

6-18-2011

Men Who Mother and Women Who Won't: Birthing a New Maternity

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MEN WHO MOTHER AND WOMEN WHO WON'T:
BIRTHING A NEW MATERNITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2011

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Examining popular film, news stories, and relevant literature, primarily from America published in the 20th and 21st century, one can see the theme of motherhood is explored, revealing that men and women are often given messages that reinforce prescribed gender roles. Men who engage in maternal practices are often shown in one of three ways: as a source of horrifying potentiality; as an example of comedy; or, the most rare, as a real, working model of masculine maternity. Women, on the other hand, are given another script. The push to mother, or the motherhood imperative, is often foisted upon women; the rejection of motherhood and anti-maternity is further used as a means to illustrate the converse of the ideal imperative.

In many ways, this presentation is a criticism of both genders' performance of maternity, showing how motherhood is marketed and directed to the populace for consumption as an agent for social, moral and biological control. The push to revise the language by which we talk about maternal practices is criticized and held up as a means by which to navigate change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank the members of my committee for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions from many miles away. For the many emails, phone calls and correspondence, I am grateful.

I'd also like to thank my father, Wilbur, and my mother, Betty, who patterned gender roles that deviated from the traditional throughout my formative years. My parents showed me that both genders could enact myriad roles and engage in multiple tasks, learning about the fluidity of gender more so than through any text.

I'd also like to thank my husband who functioned as Mr. Mom (without the comedic errors) in many ways to our daughter, Piper, and our son, Griffin, while I was completing this process. My eldest son, Mitchell, merits mention as well as our trip to the performance "Horton Hears a Who" was in many ways the inspiration for this project.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

“Thus language, muttering in its archaic tongues of something; yet one more thing that needs to be renamed.”

“Giving Birth”
Margaret Atwood

In defining and naming, from our first utterances, we classify. Children learn good and bad, right and wrong, and these simple classifications continue, helping us to understand how we situate ourselves in the world. One thing we learn early on is girl and boy, mother and father. While understanding ourselves in relation to our sex is a useful classification, it can be mired in complexity, especially when we become reductive in our use of language to binarize and hierarchize. One such instance is with the terms *mother* and *father*. The term *mother* is often given primacy over the term *father*. Mothering often designates primary care, nurturing and life-giving potential, provided by the female. Fathering indicates secondary care and often designates disciple, usually given by the male. It can seem somewhat reductive to explain such parenting tasks into such neatly defined, gendered categories, but, often, this is how such terms are bandied about.

This dissertation seeks to amend the way we talk about mothering and fathering as it is important to look not just at women and mother but at men who take on mothering traits and characteristics, embodying the nurturance of motherhood and stepping into the role of functional primary parent. Through a careful examination of both genders and their presentation in film, literature and popular culture, viewers and readers alike can see how men step into the mothering role. This is seen in one of three ways: a source of horrifying potentiality; a means of comic reflection; and, the most rare, as an incident of

real and working masculine maternity. I choose the term *masculine maternity* to enforce the importance of leveling the playing field here among genders and to exemplify the way men can and do step into the functional primary role when given the chance.

Women, on the other hand, are often encouraged by these same media scripts to follow a maternal imperative of sorts, propelling them toward an imagined maternal instinct played with in cinematic, literary and news-related texts. Further, women who succumb to and then reject this imperative or who choose not to mother at all are vilified in these same genres. In many ways, this presentation is a criticism of parenting as a whole, yet also a means of making motherhood and how it is directed to the populace for consumption an agent for social, moral and biological control.

The language by which we discuss motherhood and parenting will be challenged. I propose new ways of talking about mothering, moving toward words that don't omit men from the mothering equation but instead include myriad possibilities. I use terms in this dissertation such as *functional primary*, *ma/pa-rent*, and *biterernity* (as another alternative to *ma/pa-ternity*) to speak of men and women doing mothering work, focusing on the labor put into the job rather than the gender performing the task.

This dissertation seeks to explore how men mother and take on that primary functioning role. Conversely, while women are often urged to step into the same primary role, as exemplified with the push of the maternal imperative, some women reject this. I aim to focus on this shift, primarily in literature and film, where these traditional gender roles are overturned. In my analysis, I will use news articles, popular film and literary texts from 19th century works through literature produced through the 21st century. By moving between formal literature and popular culture texts, readers can see how issues of

motherhood are presented and discussed within varying forums, often reiterated and reestablished. Film will be fore-grounded as it is through this popular medium that the widest audiences are reached and also through which our cultural pulse is measured best. Using 19th century women's literature as a foundation roots this discussion of motherhood, the Angel in the House and the primacy of children as one that has persisted despite the progressive feminist movement. As Andrea O'Reilly notes

A central, if not defining, event in the rise of Western modernity was the emergence of the public/private dichotomy in which the work of production was assigned to the public sphere and the work of reproduction to the private sphere. This dichotomy was, of course, gender coded: a man belonged in the public realm and was to embody the valued masculine traits ... while a woman was to remain in the home domain and serve as ... "the angel in the house." (371)

In many ways, this maternal imperative persists. I will examine this through primarily American works as I am chiefly examining the American outlook and women's movement here in the United States.

Ultimately, I argue that the act of mothering is not one that can simply be defined by one's gender, but rather by the nature of the work one puts in. Calling on theorists like Sara Ruddick and Thomas Laqueur who define mothering as work that can be done by both genders, I will show through various cultural scripts that this theory of dual mothering (male and female) is being echoed and, at the same time, refuted, creating a mixed message about successful parenting. Because cultural scripts often demonize both genders when it comes to functioning as effective nurturers, women *and* men need

to rewrite the mothering act, coauthoring a new language. Through the news stories reported and through the popular literature and film texts consumed, we internalize specific attitudes and beliefs about motherhood; it is my goal to show how these scripts compete with each other, working in an almost didactic fashion to form an impossible image of mothering and nurture.

While popular media might not seem scholarly enough or worthy of focus, it often reflects larger issues in our culture that speak volumes about who we are and where we are going. Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch note in their article, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” television holds a “bardic function.”

It [television] often focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed. The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence. (164)

I believe this theory could be applied to other “common” genres: news stories, mainstream film, and popular music. By examining what is given to the populace for mass consumption, viewers of these “scripts” can see how certain ideologies about parenting, mothering and gender roles are promoted.

These texts (film, news stories, and literature) will not be given a New Critical analysis. It is not my intention to analyze each text holistically, but rather to pull pivotal scenes, key dialogue and intrinsic information from each to show how the examples I have put forth reflect the thesis I am presenting: men can mother and women, sometimes,

don't. Cultural scripts often push a maternal imperative. Further, these scripts deride men and present horrific men in such a maternal role. Occasionally, such scripts allow for a new maternity that examines maternal men and women who opt out of mothering, but, ultimately, these scripts are a mode of enforcing social control, maintaining prescribed gender roles rather than rescripting them.

With that being said, it is important to begin a discussion of motherhood in its various incarnations with a look at the feminist movement as a whole. In much the same way we define and delineate mothers and fathers, so, too, has the feminist movement been defined and delineated. It is important to discuss the ways in which scholars come to understand this vast movement encapsulated by the term *feminism* before we can level any criticism or analysis of it as a movement, or as an influence on gender studies. Feminism, as a whole, is often broken down into waves, or movements.¹ The first wave typically encompasses the late 19th century through the 1920 winning of the woman's right to vote. This wave of feminism is often historicized with an emphasis on suffragettes and their push for women's rights and equality. The second wave seems to emerge in the culture surrounding the 1960s, primarily beginning with Betty Friedan's 1963 publication of The Feminine Mystique. In the second wave, women focused further on equality, but this wave is often criticized for having no unifying purpose as the first wave did. Some scholars argue the second wave ended with the 1972 passage of Title IX, which prohibited sex discrimination in education (Sellnow 91). Others might deem the ruling in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 allowing women to seek abortions, legally, thereby taking control of their reproductive rights, as the end of the second wave. To even further

¹ It is important to note that although historically feminism is defined as such, feminist writers and thinkers, profeminists, have existed long prior to this point, going so far back as Hildegard of Bingen and Christine de Pizan.

complicate the issue, some might contend the issues grappled with during this time are still prevalent, but, regardless, third wave feminism grew out of the 80s and 90s as a response to the second wave's monolithic focus on white women and the patriarchal oppression women continued to labor under. Much of the third wave's emphasis is on race, sexuality, language and power. To add to this delineation, some feminists reject labeling themselves third wave feminists. For many women, feminism seems outmoded or outdated; for others, being critical of men and masculine oppression seems an antediluvian notion and, instead, they opt for examining the rhetoric of profeminism, an approach that "allows" for men to "do" feminism.² Often profeminists are men; however, women who choose not to identify themselves with the incendiary word, *feminist*, but are proponents of feminist ideals, are also labeled profeminist.

Elaine Showalter makes similar delineations of women's various stages through women's writing in her 1977 work, *A Literature of Their Own*, and revisits her categorization in her most recent text from 2009, *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. Here, Showalter reflects on the first phase, a phase of imitation that English women novelists would engage in. This phase from 1840-1880 is called *feminine* and, here, women would often imitate, modeling their voice on their masculine predecessors. The second phase, the feminist phase (1880-1920), coincides with first-wave feminism and illustrates similar concerns. Here women enter a "phase of protest" (Showalter xvii), seeking to establish their own voice and functioning as advocates for their gender. The third phase, that which espouses female writing, extends from 1920 to the present time. Here the emphasis is on self-discovery. Showalter admits, however, that she can now see a fourth and final stage which she calls

² See Fidelma Ashe's 2007 work, *The New Politics of Masculinity: Men, Power, and Resistance*.

“free.” She writes, “In the 1970s, I could only imagine a fourth stage, a ‘seamless participation in the literary mainstream.’... American women writers in the twenty-first century can take on any subject they want, in any form they choose” (xvii). This shift to every topic and every subject as navigable is a new, previously unimagined one. It is because of this allowance that I want to turn to one of the most bristly subjects housed within the feminist pantheon: motherhood.

Motherhood and feminism make strange bedfellows indeed. Margaret Sanger espoused the idea that a woman should be able to choose to reproduce and effectively promoted birth control. *Roe v. Wade*, as I mentioned, established a woman’s ability to legally secure an abortion. Both these instances define and shape a feminist movement espousing one single idea: choice. But what about the choice of a woman who wants to mother? What of the woman who opts not to restrict or limit her ability to reproduce? Does the choice to mother garner the same respect among feminism as the choice and freedom not to?

Some would find this argument whether to mother or not to mother is less about feminism and more about political leanings. In other words, are we discussing left-wing radical feminism or right-wing, conservative feminist politics? Sadly, it seems, women find not just men, or more specifically, the patriarchy, as the enemy, but divisions within their own encampment. Can a woman be a proponent of pro-life, family values and still be a feminist? Apparently not. As Susan Maushart notes of Shulamith Firestone and her work *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone argues for a rejection of motherhood in biology and practice (“Faking Motherhood” 467). In Andrea Dworkin’s 1983 book, *Right-Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females*, she argues that women contributed to

their own oppression when they espouse traditional views (i.e. patriarchal views). She writes in Letters from a War Zone, “Why do right-wing women agitate for their own subordination? How does the Right, controlled by men, enlist their participation and loyalty? And why do right-wing women truly hate the feminist struggle for equality?” (194). Is this a fair assessment or does this border on essentialist thinking? Does a feminist have to hold certain prescribed views or is there only one “brand” of feminism allowed? This debate continues, most recently in the very political arena Dworkin criticizes. As we watch the ascendancy of the latest female politician, Christine O’Donnell from Delaware, seeking the Senate seat, we see the criticism leveled at her is often rooted in and directed toward her conservative leanings rather than championing her success as a woman in a male dominated arena.³ Writing for the American Thinker, Lloyd Marcus notes, “The liberal media and weird-thinking women on the Left accuse conservative women of being extremist and outside the mainstream. And yet, they are the ones who are anti-marriage, consider child-rearing demeaning, seek to feminize men, and are pro-abortion.” Regardless of one’s political ideology, the essential reduction to what, specifically, a person advocates as being right or left, right or wrong, is reductionism. Some feminists reject this fallacy. As Helene Cixous writes in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “... there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in common I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions...” (1090). Women are many things; implying the feminist woman is just one thing is false.

Moving specifically to issues related to motherhood, we can see how women have taken up what Susan Maushart calls “the mask of motherhood”. In her work, “Faking

³ Women and politics will be discussed, specifically within the context of maternity, in Chapter Three.

Motherhood: The Mask Revealed,” Maushart calls this mask the “repertoire of socially constructed representations that have crossed that line [between self-control and self-delusion.]...It pits male parents against female, amplifying the disjuncture between the verbs ‘to mother’ and ‘to father’” (460-61). Further, she writes,

The mask of motherhood is what mutes our rage into murmurs and softens our sorrow into resignation. The mask of motherhood is the semblance of serenity and control that enables women’s work to pass unnoticed in the larger drama of human life. Above all, the mask keeps us quiet about what we know, to the point that we forget that we know anything at all ... or anything worth telling. At the same time, the mask of motherhood is a useful coping mechanism.... When the coping mechanism becomes a way of life, we divest ourselves of authenticity and integrity.... [W]e no longer make a life—we fake a life. (16)

Because motherhood hasn’t been a central subject of exploration (consider the recent self-discovery aspect of Showalter’s third phase of writing), women have come to lie to themselves and each other about the rigors of the mothering act, either by omission or self-deception. Have we dismissed mothering as a simple act, biologically determined, and not worth further exploration? In part, we have. Maushart doesn’t ignore the feminine responsibility inherent in molding and shaping such a mask. She contends that “whenever we assign blame to patriarchy, we implicitly hold ourselves responsible too. Although it is true to say that the mask of motherhood has been forged on the anvil of patriarchy, it is no man-made delusion.... [W]e wear the responsibility, along with the conviction that what we have made, we can unmake” (473). Women, in part, are starting

to explore “unmentionable” aspects of mothering: maternal anger, maternal ambivalence and maternal rejection, to name a few. These topics will be investigated in greater detail in my own Chapter Three.

Not only is there a rift within the feminist camp as a whole, but also regarding the place men have in this movement, if any. Some might query: what are men doing in a discussion of feminism or, more pointedly, in one concerning the aspect of motherhood? While some feminists would argue that a woman, especially in the 21st century, can mother without a male presence, so, too, can a man choose to parent without a female one. Involving men in the realm of motherhood, in some instances, can be seen as robbing feminists of the one thing that is uniquely and biologically theirs, and theirs alone. While uncomfortable with the traditional, familial and paternalistic structure in which motherhood is often housed, women often seek to claim motherhood as theirs, uniquely, biologically, socially, and linguistically. I would argue, again, much as Helene Cixous argues in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” that there needs to be a rejection of essentialism in feminist theory. Instead women need to embrace all facets and all members, both male and female. Cixous writes,

Begetting a child doesn't mean that the woman or the man must fall ineluctably into patterns or must recharge the circuit of reproduction. If there's a risk there's not an inevitable trap: may women be spared the pressure, under the guise of conscious-raising, of supplemental interdictions....—mother—father—family? No; it's up to you to break the old circuits. It will be up to *man and woman* to render obsolete the former relationship and all its consequences, to consider the launching of a brand-

new subject, alive, with defamiliarization. Let us demater-paternalize rather than deny woman, in an effort to avoid the co-optation of procreation, a thrilling era of the body.” (1100; emphasis added)

In other words, it is incumbent upon both men and women to challenge the increasingly paternalistic structure of the feminist movement and rewrite these scripts, the scripts that tell women and men how they should function. Betty Friedan echoes this idea in The Second Stage. She argues,

The second stage cannot be seen in terms of women alone, our separate personhood or equality with men. The second stage involves coming to new terms with the family—new terms with love and work. The second stage may not even be a women’s movement. Men may be at the cutting edge of the second stage. (436)

In an academic world where women’s studies was once the new, hot thing on campus, the emergence of masculine studies and a shift toward inclusive gender studies may very well be indicative of this shift where the emphasis is on both genders working together rather than the occlusion of one in favor of the other. More specifically in 2006 Andrea O’Reilly, a foremost scholar in the field of motherhood, “coined the term *motherhood studies* to acknowledge and demarcate this new scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate and distinctive discipline” (O’Reilly 1).

In a sense, the very language we use to speak of feminism and feminist thinking has become tainted with false images of a caricature-like woman who is anti-man and anti-child. This image of feminist as harpy, harridan, and virago pervades our social consciousness as much as the mythological bra-burning feminist. As Cixous writes about

demater-paternalization, so too must we revisit the language that binds us to mothering and fathering. What makes a mother? Is it a woman simply because of her gender? Is a father a father because he is a man? Most of the definitions of the term are, of course by their nature, reductive, but a mother is much more than the woman in relation to the children to whom she has given birth. Does our language do justice to the act?

Instead of examining, for now, what makes a mother, I think the more interesting question is *who* makes a mother, not so much in terms of whether parenting skills are learned from one's own parents, memorized from the spate of manuals on the matter, or tested as an innate knowledge, but rather the literal *who* makes a mother. Is a woman the only one competent for the job because of her biological qualifications? While viewing woman as the only possible person capable of mothering might be the logical and reductive answer, many theorists cling to this designation. Nancy Chodorow, for instance, observes, "Mothers are women, of course, because a mother is a female parent, and a female who is a parent must be an adult, hence must be a woman. Similarly, fathers are male parents, are men" (11).⁴ Granted, our language makes it difficult to speak about this biological signification we take as obvious. Mothers are typically designated as women, while fathers are men, simply defined, and primarily so, because of their sex. Of course, these words carry a heavy connotation with them as well. In his work, Recreating Men: Postmodern Masculinity Politics, Bob Pease posits, "The semantic field covered by 'fathering' in English is the act of impregnating, whilst the concept of 'mothering' conveys nurturing and care-giving" (62). Returning to Chodorow again, we

⁴ Her definition, while clear, is ultimately too simplistic and reductive. While these categories of individuals are capable of performing functions as mothers and fathers, for my purposes, I will stick to examining how the binary of gender serves to incapacitate a thorough and clear discussion of parenting tasks.

see that, for her, women mother because they are biologically capable of giving birth, they possess an inherent maternal instinct and they are trained in this learned behavior. Chodorow asserts, “That women have the extensive and nearly exclusive mothering role they have is a product of social and cultural translation of their childbearing and lactation capabilities” (30).⁵ While society might establish biology as a physical determinant of the mothering role, what does this say for a man’s function? Again, isn’t this rudimentary argument ignoring the act of parenting and what is involved for both parents? By consigning mothering to one biologically determined sex and fathering to another, aren’t we in danger of backpedaling away from the inclusive nature espoused by contemporary gender theory?

One aspect of gender theory is the notion of ridding language of the inextricable link between gender and sex. Consider Judith Butler’s, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Although Butler does touch on the artifice of gender, specifically in application to drag, what I want to concentrate on is her concept of the fluidity of gender and its performative quality. Butler writes,

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (6)

⁵ It should be noted that later Chodorow does mention Harry Harlow’s finding with infant monkeys. Harlow found that these creatures preferred soft “mothers” made of terrycloth without a bottle to the wire constructed ones with a bottle. It would seem here that “warmth,” perhaps both physically and tentatively emotionally, dominates any biologically contrived lactating that is superimposed on a female. While Chodorow does seem to stick to basic biological premises of mothering, these types of findings support later conclusions drawn in this chapter as well as ones that follow regarding who can and cannot parent.

For Butler, gender is an act one performs, and it is constantly morphing and changing.⁶ Early on in her work she asserts that “the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms” (1). I would take this idea one step further and say that men can no longer be understood in stable and abiding terms. If gender is a performance, male and female are just bodies that act either masculine or feminine, or, to take it one step further, perform mother or father. As Adria Schwartz concludes in her article “Taking the Nature out of Mother,” “Butler’s critique would suggest that the category of mother is a constructed subject based on a questionable category of gender” (250). Based on this line of thought, if we don’t open ourselves to the possibility of gender as a performance, we allow for no resistance or choice, and biology ultimately does become one’s destiny.

John MacInnes agrees with Butler. He observes in, The End of Masculinity, that gender is purely an assumptive value held by others about others and, of course, themselves. He asserts, “Gender, in the sense of an actually existing identity or social characteristic of men or women, does not exist” (2). He further argues inherently for the concept of gender as a performance; gender exists as “a set of assumptions which people hold about each other and themselves in certain contexts, and which in other contexts they simultaneously deny” (39). Kyle Pruett, M.D., author of The Nurturing Father, also posits, “Masculine ... does not mean male. It means only the traits, behaviors, expectations, and appearances shaped by a society and its institutions that are publicly

⁶ Martha Nussbaum takes Butler to task for her obscure writing as well as her “new” idea. Nussbaum mentions that the notion of the artificiality of gender was proposed long before Butler by social-constructionists like John Stuart Mill. She also mentions the importance of other feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon and Gayle Rubin in contributing to this gender-free idea from a biological and legal standpoint. While I am not arguing that others have not enriched this discussion, I want to highlight Butler for her seemingly simplistic notion of performativity that Nussbaum attacks. In later chapters, I hope to show how, in fact, this performativity is less idealistic and more pragmatic.

linked to maleness. Masculinity is a gender role concept” (226). By extension, either sex could play this role.

Also worthy of mention is Freud, who believed in the inherent bisexuality of humans. For Freud, each gender exhibits its opposite, both biologically and mentally. He notes that all “combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics, so that pure masculinity and pure femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content” (qtd. in Morrow 58).⁷ It might even merit mentioning Simone de Beauvoir’s observation in her 1949 work, The Second Sex: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (267). If one must become, or learn, how to be a woman—and, I might here extrapolate her conclusion further by stating one would need to learn to be a man as well—one might deduce such learning could encompass certain roles, such as parenting, each gender is asked to perform. If gender is so tenuous and uncertain, if it is in fact a performance and construction and even a learned behavior, then doesn’t that contradict how we often link men always-already to fatherhood and women always-already to motherhood, consigning them so simply because of their sex?

