era," *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (London: Routledge, 1992) 31–51 (33).
13 Sarah Ellis, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence and Social Obligations* (London: Fisher, Son and Co., 1843) dedication. In the same year, Ellis also published *The Mothers of England, Their Influence and Responsibility* (London: Fisher, Son and Co., 1843).
14 Dorothy Marshall, *The Life and Times of Victoria* (London: Weidenfeld, 1972) 80–81.
15 Julie Hankey, "Victorian Portias: Shakespeare's Borderline Heroine," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.4 (1994): 426–48 (426).
16 Ruskin 185.
17 Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical*, 2nd ed. (1833; London: G. Bell, 1930) 26.
18 Anne E. Russell argues that *Shakespeare's Heroines* "came to be understood to embody a characteristically Victorian conception of ideal womanliness" in "'History and Real Life': Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines* and Victorian Women," *Victorian Review* 17.1 (1991): 35–49 (37).
19 Mary Cowden Clarke, preface, *Shakespeare's Works, Edited, with a Scrupulous Revision of the Text, by Mary Cowden Clarke* (London and New York: Trubner Appleton, 1860) v.
20 Mary Cowden Clarke, "Shakespeare as the Girl's Friend," *Shakespeariana* 4 (1887; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965): 355–69 (355).
21 Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Complete Concordance to Shakespeare: Being a verbal index to all the Passages in the Dramatic Works of the Poet* (1845); qtd. in Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts, eds., *Women Reading Shakespeare, 1660–1900: An Anthology of Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997) 81.
22 Cowden Clarke, preface, *Shakespeare's Works* x.
23 Cowden Clarke, "Shakespeare" 369.
24 Cowden Clarke, "Shakespeare" 356.
25 Bradford-Whiting 34.
26 Jameson 269.
27 Jameson 288.
28 Jameson 159–60.
29 Jameson 302.
30 Jameson 317.
31 Edward Dowden, "Shakespeare's Portraiture of Women," *Shakespeariana* 2 (1885; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965): 201–19 (202).
32 Dowden 218.

33 Qtd. in Juliet Dusinberre, "King John and Embarrassing Women," *Shakespeare Survey Volume 42: Shakespeare and the Elizabethans*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 37–52 (37).
34 See Claudio Nimbus [Randall McLeod], "An Evening without Mrs Siddons," *Critical Survey* 7.3 (1995): 256–91 (286).
35 Nimbus 286.
36 Nimbus 286.
37 Margaret Isabella Tucker, "Shakesperian Characters. 1. Contance," *Shakespeariana* 1 (1883–84; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965): 229–30 (229).
38 Tucker 229.
39 Bradford-Whiting 36.
40 Dowden 208.
41 Dowden 209–10.
42 Jameson 322n.
43 Thomas Campbell, *The Life of Mrs Siddons* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834); qtd. in Thompson and Roberts 56.
44 Jameson 322.
45 Jameson 335, endorsing earlier critics Cumberland and Professor Richardson.
46 Jameson 335.
47 Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) 121.
48 M. Leigh-Noel, *Lady Macbeth: A Study* (London: Wyman, 1884); rpt. in Thompson and Roberts 174–76 (174–75).
49 Leigh-Noel qtd. in Thompson and Roberts 173.
50 M. Leigh-Noel, *Shakespeare's Garden of Girls* (London: Remington, 1885); rtp. in Thompson and Roberts 176–85 (179).
51 Leigh-Noel, *Shakespeare's Garden* 181.
52 George C. Gross, "Mary Cowden Clarke: 'The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines' and the Sex Education of Victorian Women," *Victorian Studies* 16.1 (1972): 37–58 (57).
53 Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines in a New edition, Condensed by her sister Sabilla Novello* (London: Bickers and Son, 1879) 82–83.
54 Cowden Clarke, *Girlhood* 208.
55 Cowden Clarke, *Girlhood* 209.
56 Cowden Clarke, *Girlhood* 54–55.
57 Cowden Clarke, *Girlhood* 56.
58 Cowden Clarke, "Shakespeare" 335.
59 Bradford-Whiting 34.
60 Alice Edwards, *My Thoughts on Shakespeare. Mothers of Great Men: Cicero, Augustine, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wellington, Wesley, Napoleon, Scott* [written on board the *Ormonde*] (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, n.d., *c.* 1920) 6.
61 Edwards 13.

62 "Mothers," *All the Year Round*, ed. Charles Dickens, 9 Sept. 1865: 157–59 (157).
63 Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 213.
64 "Mothers" 157.
65 Qtd. in Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: Murray, 1993) 12.
66 Simon Schama, *A History of Britain. Volume 3: The Fate of Empire, 1776–2000* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2002) 197.
67 Joanne Shattock, *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 250–51.
68 Elaine Aston, "'Studies in Hysteria': actress and courtesan, Sarah Bernhardt and Mrs Patrick Campbell," *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 253–71 (253).
69 Carol Smart, "Disruptive Bodies and Unruly Sex: The Regulation of Reproduction and Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *Regulating Womanhood: Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992) 7–32 (23).
70 "Murder of the Innocents," *Lancet* (1859); qtd. in Matus 159.
71 Roger Smith, *Trial by Medicine: Insanity and Responsibility in Victorian Trials* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1981); qtd. in Matus 145.
72 Bradford-Whiting 41.
73 Laura Stubbs, "That Shakespeare's Women are Ideals," *Stratford upon Avon Herald* 1 July 1898; qtd. in Thompson and Roberts 246.
74 Natalie J. McKnight, *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1997) 28.
75 Gail Marshall, "Cultural Formations: the nineteenth-century touring actress and her international audiences," Gale and Stokes 52–73 (71).

Carol Banks is associate lecturer in Literature at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK, and the editor of *Diffusion: The UCLan Journal of Undergraduate Research*. She edited *Critical Survey* from 1999 to 2003 and is the author of several articles published in anthologies and academic journals, including: *Shakespeare's Histories and Counter-Histories*, edited by Dermot Cavanagh, Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Stephen Longstaffe (Manchester University Press, 2006); *Shakespeare in the Media*, edited by Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier and Jorg Helbig (Peter Lang, 2004); *Women's Writing*, volume 8, number 2 (2001); *Religion and the Arts*, volume 4, number 2 (2000); and *Shakespeare and the Visual Arts*, edited by Holger Klein and James L. Harner (*Shakespeare Yearbook*, volume 11, 2000). *Address*: University of Central Lancashire, Preston, Lancashire, PR1 2HE, UK. [email: cabanks@uclan.ac.uk]