I would argue that we need to move beyond such reductive terms and consider a new foundational approach not just to gender, but to parenting. In Alice Jardine’s work Gynesis, she notes that women have existed only as Other to men, and, while I would agree, I would also argue that we need to move beyond looking at *men* in opposition to women, specifically in terms of mothering. Mothering has often been deified, elevated to a status of matriolatry, or mother-worship. Mothers are supposed to follow a set script, and while implicitly we all know what might be found in this writing, Ruth De Kanter

⁷ It should be noted that Freud also postulated that “anatomy is destiny.” While I don’t want to rely on Freud for my premise, I do want to point out his psychological sway in the matter, albeit ambiguous and shifting at best.

outlines it well in her essay “The Children’s Home.” She notes that a certain ideology of motherhood is produced by external texts (e.g., magazines, television, books, etc.) that often conflict with the internal feelings of the mother, thus producing guilt. Some prescribed emotions that make up this script and mothers internalize are “all women want to be mothers; mothers know intuitively what their children need; and infants need the constant presence of their mothers” (141).⁸ Although full of hasty generalizations and unfounded conclusions, these notions regarding the true nature of motherhood persist. To further historicize this concept, while feminism has been concerned with the nature of motherhood, what of the nurture? What of the work involved?

The problem with this ideal script is multifaceted, but first of all is the notion of maternal instinct. Even writing in 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman mocked that instinctual view, instead comparing mothers to soldiers, asserting that they, too, needed training.⁹ Again, returning to language, Gilman brought up the binarism by which we understand mothers, as either “natural” or “unnatural,” critiquing this standard. She writes, “But these terms again show how prone we still are to consider the whole field of maternal action as one of instinct rather than of reason, as function rather than a service” (184). This reference to the maternal instinct persists. In 1977, Phyllis Schlafly wrote in her work, “The Power of the Positive Woman,” “The overriding psychological need of a woman is to love something alive. A baby fulfills this need in the lives of most women” (431). What about men? As though answering this implicit question, she asserts, “Men

⁸ De Kanter also mentions other key points that make up this ideology of motherhood. She includes that a biological mother always loves her biological child; the biological mother is the best caretaker for her children; love, marriage, and motherhood are naturally linked; and motherhood within the heterosexual structure of marriage is the best way to raise children. These points will be important in Chapter Three.

⁹ Gilman’s *Women and Economics* beautifully delineates how women are classified as “natural” or “unnatural” in terms of their mothering. This standard of motherhood is very akin to the script to which De Kanter refers. Gilman, it should be noted, also wrote, “We are each and all born into the accepted idea of motherhood and trained in it” (174).

are philosophers, women are practical, and 'twas ever thus. Men may philosophize about how life began and where we are heading; women are concerned about feeding the kids today” (432). Schlafly believes in absolutes. For her, men are intellectuals while women are nurturers. This maternal instinct confines women (and men) by their sex to their gender role. When the parameters in which a woman can mother and a man can father are narrowly defined, all else is deemed unnatural or abnormal.

The way in which the maternal instinct confines women is akin to Linda Kerber’s observation on the “Republican Mother.” She noticed that “motherhood was discussed almost as if it were a fourth branch of government, a device that ensured social control in the gentlest possible way” (qtd. in Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation, 23). The concept of Republican motherhood, originating during the American Revolution as a means to encourage a set of behaviors (namely patriotism and duty to one’s country), was also used to ensure that women were raising children to extol a set of virtues desired by the state. Boys, under the tutelage of their mothers, would become model examples of the republic, while girls would continue to perpetuate the ideas and ideals espoused by the domestic sphere. It seems the maternal is a way to enact a modicum of control, but in many ways the control was simply a reinforcement of the societal norms, especially for women and mothers.

This control can perhaps best be seen in not just the language but the images we use to create our discourse on motherhood. As Hilary Graham showed in “Images of Pregnancy in Ante-Natal Literature,” published in 1977, our ideals of motherhood are still with us. Graham postulated that the romantic photography and idyllic images of mother and child reinforce the ideal, or the imagined real, of a mothering experience.

Most parenting magazines, including Parents, Child and American Baby, also portray mothering as bathed in this soft, hazy glow of idealism. Children are rosy cheeked and smiling while moms are doting and perfectly outfitted and coifed. This is advertising at its prime, and motherhood is marketed just like any other product.

This notion of maternal instinct can be seen even in watching (or reading) the news. In two relatively recent news stories, it is evident that maternal instinct is still heralded and much believed in. Headlines from CNN, February 14, 2005, tout, “Pregnant Woman: ‘Maternal Instinct’ Helped Kill Attacker.” In Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, twenty-six-year-old Sarah Brady stabbed twenty-two-year-old Katherine Smith in an effort to save her life and the life of her unborn child. Apparently, Smith convinced Brady, whom she had never met before, to come to her apartment to pick up a package that had been wrongly delivered. Once Brady arrived, Smith pulled out a knife. Brady fought back, stabbing the woman three times, which ultimately resulted in her death. Later it was discovered that Smith had been passing herself off as pregnant and even had a nursery set up in her home. It is assumed that Smith had anticipated taking Brady’s baby and passing it off as her own. Brady is quoted as saying, “It is a maternal instinct to protect your child to the very end.” If this is the case, and maternal instinct is ultimately about saving your child, how do we explain those women who kill, starve or torture their children? Where is the maternal instinct in those cases?¹⁰

Another news story from CNN posted March 4, 2004, exhibits maternal instinct in almost mythic proportions. The headline reads, “Mom To Be Reunited with Daughter

¹⁰ While I don’t want to discuss these compelling cases at this juncture, Chapter Three will explore in depth women who choose not to mother (anti-maternity) and specifically those women who exhibit the opposite of maternal instinct, or the rejection of maternity. I mention this here simply to showcase what this dissertation will encompass.

Missing for Six Years,” and the article tells of Liz Cuevas who seemingly lost her daughter in a fire when she was just an infant. Although her two other children survived, police never found the body of the infant. This year, while attending a birthday party for another child, Cuevas was amazed to see how much a six-year-old girl attending the party resembled herself and her other children. Cleverly, Cuevas told the girl she had gum in her hair, removed some strands, and submitted them to the police for DNA testing. Never believing her daughter died in the fire, Cuevas was proven correct when DNA testing showed that Delimar, the little girl, was in fact her child. Apparently a family acquaintance, Carolyn Correa, kidnapped the child and set fire to the house to hide the incident. Here, maternal instinct seemingly came into play and the mother recognized the child she had last seen when she was ten days old. While a poignant story, it also serves to reinforce the idea that a mother inherently knows her child better than anyone. Sara Ruddick, in Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace, notes that mothers are judged by other mothers, employers, teachers, doctors, and others. Their worthiness is determined by what she calls the “gaze of others” (111). Here, in these two news stories alone, we see how the “gaze of others” functions to deem these two women worthy and exemplary of what true motherhood should exhibit.

Many of these ideals and dictates of how a mother should be also exist in the inverse. Mothers who don’t measure up fit in that “unnatural” category. In the 1940s, John Bowlby posited that childhood delinquency was caused by a separation from the mother, thus placing the burden exclusively on the woman. If a child was “maternally deprived,” it was likely s/he would wind up a hooligan (qtd. in Hansen 186). This thinking can still be seen in the manuals followed today. In The Womanly Art of

Breastfeeding, published by the LaLeche League, it is noted that “physical attachment of child to mother during its early months of life [has] profound implications for its subsequent emotional development” (qtd. in Rubin 208). If one subscribed to this thought and thus surrounded the child with attention and affection, it might also be likely that the parent would be accused of “smother-love,” Philip Wylie’s accusation toward a mass of mothers who overwhelm and dominate their children with overt affection (qtd. in Patterson 3).¹¹ It might not seem surprising, considering the disparity and conflict over the biology and terrain of women, that Jeffner Allen would propose that women enact a “philosophy of evacuation” and remove themselves from the constraints of motherhood since mothers are simply a “body ... used as a resource to reproduce men and the world of men, understood as the biological children of patriarchy and as the ideas and material goods of a patriarchal culture” (qtd. in Hansen 30). Or, consider how Luce Irigaray defines mother. She states a mother is “Someone who always acts according to commands and stereotypes, who has no language of her own and no identity” (qtd. in Patterson 31). Considering these various ideals and derogatory images, what can persist and exist for those who choose to mother? How do we move beyond the ideal script and away from sanctioned, gender-prescribed roles and into a 21st century where some men are mothering and women, sometimes, are not?

Two theorists key to understanding this new vision of maternity are Sara Ruddick and Thomas Laqueur. These two theorists, while not always in complete agreement, offer new insight to the constraints of traditional gender roles in parenting. For Ruddick,

¹¹ On par with Philip Wylie’s 1942 Generation of Vipers is Hans Sebald’s 1976 Momism: The Silent Disease of America which also blames mothers for the faults of their children. For Sebald, mothers seek fulfillment within the home and often find mothering different from how it is pictured in the media. He states, “Unlike a disappointing marriage, disappointing motherhood cannot be resolved by divorce” (qtd. in Patterson 4).

the mother is the one who works for the child, providing interaction, care, love and support. In her article, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth,” Ruddick asserts, “To be a ‘mother’ means to ‘see’ children as demanding protection, nurturance, and training and then to commit oneself to the work of trying to meet these demands” (33). She continues to assert, “Mothering work is no longer distinctly feminine. A child is mothered by whoever protects, nurtures, and trains her” (35). For Ruddick, all mothers are adoptive mothers. In other words, one “adopts” the child, whether she gives birth or not, in terms of caring for the child (qtd. in Daly and Reddy 4). Birthing and biology have less a role than the work performed. In “From Maternal Thinking to Peace Politics,” Ruddick continues her argument for revisiting the language and institution of motherhood. She asserts, “There is, for example, no reason why men cannot engage in mothering, and many men already do” (144). She observes that mothering has often been a “fearsome, crystallized *female* identity,” but it must be rewritten as “enabling *human* work” (149, italics mine). The emphasis on the work put in is given greater attention than the gender of the person performing the task. For Ruddick, who adopts what she characterizes as a utopian mind, she looks ahead to a space where “[M]en become mothers and mothers invent new models and styles of public, nonviolent resistance and cooperation that are suitable to their particular temperament, personal history, social location, and economic resources” (153). In other words, Ruddick sees a time where the scripts that deem that only women can be mothers and that mothers are x and not y will be rewritten.

In a similar vein, Laqueur contends the biological referent shouldn’t be as much of a determiner of parenthood as the connectivity and commitment to the child. He posits that “‘mothering’ should be gender-neutral and that fathers do as much emotional work

as mothers” (qtd. in Hansen 25). While this labor could get into a contest of who can “best” the other in terms of work contributed, what is important to note here is that ‘mothering’ can be done by either sex. For both Ruddick and Laqueur, ‘mothering’ is based on labor, or who is doing the work. These two theorists are trying to combat reductive thought: gender roles prescribe what we should do rather than describe how we might function.

Since I have mentioned the role of labor, I would like to explore a little further the concept of labor (i.e., emotional and physical work to raise and care for a child) versus laboring (i.e., the birth-giving process which, so far, only women are privy to).¹² Interestingly enough, it is on this point that Ruddick and Laqueur seem to initially be at odds. In his article, “The Facts of Fatherhood,” Laqueur takes issue with Phyllis Chesler who in a 1988 issue of Ms. magazine argues motherhood is a ‘fact’ versus fatherhood which is an ‘idea’ (157). He also relates a story about his daughter Hannah who wants to be a daddy rather than a mommy because mommies do all the work (159). His young daughter is astute to pick up on a division of labor that many take for granted, if they do not consciously admit it. While we may see many fathers as capable of enacting the labor involved in raising a child, often it is the primacy of birth that is privileged. In Ruddick’s essay “Thinking about Fathers,” she criticizes Laqueur’s “labor theory” of parenting by stating that we must privilege the labor-theory of birth giving for the female. Ruddick feels Laqueur diminishes this position (182-83). Ruddick, however, isn’t unaware of the role the biological father plays in the procreative act. She admits, “Laqueur reminds me that any account of birth that respects human bodily life should

¹² One might argue this fact, however, since Thomas Beatie made headlines as the heralded “Pregnant Man” in 2008 and again with another child in 2009. I will discuss the birth of his children in greater depth in Chapter Two.

include male as well as female procreative acts and desires” (187). So although Ruddick does distinguish between the labor to give birth and the labor of care, she does also want to include men and their physical bodies in the birthing process, just as both theorists agree the labor performed to raise a child can be enacted by men and women. Ruddick further notes, “The work of child tending can be, and is being undertaken by women and men, gay and straight, single, coupled, or in many kinds of social arrangements” (185). While, as Phyllis Chesler noted in her article, fatherhood seems to be merely an idea for the father and a biological fact for the mother carrying the child, what is most important, or perhaps of equal importance, is the action of caring for the child and working to raise and support a new life after its brief stint in utero. It is this activity that can be fulfilled by both men and women acting as mothers (again, not as fathers as that terminology diminishes their role and notes a different kind of work). Returning to Ruddick, she concludes, “A man or a woman is a ‘mother,’ in my sense of the term, only if he or she acts upon a social commitment to nurture, protect and train children. All mothering depends upon some woman’s birthgiving but there are many possible birth-respecting relationships between mothers and birthgivers” (187). Ultimately, the dedication and being-thereness are what matters most in making a mother, regardless of one’s biological sex.

I should further explain that it is important to address the inevitable question: Why not just label these men “good” fathers? The simple answer is that it isn’t enough. Fathering is always-already subsumed under the dominance and primacy of motherhood. To enact a new way of understanding maternal practices, the language must be rescripted or, if we continue to use the mother-father dynamic, the language needs to exhibit the

equal footing of the work that is being described. In “Revolutionary Parenting,” bell hooks examines the language of mothering and fathering, noting the problem with dictionary definitions of such terms which equate responsibility to fathering and tenderness and affection to mothering. Through this denotation, “[b]y placing sole responsibility for nurturing onto women, that is to say for satisfying the emotional and material needs of children, society reinforces the notion that to mother is more important than to father” (148). The language mires down the roles into gender essentialism, and bell hooks asserts that “[w]omen and men must define the work of fathering and mothering in the same way if males and females are to accept equal responsibility in parenting” (148).¹³ By changing the way in which the parenting act is discussed and the way in which the key figures are referenced, behavior will change. It becomes a words follow deeds self-fulfilling prophecy. What is done, the work, will mirror the language used to talk about it.

In this shift to labor (i.e., work), it is important to note what is said about the work men and women do in the home. If we are trying to see gender-free designations within this sphere, specifically in the realm of parenting, we must ask ourselves how the labor of men and women differs?¹⁴ In Michele Barrett’s Women’s Oppression Today, she traces how different periods in history, different societies, and variances in one’s social class affect the power men have over the labor women produce. She illustrates how, in the Western tradition, the father is the head of the household while the woman

¹³ For hooks, however, she seeks to equate maternal and paternal rather than trying to identify men with the maternal, something she feels they will reject as it seems too tied to the feminine.

¹⁴ Ann Crittenden in The Price of Motherhood notes Shirley P. Burggraf’s nomenclature of “feminine economy” to designate “the work of caring for dependents, from infants to the sick and elderly” (275). In this instance, she notes, it is often women who are saddled with the responsibility of caring for a sick parent or relative. While I conclude that there is a shift taking place in terms of child-rearing and care, I am not prepared to make a comment on which sex enacts the labor to care for the aged.

exchanges her name and home while offering domestic and sexual service for economic support. As Mary O'Brien observes, "Reproductive labor, like all human labor, creates value" (59). She also mentions Shulamith Firestone, akin to the previously mentioned Jeffner Allen, who believes it is this biological tie to reproduction that leads to the exploitation of wives' labor. The value of a mother's work is relative to the one receiving the benefits. Consider that

Mothering, in spite of all the ideology surrounding it, is low-status work. It receives no pay in a society that measures things monetarily.... Should men expand the parameters of masculinity to include mothering, they will not gain the high status and financial rewards that women accrued when they proved themselves in the traditionally male world of work, and this is surely an impediment to progress. (Eyer 233)

This structure of dominance mimics that of the subordination of workers required by capitalist production. Motherhood, as work, is not valued. While it would be impossible to deny that in some homes men are the head of their households and the traditional structure of owner-laborer is in play, I am not aiming to conduct a sociological study on how and why this dualism has shifted. Rather, I am positing that it is reductive and elementary to simply view the family in terms of binary constructions. Without going too far into the realm of Marxism, I think it merits pointing out that this kind of hierarchical thinking (man/woman as parallel to owner/laborer) is exactly what needs to be overcome. As Barrett herself asserts, "the family doesn't exist other than an ideological construct" (199). We must move from this deified view of the traditional nuclear family and instead consider the questions Adria Schwartz posits: "Can a father

be a mother? What might distinguish mothering and fathering work, and are those differences necessarily gender-related?” (253).

Carole Klein notes, “The cultural belief persists that a good mother is an asexual person” (Patterson 23). That being said, this notion of gender-free parenting has been alluded to by critics in the latter half of the 20th century. Jessie Bernard in her 1974 work, The Future of Motherhood, asserts, “We cannot ... afford to deprive either sex of the strengths of the other. Motherhood ... is too important to leave to women. Inside or outside of the home” (365). Dorothy Dinnerstein’s 1976 The Mermaid and the Minotaur, illustrates how, as the title suggests, women, and men, are raised to enact the inconsistency of either gender, becoming half of one thing and half of another without truly understanding both. Dinnerstein urges collaboration between both genders, specifically in child-rearing. Elisabeth Badinter, writing in the 1980s, comments on maternal love, stating that paternal love can play just as important a role. With the changing dynamics of family, she asserts, “maternal love is no longer the exclusive domain of women” (qtd. in Patterson 29). If attachment and work play the main roles in determining motherhood (and here I mean the gender-free term designating primary care for a child), then what is taking place regarding our attitudes and shift toward men in this role?

Is it naïve to assume that the battle of the sexes could be remedied by a simple restructuring of our conception (pun intended) of motherhood? It was only just 1994 when Gloria Steinem put forth her collection Moving Beyond Words, which contained the incendiary, albeit hilarious, essay entitled “What if Freud Were Phyllis?” Here, Steinem imagines a gender reversal in the founding of psychoanalysis. Penis envy, or

that desire for what is lacking in women, by women, is now turned on its head and becomes womb envy. While this notion is both comedic and insightful, I would argue that desire for the lack (power) becomes present in the opposite sex; thus men desire what they lack, a womb, or power.¹⁵ I mention this not to rely on a shifting of the binarisms this aims to combat, but rather to show how men are illustrating a desire to link themselves with the traditional maternal.

What often becomes problematic with this desire is society's overt pressure to deny men the functioning ability as nurturers. In 1983, Dr. Geoffrey Greif, a Philadelphia social worker, studied 1,135 single fathers with custody. Eighty-three percent of them expressed satisfaction with their relationship with their children. Greif observed, "As long as these fathers were functioning privately in the house with their children, they seemed to do fine. It was in trying to balance his role as parent and worker, or parent and single man, that the father experienced real difficulty" (qtd. in Rubin 241). Thus, these men become what Richard Engelhardt labels "closet nurturers" (qtd. in Rubin 244). While I mentioned the "gaze of others" and the script as written for women, it can also be observed to be prevalent for men as well. Engelhardt, a psychiatric social worker, posits, "Both genders have been cheated by distortions of the sex-role differences that have evolved over the ages. It's been pounded into men that they can't cry, that they have to be competitive and tough, that to be nurturing and expressive is a territory reserved for women" (qtd. in Rubin 242). Even certain manuals that deal with child-rearing push men into stereotypical roles. Consider Penelope Leach's insistence

¹⁵ I use this essay not as a sociological study, although I will rely on some sociological data for support, but rather to illustrate the potential in gender-free parenting. While the biological necessities allowing a man to give physical birth are advancing, men desire to share the experience of the womb, specifically in literature, film and music, genres I will examine in greater depth in the ensuing chapters.

that “dads are in the way when mothers are attaching to their infants, which mothers do hormonally, through breast-feeding. Since dads don’t have breasts or maternal hormones, their job is to stand back and support their wives” (qtd. in Eyer 75).¹⁶ What about men who lactate?¹⁷ What about women who don’t breastfeed? What about men’s attachment to their infants? These issues all seem to be pushed to the side in favor of the primacy given to mother/woman and child. While men do seem to be subject to the same stereotypical functioning of traditional family roles, strides are being made in the envisioning of a new maternity, to which my title alludes.

So, while I do assert that men and women can nurture and that gender is simply a performance, and, thus, that men can be mothers just as women often are, it is important to note that this gender-free motherhood isn’t always enacted in the same way. In Ralph LaRossa’s article, “Fatherhood and Social Change,” he posits that the culture of fatherhood and the conduct of fatherhood are two different elements.¹⁸ How a man acts versus how a society believes he should act are two different things. So, although E. Anthony Rotundo comments on the “Androgynous Fatherhood” of the 1970s, defining the good father as “an active participant in the details of day-to-day child care...involv[ing] himself in a more expressive and intimate way with his children...,” this interaction is still not the same as the interaction of a female parent (qtd. in LaRossa 451). While the man may nurture and care for his child, the care is different from that of

¹⁶ One could note the biological approach to this issue in the animal kingdom. Among seahorses, females deposit their eggs in the male’s pouch, thus impregnating him. And, it should also be noted with the species of Dyak fruit bats that the male does lactate. See Sarah Blaffer Hrdy’s Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants and Natural Selection for more.

¹⁷ Men have actually been shown to lactate, often in response to their own wives’ lactation. This topic will be covered further in Chapter Two.

¹⁸ LaRossa’s claim is one that I often reiterate. While I am focusing on the culture of fatherhood (the belief system and attitudes depicted about men’s caregiving), I won’t delve too deeply into the conduct of fatherhood, or what LaRossa describes as their behaviors. This is more exclusively the realm of sociology, not the field of inquiry I am emphasizing.

a woman. Michael Lamb studied the way in which parents interacted with their children, noting three levels of involvement: engagement (one-to-one time); accessibility (parent is doing one activity but is ready to assist the child if needed); and responsibility (the care of the child in terms of buying clothes, taking him/her to the doctor, etc.). It was shown that “mother-child interaction is dominated by caretaking whereas father-child interaction is dominated by play” (qtd. in LaRossa 453). Does the preferred method of interacting with one’s child as dictated by gender mean that men aren’t capable of caretaking or that women can’t play with their children? Certainly not. I point this study out to show that although both genders are capable, their inherent styles may differ. LaRossa concludes by noting that the “culture and conduct of fatherhood appear to be out of sync. The culture has moved toward (not to) androgyny much more rapidly than the conduct” (455). Again, perhaps this cultural anticipation is a good prognosticator of where we hope to see the conduct of a new generation of men, perhaps a generation of men who do mother. Although a man’s interaction with his children will be unique to the person he is and potentially the biological sex he embodies, this is not to say that he is unable, unwilling or unfit to perform the role of mother.

It has been discussed that motherhood is a job that one must be trained for. Despite the persistence of maternal instinct, ask any woman who has just given birth to an infant and she will most likely tell you caring for this new being is a learning process. Through trial and error, a parent learns what works. Consider this: “Mothering, like everything else in life, is best learned by doing” (Rothman 226). Diane Eyer articulates that “[p]arenting skills are usually acquired ‘on the job’ by both mothers and fathers—and both do equally well when given the same experience” (155). So despite the

persistence of rigid gender stereotypes, there is an ongoing shift from aggressive and competitive traditional definitions of masculinity to new, positive changes. Cooper Thompson, in his article, “A New Vision of Masculinity,” writes,

“Fathering” is one example of a positive change. In recent years, there has been a popular emphasis on child-care activities, with men becoming more involved in providing care to children, both professionally and as fathers. This is a clear shift from the more traditional view that child rearing should be delegated to women and is not an appropriate activity for men.

(82)

Perhaps this shift is what Betty Friedan was alluding to in The Second Stage. It does seem this second stage we are entering places a burden upon men, and women, to challenge the roles by which we have so long been defined. By surrendering the uniquely female status of mother, we are allowing gender barriers to be broken and attempting to view men as not the enemy feminism sometimes purports them to be, but rather collaborators, cohorts, cronies, allies, and partners in parenting that needn't be gender-specific.

The argument for gender-free parenting is what Barbara Katz Rothman argues in “Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Ideology in a Patriarchal Society.” Here Rothman posits that there needs to be a move beyond biology and genetics and an examination of socially constructed designations, with a goal to being more inclusive in the terms used. She writes, “The social relationship of parenting, of nurturing, and of caring needs a social base, not a genetic one” (155). Rothman argues for this universal nurturing to be developed and learned by both genders, not just so that nurturing and mothering roles can

be shared, but so both genders can collaborate with the care of elderly parents or capably care for a sick spouse. In other words, “We have to move beyond a paternity standard to a standard of nurturance.... Men should join women in mothering because it is the only way to avoid recreating the gender and class system and still live together” (155). While mothering might be the “one thing I can do that you can’t do better” act that feminism likes to claim when convenient, there are opportunities that open up mothering practices and maternal engagement and bring men to the table examining this male-female intersection.

Although it might seem a bit utopian, moving beyond these confining categories determined by our sex is a necessity in the 21st century, especially if we consider the myriad ways in which children are being parented and raised. It’s worth mentioning Sara Ruddick again who envisions this world as one where

...there will be no more “fathers,” no more people of either sex who have power over their children’s lives and moral authority in their children’s world, though they do not do the work of attentive love. There will be mothers of both sexes who live out transformed maternal thought in communities that share parental care.... (qtd. in Rothman 157)

To follow Ruddick’s premise, it is essential to return to the rudimentary forms of language, renaming the roles in parenting, for they are overwhelmed with connotations designating one biological sex. Barbara Katz Rothman, this time in her book, Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society, asserts that “I would like us to get rid of our ‘mommy’ and ‘daddy’ language. We are individuals, in individual relationships with our children, and not the embodiment of gender-based parental roles”

(260). Language, one of our most basic forms of communication, can mire us down in archaic patterns of thought, causing us to adhere to reductive modes of thinking about parenting. Shouldn't the language we use adequately represent the work and people we are defining? In De Beauvoir's The Second Sex, she concludes by asserting, "To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood" (732). I would agree and argue that men and women need to equally and unequivocally affirm their *motherhood*. It is only by and through this mode of thinking that we can restructure, both in language and practice, the way we view, discuss and enact parenting. Thus, in my work, I will adhere to Rothman's thesis, using motherhood to designate the work performed by both males and females, hoping in one instance to reconceive the way we view this role.

Thus, in the following chapters, I will take each gender in its own turn, examining how these narrative scripts work to dismantle and yet reinforce the hierarchy of mother over father. Chapter Two, "Men Who Mother," will examine how men who take on mothering roles are depicted. This chapter will be divided into three sub-sections, illustrating the way I see masculine maternity depicted. It is my contention that men are shown in this role in three ways: as a source of horrifying potentiality; as an example of comedy; or, the most rare, as a real, working model of masculine maternity. Again, as we currently understand parenting, we understand it as gendered. This chapter will illustrate the ways in which men are enacting motherhood, or attempting to do so. How are men crafting their own dialogue in response to the way in which they are portrayed as nurturing, mother figures? Are we entering a "free" phase that depicts men as nurturers,

as mothers, rather than dismissing them as the secondary parent, and one that, sadly, is often disposable? I will attempt to examine these questions by looking at myriad films and, primarily, the following literary texts: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein; Bram Stoker's Dracula; Gail Godwin's A Mother and Two Daughters; and Anne Tyler's Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant.

In Chapter Three, "Women Who Won't: Rebellious and Resistant Maternity," I will examine women who reject maternity. This chapter will also have three subsections: the motherhood imperative, the rejection of motherhood, and anti-maternity. To begin with, I want to discuss the imperative of motherhood and how it is insinuated on women. I will demonstrate how women are forced into a role, mediated through narrative scripts not all may fit. Although it may seem women are given other options, these films, texts, and news stories present another story. Second, I want to focus on texts that illustrate women who seem to have chosen motherhood but later reject it, deciding it isn't something they want to "do" anymore. This chapter will conclude with an examination of anti-maternity, or women who absolutely choose not to define themselves as mothers. I will examine works about women who won't have children, and how they are constructed in texts they write versus the texts written about them. How do women who don't have children fit in with the texts, visual or otherwise, that state that women should have offspring or that, implicitly, lurking under the surface in every woman is a maternal instinct clamoring to get out? Is there an element of social control implicitly present in criticizing and viewing these women? This chapter will also look at a variety of films, but, primarily, the following literary texts: Kate Chopin's The Awakening; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Story of Avis; Alta Gerrey's Momma;

Augusten Burroughs's Running With Scissors; Dorothy Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina; Janet Fitch's White Oleander; Gail Godwin's Father Melancholy's Daughter; Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping; and Elizabeth Gilbert's Eat, Pray, Love.

Chapter Four, "Merging the Two," will offer an opportunity for final reflection along with a preview of potential research related to the themes presented within these pages. Chiefly, two areas come to mind: current dystopian fiction, primarily in the Atwood series Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood and Cormac McCarthy's The Road, and popular television drama, chiefly *Sex and the City*. For example, in Atwood's work, almost all the men mother in some capacity; the only character who doesn't mother is Oryx's mother, the one woman who is supposed to enact this function. Although this is a dystopian novel and such works often serve to illustrate what might happen in an imagined future, I will argue less about the message and more about the realism with which Atwood is presenting her story. Men do mother, and here we will see how and why. As a foil to this work, I will examine *Sex and the City*. As a comedy, it makes viewers laugh, yet also plays with gender roles and fluidity. Here the women don't want to mother so much as do the men, specifically Steve Brady and Aidan Shaw. By looking at these two genres, we might be able to discern the cultural pulse of our own society regarding gendered or, more specifically, genderless parenting. In addition, I will compare these issues in *Sex and the City* with an early 20th century text, The Home-Maker, by Dorothy Canfield, providing a context and example of how the pendulum of societal issues and changes shifts, or, decidedly, does not.

What does this shift, or lack thereof, say about the contemporary feminist movement? What does it say about our views regarding motherhood and parenthood?

These are just a couple questions that will be addressed in the ensuing pages. If a woman and a man are equal, if a woman can do anything a man can do, specifically in terms of the labor and work required for a task, can the reverse be true too? Is a man equal to a woman? Can a man mother? I argue that, yes, if the “anything you can do, I can do better” mantra holds for women, then, conversely, it must also hold for men.

Chapter Two

MEN WHO MOTHER

“I was out walking with my then 4 year old daughter. She picked up something off the ground and started to put it in her mouth. I asked her not to do that. "Why?" she asked. "Because it's been laying outside and it is dirty and probably has germs." At this point, she looked at me with total admiration and asked, "How do you know all this stuff?" "Uh," I was thinking quickly, "...all moms know this stuff. Um, it's on the Mommy Test. You have to know it, or they don't let you be a Mommy." We walked along in silence for 2 or 3 minutes, but she was evidently pondering this new information. "OH...I get it!" she beamed, "So, if you flunk, you have to be the Daddy."

“The Mommy Test”
Email witticism

Let's step back a moment and, while considering the previous definitions I've just asserted, return to our basic understanding of mother as giver of life, or life force. One could make the argument that the Christian figure of God could be perceived as a mother. He gives new life, according to the salvation model as espoused by Christians, and he enacts mothering traits, listening to prayers and providing a source of comfort and strength to those who are downtrodden and disheartened. He also sacrifices himself, something also commonly associated with the maternal. While I don't aim to explore the Christian model extensively, it is interesting to note that this argument is valid and stirring up debate. The Christian Reformed Church's synod ruled that "...God cannot be called 'mother' or 'she'" in mid-1997 ("God Cannot Be"). Religion, with dogma and strict notions regarding gender designations, might have some contentious thoughts about viewing men as mothers, society isn't much different.

In Ralph LaRossa's article, "Fatherhood and Social Change," he contends that while the culture of fatherhood might be morphing to be more inclusive, the conduct of

fatherhood isn't evolving at all. In other words, while we might be more tolerant in our ideas, our actions are much further behind. His thesis, however, is debatable. A recent CNN article asserts, "More dads want to be Mr. Mom." Kate Lorenz, the article's author, found, "The number of dads who say they are willing to give up the breadwinner role if their spouse or partner earned enough to support their families rose from 43 percent in 2004 to 49 percent in 2005." Along with this desire is a push to change the conduct of men and the way they are viewed. As early as 1970, the National Organization for Women asserted, "We reject the idea that mothers have a special care role that is not to be shared equally by fathers" (qtd. in Griswold 245). Furthermore, the role of fathers in this complex act of parenting is slowly being revisited, especially in terms of language. In the mid-1980s, Fathers for Justice, Fathers United for Equal Justice, and Fathers Are Capable Too, formed in Alabama, Maine and Texas, respectively, set out to reform custody law. Instead of receiving "visitation," these organizations demanded "parenting time" for fathers (262). Essentially, "Fathers must see themselves as more than 'helpers,' and work and other institutions must be restructured so that fathers and mothers can share child care equally" (Griswold 7). These prescribed roles are difficult to overcome, however, as can be seen in the case of Amos King. A social worker from the Department of Children and Youth Services was sent to investigate allegations that King was "keeping a child." He was: his own son! King had to show proof of his relationship to the child (Pruett). One must wonder if we view masculine nurturing as so foreign as to be suspicious of it.

Apparently, not only should we be suspicious of it, but we should also question the quality of masculine nurture. In an article from CNN in 2007 entitled "Child Care

Linked to Later Behavioral Issues,” readers are warned that “[t]he more time that children spent in child care, the more likely their sixth-grade teachers were to report problem behavior.” While this seems more like maternal scare tactics, what is further problematized by this study is the admission that, “[i]n the study, child care was defined as care by anyone other than the child’s mother who was regularly scheduled for at least 10 hours per week.” The results of the study alone merit serious criticism, but what is far more interesting within this context is the absence of the father in the definition of primary care as the mother is the only one who is not designated in the study as “child care”. Are we to understand that a father taking care of his child is child care? Can a father providing nurture for his child not function as effectively as the mother? And, further, why is paternal or masculine care defined as “child care” rather than being aligned with the importance of the maternal? This is truly a critical conflict.

Physically, we can see how men have also taken on some of the conduct of the maternal. We are all familiar with men who experience sympathy pains for their pregnant partner. Men experience food cravings, weight gain, nausea, cramps, and vomiting, physically responding to the physiological changes from the realization of the pregnancy (Pruett 26-27). In some South Pacific cultures, the father undertakes *couvade*, the process by which he simulates the pregnancy and delivery of the woman (27). In Fiona Giles’s Fresh Milk: The Secret Life of Breasts, she devotes a chapter to the interesting phenomenon of male lactation. Here she includes the story of a man who accidentally came across his ability to calm down his third child, Miyuki, by letting her suck at his nipple. As his wife was late and he had depleted the store of pumped breastmilk, his daughter inadvertently latched on to his nipple and was immediately

soothed (191-93). While in this instance the nipple simply provided closeness, comfort and calm, Giles recounts other instances where male lactation is “normal.” In the animal world, lactation can occur and, through the use of synthetic hormones, men can lactate. Jared Diamond posits, “We’ve known for some time that many male mammals, including some men, can undergo breast development and lactate under special conditions...Lactation, then, lies within a male mammal’s physiological reach” (qtd. in Giles 187). Laura Shanley’s essay, “Milkmen: Fathers Who Breastfeed,” recounts Shanley’s own experience with her husband who convinced himself he could lactate, and did, upon the arrival of their first child (qtd. in Giles 185). While it is certainly not common to see men breastfeeding their children,¹⁹ this is one way in which the physical disparity between men and women is being surmounted, even if only in select, single situations.

Despite this apparent conflict, the fascinating distribution of ideologies is most apparent in the media and the way in which men in mothering positions are portrayed.²⁰ It is my contention that men who take on mothering roles are shown in film and literature in one of three ways: as a source of horrifying potentiality; as a source of comedic response; or, the most rare, as a real, working model of masculine maternity. These varying interpretations serve as mirrors in a sense. They show viewers and readers of these texts the tragic and fearful reality that could happen if the status quo is overturned. They allow viewers and readers to ridicule and deride the possibility of a man functioning

¹⁹ It is not common to see women breastfeeding their children either. Formula is peddled in maternity wards and women are often encouraged to supplement with formula instead of relying on their own ability to feed their child despite the mantra, “Breast is best.” Through my own experience in the hospital, thrice, I can speak to this phenomenon, personally.

²⁰ While I will be focusing on film and literature as illustrative of the way masculine maternity is depicted, I will return to real-life examples, specifically in the later part of this chapter as I show how men are successfully functioning in the mother-role.

as might a woman, although seeing their equality with a man is something the woman's movement has been asking for themselves for quite some time. And, in sporadic and rare moments, men can be seen as coping, dare I say functioning well, in the role as "mother" or primary caregiver. These mirrored images give us glimpses of our biggest fears and our potential, looming reality.

Horrorifying Masculine Maternity

Horror often exposes what we fear the most. Whether it is a stranger in the house, a mentally deranged individual, or unexplained phenomenon, horror forces us to confront what we fear. In many instances, horror disrupts the status quo as with the films and texts I will discuss. In all of the ensuing examples, the physicality of man is tested and his logical bounds and abilities are in play. While man does play a role in the creation of life, he doesn't give birth. He doesn't "create" in the same way a woman does. When man is given the ability to create a being and bring forth life, we are shown the horror that ensues. Overturning the order of things causes a horrific reaction and one that ultimately brings the creator's demise, and often that of the being produced.

As a source of horror, literary examples such as Frankenstein (1818) and Dracula (1897) come to mind. While Frankenstein might be a clearer, more obvious example with Dr. Frankenstein creating life, however horrific it might be, Dracula, too, shows life-giving potentiality with the male, this time through the physical monster of the vampire. Before I discuss the monstrous maternity of this text, I also want to point out the male nurturing figures that come up, too.²¹ If we examine the literary text, we see the character of Mina Murray has neither a mother nor a father, but is essentially mothered

²¹ This concept will be further explored later in this chapter when I discuss realistic portrayals of men as mothers, but it is worth noting, as we explore these other texts, especially in the realm of horror fiction and text, that the monstrous mother man is often pitted against or acts as a foil to the nurturing motherly male.

by Van Helsing, who takes care of her, specifically after she begins the metamorphosis into a vampire. The act of mothering is intrinsically taken over by the male characters in the novel, Arthur Holmwood, Quincey Morris, John Seward and Van Helsing, when they care for Lucy Westenra as well. With Lucy, not only is this act emotional but physical as well. All four men provide blood in a transfusion to Lucy in an effort to stave off the deterioration she faces in light of the vampiric bite she has received. They essentially provide life to her as best they can.

While the men act in a maternal manner, the women do not. Dracula overturns the order of things, presenting women who feed off children and abandon purity and virtue in favor of lust and pleasure. Readers are initially introduced to this role reversal when Johnathan Harker comes across the “three young women, ladies by their dress and manner” (38). But these are no ladies; in fact, they are female vampires who seductively try to lure Harker into their fold. Dracula returns, however, giving them sustenance in the form of a child. Harker notes, “If my ears did not deceive me there was a gasp and a low wail, as of a half-smothered child. The women closed round, whilst I was aghast with horror...” (40). The gender roles are overturned. Harker is passive in the face of sexual advance and the women are aggressors, displaying no piety or nurturing behavior. Mina and Lucy, the main female characters in this work, also deviate from the norm. Although Mina writes in her journal, “We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked...” (230), little is seen in the context of this work. Mina and Lucy both display more aptly qualities of the “New Woman.” Mina comments earlier,

I believe we should have shocked the “New Woman” with our appetites....Some of the “New Women” writers will some day start an idea that men and women should be allowed to see each other asleep before proposing or accepting. But I suppose the New Woman won’t condescend in future to accept; she will do the proposing herself. And a nice job she will make of it, too. (92)

Essentially, both Mina and, even more so, Lucy, with her frank openness, defy the traditional 19th century gender structures. Mina plays just as much of a role in undermining Dracula as do the men. While the men might be the brawn behind the operation, it is Mina who is the brains. But it is the two women’s overthrowing the traditional strictures of the maternal that is most notable. With Lucy, readers later come to understand that she is the “Bloofer Lady,” luring and feasting on the life of children. When the men come to kill her at her tomb, they find her with a child, displaying not nurturing and gentleness but hunger. Christopher Craft observes, “[t]he child Lucy clutches...is not being fed, but is being fed upon” (54). Her feminine nature has been turned into something unrecognizable.

Readers see the overthrow of the maternal feminine more shockingly with Mina’s character. Mina seeks to understand all that is going on around her, thriving and thirsting for knowledge. While staying with Dr. Seward, Mina seeks to speak with his patient, Renfield, and through him we learn more about Dracula, indirectly, and how he “creates” life. Renfield notes, “I used to fancy that life was a positive and perpetual entity, and that by consuming a multitude of live things, no matter how low in the scale of creation, one might indefinitely prolong life....relying, of course, upon the Scriptural phrase, ‘For the

blood is the life” (235). While Renfield consumes flies, spiders and other assorted creatures, readers come to see the importance of blood as a life-giving substance. While Mina is staying with Dr. Seward, Dracula comes to her in the form of a white mist. When the men burst into the room, they find Mina in a sexualized position and a maternal one, essentially breastfeeding on the Count. Seward recounts in his diary, “With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare breast which was shown by his torn open dress” (283). This pivotal scene is sexualized, maternalized and spiritualized in the text. Dracula later tells Mina, “And you, their best beloved one, are now to me, flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood; kin of my kin...” (289). Dracula takes on the role of God, of mother, providing and sustaining life, in a deviant form.

Dracula’s bite then both creates and ends life, thus establishing a monstrous, unrecognizable maternity. What he creates is a band of undead beings that “live” off the life/blood of others. His mouth is, as David Skal comments, “an ambiguous orifice; engulfing yet penetrating, nightmarishly blurring the distinctions of gender” (58). Dracula is both male and female, giver of life and taker of life, God and devil. Dracula aims to create a brood of creatures in his likeness, and Craft posits: “Indeed, Dracula’s mission in England is the creation of a race of monstrous women, feminine demons equipped with masculine devices” (44). Phyllis Roth, quoting Royce Macgillray, notes, “Dracula even aspires to be, in a sense, the father of the band that is pursuing him. Because he intends, as he tells them, to turn them all into vampires, he will be their

creator and therefore ‘father’” (6). Because Dracula overthrows gender normalcy, I would argue he aims to be the *mother* of this band of men. As Cyndy Hendershot explains,

Although written in a climate in which the two-sex anatomical model was firmly established and in which anatomy was used obsessively to explain sexual, racial, and class behavior, it was also written in an atmosphere of great confusion concerning gender stability.... [B]oth the New Woman and the aesthete threatened gender “normality” through their redefinitions of sexual and gender codes.... Stoker introduced the vampiric body, the body which undermined any belief in the clear-cut biological difference between men and women. (377)

If there is no biological difference, then man can be mother or, in this case, creator, as is Dracula. If biology isn't a factor, creation is not predicated on sex, opening wide the possibilities for birth and rebirth. Dracula's mouth is the only sex organ he possesses.

Quoting Christopher Craft, Hendershot continues,

[T]his mouth compels opposites and contrasts into a frightening unity, and it asks some disturbing questions. Are we male or are we female? Do we have penetrators or orifices? And if both, what does that mean? And what about our bodily fluids, the red and the white? What are the relations between blood and semen, milk and blood? Furthermore, this mouth, bespeaking the subversion of the stable and lucid distinctions of gender, is the mouth of all vampires, male and female. (379)

The line is blurred between blood, semen and milk as the reader experiences this gender in flux. This horrific portrayal confuses gender normalcy, calling into question the rigid roles prescribed for each gender. Gender fluidity can be seen in the cinematic version of Dracula as well.

In the Francis Ford Coppola version (1992), the scene where Dracula feeds Mina is adapted, but instead of appearing as monstrous and forceful, the scene seems almost tender. Dracula (played by Gary Oldman) bares his breast to feed Mina, to give her “life” to be with him. In both a move as a mother/father and a lover, Dracula seems to breastfeed Mina. Here, life is given through the monster, the man. Lisa Hopkins notes “[w]hen Mina sucks from Dracula’s breast, images of motherhood and images of monstrosity startlingly coalesce, as when a somnambulistic Lucy actualizes the fantasies of preying on small children...” (7). While much has been written about Lucy and Mina as monstrous mothers, I find Dracula is more obviously the monstrous mother, creating a series of vampires in his wake, extending his genealogical line if you will by each subsequent bite enacted by previous victims.

This Dracula, however, is a much more sympathetic character. The tagline for the film is “Love Never Dies,” hearkening to the fanciful plot addition that this Dracula has lost his love and believes she is reincarnated as Mina. Dracula is initially shown as a young man. His wife receives a note that he has died while he was off to battle, and she responds by ending her life. When he returns, he rails against his fate. He stabs the center of the cross and decries, “This blood is the life and it shall be mine.” Because Dracula has lost his love, he denounces God, overthrowing the “traditional” order of creation where God gives life via the woman. He essentially becomes Dracula because of this fateful

decision, a plot addition Stoker's book doesn't include. Not only does he become Dracula, but he embodies Christ-like characteristics by reversing them. He is a dark force, but yet a creator as well, recrafting the myth of Dracula. Stephenson Humphries-Brooks posits, "Dracula recreates a world of life and death that both condemns the Christian world order and destroys the mythic Christ himself. He undoes Christ." Although rejecting God, he also mimics him. Humphries-Brooks charts how Dracula's language mirrors Christ's words.

Mina: I want to be with you always.

Dracula: You cannot know what you are asking.

Jesus: You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink? (Matt 20:20-28).

Dracula: There is no life in this body.

Jesus: . . .unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you (John 6:53).

Dracula: You must die to live.

Mina: My life and love always.

Dracula: I give you life eternal, everlasting love.

Jesus: The one who loses life for my sake will find it (Matt 10:39b; author translation).

These ideas of creation and life giving are juxtaposed here. Dracula is seen as a "life" giving force, calling the standard notion of creation and creator into play. David Skal calls Gary Oldman's Dracula "an androgynous ancient" (278), again reasserting the feminine and masculine powers this creature holds.

Another tale rooted in monstrous, male maternity is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818). Again, as with Dracula, images of nurturing males serve as foils to the monstrous Victor Frankenstein. Initially, readers meet Robert Walton who captains the ship and to whom Victor confides his story. While Walton initially laments his lack of friends, his need is met by the nurturing he provides Victor Frankenstein. We are told, "When he had in some measure recovered, I removed him to my own cabin, and attended on him as much as my duty would permit" (25). Walton helps Victor recover from his physical and mental state and he grows to care for him. Walton writes, "For my own part, I begin to love him as a brother; and his constant and deep grief fills me with sympathy and compassion....Yet I have found a man who, before his spirit had been broken by misery, I should have been happy to have possessed as the brother of my heart" (27).

Another nurturing male is Alphonse Frankenstein, Victor's father. Readers are told that he marries his friend's daughter, Caroline, after her father, Beaufort, dies, leaving her an orphan. Initially she was simply placed under Alphonse's protection, but two years after his death, they marry. Shelley writes: "There was a considerable difference between the ages of my parents....He strove to shelter her...and to surround her with all that could tend to excite pleasurable emotion in her soft and benevolent mind" (33). While their relation was one of tender and devoted love, there is also the element of fatherly/motherly affection shown by Alphonse who does nurture Caroline. Although Victor does exhibit and stand as a prime example of monstrous maternity, it is also important to note that he does function as a caring, doting, mother figure to the character of Elizabeth Lavenza, an orphan his family adopts while in Italy. Caroline tells Victor, "I have a pretty present for my Victor—to-morrow he shall have it" (35). She is

seen as a thing to be possessed rather than an independent being, an important aspect to remember as Victor develops. Victor narrates, “And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally, and looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, love and cherish. All praises bestowed on her, I received as made to a possession of my own” (35-6).

The last nurturing man we see in this text is Henry Clerval, Victor’s childhood friend who nurses him back to health after he falls ill once he creates his nameless monster. Again, Victor narrates, “This was the commencement of a nervous fever, which confined me for several months. During all that time Henry was my only nurse” (62). So, although the men do nurse, nurture, care and console, the crux of this novel is monstrosity, specifically in terms of the creature, or the rejection of the creature, Victor produces.

Language is also centrally important in this text in the creation of the monster. Victor’s diction discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter....After so much mimics that of the birth process, hearkening to the sexual aspect as well.²² He asserts:

After days and nights of incredible *labour* and fatigue, I succeeded in time spent in painful *labour* to arrive at once at the summit of my desires, was the most gratifying *consummation* of my toils. (52, italics mine)

While Victor’s intentions seem noble enough, they ultimately are self-serving. He tells Walton, “No one can *conceive* the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success....A new species would bless me as its

²² Labour is used extensively throughout the text. It becomes important when Victor undertakes to create a companion for the first creature he made and again at various points throughout the work.

creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs” (54, italics mine). It is ultimately the idea of creation that Victor is enamored with; when the monster comes to life, he is not overwhelmed with affection, but rather disgust and horror at the physical monstrosity of the being he has infused with life. Throughout the text, the nameless monster is called daemon, devil, vile insect, monster, and fiend. It isn't until Victor engages with the creature that he comes to understand his responsibility. The being asserts, “Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed” (100). Victor empathizes, to some degree, commenting, “For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (102). It is here, as Victor listens to his creature's tale, that we see how he embodies aspects of the monstrously maternal.

Perhaps the most incomprehensible aspect of Victor Frankenstein is his lack of maternal instinct. Although a creator and producer of life, he has none of the maternal inclination. Since Victor functions as both male and female, it is this duality and his fallibility in terms of caring for the creation that imparts to him the quality of being monstrously maternal. As the being tells his tale, readers learn he had to fend for himself. Victor instilled no means for him to obtain shelter or gather food. It was through the observation of others, specifically the cottagers, that the being learned language and how to think. He saw he was not like others, but rather queried, “Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? ...No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with

smiles and caresses....What was I” (121)? It is only at the end of the text that he recognizes himself as “miserable and abandoned... an abortion” (222). Because Victor possesses the scientific and intellectual ability to create life but lacks the emotional and mental ability to sustain it, he represents the horrific side of masculine maternity.²³ Joan Copjec observes, “Frankenstein plays the role of an extremely bad mother. But what makes him bad? Not the fact that he refuses the demand of ‘his child,’ but that he interprets his cry as a demand” (43). Frankenstein lacks the ability, or the desire, to understand the creature that he has imbued with life.

The notion of female and male ways of creating is called into question much as it is within the Dracula tale. Can the two merge into one plausible conception without being horrific? For men to undertake the role of the woman, no, in this instance, it cannot. Margaret Homans posits of Frankenstein, “The novel is about the collision between androcentric and gynocentric theories of creation, a collision that results in the denigration of maternal childbearing through its circumvention by male creation” (148). As I discussed the Christ analogy within the context of Dracula, so, too, can the same theory be applied here: “Like the creations of Adam and Eve, which excluded the maternal, Christ’s birth bypassed the normal channels of procreation” (151). These early texts show how horrifying male maternity can be. While during the 19th century the female body was a battleground in terms of its representation and in terms of eliciting control, these texts speak across centuries as the idea of reproducing male returns in modern works, asking readers to again consider the purpose of the monstrous male.

²³ There is a wealth of possibility here in terms of developing this argument in relation to 21st century advances in science. One could discuss the plethora of reproductive technologies now available, not to mention stem-cell research and cloning. Much has been developed with these ideas in terms of dystopian fiction, something that bears investigation, but not within the scope of this dissertation.

Current representations of a man creating or giving life abound in the contemporary horror genre. Many of them use the lore built up around Frankenstein and Dracula to create their own story. In *Van Helsing* (2004), these two tales are combined. “Transylvania 1887” is scripted at the bottom of the screen. As viewers watch the beginning scenes of the film, they see, cast in black and white, images of Dr. Frankenstein jubilantly shouting, “It’s alive!” Rain bespatters the castle as the villagers try to invade the location where Dr. Frankenstein works. While the good doctor realizes he must abandon his creation, Dracula shows up and it is through the narrative that viewers learn Dracula gave Victor the castle to develop the creature. Dracula desires to take over the monster, but, in this telling, Dr. Frankenstein confesses that he could never allow the creature to be used for Dracula’s evil plan. Dracula even quotes Frankenstein to Frankenstein, asserting that the monster is but “A triumph of science over God.” Victor is a much more sympathetic man. Of course even a scientist doesn’t stand a chance against the undead Dracula and, after Victor’s demise, viewers later see the monster rescue the dead Victor. The villagers burn the windmill where the monster tries to hide, and as the structure crumbles, we hear the monster name Victor; he cries “Father” as he falls.

So what is Dracula’s plan? By using the knowledge of Victor Frankenstein, he hopes to create life without women. While Dracula does have three brides who “produce” offspring, they aren’t alive. Dracula seeks to create life of his own. In this narrative, he replicates Dr. Frankenstein’s contraption, using other men he captures to mediate life. When Dracula captures the reluctant Frankenstein monster, a monster believed to be dead, and uses him to mediate life to his spawn, he is successful. It is only through the

monster that Dracula can give life, and monstrous life it is. The implicit message is men give life. In all these instances, a man as mother or creator of life is a horrifying one. Dracula maintains in the film: “This is why you were made. To prove God is not the only one to give life.” As in Shelly’s work, the monster is a sympathetic creature and one who desires no part in this plan. But it is for naught. Dracula wails, “Give me life,” as the monster is forcibly strapped into the elaborate machine with pulleys, levers, electricity and bubbling, frothy liquid. The scene is dark, confusing and utterly monstrous. This is the postmodern interpretation of Shelly and Stoker. Life in the hands of man, a monster, is monstrous.

This cinematic portrayal combines these two pivotal texts, but other contemporary films draw on one or the other, again adding new twists to the traditional narrative.²⁴ *Blade* (1998) tells the story of a hybrid, half vampire, half human. While not much is revealed about his creation beyond the fact that his pregnant mother was bitten by a vampire while Blade was in utero, there still exists the vampire creation ideology that I discussed earlier. A vampire creates a new being. Blade believes his mother died during childbirth, but he is later reunited with her and the vampire, Deacon, who bit her. She calls him Eric, but he isn’t Eric anymore; he is this new creature, Blade. Other facets of masculine maternity come into play in this film. Deacon Frost seeks to resurrect the blood god, La Magra, and needs the blood of Blade to “create” this life. Death, violence and fear result when men seek to create new life. This is a constant theme ever-present in

²⁴ While I will discuss *Blade* here, the two Frankenstein-ian films, *Weird Science* (1985) and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), fit in more with the parameters of comedic masculine maternity, a topic I will investigate later in this chapter.

these films.²⁵ On the other hand, just as there seems to be a foil in the two novels for the horrific masculine character so, too, there is in *Blade*. Since Blade was orphaned, he had to fend for himself, that is until Whistler came along to rescue him. Viewers are told Whistler (played by Kris Kristofferson), a vampire hunter, found Blade when he was 13. He is Blade's male mother. He nurtures, cares for, and alleviates the hunger that vampiric Blade doesn't understand or know how to curb. He helps harness Blade's anomalies and teaches him to use them as strengths in combating the evil vampire race.

So far, men who mother are "mothering" in the sense that they are creating new life and, so far, it is horrific. Sometimes, however, the focus is more on the foil, or the nurturing father that appears in the horror genre. In *Hellboy* (2004), a demon (Hellboy) is accidentally summoned as the Nazis try to use black magic in gaining power for their side in WWII. Rasputin is the evil monk who tries to open the portal to the other side, hell. Fortunately, the allied forces arrive to stop their success, and Rasputin is sucked to the other side, but not before the demon, Hellboy, is summoned. The red faced, spirited creature jumps from his hiding place in the church into Dr. Trevor "Broom" Bruttonholm's arms. Viewers are told, "It's a boy," as we hear Broom comment that he was "an unready father for an unwanted child." Later in the film, when Rasputin returns from the other side and confronts Broom, he asks him if he would like to know the child's true name. Dr. Broom asserts, "I already know what to call him. I call him son." It is Dr. Broom who gives Hellboy a home, helps him understand who he is and loves him unconditionally. He is a masculine mother.

²⁵ Although *Underworld* (2003) doesn't use *Dracula* or *Frankenstein* as a source of inspiration, it does still present elements of horrific masculine maternity. Here, the vampires and werewolves are at war, but one of the werewolves discovers a means of creating a super race of vampire/wolf hybrids through science.

Although the good doctor is a positive character, there still exists the male who simply seeks to create life rather than nurture it. Rasputin creates Sammael, another demon, from his breath. Even Hellboy has the power to give life as he brings back Ivan, a corpse he digs up in the cemetery to garner information about finding the errant demons unleashed by Rasputin. It is important to note that Hellboy is a demon. Rasputin seeks him out and uses Sammael as a lure to help usher in the apocalypse. Hellboy is also known as Ahung Un Rama, or the right hand of doom, illustrated with his overly large fist. Although a creature meant to ignite evil, Hellboy is a good character, largely due to his upbringing. Here is a classic example of nature versus nurture. Hellboy is even told, “You have a choice. Your father gave you that.” This language also plays with the language of Christianity and the choices one is given. Just as these texts play with the idea of creator, the idea of God, so we see creation conceits in the men who take on the role of mother.

Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) perhaps most clearly shows the duality of masculine maternity, as the two main characters, Louis (played by Brad Pitt) and LeStat (played by Tom Cruise), vie for the ultimate role of mother to Claudia. It is LeStat that creates Louis and makes him a vampire. LeStat is a killer, delighting in his status: “God kills indiscriminately and so shall we.” Louis, on the other hand, is sympathetic, valuing life and opting to prey on animals rather than human flesh. When the two stumble upon a little girl, Claudia (played by Kirsten Dunst), as she hovers over her dead mother’s body, they make a choice. Since her mother has died of the plague and she is alone, LeStat and Louis decide to become her mother. Of this moment, Sandra Tomc notes, “This violent demystification of maternal power, centered as it is on the

mother's body as something dead and obsolete, then opens the conceptual space for the alternative represented by vampire sexuality" (98). Louis bites Claudia, and Lestat gives her life blood, allowing her to suckle from his wrist. Lestat declares, "You are mine and Louis's daughter now." Later, Louis explains to her, "I took your life and he gave you another one." Claudia realizes the implications: "You became my mother and my father." Thus, "Claudia's birth in turn inaugurates an expansion of socio-sexual options for the vampires, who now play through an almost dizzying variety of roles. Louis is variously Claudia's lover, father, and mother; he is Lestat's wife and son..." (98-99). Such is the duality of the monstrous mother/male that creates new life. While a man who tries to subvert the norm and issue forth life is typically monstrous and horrific, a man who nurtures that same life can be acceptable. It's a complex dynamic though and one that flirts with the alternative acceptance of androgyny. As Rice herself states, "I see the androgynous figure as the ideal figure" (qtd. in Torc 97). It is perhaps through that androgynous role playing that we move to a clearer understanding of masculine maternity, although here the presentation is wholly horrific.

Comedic Masculine Maternity

Some film texts form a bridge from the horrific to the comedic by mocking the fantastical nature of the concept of male conception and production of a child. *Weird Science* (1985) is one such film. Here the Frankenstein legend is parodied. Wyatt Donnelly (Ilan Mitchell-Smith) and Gary Wallace (Anthony Michael Hall) are two hapless nerds who can't seem to catch a break, but these geeks are smart. While watching an adaptation of Frankenstein, they get the idea to make a girl "like

Frankenstein...only cuter.” Donning bras on their heads and chanting (perhaps to get in touch with the feminine a la Lamaze and through outward vestiges), the boys hook up their computer to a Barbie doll and tap into the government’s mainframe in an attempt to create life. One of the boys deadpans, “I want her to live. I want her to breathe. I want her to aerobicize.” Miraculously, the boys do create life, but it isn’t monstrous; far from it. Lisa, played by Kelly LeBrock, appears in their doorway in a cloud of smoke, sporting little more than a cropped tee-shirt and leg warmers. She is a sexual, magical being the boys created to help them un-geek. She is their toy, their come-to-life doll. Lisa even tells them, “You made me. You control me.” This sexualized creation is a bit of a perversion of the conception of life. Yet, while she isn’t a child, she is mothered by the two teens. Although she fulfills their lustful teenage fantasies and helps them become men in fantastical, over-the-top cinematic circumstances, the boys mother her. They reign in her no holds barred party throwing and gift giving, telling her she must go back to wherever it is she came from. Their moral responsibility kicks in and they do the right thing, helping her to discern right from wrong along the way. At one point in the film, Lisa takes on the two cool kids who antagonize Wyatt and Gary, frequently labeling them derogatory terms. She warns the bullies, “I think they’re going to force everyone to redefine their terms.” Here, she means the opinion held by the bullies of Wyatt and Gary, but in the larger scope, perhaps the term of creation/conception is being revisited.

Another film that presents a comedic, sexualized creation by a masculine personage, bridging the horrific to the completely comedic, is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Here again the viewer finds the familiar Frankenstein story with similar conventions: a gloomy castle, dark scenery, lightning crashes at crucial moments and an

Igor-like henchman (Riff-Raff, played by Richard O'Brien). The doctor in this story is Dr. Frank-N-Furter, played by Tim Curry. Here, gender conventions are flouted as we are first introduced to the good doctor with the musical number, "Sweet Transvestite." Complete with lipstick and a corset, Dr. Frank-N-Furter proceeds to tell his crowd through the song, "I Can Make You a Man," how he's "...been making a man with blonde hair and a tan." Although the logistics of his creative powers aren't clear beyond a few zaps of electricity and rainbow colored liquid, Rocky Horror is born with a "Charles Atlas stamp of approval." Frank-N-Furter tells this fully grown man, "In just seven days, I can make you a man." Mirroring both the God-like creation of the world in seven days, the film uses a creation motif throughout. Again, viewers see a replica of Michaelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" at the bottom of Dr. Frank-N-Furter's pool, further perpetuating this theme. What differs, however, is the intent of creation. Rocky Horror (Peter Hinwood), the full-grown man Dr. Frank-N-Furter has given life, is a sexual plaything chained to the good doctor's bed. The only mothering that takes place is the act of giving life, for the intention of Dr. Frank-N-Furter is purely and completely hedonistic. Although the film is comedic in its presentation, the horrific element is still present in the concept. Can a man give life and be nurturing?

No film better exemplifies masculine maternity than *Junior* (1994), for it is here where viewers actually see a man pregnant, gestating and giving birth, cinematically rendered, of course. The tagline for this film, "Nothing is Inconceivable," presents the initial premise. Two scientists, Dr. Alex Hesse (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Dr. Larry Arbogast (Danny DeVito), want to begin human trials on their new drug, Expectine, which purports to help reduce the rejection of an embryo by the woman's body, resulting

in miscarriage. Unfortunately, the FDA disallows the team's proposal and Hesse, through persuasion by Arbogast, consents to implantation of an embryo and undergoes the human trial himself. What ensues is much witty banter regarding gender exploration and role-reversal, all for the sake of comedy. In one scene, Hesse complains to Dr. Diana Reddin (Emma Thompson) about the pain he is experiencing. Reddin begins a diatribe about what women go through, concluding, "Men are pathetic, really, when it comes to pain." Although the plan was to complete the clinical trials and abort the study (and the baby) after a few weeks, Hesse can't do it. He tells his colleague, "I can't help but wonder what it would be like...to have my baby." Viewers watch the comedic result as this nurturing desire is uttered by a character played by the epitome of masculinity, uber-male Arnold Schwarzenegger. Hesse further states, "I'm gonna be a momma, too!"

What is "natural" is explored in this film. In response to Hesse's proclamation, Arbogast asserts, "This is totally against the natural order. Guys do not have babies." When Hesse retreats to a natal clinic, the director of the center speaks about dispensing with the myth of the natural mother. Although this admonition to rewrite the mythology of motherhood does provide pause, the real conflict arises when it is revealed the "anonymous" donor egg is really that of Dr. Diana Reddin. When she realizes Hesse is carrying her baby, Dr. Arbogast retorts, "Just cause your egg is in some guy doesn't make you the mother." Playing off the notion of what makes a father (is it biology, is it being-thereness, etc.), role-reversal and gender prescribed roles are further explored in comedic one liners meant to evoke a laugh, yet also providing fodder for discussion. The truest observation comes from Reddin, when in a fit of anger after realizing she won't be carrying the child to term, maintains, "You think men don't hold enough cards? You

have to take this away from us as well?” The fear of male reproductive power is evident. While it might not be plausible that a man can carry a child to term without a woman, what happens when a woman loses that maternal authority and is on equal footing with her male co-parent?

Or perhaps I should back up. What could happen, what would happen, if a man could, a la Arnold, carry a baby to term? In a headline from MSNBC.com from January 15, 2007, readers are told, “Hospital Plans to Offer First Uterus Transplant.” The article reads, “A New York hospital is taking steps to offer the first uterus transplant in the United States, a radical experiment that might allow women whose wombs were removed or are defective to bear children.” Using the wombs from organ donors might enable these women to bear life. Now, if a uterus is transferable, what about the possibility, real or imagined, of a man giving birth, of being a “mom” in this sense of creating life? Perhaps Hollywood is not far off the path of scientific actuality.

While these films set out to explore the horrific and comedic and, in the last instance, possibly real chance of a man to produce life, the comic male mother is more prevalent as the laborer, meaning the individual putting forth the parental work. In the mid-eighties, sitcoms extensively explored plots where the housekeeper, nanny, cook and moral center of the family was the hired worker, typically male.²⁶ Consider the sitcoms *Who's the Boss* (1984-1992) and *Mr. Belvedere* (1985-1990). Tony Micelli (Tony Danza) and Mr. Belvedere (Christopher Hewett), respectively, served the same role. Not only did they perform the same tasks, but they provided the connectivity for the family unit. This center came not from the female business executive and mom, Angela Bauer

²⁶ Interestingly we can see the pendulum swing this way again with the onslaught not of nannies, but “mannies,” men who take on the responsibilities of child-rearing and caregiving for their employers.

(Judith Light), or the law student and mom, Marsha Owens (Ilene Graff), but rather the male domestics, hired and paid to do the job that the woman couldn't do singularly or effectively on her own.²⁷ The female lead is married in the *Belvedere* series, but she is devoted to her career and Mr. Belvedere often does step in to function as the caregiver. She is married, but the father embodies prototypical masculinity, writing a sports column, and almost serves as a foil to the nurturing masculinity exhibited by Mr. Belvedere. In *Who's the Boss*, Angela is divorced and her ex-husband's presence in the children's life is negligible. Tony serves as the primary caregiver in many ways as Angela is so entrenched in succeeding with her career. In both instances, the men use humor, but aren't as humorous themselves in that they aren't ridiculed or mocked in the way cinematic nurturing mo/fathers are. Even a television program like *Charles in Charge* (1984-1990), where Charles (Scott Baio) is simply a college student who functions as a live-in nanny, positions him in a more powerful relationship with the children than the biological parents. Charles often finds himself in situations where he dispenses wisdom, learns something himself and helps bring the traditional family unit together in closer proximity, all within the space of thirty minutes!

This isn't to say the television realm does not tackle the comedic male biological father. *Full House*, which ran from 1987-1995, showcases father Danny Tanner (Bob Saget) and his struggle to raise his three daughters after his wife was killed by a drunk driver. Despite the serious and wholly depressing scenario, levity factors in because Danny can't raise his daughters alone. His brother-in-law, Jesse Katsopolis (John Stamos) and friend Joey Gladstone (Dave Coulier) step in to help him raise the children.

²⁷ The import of a male domestic implies that women who work or women on their own can't manage and navigate the business and personal world of family. I am not maintaining this position, but it is one that I will explore in Chapter Three. Who is the better mother: the stay at home mother or the working mom?

While the message is evocative of Hillary Clinton's ideology, "It takes a village... [to raise a child]," the real undercurrent speaks to a man's ability to father, or mother, his own offspring. One man isn't enough, but three might be. But even three men are no match for one woman as Becky (Lori Loughlin), Jesse's girlfriend, shows up and helps mediate any male faltering or inability. Without a feminine presence, the men would be incapable of tending these three girls. In most instances, the men resort to humor to help solve any problem or crisis that arises. While situations usually work out, the plot is fairly static, ending in successful resolution, it seems, only by happenstance and blind luck.

Another sitcom airing from 1987-1990 also dealt with the possibility of a biological father raising a child, solely and on his own, but with added complications.²⁸ *My Two Dads* introduced the premise of two possible biological fathers, Michael Taylor and Joey Harris (Paul Reiser and Greg Evigan), raising a daughter, Nicole (Staci Keanan). The mother, whom the men both loved, dies before revealing which one is the father, but issues joint custody to both men in her will. The judge declares that both are the father so, in true fantastical sitcom fashion, the men undertake to raise Nicole together, opting to never find out who the real father is. One could read the cliché, two heads are better than one, into this dynamic. Two men almost equate to one mother, the previous arrangement. Is this the message Hollywood is sending?

Wholly comedic responses to men in mothering positions are much more common in cinema. Consider the success of films such as *Daddy Day Care*, *Big Daddy*, *Mr. Mom*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Junior*, or most recently, *The Pacifier*. Listen to the jokes

²⁸ *Raising Hope* (2010) is a Fox sitcom, recently aired, that follows in the same vein as these previous comedies. Here 23 year-old Jimmy Chance (played by Lucas Neff) is in charge of raising the daughter whom he sired with, unbeknownst to him, a convicted felon.

about men in these roles, such as the email excerpt cited in the epigraph of this chapter entitled “The Mommy Test” that makes fun of men’s capability to function in the primary role of dominant caregiver. To return to the film genre, Deborah Lupton and Lesley Barclay note in Constructing Fatherhood: Discourses and Experience that “[i]t is telling that the genre of contemporary mainstream film that has focused most on men in a fathering role is the comedy” (69). What is implicit in these films is that man is incapable of serving as the primary caregiver. We end up with a sort of reverse sexism if you will. In most of these films, men get “stuck” with the child, often with no clue what to do or how to function. Even popular music plays with the idea of the incapable man. Listen to the lyrics of the recent *Lonestar* song, “Mr. Mom” (2006), and you are presented with a picture of a man who is incompetent on his own with his own children. After recently losing his job, he becomes the one to stay at home with the children while the wife goes out to work. The lyrics reveal his expectations about his new role and show how his duties devolve into something completely unexpected:

Lost my job, came home mad
Got a hug and kiss and that's too bad
She said I can go to work until you find another job
I thought I like the sound of that
Watch TV and take long naps
Go from a hand working dad to being Mr. Mom

(Refrain)

Well, Pampers melt in a Maytag dryer

Crayons go up one drawer higher
Rewind Barney for the fifteenth time
Breakfast, six naps at nine
There's bubble gum in the baby's hair
Sweet potatoes in my lazy chair
Been crazy all day long and it's only Monday
Mr. Mom

Football, soccer and ballet
Squeeze in Scouts and PTA
And there's that shopping list she left
That's seven pages long
How much smoke can one stove make
The kids won't eat my charcoal cake
It's more than any maid can take
Being Mr. Mom
(Repeat Refrain)

Before I fall in bed tonight
If the dog didn't eat the classifieds
I'm gonna look just one more time
(Repeat Refrain)

Balancin' checkbooks, juggling bills
Thought there was nothing to it
Baby, now I know how you feel
What I don't know is how you do it.

These song lyrics go back to the maternal instinct I mentioned previously. A woman who is incompetent is somehow a disappointment to her gender. She is somehow deviant for not possessing a maternal instinct that is thought to be so primal in woman. For a man, however, it is expected that he will be bungling and ineffectual. Although men and women both function as parents for their children, it is the female that is given priority, and when the biological male parent is left on his own to run the home, disaster and hilarity ensue.

The movie of the same name, 1983's *Mr. Mom*, showcases a cinematic version of the above song. In this rendition, Jack Butler (Michael Keaton) is laid off from his job as an engineer. His wife, Caroline (Terri Garr), is a stay at home mom to their three children. When he loses his job, they both hit the market to see who can find employment. Jack ends up chagrined when Caroline lands an advertising position. As she bustles out the door, she tells Jack, "There's nothing to this you know," and admonishes the kids, "Take it easy on daddy. He's a rookie." Of course, here is where the comedy comes in. Jack is told, "You're doing it wrong," by parents, the children's teacher, and even his own kids as he drops off his children, going in the wrong direction through the school circle. This concept of doing it wrong plays out throughout the whole movie. Is Jack doing it wrong or is he doing it his way? This is a theme that crops up repeatedly in this genre. The idea of doing it right seems to be, again, inherently given to

the female. As Jack initiates care-giving for his children, he does bungle a bit. He loses both kids in the supermarket, destroys the laundry, wrecks the home, and *tries* to manage chaos that the children find themselves in the midst of (think: a baby eating chili from a can!). Finding himself completely out of sorts and, essentially, an unskilled laborer in his new job, Jack deteriorates. Physically, he lets himself go. He finds himself watching *The Young and the Restless* and playing poker for grocery store coupons with the neighborhood ladies. In one scene he laments to Caroline that his brain has turned to mush; she doesn't much hear him though as she is too enraptured in her new role. This lamentation doesn't last long, however, as Jack soon learns the ropes of his new job. He takes pride in his position, conversing with and nurturing the kids (weaning one child off his blanket, or "woobie."). Although Caroline's boss sees Jack as inferior, referring to him as one of the "wives," Jack recognizes his insecurity and doesn't enact, for lack of a better term, macho bravado, accepting, as he says, that he has "a household to run." Although this foray into role reversal was appropriately timed for the decade in which it came out and represented, by film's end, Jack has his job back and Caroline is given the opportunity to work three days at the office and two at home. Jack's masculinity is restored and the traditional family unit is in play²⁹.

Ten years later, viewers were shown *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). In this film, Daniel Hillard (Robin Williams) is the primary caregiver. His wife, Miranda (Sally Field), becomes exasperated with his laissez-faire attitude toward raising their children. Their conflict comes to a head when Miranda arrives home to find Daniel has thrown a lavish

²⁹ Television tried to duplicate this humorous theme with 2005's *Meet Mr. Mom*. Although only airing a season, this show attempted to blend comedy with reality television, having the dads take over the family while mom goes on a relaxing getaway. With ridiculous tasks and competitions, the reality aspect of this show is questionable, likely putting in play unrealistic scenarios to further reinforce the idea that a mom is necessary to successful family functioning.

birthday party for their son after she had grounded him. She asserts to him, “You have all the fun and I get what’s left over.” Daniel rationalizes that she chose the career, but Miranda maintains she has no choices, that is until she chooses divorce. Custody is granted to her, ironically because she has the home and the job. Although Daniel is the caregiver, he is marginalized (perhaps because he is a man?). Daniel maintains, “I have to be with my children. It’s not a question really.” When he finds out that Miranda takes an ad out for a nanny to watch the children when they come home from school while she is at work, Daniel seizes upon the opportunity. She won’t let him assume his parental role so he inquires of his brother, who happens to be a make-up artist, “Could you make me a woman?”

Daniel exemplifies gender performance. As a woman, Daniel becomes Mrs. Euphegenia Doubtfire. S/he is much more “parental” as a woman, tapping into some intrinsic aspect of him/herself that heretofore was missing. Although Daniel is still Daniel, s/he is able to perform in ways unavailable to him before. As Mrs. Doubtfire, he manages to cook lavish meals, taking the time to learn how to prepare fine dishes. He cleans and maintains the home. While this aspect is new, he still nurtures the children, a trait present in Daniel. He helps the children with their homework, even assisting the son in raising his grades. He continues to read to his youngest daughter. He hasn’t changed so much personally as physically, but this physical performance enables Daniel to perform all these tasks with more discipline and a perfect blending of male/female that results in Miranda stating, “Who needs a husband when I have you.” Trussed up as a female, Daniel is a new creation and much more palpable.

Unfortunately, when Miranda finds out the deception that has been ongoing under her nose, she reacts with vehemence and Daniel loses even more ground in the custody of his children. He tells the judge, “I’m addicted to my children, sir.” He loses visitation and declares to Miranda, “You took my children away from me.” It isn’t until later that Miranda, watching a cartoon of Mrs. Doubtfire starring her erst-while husband, realizes what she missed out on, not personally but for her children. She tells Daniel, of Mrs. Doubtfire, “She brought out the best in them. She brought out the best in you.” Daniel as woman is good-enough, but as man is not. Again, the nurturing male is present but is a source of comedy. He can’t do it right, and right is dictated by the woman. Although by film’s end the two are speaking and Daniel is to assume responsibility for the children after school until she returns from work, it is her dictate that rules. Daniel may call them “my” children, but the message is they are hers. A father is nothing more than a breadwinner. Although he is able, to some degree, to nurture his children, usurping the role of primary caregiver is against the norm and denounced, even in a genre as innocuous as comedy.

2003’s version of *Cheaper by the Dozen* features a similar message. Kate Baker (Bonnie Hunt) begins the film with a voice over: “With each child, we got further away from our big career dreams.” Despite this, Kate and Tom Baker (Steve Martin) manage to produce twelve children. While raising this many children might be daunting enough, Tom is also a football coach and Kate is a writer. The rub comes when Tom’s big offer to coach his alma mater arrives at the same time Kate has the opportunity to publish her book. The family moves and Tom assures Kate he can handle the children on his own while she goes on her book tour. Despite ribbing from his friend, Shake (Richard

Jenkins), who calls him a “pansy house-husband,” Tom is determined to navigate both the domestic sphere and the professional world. Kate’s friend, Diana (Vanessa Bell Calloway), tells Kate when she fears Tom’s ability to manage on his own, “You’ve been the primary caregiver for what, 22 years? Can’t Tom handle the kids for awhile?” The answer, in short, is that he can’t. As in most of these comedies, the father’s inability to manage what is largely seen to be the female sphere is the crux of the comedic bent. When the repairman comes to fix the chandelier that the children broke, literally, from swinging from it, he says to Tom, “You are in over your head, mister.” In the paper, the headline queries, “Can Baker coach two teams?” His children and his co-workers wonder if he can balance football and family. When it is evident that Tom is doing a poor job at both, Shake tries to emphasize the importance of the professional sphere. He tells Tom, “This is your moment, not theirs.” When he realizes Tom is giving up his dream, he rides him, but Tom recognizes the need to “coach” the personal sphere. He tells Shake, “Just going with a different one [dream]. If I screw up my kids, nothing else matters much.” While the man sacrifices his dream, the woman gets hers. Yes, Kate cuts her book tour short, but she has obtained her goal and it is honored. She returns home to restore order and navigate both spheres as Tom cannot. Interestingly enough, this film can be read in a feminist light. Kate can do it all, and does, but what about men? The comedy here resides in the man trying to go it alone. He can’t. The woman must swoop in and resume her role to establish order. The message is the implicit (i.e. stereotypical?) family structure must be honored.

On the heels of this film was 2007’s *The Game Plan*, starring “The Rock,” Dwayne Johnson, playing superstar quarterback Joe Kingston. A narcissistic, personable

and successful athlete and bachelor, his world is shaken when an eight year old girl, Peyton (Madison Pettis), appears on his doorstep claiming to be his daughter. After it is revealed that Peyton is Joe's daughter, they begin to get to know each other. Peyton begins a round of probing questions, inquiring "What's the best thing that's ever happened to you?" Further revealing his insular world, Joe seems torn as to what trophy or accolade is most significant for him. As with most comedies exploiting the inability of the man as the primary caregiver, viewers see how Joe tries to feed Peyton with food to suit the diet and portion size of a football player. He bumbles through bedtimes stories. Finally, he forgets his daughter at a bar. Stepping in to fill the "maternal" role is Stella, played by Kyra Sedgwick. Although far from maternal, she, as his publicist, and, perhaps as a woman, knows how to play the part. Joe trades in his impractical sports car for a family vehicle, and the discussion at press conferences also centers on what a good dad he is. While the façade is intact, the reality is far from a success. Peyton overdoes Joe's Jacuzzi tub with bubble bath and Bedazzles his prized football, resulting in Joe throwing a temper tantrum: "It's all me. It's mine." While Joe has heretofore been successful at maintaining the carefully constructed illusion that Stella has put into play, another female must step in to cause Joe to evolve. Peyton's ballerina teacher, Monique (Roselyn Sanchez) isn't impressed with Joe's all-star status, even when he points out, "I have a whole team, a whole city depending on me." For she counters, "You have a little girl depending on you." Monique asserts that in general "...mothers are smarter, kinder, and better at just about everything," but she concedes that she "...wouldn't underestimate the power of the father." True to form, Joe learns his lesson and wins the girl (both Peyton and Monique), and the final scene reinforces traditional family structure, with all

three engaging in a sing-a-long to Elvis. Without feminine intervention, Joe's pa/maternity would be in name only.

The sequel to 1987's *Three Men and a Baby* was 1990's *Three Men and a Little Lady*. While most people think of the aforementioned movie as the epitome of masculine maternity, I want to look at the conclusion of this series as I think it says more about the concept of men as mothers, forming a conclusive end to the initial tale. In the first film, a baby, fathered unknowingly by one of the three men (Jack, played by Ted Danson), is left on their doorstep. The comic element comes from watching Peter (Tom Selleck) and Michael (Steve Guttenberg) try and figure out how to care for this infant until the mother (Sylvia, played by Nancy Travis) decides to return for her, or Jack comes home from his film shoot in Turkey. At film's end, the mother does return to take the baby back but realizes she can't raise her on her own. The men, exhibiting attachment and showing care for the infant for this extended period of time, function in more of a maternal role than the biological mother and find the only thing to do is to ask Sylvia and the baby to move in with them.

Three Men and a Little Lady picks up where the first movie left off; only five years have passed. All four parties, the three men and the one woman, function as equal caregivers in the shared home. While this seems to work for the parties involved, society, in the form of pre-school teachers, other children, other suitors and Sylvia's mother, steps in. This eclectic family dynamic isn't the way a real family should be. When Sylvia's boyfriend, Edward (Christopher Cazenove) tries to get her to go to England to perform in a play he is directing, she protests, "My family is here." Her beau retorts, "Your roommates are here." Everything about their family structure is unconventional. Sylvia

doesn't embody the traditional feminine maternal. There is a running gag in this film regarding everything Sylvia attempts to cook. Not only that, but she left Mary on a doorstep when she was an infant. The three men, Peter, Michael and Jack, are also unconventional men. They all love Mary (Robin Weisman) as if, individually, they had fathered her. Because they didn't but are happily placed in the role of caregiver, instead they all *mother* her. One of the most poignant scenes in the film involves a redo of a scene in the first film. In the original, the men sing the fussing baby to sleep with a rendition of "Goodnight Sweetheart." Here, they are the maternal figures as the biological mom is absent. In the sequel, the mother and grandmother look on, one with laughter and the latter with disapproval, as the three men again sing five-year old Mary to sleep, this time with an improvised rap song. The rub, as I mentioned, comes when this unconventional family is judged.

Sylvia realizes she does want tradition. When she informs the men that she will be marrying Edward and moving with Mary to England, the men struggle to recognize this decision as one in the family's best interests. Peter struggles the most, chafing at Sylvia's rationale that marrying Edward and "becoming" a traditional family is best for her, and for Mary. When Peter gives Edward a hard time, Sylvia calls Peter selfish. Peter asserts, "I didn't leave my baby on the doorstep when she was six months old." Sylvia's maternal capacity and judgment are called into play by masculine maternity. The real conflict in this comedy comes through Sylvia's pursuit of the traditional. She has sized up Edward as the man to help provide her with a father for Mary, neglecting the three male moms she has before her. Edward is truly a wolf in sheep's clothing, expostulating, "I'm sick of rearranging my life because of a child," and later telling

Mary, “Oh shut up, you little shit.” His intentions are suspect, especially when it is revealed to Sylvia, through Peter (through a series of comic mishaps), that Edward’s intentions are to ship Mary off to boarding school. While Edward might not “fit” into Sylvia’s imagined ideal traditional family structure, Peter does and will. Peter, with the help of his two cohorts, stalls an official wedding and steps in to function as a father that Sylvia needs for Mary. The conventional family unit is established once again and normalcy can be resumed.

In the most recent example of masculine maternity, viewers were witness to Eddie Murphy’s antics in the 2003 film, *Daddy Day Care*. In much the same way as *Mr. Mom* begins, Charlie (Eddie Murphy) loses his job. When his wife, Kim (Regina King), suggests she return to work, Charlie adamantly asserts, “No, I’m not going to be staying home with him.” The “him” in this instance is the couple’s son, Ben (Khamani Griffin). While Charlie had a career in advertising, it is Kim who stayed home to care for their young son. When Charlie can’t find a job after weeks of searching, Kim takes on the role of breadwinner with ease (again, much like Caroline in *Mr. Mom*). Charlie’s best friend, Phil (Jeff Garlin), who also lost his job, maintains of their status, “We are worthless failures.” Because they aren’t functioning in their traditional role as breadwinner and are left tending their children, their identity is compromised, in their eyes. While sitting at the playground with their children, Charlie has an epiphany. After listening to the other mothers gripe about Chapman, the rigid, expensive and seemingly only alternative to childcare, Charlie gets the bright idea of opening his own daycare center in his home. This is met with much derision and cynicism from all parties involved. His wife, although the most supportive of all the comedy wives discussed so far, asks, “What are

you going to do when you get a real job?” The mothers who come to sign up their children, after realizing the child care providers will be Charlie and Phil, assert, “It’s unnatural...it’s hinky.” The men are even called “sickos.” Charlie asks the throng of women, “[C]an’t women do what men do and men do what women do?” Although he does enroll some students for his child care services, even Phil wonders what they are doing. He states, “We don’t know anything. We’re not even good parents.” In spite of Phil’s initial concerns, the two men give it a go. Phil learns that his singing and guitar playing are great ways to calm the kids down. Charlie figures out he can’t feed them whatever they want (especially not sugar) and institutes a healthy menu and a schedule. The men put on puppet shows, stage skits, color and listen to the children about what they want to do and learn. Interestingly enough, the men learn more about the children they care for, and their own children in the process, than the children’s own parents. The men teach one overly shy child to socialize, a little girl to read, Phil’s son to potty and one of the ruder children manners. The men mother and succeed in caring for and teaching the children in ways their own parents can’t. Initially, rote scatological humor and typical Eddie Murphy hysterics are featured, but all in all, the film portrays men in mothering roles as a success.

Despite their success, the men still don’t see themselves as fulfilled. Charlie and Phil are judged by a fellow employee and father of one of the children whom they care for. When Bruce (Kevin Nealon) finds out the two men run the daycare center, he laughs, “You’re wiping boogers for a living. Losers!” Even Charlie discounts the importance of his job. Charlie tells Ben, “Back when I had a real job....” Because Charlie’s position is rooted in the home, I’m arguing he is unfulfilled. He doesn’t “fit” in

this sphere, and so when Charlie's real job does offer his position back, he abandons the children and the daycare to assume what he feels to be his rightful place back at the agency. After sitting through a meeting where the company is set to push sugar cereals and after finding one of Ben's pictures in his stack of papers, Charlie realizes where he belongs. He tells his co-workers, "My kid...My kid is the most important thing." He leaves his job and returns home. It is here that Charlie turns his "mothering" into a true entrepreneurship, opening "Daddy Day Care" and moving it outside of the home. True, the interest and the enrollment skyrocketed after parents saw the success the men had with the children, but the implicit message is the men are different outside of the home in the business sphere versus how they might be perceived in the realm of the household. Although their function in both atmospheres is intrinsically the same, the perception changes with the shift in locale. When the men mother in the home, it is "hinky;" when they run and supervise a business engaging in the same behavior and activity, it is acceptable.

So far, all of the films I've discussed show a biological parent taking on the primary caregiver role. Usually this is met with disastrous consequences or, if it is somehow successful, some version of "tradition" is restored by film's end.³⁰ What happens when there is no biological tie and a man is left in charge of the children in a primary caregiver role? While I discussed the success of this concept in the realm of the television sitcom, big-budget Hollywood films offer another interpretation. In much the same way as the biological fathers are treated when they step into a mothering role, so,

³⁰ I have bandied about "traditional" referencing to family structure throughout this section. While the notion of "traditional" is being revisited, the concept of a male breadwinner, female caregiver in an exclusively heterosexual union is still the norm. While many might want to reject this position, and while many derivatives of this basic equation may exist, for my purposes, I'm using "traditional" to refer to this family unit.

too, are the men who assume this care-giving role. It is important for the “traditional” order to be maintained and restored. Also, the woman dominates the home. Her rule is law. These main themes play out in three films released between 1999-2005: *Big Daddy*, *Are We There Yet*, and *The Pacifier*.

Adam Sandler is an unlikely father, and an even more unlikely mother in the film *Big Daddy*. When viewers are first introduced to his character, Sonny Koufax, we see a man who spends his days sleeping, playing video games and living on money from a settlement as a result of a cab running over his foot. When Sonny’s father calls him, he even decries, “You still act like you’re six!” When Julian, played by Dylan Sprouse, is left on his doorstep, Sonny must parent. Biologically, Julian belongs to Sonny’s roommate, Kevin Gerrity (Jon Stewart), but Kevin is away on business in China. Much like *Three Men and a Baby*, the roommate is left to fend for himself. Julian comes with a letter from his mother, reading, “I can’t be his mother anymore.”³¹ Although Sonny calls his father for advice and is told he will be a terrible father and Sonny tells Julian, “I ain’t a good father,” he does recognize that perhaps he can do this. He explains to Julian how dads can really “screw you up” and tells the child that he will be different. Sonny pontificates to Julian: “Real dads aren’t always that great....I don’t want to control you....You do whatever you want to do and I’ll show you some cool shit along the way.”

³² Pursuant to this, Sonny tells his friends that he is instituting a new school of child-

³¹ This concept of selective mothering after giving birth to a child, or mothering when one decides to mother and viewing motherhood as a job one can hop in and out of, is something I will touch on in Chapter Three. It is interesting to note here, however, how selective mothering comes up in conjunction with male maternity, operating as a sort of foil to this behavior. Consider the situation in *Three Men and a Baby* and here, with *Big Daddy*.

³² Although the term used throughout this film is “father” and “dad,” as I mentioned in Chapter One, I am interested in not only the semantic relationship between the terms “dad” and “father” and “mom” and “mother” but also the behavior each term represents. Because “mom” typically represents primary

raising where he believes he should “give the kids options instead of orders.” He allows Julian to change his name to Frankenstein³³ and eat thirty packets of catsup, all because that is what the child *wants* to do. While this laissez-faire style of parenting isn’t new and something that Sonny’s persona would logically follow, it is society again that questions the normalcy and structure established by the dominant male in the home. Here, when Julian starts school, Sonny gets chastised by Julian’s teacher. It is when the outside world comes into play that both Sonny and Julian’s behavior changes to suit the parameters of tradition; Sonny’s tenet of giving options instead of orders is abandoned for a more rigid parenting style. Although Sonny does conform, it isn’t enough for he isn’t biologically linked to Julian.

When Child Protective Services takes Julian away, Sonny is forced to fight for the child. At the court hearing, Kevin comes back in time to claim the child and take custody, but it is Sonny who is the father/mother and whom the child recognizes as such. By film’s end, however, as is true in most of these films, the traditional order is reestablished. Time has elapsed since the court scene and viewers now see Sonny married with his own biological child. Kevin has married long time girlfriend, Corinne (Leslie Mann), and there is a poignant scene where Julian looks at her and calls her “Mommy.” The family unit is established and in play, and although Sonny formerly functioned in the mother/father role, his place has been usurped, reaffirming the necessity of maintaining traditional family order.

caregiver and the work involved in such an endeavor, I am interpreting Sonny’s behavior as mothering although semantically he would logically recognize himself as male and thus his performance as fathering.
³³ Perhaps Julian’s name merits mentioning if only for the irony therein. If Julian is Sonny’s “creation” and Julian is “creating” a new school, the name change might be read as symbolic, and highly humorous.

Not only is maintaining the traditional family unit important, but it is also important to recognize that in the male/female hierarchy, the woman has dominance over the children. This theme is enforced in the 2005 comedy, *Are We There Yet?* In this film, Kevin and Lindsey (played by Philip Bolden and Aleisha Allen, respectively) are determined to keep potential suitors away from their newly divorced mother, Suzanne (played by Nia Long). By and large, the two children succeed, that is until Nick (Ice Cube) comes along. When Nick first sees Suzanne, he is smitten, but when he realizes she has children, he quickly complains to his friend, “She’s a breeder. Two of ‘em.” He observes that children are “...like cockroaches ‘cept you can’t squish ‘em.” Despite the fact that Nick dislikes children and the children call Nick “the enemy,” they both persist in their mission, Nick to obtain the affection of Suzanne and Lindsey and Kevin to get rid of Nick. When the children’s biological father can’t take them as promised and Suzanne has a big company shindig to promote, Nick offers to take the children and assume responsibility for them so she won’t have to worry. She consents and surrenders her primary status, if only temporarily.

Nick truly puts in the work that earns him, if only momentarily, primary caregiver status. The children destroy his car (his “baby” initially) and test the bounds of his responsibility, but he persists and sacrifices. When the children hop a train to get to their biological father’s house, Nick hops on a horse and rides along beside, hoping to rescue them. When he does find the children, he sees them staring into a window where they see their father with his new partner and baby. Instead of getting angry, Nick immediately nurtures, saying, “It’s a shame that anybody can call themselves a father, but he’s the failure, not you.” The relationship between Nick and the two children shifts and

Nick becomes counselor and advisor, albeit with a lot of trial and error. Kevin laments, “We are a lot of trouble. That’s why our daddy doesn’t want to be with us.” Their biological father’s rejection is soon forgotten as they realize Nick DOES want to be with them. Although he recognizes himself as an imperfect caregiver, the children counsel him, saying, “You have to get experience There are books you can read, too.” As seen before, the man falters when thrust into the role of primary caregiver. There is much mayhem; the children cause an accident, burn up Nick’s vehicle, and end up being abducted by a truck driver who thinks he is saving them from a kidnapper, Nick.

What is fascinating is how Nick is committed to his role of nurturing and caring for these children who, in this instance, aren’t his own. When the truck driver snatches the children, Nick shouts, “Bring me back my kids.” “My” is of particular importance here because in the absence of a reliable father figure and a maternal presence, Nick has become their world. He is representative of masculine maternity. When the children do arrive and the mother sees the disastrous entrance he and the children make, she chastises and rejects him. Nick has brought her children back, but it wasn’t her way. The catastrophe that the children endured, the lessons learned and the evolution of their behavior are inconsequential. What matters is the way the children are presented and manner by which her rules are followed. The male is suspect because his way is not hers. It is only when he apologizes and says goodbye to the children, humbled and compliant before the female, that circumstances shift. Suzanne comes to forgive and accept Nick’s repentance, both when she sees the transformative quality he had on the children and when she realizes that her traditional family unit can be reestablished with the presence of

Nick. Instead of usurping her role, he will be subsumed under her, taking on the figure of father and, perhaps, husband.³⁴

The Pacifier (2005) also shows what happens when a man is thrust into the role of primary caregiver. Here, Shane Wolfe (Vin Diesel), a Navy SEAL, is given the task to protect the kids of a dead scientist while the mother must go retrieve a mysterious safe deposit box the dead scientist/father left behind. Wolfe's approach to the children at first is wholly masculine. He inquires, "Is there anyone here who understands the meaning of the word discipline?" He uses brute strength and intimidation tactics to whip the children into shape. When force doesn't work, he slowly merges his bravado with the intricacies and nuances of nurturing. In one scene, Wolfe's Navy SEAL ammunition belt becomes a receptacle for juice and bottles. In another, he drives a minivan with "World's Greatest Mother" on the back. These two worlds collide and merge. It isn't long before he is functioning in the role of the children's mother, going so far as to step in as "Den Mother" to the little girl's Girl Scout Troop. Although these worlds do merge, it isn't seamless. The eldest daughter declares, "You're not my dad...we hate you and you hate us."

But when Wolfe nurtures instead of dictates, when he embodies primary caregiver status, he wins them over. He finally tells the children, "You listen to me and I'll listen to you, too." He nurtures the oldest boy, encouraging him to perform in a play if that is what he longs to do. He reads stories and sings songs to the youngest children. He teaches the eldest daughter how to drive and the middle daughter self-defense. He brings

³⁴ It is safe to say this is the ultimate goal as the sequel to this film, *Are We Done Yet?* (2007), picks up where this film left off, with the family moving from the city to the country. Suzanne is now pregnant with Nick's child and they buy a fixer-upper. Nick's function, in this film, is to exert his masculine ability in restructuring the shell of a home while Suzanne reestablishes her maternal function that was somewhat abandoned in the first film.

to the table the skills he does have, but presents them through a maternal guise. Wolfe is successful in creating and establishing order, resulting in children who are fully functioning and thriving. This order can't last, though, for the domestic sphere is not the realm of the man. The mother, Julie Plummer (Faith Ford), sweeps back in to take over. Wolfe's role is not of nurturer, but simply pacifier. Just as a father often is said to be "babysitting" his kids, so, too, Wolfe fulfills a momentary role that has no permanent function.

Realistic Masculine Maternity

So men who create can be seen as horrific and the men who nurture and care can be the subject of ridicule, but men who sincerely embody masculine maternity pattern a new direction. These men are shown embracing a heretofore feminine status or what I call the functional primary. The functional primary is the one who steps in, nurtures, cares, enacts the being-there-ness, and puts in the work of the primary parent. The designation of functional primary is a status, however, that moves beyond gender.

At the far end of this masculine maternal spectrum is Morris Buttermaker (Billy Bob Thornton), coach to the *Bad News Bears* (2005). Buttermaker is a former professional ball player and, incidentally, an alcoholic. He is recruited to take over a team of boys who possess little, if any, skill at little league baseball. When Liz Whitewood (Marcia Gay Harden), recruiter and one of the mothers, states, "It's a shame none of the fathers could be here," viewers know that these boys have been abandoned, not only by a sport that values achievement and winning, but by parents who value the same. As the boys are introduced, it is evident that Buttermaker, with all of his flaws, is the perfect role model and teacher for these left-behind kids. Thornton's character allows

the boys to get in a pesticide fight (his profession by day) and fix him martinis, and he encourages the kids to lie to their parents. What is important here is not so much what he does but what he doesn't do; he doesn't leave.

Although no parents are present, he stays and sticks it out with the kids. When they finally do start to exhibit some skill and talent, the parents come out to see the children, but only to offer superficial cheers. It is Buttermaker who has the staying power. The female teammate, interesting enough, also serves as a lesson to Buttermaker. Amanda (Sammi Kane Kraft) is a skilled pitcher whom he recruits to bring luster to the team. Incidentally, she is also the daughter of one of his old girlfriends; Amanda is a little girl who sees Buttermaker as a father-figure. Although he rejects that position, he later comes to her and nurtures her, pulling her out of the winning game for the season so she won't damage her already bruised pitching arm. Instead of a barking, no-holds-barred coach, he is a counselor and friend, encouraging the team to do their best and giving them all an equal shot. When Liz sees that Buttermaker is allowing them all to play equally, she is outraged and inquires what he is doing, stating that her son wants to win. Buttermaker, outraged, asks her how she would know. He states, "When do you see him? Between basket-weaving and ballet?" Even Buttermaker, a washed up professional ball-player, alcoholic and loner, is a better "mother" than the real one. He calls her on the mat, further stating, "Maybe somebody should tell you how to raise your son." This incident, reflective of Peter's chastisement of Sylvia in *Three Men and a Little Lady*, exhibits how the masculine maternal battles with the feminine maternal. Although in *Three Men and a Little Lady* the traditional family order won out, here the outcome is more open-ended. True, Buttermaker is not a parent or a parental figure to

these boys, so his authority carries less weight. Nevertheless, he does exhibit the rub that takes place between the two genders in terms of care giving. Since this is a comedy as well, less stock can be put in his parting shot.

Interestingly, one genre that tackles masculine mothers as real and functioning beings, and does so with aplomb, is children's literature. I first came to this topic through sitting with my oldest son at a production of *Seussical: The Musical*. As the lights went down in the theatre, I was astounded by the very big, very grey and very male Horton the elephant sitting atop a nest of eggs. When I went back to reread Horton Hatches the Egg, first published in 1940, I was shocked by the portrayal not only of male maternity, but female abandonment as well (a topic I'll turn to in Chapter Three).

The story of Horton begins with Mayzie, "a lazy bird hatching an egg" (95). Readers are given Mayzie's opinion of motherhood through her own words:

I'm tired and I'm bored
And I've kinks in my leg
From sitting, just sitting here day after day.
It's *work!* How I hate it!
I'd much rather play!
I'd take a vacation, fly off for a rest
If I could find *someone* to stay on my nest!
If I could find someone, I'd fly away—free.... (95)

Mayzie realizes the sheer prospect of getting a child here is work and equates removal from this situation as somewhat freeing.³⁵ When she sees Horton walk by, she convinces

³⁵ It is impossible not to see a plethora of women in Mayzie's statement, from Edna Pontellier to Britney Spears. I will discuss the desire to free oneself from maternity more in Chapter Three.

him to take on her role, even though, as he says, “*Why, of all the silly things! I haven’t feathers and I haven’t wings*” (97). Physically, he doesn’t suit the part, but he plays the role anyway. Through rain and snow, being stalked by hunters, braving an ocean trip and being sold to the circus, Horton stays on the egg, continually chanting: “I meant what I said/And I said what I meant.../An elephant’s faithful/One hundred per cent” (110)! While he admits sitting on the egg isn’t much fun, he knows, “No matter WHAT happens,/ This egg must be tended” (116). Meanwhile, readers see Mayzie “...having such fun, such a wonderful rest,/ Decided she’d NEVER go back to her nest” (108)! The climax of the story comes when Mayzie flies by the circus and decides to go in only to find Horton there. Soon after, the egg he has sat on for “fifty-one weeks” hatches and Horton cries out, “My EGG! WHY, IT’S HATCHNG” (138)! Mayzie cries out that it is hers, but the resulting offspring isn’t a bird, but an elephant-bird with ears, a trunk and a tail. We are left with the crowd shouting: “MY WORD! *It’s something brand new!...And it should be, it should be, it SHOULD be like that! Because Horton was faithful! He sat and he sat*” (145)! This revelation of ma/paternity equating to the work that is done is one that I mentioned in Chapter One. The stick-to-it-iveness makes the parent here, makes Horton the primary caregiver.³⁶

Children’s literature and film are rich with these images. In *Finding Nemo* (2003), Nemo is raised by his father, Marlin, after his mother is eaten by a predatory fish. Stories like *Hansel and Gretel* and *Cinderella* show children left in the primary care of their father. All is well until the introduction of a stepmother who is portrayed as the

³⁶ I should also mention here the 2005 children’s book, *And Tango Makes Three*, written by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson. This story is based on the true story of penguins Roy and Silo located at the New York Central Park Zoo. It tells of the nurturing and protecting of first a rock (an imagined egg) and then a real egg by the same-sex penguins. This book, because it presented same-sex “parents,” was banned multiple years after its release.

impediment to the family units' happy existence. In the tale of *Pinocchio* (the Disney version), Geppetto carves a little wooden boy puppet and wishes upon a star that he will become a real boy. He does. The father, in this story, is the caregiver, but many forget the character of The Blue Fairy. She is the one who grants life to the inanimate wooden object. While many remember Pinocchio as a pivotal example of male maternity, it is still mediated by a woman.

Even in cases that seem to illustrate a negative feminine presence, often the feminine is given primacy over the masculine. Consider the story featured in the May 17, 2010 issue of *People* magazine entitled "A Father's Fight to Find His Baby." Here readers are told of 27 year-old Brandon Henry, a man who found out his girlfriend was expecting their child. Although shocked, Henry was eager to step into the fatherhood role. After nine months of anticipating the arrival of his child, Henry was shocked to receive a phone call from his girlfriend, Stephanie Chavarria, informing him their baby had strangled on the umbilical cord and died. She, however, was lying. She had never been to the hospital where she claimed to have delivered the baby, so, encouraged by his family to do so, Henry contacted the authorities. Chavarria revealed that she had gone to Italy with her parents and had the baby there, leaving the infant at a church. While the U.S. police couldn't help Henry as no crime had been committed, Henry devoted himself to finding his child. After seven months of waiting, filling out paperwork, and proving his merit, Brandon Henry was reunited with his three-month-old son whom he had never before met. Henry states: "You know how mothers have that bond with their kid: I had the same thing" (Smolowe and Gossman 96). Although Henry has primary responsibility for the child, Chavarria is said to have visited the baby twice and often calls every day.

Sadly, what was asked of Henry was much more than was asked of Chavarria. Henry reiterates that “He [the child, Pietro/Peter] was worth all the wait and the pain and the suffering. He’s a part of me” (96). Mimicking the language of childbirth and the extensive waiting process, Henry reclaimed his child, illustrating a masculine push to embody maternity and a very real capability to enact it.

Earlier I mentioned the possibility of uterus transplants and the possibility of men giving birth. This fictional sounding, real-life scenario is best illustrated with the controversy surround Thomas Beatie, “The Pregnant Man.” Beatie was born a biological female, but had sex-reassignment surgery and is legally deemed a male. In an article entitled “Labor of Love” posted in the March 26, 2008 version of *The Advocate*, Beatie writes, “I decided to have chest reconstruction and testosterone therapy but kept my reproductive rights. Wanting to have a biological child is neither a male nor female desire, but a human desire.” Readers learn that Beatie married a woman who, through a battle with severe endometriosis and subsequent hysterectomy, is unable to carry a child. He decided to then stop taking testosterone injections twice a month and see if his menstrual cycle would return. It did. Through a home insemination of anonymous sperm, Beatie became pregnant, but it wasn’t without complications. He lost his right fallopian tube due to a first ectopic pregnancy with triplets. Doctors refused to help him. Friends laughed. He even tells of his brother who, on hearing of the loss of his triplets, said, “It’s a good thing that happened. Who knows what kind of monster it would have been.”

Beatie reflects on his status as pregnant man:

How does it feel to be a pregnant man? Incredible. Despite the fact that my belly is growing with a new life inside me, I am stable and confident

being the man that I am. In a technical sense I see myself as my own surrogate, though my gender identity as male is constant. To Nancy, I am her husband carrying our child—I am so lucky to have such a loving, supportive wife. I will be my daughter's father, and Nancy will be her mother. We will be a family....Our situation ultimately will ask everyone to embrace the gamut of human possibility and to define for themselves what is normal.

Beatie delivered a healthy baby girl and yet another child in the summer of 2009. His experience has caused much consternation in the public eye. Some decry him as a woman no matter what. Others consider this a false story, claiming he isn't really a man so his pregnancy doesn't "count" per se. Beatie's appearances on *Oprah*, the Discovery Channel, within the pages of *People*, and in an interview with Barbara Walters on *20/20*, gave him credence and a forum to explore ideas of gender, pregnancy, and parenthood that many seem unwilling to explore. These foundational, rigid concepts seem just that, unwilling to be up for redefinition, but by this couple entering the public forum, the dialogue is ultimately created. Although transgender individuals having babies isn't a new thing, it isn't a public thing. The idea of a man needing to be a parent isn't often accepted with the same credence as a woman's desire. This might be another way in which Beatie's role as pregnant man is undermined; his "female parts" per se give him that feminine desire, or this is how many have reacted and responded to him.

Occasionally, literature will explore the functionality of men in a primary caregiving role and the very real desire to be a parent. Judy Markey's book, *The Daddy Clock* (1998), introduces us to 44 year-old Charlie Feldman, a sportswriter who more

than anything is consumed with his biological clock. Markey writes, “Nobody ever talks about the guy biological clock, but it was ticking loud and clear in me. It had been for years. And I did not have a lot of time left. Not at forty-four. Nor did I have a lot of options” (9). When he meets fellow writer, Lacy Gazzar, they form a friendship, and more, but Lacy doesn’t want any more children. She has just sent her daughter off to college and is ready to be free, but when she becomes pregnant, and it might be Charlie’s, she offers a diatribe about the possibility of solving both their problems, with Charlie raising the baby, solo, no matter what. She asserts, “DNA isn’t the answer. The answer is in you—in your heart. Not in some test tube. Parenting has nothing to do with biology...in real life, once you fall for a kid, that’s *your* kid. I’m telling you, it’s about connection—about bonds, not biology” (148). While Charlie relents and after a complex legal agreement takes full responsibility for the baby, we find him realizing, “...for the first time in twenty-five years, my job was not my life. My life was completely defined by the needs and the presence of Jake. I *had* a job. I *was* a dad” (239). Lacy has abdicated her primary role, but by novel’s end, four months after Jake’s birth, she returns, alluding to the fact that she can’t do it; she can’t “abandon” Jake. The stereotypical reunion of the two, or three, is again the resolution of the traditional family unit, no matter how subversive the initial jaunt through the plot might appear. Traditional family order is not quite restored, but the last line, “...Lacy Gazzar stepped over the threshold” (261), conjures all sorts of happily-ever-after images for the reader, especially since it is Charlie’s threshold. Without assuming more about the plot than is provided, it is not a stretch to imagine a neat family unit being concocted come novel’s end.

What happens when the neat family unit is divided, through divorce, and the man seeks to be the primary caregiver? Perhaps the best illustration of this is the 1979 film *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep play Ted and Joanna, a couple who just can't make it work anymore. Joanna feels overwhelmed by the clutches of motherhood and family. The fear in her voice is palpable when she begs of Ted, "Don't make me go in there," unable to even return to their apartment. She asserts to him of their son, Billy, "He's better off without me." While Ted is left in a state of confusion, he seeks answers from her friends. Joanna's friend tries to explain to him that it took a lot of courage for her to leave. Ted retorts, "How much courage does it take to walk out on your kid?" Here, in this dynamic, the masculine is put in a judgmental role, having the higher hand. Although looking at the context of this film, one can see the empathetic response Joanna's decision would likely draw from a feminine/feminist crowd who decidedly would relate to her assertion that she needed to find something interesting to do, a confession she admits in a letter to Billy. What follows in the film's narrative trajectory is the typical chaos left in the wake of Ted trying to maintain a successful job, a happy home and a well-nurtured child. In one scene where he tries to make breakfast, Ted ruins the French toast, burning it and his hand in removing the skillet from the stove. What are often typical elements of a befuddled man in the role of caregiver eliciting a comic response, here the result is devastating, tragic, and sadly, realistic. Ted not only struggles in the home sphere, but at work as well. Ted's boss pointedly maintains, "I can't be concerned about you worrying about a kid with a running nose." Ted comes to terms with the reality of his situation and comes to embody the role into which he has been thrust. He removes every trace of Joanna from the apartment, throwing away

tampons, make-up, books, pictures, and more in an effort to eradicate her, specifically, and the feminine, generally. With this, Billy and Ted move into a clearly defined relationship built on animosity for the situation. One scene, typical of their interaction:

Billy: “I hate you.”

Ted: “I hate you right back you little shit.”

Billy: “I want my mommy.”

Ted: “I’m all you’ve got.”

While Ted’s effort to supplant Joanna is not complete, he does engage in the work required. Initially, though no words are spoken, Billy and Ted communicate by eating doughnuts together and reading at the kitchen table together (Ted, the paper, Billy, the comics). This interaction gradually evolves to conversation where the two share about their day, speaking, laughing and engaging wholeheartedly.

The conflict for the two returns in the form of the feminine; Joanna, after a 15 month absence, returns and wants her son back. Joanna’s argument? “I’m his mother,” she asserts, twice. Ted presents the fundamental question: “What law is it that says that a woman is a better parent simply by virtue of her sex?” In an adept argument, Ted articulates the work required to make a good parent—constancy, patience, listening to the child, pretending to listen to the child, love— dismantling the biology of the equation. Ted loses the custody battle, winning only visitation. In a repetition of an earlier scene, viewers are shown Ted and Billy in the kitchen with the previously fumbled routine down pat. When Joanna arrives to pick up Billy, she concedes, “I came here to take my son home and I realized he is home.” Although the man, Ted, is not legally allowed primary

custody/primary caregiver status, the feminine, Joanna, recognizes her lack. Billy stays with Ted in a realistic depiction of masculine maternity. It must be noted, however, that this is only achieved at the bidding of the feminine. Although Ted does the work, it is Joanna who endows him with the right to assume the maternal cloak.³⁷

It seems that as far as realistic masculine maternity goes and the portrayal it is given in film and literature, the nature of this situation relies on mostly a three-fold trend. Essentially the parent primary abdicates her role through three means: divorce, abandonment (changed mind), or her death.³⁸ This can be either through circumstance or choice, but essentially there must be a “death of the mother,” whether figurative or literal, to allow for the possibility of masculine maternity as fashioned in a real sense, lacking in horrific or comedic undertones.

While *Kramer vs. Kramer* looks at how divorce can sometimes cause a woman to step down from her role as parent primary, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) examines another aspect of this abdication. In this film based on the real life situation of Chris Gardner, viewers are met with a man who is determined not to be like his own father. Will Smith plays Gardner, a man who first met his own father when he was in his twenties. Gardner and his wife, Linda (played by Thandie Newton), struggle to make ends meet. For Linda, this work, the double shifts of her financially remunerative job and the work of maternity, becomes too much. Much like Joanna in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, she

³⁷ Almost thirty years later, the masculine role of care-giving is still mediated by the feminine, but in a wholly different manner. While in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, Ted was able to go at it alone, in 2008's *Definitely, Maybe*, the focus is again on reestablishing a feminine presence for the child, daughter Maya (played by Abigail Breslin). The main character, Will (played by Ryan Reynolds), has gone through a divorce and shares custody (he sees her twice a week). The cinematic narrative focuses primarily on reconnecting Will with the one that got away, his lost love, with the help of his daughter. Again, the “traditional” family unit seems in play at film's end, visually realizing the man-woman-child triad.

³⁸ It is difficult to focus solely on the masculine part of the equation, subsuming the feminine, but for focus and argument, the abdication of maternal roles will be centered on exclusively in Chapter Three.

becomes incapable of seeing outside of herself. She tells Chris early on in the film, “I don’t care,” referring to her desire to leave their son, Christopher, with the husband. An altercation between the two ensues, with Gardner asserting, “Don’t you ever take my son away from me,” and “Christopher stays with me, he’s living with me.” Linda inherently knows this to be true, but recognizes her role, the one she has assumed and the one society believes she should embody, and maintains to Gardner, “He should be with his mom.” Whether he should or not is of no consequence as Gardner pointedly claims, “You know you can’t take care of him.” While it hasn’t yet been revealed what kind of mother or father either party is, this is assumed as fact by both parents. Lisa goes to New York to live with her sister and Gardner takes on the role of parent primary. The film depicts the struggles of a father who becomes homeless trying to make a home for his son. Gardner attempts to sell bone density machines during the day, but finds he can’t make a return on his initial investment. Subsequently, Gardner loses his home, but keeps his spirit upbeat and imagines a fantastical world for his son, sheltering him from the reality of their situation. Gardner imagines the bone density machines as time machines for his son at night, weaving stories for his child. When they take shelter in a bathroom stall, Gardner envisions it as a cave in which they seek shelter from the dinosaurs outside.³⁹ The fantasy world he weaves for his son is secondary to the real life work he puts in at Dean Witter, working his way up as top broker and securing a future for his family. Although he has to complete a rigorous internship with no pay, Gardner commits to the work and, eventually, succeeds. As I’ve reiterated throughout, the definition of

³⁹ Another film that shows a father weaving stories for his son to shelter him from reality is the 1997 work *Life Is Beautiful*. Here the father and son are prisoners in a concentration camp yet the father convinces the son that it is a game.

parent primary, whether masculine or feminine, depends on punching the clock. One must put in the work.

A more contemporary example of a father, realistically portrayed and given primary responsibility, is 2004's *Jersey Girl*. Although comedic to a degree, the realistic and dramatic structure played out here imbues this film with a plot more suited to realistic masculine maternity.⁴⁰ The same theme is here as in the comedies, but the approach differs. Ollie Trinke, played by Ben Affleck, is bitter at losing his wife in childbirth and the fact that he has to raise his newborn girl, Gertie, by himself. Interestingly enough, we see a multi-generational family of men raising the little girl as Ollie's father also takes part in the nurturing of the little girl. Although Ollie has to learn to be a good parent, the emphasis isn't so much on the fact that he is a man, but rather the fact that he is struggling, like most parents, with the sidelining of the self in favor of the necessary nurture of one's young. Ollie lets his work consume him. When asked about the baby by his assistant, Ollie replies, "Forget about the baby. I just want to do my job." At one point, Ollie asks his father to see to the crying Gertie while he deals with a business call, telling his father that the call is important. His father, played in wonderful comic seriousness by George Carlin, states, "What could be more important than your kid crying?" It isn't until he loses his "professional" job that Ollie begins to master the domestic sphere. For Ollie, this revelation doesn't come easy. Although he gradually rises to the occasion as ma/parent, he belittles his role: "That's all I am now. I'm just your dad," he tells Gertie. Of course the feminine figure of Mia (Liv Tyler) steps in as

⁴⁰ Another recent example of a masculine primary caregiver by way of death is 2007's *Dan in Real Life*. The plot of this film centers more on the main character, Dan, finding love again rather than the parenting, nurturing and care-giving demanded of his children. One could argue, however, reestablishing the "traditional" family structure is one way, albeit the most common in cinematic depictions, this masculine maternity is mediated.

the maternal presence and the voice of reason. Although younger and childless, she is the sage. She admonishes Ollie, stating, “Like it or not, this is you...just accept who you are.” For Ollie, his identity is wrapped up in his job and he struggles to obtain the life he had. Through a series of epiphanies, Ollie comes to realize that he is “...just a guy who’d rather be playing in the dirt with his kid.” Instead of interviewing for a job in the city, he leaves to make his daughter’s play, realizing the value of the “job” he has and not the one he had. His lessons are ones we all learn, and we celebrate him as parent, as mother and father.

Biologically speaking, these men have to step into the primary parent role. The children in all three examples are theirs and, as part of a parental equation, one factor seemingly takes over in the absence of the other. This addition, or subtraction as it were, seem obvious. While that may be the case, and while we may see biology trump in these instances, men are depicted as assuming the role of primary caregiver even when biology isn’t at play, or especially when it isn’t a factor. For many men, they are thrust into this role as the non-biological parent working as the functional primary. Again, the male assumption of the primary parent role seems to come about through the death or abandonment of the mother.⁴¹ One work that deals with the exploration of the literal death of the mother is the novel, Silas Marner.

George Eliot’s 1861 work, Silas Marner, seems a bit out of place in what has so far been an exploration of more contemporary films and works dealing with masculinity and maternity. This novel, however, roots the idea as a very 19th century construction,

⁴¹ The short-lived series, *Kevin Hill*, featured a double rarity: a man (played by Taye Diggs) functioning as a primary caregiver/maternal figure while also exploring, albeit indirectly, the issue of race. Hill, a lawyer in the show, is given custody of his 10 month old cousin, Sarah, after her mother’s death. Only airing from 2004-2005, the show was cancelled in its first season.

yet one that persists well into the 21st century. In Eliot's work, we are introduced to Silas Marner, an outcast weaver who is, by natural description, very in touch with the feminine arts. We learn he heals through memories of his mother's remedies and creates whole fabric through thread. What Marner loves more than anything, however, is his gold. Eliot writes: "He loved the guineas best, but he would not change the silver—the crowns and half-crowns that were his own earnings, begotten by his labour; he loved them all....thought fondly of the guineas that were only half-earned by the work in his loom, as if they had been unborn children..." (19). It is interesting to note the language here: labour, love, children; although in a different context here, the verbiage is multi-layered. For Marner, the coins he buries under the floorboards and hoards are his family until Eppie comes along.

I said that I am going to reserve discussion about absent mothers (actually and symbolically) until Chapter Three, but a discussion of Molly merits mention in contrast to Marner's role in this novel. Molly is no longer a beautiful woman "as handsome as the best" (108) and is, instead, a slave to her opium addiction. She is physically present, at times, although we learn that the child she has with the wealthy Godfrey Cass is "accustomed to be[ing] left to itself for long hours without notice from its mother..." (111). It is a fit of revenge that prompts Molly to make the trip to Godfrey Cass, her secret husband: "This journey on New Year's Eve was a premeditated act of vengeance which she had kept in her heart ever since Godfrey, in a fit of passion, had told her he would sooner die than acknowledge her as his wife" (108). It isn't for care of her daughter and an effort to seek a better life for her, but readers also empathize, or are encouraged to momentarily empathize, with Molly when she is described as having

“lingering mother’s tenderness” (109), and it is this that keeps her from giving her infant to Godfrey for caregiving. Regardless, the drug wins out and Molly passes out in the snow on her way to Godfrey while the child toddles off and inside the home of Silas Marner. When Marner returns inside, he instantly sees “Gold!—his own gold—brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away” (112)! The child’s analogous nature and description to Marner’s beloved coins aren’t coincidental. The “soft yellow rings” of her hair mirror the beauty of the currency Marner treasures, but within paragraphs readers witness a shift toward the maternal.⁴² Marner, we are told, presses the crying child to him “...and almost unconsciously utter[s] sounds of hushing tenderness...” (113). Within the next hour, he feeds her and follows her around as she explores his home so she won’t hurt herself. The “unconscious” caregiving seems to designate a masculine imperative akin to the maternal one that is often bandied about (mother’s instinct). By contrast, however, “Silas’s dull bachelor mind” (113-14) takes some time to discern that her tears are also due in part to her wet boots. As Larry Shillock notes, “While mothering is a form of labor, and Silas has proven himself capable of extended bouts of work, he brings to the task little of what domestic ideology required” (34). This picture of male maternity isn’t perfect.

Another contrast established is that of the desired father figure, Silas Marner, and the actual biological father, Godfrey Cass. After Marner takes the child into town to report the occurrence, it is suggested by one of the women, Mrs. Kimble (who hesitates to take the child for fear of soiling her beautiful dress), that Marner pass off the child. She asserts, “I’ll tell one o’ the girls to fetch it” (117). In this community, the child is

⁴² Language of terms like “maternal” and “paternal” seem to reinforce the binary opposition I am eschewing. It should be noted, however, that a maternal response is one of nurture whereas the paternal response would be to solve the mystery of the girl’s arrival. Marner exhibits both.

characterized much like a possession. Marner reports, “No—no—I can’t part with it, I can’t let it go, . . . It’s come to me—I’ve a right to keep it” (117). Godfrey keeps his mouth shut and contemplates inwardly. Eliot writes of Godfrey, “Perhaps it would be just as happy in life without being owned by its father. . . is there any other reason wanted?—well, then, that the father would be much happier without owning the child” (122). Even later, Marner seems to only be able to convey that “. . . the child was come instead of the gold—that the gold had turned into the child” (124). Later, Marner tells Dolly Winthrop, “But she’ll be *my* little un, . . . She’ll be nobody else’s” (125). Although both men, and even the women, characterize the girl as a thing to be dealt with, the nuances of Marner’s speech, “I can’t part with it, I can’t let it go,” seem to indicate a passionate possession imbued with more than just ownership. The parallel to the gold, the desire to be solely responsible for her, indicates, perhaps, more a being of value rather than a thing of ownership. For Cass, however, ownership indicates a different responsibility. For him, biological ownership and private acknowledgement of his paternity dictate that he must provide. To meet his desires as well as his perceived notion of paternity, he determines he will “. . . see that it [the child] was well provided for. That was a father’s duty” (136).⁴³

Marner’s mothering is mediated by Dolly Winthrop, a “notable mother” (122) who guides Marner with her tutelage. She tells Marner, “I’ve seen men as are wonderful handy wi’ children. The men are awkward and contrairy mostly, God help ‘em—but when the drink’s out of ‘em, they aren’t unsensible, . . . so fiery and impatient. . .” (124). Marner seems to disrupt all these qualities. We are told when Marner takes the child (Eppie he names her) that, “Marner took her on his lap, trembling with an emotion

⁴³ Again we see a gendered breakdown of what labor is involved in fathering and mothering. One is about providing monetarily while the other is about providing nurture. It is my hope that this language can be restructured as both parts are integral, regardless of preconceived ideas about gendered responsibility.

mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life” (124). Dolly offers support but doesn’t take over the role of mother for Marner, and it is through his act of engaging in the behavior of nurturing that readers begin to witness the transformative quality of maternity for the masculine Marner. Whereas heretofore there was a parallel to Eppie and the gold, once Silas begins the nurturing and maternal undertaking of caring for the child he has an epiphany of sorts.

Unlike the gold which needed nothing, and must be worshipped in close-locked solitude—which was hidden away from the daylight, was deaf to the songs of birds and started to no human tones—Eppie was a creature of endless claims and ever-growing desires, seeking and loving sunshine, and living sounds, and living movements; making trial of everything, with trust in new joy, and stirring the human kindness in all eyes that looked at her. The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward... The gold had asked that he should sit weaving longer and longer, deafened and blinded more and more to all things except the monotony of his loom and the repetition of his web; but Eppie called him away from his weaving and made him think all its pauses a holiday, reawakening his senses with her fresh life, even to the old winter flies that came crawling forth in the early spring sunshine, and warming him into joy because she had joy. (127-28)

Further, we are told that as Eppie grows into her own, Marner, too, experiences a rebirth, a renaissance of spirit: "...his soul, long stupefied in a cold, narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness" (129). For Marner, who has "brought up an orphan child, and been father and mother to her" (142), he experiences as much growing up as the child he sought to rear.

The debate about what constitutes parentage, paternity, maternity, doesn't come until novel's end when Godfrey reveals that Eppie is his. Again, his language doesn't mirror nurturing and care but rather ownership and possession. He asserts, "But I've a *claim* on you, Eppie—the strongest of all claims. It's my duty, Marner, to *own* Eppie as my child, and provide for her. She is my own child...I have a *natural claim* on her that must stand before every other" (171, italics mine). For Marner, biology and claim offer no hold. He asserts, "Your coming now and saying 'I'm her father,' doesn't alter the feelings inside us. It's me she's been calling her father ever since she could say the word" (171). Eliot writes, "Godfrey, unqualified by experience to discern the pregnancy of Marner's simple words, felt rather angry again. It seemed to him that the weaver was very selfish (a judgment readily passed by those who have never tested their own power of sacrifice) to oppose what was undoubtedly for Eppie's welfare; and he felt himself called upon, for her sake, to assert his authority" (172). There are lots of interesting things in play here. For one, again the language conveys much within the situation. The "pregnancy" of Marner's words echoes the way in which his nurturing, through language and care, gave birth, symbolically, to Eppie. The fact that Godfrey can't comprehend this furthers the divide between these two factions. Secondly, the sacrifice that is called into play is ironic. The weaver undoubtedly sacrificed much of his own life in the care and

raising of Eppie, yet the generosity perceived by Godfrey is a sacrifice in his own mind of his financial remuneration. Godfrey still doesn't understand maternity, paternity or, one could argue, humanity. He only comprehends authority, control and dominance, what he tries to assert with Eppie and Marner. Nancy Lassiter, Godfrey's second wife, even joins the argument, asserting, "...there's a duty you owe to your lawful father" (174). Eppie ignores the language of duty, ownership and proprietary nature, knowing her duty is to the man who put in the work. Eppie declares, "I can't feel as I've got any father but one" (174), here meaning Silas Marner. The only sacrifice (if one could call it that) that Godfrey makes is accepting Eppie's pronouncement, keeping her parentage quiet, and offering to rectify the damage he's done in other ways, perhaps financially. For Eppie and for Silas, there is no confusion regarding what makes a family, and here we see a masculine example of maternity, fulfilling the work involved in caring for a child. Larry Shillock comments that Eliot's novel,

contests domestic ideology even as such an ideology is asserting its authority. A kind of gender critic "foremother," Eliot shows that raising a child to adulthood is not dependent on mothers or woman's nature and is actually a task that even an aging, hearing-impaired, mentally distracted, visually challenged, masculine miser can do. (33)

It is a success, as Eppie declares at novel's end, "I think nobody could be happier than we are" (183). Silas is a ma/pa-rent to Eppie, in every way that counts.⁴⁴

Abandonment of the child by the female primary is another occurrence that leaves the male holding the responsibility of being the functional primary for the child. The 1999 film, *The Cider House Rules*, explores this topic. Based on an adaptation of John

⁴⁴ For a modern twist on Silas Marner, see Craig Brewer's 2006 film, *Black Snake Moan*.

Irving's 1985 novel of the same name, this film explores two characters: Dr. Wilbur Larch (played by Michael Caine), the director of an orphanage and secret abortionist, and Homer Wells (played by Tobey Maguire), one of the orphans whom Dr. Larch trains in gynecological science. Although viewers are told Larch is a "caretaker to many, father of none," we are shown the pivotal relationship he has with Homer Wells. After Homer is adopted, twice, and subsequently returned both times, Larch assumes more of an involved care-giving role with Homer. Larch insists that a life should "be of use," so he shows Homer the way to care (in this instance as a doctor) for another person. Larch takes care to read to the orphans at night, and through the work Larch puts in, Homer learns what it means to have a male mother. Homer knows parenthood is defined by the work one does. He responds when asked why he doesn't want to search out his birth parents by asserting, "They never did the things parents are supposed to do." Homer, in fact, sees parenting through the actions of the doctor and, admittedly, the nurses of the orphanage. It is years later that Homer learns the extent of Dr. Larch's protective measures when he learns he never had a heart defect; instead, Larch swapped out x-rays to keep Homer from the war. Homer does leave the orphanage to explore the world on his own, but returns after Larch's death to take over the orphanage and the maternal/paternal duality that Larch kept in play.

Michael Caine returns in a film that showcases the idea of masculine maternity in the 2003 work, *Secondhand Lions*. Hub (played by Robert Duvall) and Garth (played by Caine) are two crotchety old men who make sport of shooting catfish, flying in their airplane at top speed past the radar gun, and scaring off traveling salesmen with guns shot from their front porch. These men are great uncles to Walter (played by Haley Joel

Osment) and are responsible for him when his mother, Mae (Kyra Sedgwick), drops him off for “two months tops” so she can go to court reporting school. Walter, who barely knows these men, runs away and finds out his mother lied and that she isn’t enrolled in school. After the men track the boy down, they bring him home, Hub telling Walter, “It ain’t our fault you got a lousy damn mother.” Walter, instead of rebelling against the situation, grows to embrace these men as his family. Hubb and Garth regale Walter with stories from their youth and what it was like for them to be young men in Africa.

Through these stories, Garth mainly shows Walter what it is to be a man and claim the life desired. When Hub grows ill, Walter implores, “I need you to stick around and be my uncle.” “Uncle” functions as the only name Hub has, yet he is a parent in function. We see this when Mae returns with Stan (Nicky Katt), the man she is going to marry and form a “real” family with (if only Walter will tell her where the hidden money and gold the uncles have squirreled away can be found). Nothing comes of the couple’s furtive search of the property, but she does take Walter away. While the men think of getting a lawyer to take him away from her, Garth acquiesces that “No judge is going to take a child away from its mother and give it to two old bachelor uncles.” Mae isn’t a completely selfish mother for she does respond to Walter’s plea: “Mom, do something for me for once. Do something that’s best for me.” She takes Walter back to Garth and Hub where Garth proclaims, “Welcome home.” The family unit is real and resumed upon Walter’s return.

What is interesting in the above two examples is the role of narrative in forming a relationship with a child. While simply telling stories to a child doesn’t make one a parent, it is a part of the process and work in “playing” one. It may be difficult to see

these men as mothers because our language evades and categorizes in such confining parameters. A mother is a woman, a father is a man, but is it that reductive? How do we define mother and father if we remove the constraints of sex? Certainly if we conclude biology doesn't necessarily make a parent, establishing that the work one puts in is a good start. We distinctly and implicitly know what it is to mother or what we mean when we point to an act as mothering (primary care, nurturing, feeding, fretting, etc.). The same can be said for fathering (discipline, rough-housing, play, etc.). Certain "work" seems more maternal than paternal, but why narrow these conventions? Couldn't maternal and paternal work be cross performed by either gender? And further, don't we need a new way of talking about this parenting work? I propose that another way of conceptualizing these acts of maternity might be through the notion of bi-ternity. One is a ma/pa-rent on multiple levels, not simply consigned because of one's gender.

The final example of a man stepping into the functional primary role due to abandonment is 2002's *About a Boy*. *About a Boy*, based on Nick Hornby's novel of the same name, presents another picture of realistic masculine maternity. Here, however, we aren't given a clear cut example as previously mentioned where the father is thrust into the role of primary caregiver. Instead, we see Hugh Grant playing Will, a character who only tries to date single mothers because they are "so grateful." It is only after encountering Marcus that Will assumes the role of parent. Marcus's mother Fiona, (played by Toni Collette), is manic depressive and attempts suicide. She doesn't understand Marcus's world, and despite her love for her son, she is emotionally and often physically absent. It is to Will that Marcus turns for guidance, and we as viewers see Will grow into a surrogate parent. He advises Marcus on music, clothing, and girls, and

most importantly, he tolerates, if not enjoys, Marcus's company in his home where Marcus comes to spend his time after school. It is through Will that Marcus's and Fiona's relationship is mediated. Will learns to care for Marcus because Marcus needs him. Although Will begins the film stating, "no man is an island," a quote he attributes to Jon Bon Jovi, he ends the film realizing that he may be an island but is inextricably linked to others, Marcus specifically, who comes to view him as a parental figure. And, in many ways, he is. He parents not only Marcus, but also Fiona. When she asks him if she is a bad mother, he tells her straight: "No, you're not a bad mother. You're just a barking lunatic." By injecting humor into her tragic worldview, Will helps Fiona move outside herself, enabling her to resume her responsibilities, at film's end, with Will a part of their lives but not as the male-female couple conventionally dictated. While Marcus is abandoned, emotionally and almost physically at the start of the narrative, viewers see the maternal resume in multiple guises at film's close.

While the third category of realistic maternity and the examples so far look at biological dads thrust into the primary caregiver role and men forced into performing primary caregiving tasks due to death or abandonment of the mother, what about the realistic masculine maternal imperative? While the maternal imperative is a given, what about the masculine desire to nurture, reproduce and care for a child?

The 2007 film, *Martian Child*, takes viewers through the perils of a widower,⁴⁵ David, (played by John Cusack), who meets a young boy, Dennis, a troubled child who

⁴⁵ In the book on which this film is based, the main character is a gay man. It is unclear why the screenplay establishes the parental figure as a widower. It is important to note that the analogous nature of masculine maternity and homosexuality is a red herring. Again, the linking of gender to sexual orientation to work done is a fallacy. Often there is an errant assumption that because a man exhibits nurturing behavior or acts in a way aligned, typically, with the feminine that he is inherently homosexual. This topic alone could merit singular exploration. I will return to this topic when discussing ABC's new sitcom, *Modern Family*.

believes he is from Mars. Although he and his wife were going through the adoptive process together, after her death David persists with it and is matched with Dennis (played by Bobby Coleman). His implicit need for a child continues, despite the lack of the feminine presence. David doesn't let his desire drive the interaction, though, and often considers his own ability to parent. He wonders if he is qualified to raise a child, but his wife's best friend Harlee (played by Amanda Peet) asserts, "Asking that question makes you more qualified than most." Even his sister Liz (played by Joan Cusack) questions a man's ability to adopt, considering, "Aren't single men like the bottom of the totem pole?" David makes compelling arguments himself, however, maintaining that he wants "to do something meaningful." Again, the focus isn't on *being* the parent but *doing* the parenting, or doing this meaningful thing. Although Dennis believes he is from another planet and embraces odd behavior in internalizing this belief, David slowly "normalizes" him, teaching him to play baseball and encouraging him to engage in a food fight, complete with smashing dishes in the process. David and Dennis grow together, slowly becoming whole. Essentially David's most compelling argument comes when he maintains, "I get the arguments against it and bringing another child into the world...How do you argue with the logic of loving one who's already here?" The two create a family, redefining what it is to be mother/father/child/family.

Sometimes the redefinition of a masculine mother is embodied not so much by the literal act of "mothering" a child, but rather the figurative act of mothering, and all that that particular word entails. Anne Tyler's novel, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, presents Ezra Tull who is strikingly maternal, especially in contrast to his mother, Pearl. Raising three children on her own, Pearl represents the maternal, but in a very flawed

way.⁴⁶ One might even argue that she is maternal in name only. Beck, the children's father, has abandoned the family, sending only sporadic letters. Pearl dismisses his usefulness in any capacity by noting, "They never asked about him. Didn't that show how little importance a father has? The invisible man. The absent presence" (20). If Beck is the "absent presence," Pearl is the present absence. She is uninvolved and unresponsive to her children, leaving Ezra to assume the mantle of nurturer. When Pearl is in the hospital, it is Ezra who comes to take care of her, not her daughter, Jenny. Pearl refers to Ezra as a "mother hen" about his restaurant, his figurative re-creation of the home he never had as "it was Ezra who had to hold them together" (24, 108). Ezra is a feeder, providing nourishment to people and his family in contrast to Pearl, a "nonfeeder" (159). Cody's girlfriend remarks to Cody that she "disliked motherly men. 'Always feeding, hovering' ... (132). These are the actions Ezra engages in, posing him as a "motherly" figure. Although as Paula Eckhard notes, Ezra is

[u]nable to unite his family, Ezra finds a sense of family and belonging in his community. He has genuine affection and concern for his neighbors and co-workers. He lovingly cares for Mrs. Scarlatti, his business partner, when she is dying from cancer. He fixes meals and hot cocoa for the Payson family and comforts them when Mr. Payson dies. Ezra generously gives to his community, and the love and concern are reciprocated. (42)

A mother to his community as well, Ezra exhibits natural maternal function. Eckhard continues, noting, "Like a concerned mother, Ezra serves those customers those foods he thinks are for their own good and not necessarily what they want" (43). Food becomes an acceptable medium through which Ezra can mediate his maternal care.

⁴⁶ Pearl's flawed maternity will be explored in Chapter Three.

Readers see Ezra's implicit maternity, dare I say his maternal instinct, come to the surface as he watches a child sleep. Ezra sees the child with "her head resting on the stainless steel arm of a chair," and we are told "it made Ezra wince" (118). He longs to place his coat under her head but stops short, fearful that he will awaken the girl. Moments later a woman bustles into the room, picks up the child and sits down, with the sleeping child cuddling closer to the woman. As Ezra watches, he is overcome with regret and longing; "So after all, Ezra could have put his coat beneath her head. He had missed an opportunity. It was like missing a train—or something more important, something that would never come again. There was no explanation for the grief that suddenly filled him" (119). What is the root cause of this grief? Is it his lack that he recognizes? For Ezra, the optimistic, persistent force in the Tull family, this seems his one moment of self-indulgence. What has he missed? Regardless, Ezra embodies the kind of work one associates with the maternal. He is berated and undervalued, but Ezra doesn't abandon (like Beck) or become cruel and angry (like Pearl), but rather persists with the work, the labor, of feeding his family, emotionally by pulling them together and physically with his culinary creations.

Beyond figurative representations of realistic maternity occur very real, very open desires of men to recreate. These are most poignantly and aptly displayed in Gail Godwin's novel, A Mother and Two Daughters. Readers are introduced to Stanley, a man with whom one of the daughters in the aforementioned title is having a relationship. He is characterized as "...a touching man, surprisingly sensitive and full of all sorts of softness and feelings that did not seem to conflict with his masculinity" (251). Pursuant to that end, readers learn that he tells Lydia that "...he wished he could have a baby"

(252). Lydia misinterprets his desire, understanding his desire as an intrusion on her body as she would be bearing the babies, but Stanley quickly clears up any confusion: “No, I didn’t mean that...I just meant I wished I could have one. Just one little baby that would come out of me and be all mine” (252). Lydia, instead of being repulsed, is charged by this idea. She ruminates on his desire:

What a strangely attractive, almost erotic idea: her beautiful, slim, deferential Stanley as a male mother. The strange vision helped Lydia, temporarily, to a fresh imagining of the world: gentle male mothers with their long brown arms and legs cuddling infants; male mothers with healthy penises dangling freely beneath loincloths, but subjugating their male force to the care of a small creature. But, lacking practice in transferring vision into symbol, Lydia fell back into literal territory with a thud and Stanley’s vision seemed preposterous, even slightly obscene. From where was the baby going to come out of him? Would he still be able to have a penis? What about breasts? (252)

Lydia’s questions are ones we are left with as we contemplate this idea of male maternity. They are valid. Much like Lydia, we can envision the idea, but we can’t achieve that “fresh imagining” of our language, of the familial structure, of the operation and function of parental roles. Later in this novel, gender is further brought up within the dictates of religion and work (within that spectrum), bringing us back to where I began this chapter. Merle, Nell’s old friend, pontificates, “...it beats me how a woman can be a priest any more than a man can be, say, a mother...” (394). While no hard and fast answers are

given, the characters in this work grapple with how gender defines one's allowable wants and abilities.⁴⁷

Stanley can't mother, even though he wants to, but we can see men engaging in co-parenting in ABC's new comedy, *Modern Family*. What is interesting about this show, however, are the parents: the male mothers are two gay men. In this sitcom, Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) and Cameron (Eric Stonestreet) are caregivers to a newly adopted Vietnamese baby, Lily. In one episode, "The Bicycle Thief," Mitchell and Cameron prepare to take Lily to her first playgroup. Mitchell suggests that Cameron tone it down a bit, encouraging him to change his attire and fit in. Cameron opts for a polo shirt instead of paisley to appease his partner, retorting that he will simply look like Mitchell's golfing buddy with whom he has a child. Although the show embraces stereotypes and clichés (Cameron almost loses it when one of the mothers at playgroup dismisses Meryl Streep's performance in *Mamma Mia!*), it also portrays some very real fears within parenting. One such fear is the worry of measuring up: Is my child progressing and advancing properly? Am I a good parent? Mitchell is rattled when he sees another child build a tower of blocks while his Lily simply inspects them before her. What does he do? He swipes the little boy's tower and places it in front of Lily, clapping his hands and praising her. When he realizes that the play sessions are taped for parents to take home and watch, he recoils, asking Cameron to leave because he "...just stole some kid's intellectual property." The humor and draw come from the very real conflicts and worries these parents face, gay, male or otherwise. Because these are two men parenting, how does one label them? Is one the father? Is one the mother? Is the more

⁴⁷ Godwin's novel also examines the maternal imperative, something I will come to specifically within Chapter Three.

overtly feminine one given a different nomenclature? The fact that their sexuality is such an issue in this show doesn't negate the gender confines at play. What happens to a man, any man, who explores his role as a mother, or a man who engages in the work of mothering?

The voice of men isn't silenced, but it often is subsumed under the mantle of fatherhood. Many fatherhood narratives exist that, comedically, explore the perils of being a male parent, or parenting in general. America's beloved Bill Cosby tackles this subject in his 1987 book Fatherhood; Paul Reiser does the same in his 1998 book Babyhood; and most recently, Fox News contributor Steve Doocy joins the ranks with his 2009 reflection on fatherhood, Tales from the Dad Side: Misadventures in Fatherhood. While these books are not about men as primary caregivers per se, they are explorations in a masculine voice delving into the complexities of parenting. These men discuss what makes a parent and share experiences of the male variety. Male voices are becoming predominant in a genre, parenting narratives, primarily relegated to the feminine. Even news magazines are exploring this shift. Consider the October 8, 2007 *Newsweek* feature, "Just Don't Call Me Mr. Mom," by reporter Brian Braiker. His reflective piece chronicles his experience over one year staying home to care for his daughter. In his piece he complains of being compared to the stereotypical Michael Keaton/Mr. Mom figure, attempting to dismantle the buffoonery commonly leveled at the stay-at-home dad.

The blogosphere even gives voice to stay at home dads and men who are thrust into the functional primary spot. *Rebeldad* is one such blog that names as its mission to

function as a space for fathers to find a connection regarding their circumstances. The blog's author, Brian Reid, refers to the title of his forum, commenting:

One of my early problems had to do with nomenclature. There is no good way to refer to a father who serves as primary caregiver. "Househusband" sounds dated, "stay-at-home dad" too long (and the acronym -- SAHD too depressing) and otherwise problematic. "Mr. Mom" is offensive for a couple of reasons. I wanted a name for us that captured something positive, something edgy. It occurred to me that I'm at the leading edge of a social revolution (gender equity in the *home!*), and that Rebel Dads would be a good name for us guys. It's not intuitive enough to show up in Webster's, but it's good enough for me.

Language seems to be a chief conundrum in dealing with a man's place in the home. Other such blogs seek to name this parental shift as well, decenterizing the home as the feminine sphere, deranking the family as the maternal kingdom.⁴⁸ After all, language is slowly coming to recognize men's emergence/presence within this field. Consider the term "manny" used to designate a man who works as a nanny. Language must be revised to suit the parameters of that which we seek to define.

Other areas of language further this conflict. Julia Wood observes, "In establishing maternity leaves but not paternity or parental leaves, women are named as those who do and should take care of children; by not being named, fathers are defined as not being primary caregivers" (127). We know that men are primary caregivers, yet the

⁴⁸ See *The House Husband Journal* for another example of a blog that plays with the name of this trend in primary paternity. *Daddy Dialectic* is a blog examining the ins and outs of parenting in the 21st century. Another popular blog, *Matt, Liz and Madeline*, follows Matt's journey of raising his daughter alone after his wife Liz died suddenly after their child's birth.

man is often referred to as watching the children or helping around the house. As Wood posits, such nomenclature belittles the masculine role and indicates the feminine imperative of always assuming responsibility for the jobs around the house and related to the children. She writes, “Our language currently offers no male parallel to women’s ‘mothering’” (156). As we think about what I call the biternal caregiver, we have to consider the question that Ann Snitow asks in her essay, “Motherhood—Reclaiming the Demon Texts”: “Do we want this new capacious identity, mother, to expand or contract?” (10). We must remember, as Kyle Pruett notes, “Each member of the species has such a rich repertoire of potential behavior that it is impossible to characterize any behavioral pattern as quintessentially male or female, including the capacity to nurture” (230). It is through our expanding and our evolving language, our depictions in popular culture and the current reality with which we are faced that we have the answer to Snitow’s question. The maternal imperative is being rescripted: Men are mothers, too. So, if we slowly begin to accept the myriad ways in which men mother, or can mother, what does this consign the female to do? What role is she enacting?

Chapter Three

WOMEN WHO WON'T

“First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage...”
-“K-I-S-S-I-N-G”

One of the long-held assumptions directed at women is that they are often always maternal or, if not maternal, have the potential to be, lurking deep within only if the right circumstance would awaken that instinct. The maternal instinct is a trait that exists in literature and culture as a given. Consider an article entitled “Will You Be a Good Mother? Demystifying the Maternal Instinct” found at Baby Center, a popular online site for new mothers. The maternal instinct here is defined by psychiatrist Elyse Rubenstein as “an inborn tendency to want to protect and nurture one's offspring.” The article asserts, “*Almost all* mothers (human and animal alike) eventually come to feel this way after they have a child” (emphasis added). The “almost all” part is interesting because, although mentioned here, “almost all” is not often what is said; it is often assumed by mothers and the culture at large that the maternal instinct is an all-encompassing reality, for all mothers. This same article even goes on to say, “Once you give birth, it's a whole new ballgame, and feelings you never expected to have will surface as part of the process of becoming a parent.”

This idea is further reiterated in *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children*, but this work takes a different look at the maternal instinct. This book aims to debunk what the authors see as misheld assumptions about child-rearing and parenting. Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman write:

Thanks to this mythos, we use the word “instinct” to convey the collective wisdom gleaned intuitively from our experiences raising kids. But this is an overgeneralization of the term. Really, the actual instinct—the biological drive that kicks in—is the fierce impulse to nurture and protect one’s child. Neuroscientists have even located the exact neural network in the brain where this impulse fires. Expecting parents can rely on this impulse kicking in—but as for how *best* to nurture, they have to figure it out. In other words, our “instincts” can be so off-base because they are not actually instincts.... What we imagined were our “instincts” were instead just intelligent, informed reactions. Things we had figured out. Along the way, we also discovered those reactions were polluted by a hodgepodge of wishful thinking, moralistic biases, contagious fads, personal history, and old (disproven) psychology—all at the expense of common sense. (5-6)

Two issues come up from this. If the maternal instinct is held on to as a belief system, how does the culture reinforce that belief? Second, if the maternal instinct is truly simple reactions based more on conditioned responses, what about those women who don’t operate typically and deviate from anything vaguely construed as maternal? How does the culture deal with these “deviant” women?

Much of what children know about mothering is given to them through their own mothers. As children, we see a set of behaviors and emulate, reject or pick and choose from the body of behaviors we’ve observed and grown up with. Further, television, music, film, books, or other entertainment often informs and confirms what we know, or

think we know. The “mythos” to which Bronson and Merryman refer is part of a script individuals are encouraged to act out (see epigraph) even from childhood. As Simone de Beauvoir writes in “Women and Creativity,” women are sold a bill of goods whereby they are set to believe what being a woman entails through literature: “Women are conditioned . . . by the myths communicated to them through the books they read—they are conditioned by the traditional image of women” (22). I would take her analysis a step further to conclude that women are conditioned by the traditional image of mother, again by the scripts circulating through the cultural dialogue.

The scripts women are believed to want and need to follow perpetuate the heteronormative ideal and the contrived happily ever after (and again can be reduced to that simple childhood chant in the epigraph). In Lip Service: The Truth about Women’s Darker Side in Love, Sex and Friendship, Kate Fillion writes, “Today the heroine is no Sleeping Beauty who expects to be rescued and animated by a dashing prince. Instead, she is a good girl who tames a bad boy. In the new script, women are not damsels in distress, but emotional saviors who rescue insensitive men, teach them to care and share, and are rewarded with perfect intimacy” (276). Women aren’t rescued in this script but are rather the rescuers.⁴⁹ By the same token, the motherhood narrative has somewhat shifted to focus on the power of the mother. Heretofore the standard ideology has placed the onus on the male with the idea that the father imparts the discipline, knowledge and decision-making for the family. The family myth began to be rescripted with child custody law. In one New York court, indications were presented that “[t]he simple fact

⁴⁹ This aspect of taking matters into one’s own hands can be seen in the 2010 film, *The Back-Up Plan*, starring Jennifer Lopez. The premise revolves around the character’s inability to find her dream man so she instead opts to skip that part and become artificially inseminated so she doesn’t miss out on motherhood. Subsequently, of course, she then meets Mr. Right and, after pitfall and struggle, happily ever after ensues.

of being a mother does not, by itself, indicate a capacity or willingness to render a quality of care different from that which the father can provide” (“Divorce and Custody”). Further, Margaret Mead’s analysis was called into play, referencing her observation, “This is a mere and subtle form of anti-feminism by which men—under the guise of exalting the importance of maternity—are tying women more tightly to their children than has been thought necessary since the invention of bottle feeding and baby carriages” (“Divorce and Custody”). Despite this conclusion, rendered in the 1970s, the dominance of the mother-knowledge, the maternal instinct and the hallowed role of mother persists. This can most pointedly be seen in what the current culture deems “The Mommy Wars.”⁵⁰ On one side, the Marxist-feminist idea that a woman must return to work to keep her independence and economic viability comes into play, urging that a woman can both have a fulfilling job and have a fulfilling family.⁵¹ To the contrary, some women argue that women can’t “have it all” and that by suggesting that idea to women, women are inevitably set up for failure.⁵²

It is these scripts, this mythos, and those generalizations that confine women to the binarisms that restrict and contract their choices and actions. Mothering, specifically, can be rendered into the divergent camps of the attentive, focused, all-knowing, present mother and the distracted, absent, selfish, neglectful maternal figure. As Deborah Connolly puts it in her essay, “Mythical Mothers and Dichotomies of Good and Evil,” women’s mothering is polarized. She writes, “Dichotomies of the moralized poles of the

⁵⁰ This cultural clash can be seen in the current debate among mothers: should I stay at home or should I return to work? The contrived “battle” between the two camps is exploited in Leslie Morgan Steiner’s 2006 work Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off On Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families.

⁵¹ See Leslie Bennetts’s The Feminine Mistake: Are We Giving Up Too Much? (2007).

⁵² See Susan Maushart’s recent work, The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It.

virtuous, caring mother and the evil, neglectful one are carefully maintained in the public imagination and in public policies” (265). How mothers are portrayed in these roles, be it through literature, film, music, television or news stories, will further reinforce how these social scripts are dominant in creating the “good” mother and “bad” mother of our instinctual understanding.

Maternal Imperative

Maternal desires are often posited as latent urges that lie dormant until awakened by the child’s arrival. Interestingly, in many of the scripts presented, this time through film, these maternal urges are so strong that even a child that isn’t biologically a woman’s can arouse the maternal need that she didn’t know she had. Perhaps the best example of the maternal imperative is the 1987 film *Baby Boom*, which tells the story of J.C. Wiatt (played by Diane Keaton). Wiatt is a cut-throat businesswoman, but when she inherits a baby from a deceased relative, Wiatt is forced to reevaluate her existence. In much the same bumbling way men discussed in the previous chapter attempt to enact maternity, Wiatt fumbles over diapers, balks at feedings, and struggles with the interaction of this little person, managing to barely establish a “hi” and “bye” with the infant. She attempts to give the baby up for adoption, but can’t. Wiatt makes it to the adoption agency, meets the adoptive family, heads out the door and makes it into the hallway, but she hears baby Elizabeth crying after her and subsequently goes back to fetch her. The previously dormant maternal instinct has been awakened. She loses her boyfriend because he doesn’t want to parent and her job because of the maternal demands she is now under because of the addition of the little girl. Her boss tells her, “You can’t have it all. Nobody can.” The character relocates from the city of New York to the country of

Vermont and there discovers a merging of her business savvy and maternal underpinnings. She concocts a line of gourmet baby food, Country Baby, and ends up being wildly successful, in romance, in business and as a mother. When the boss men of her previous company offer her a chance to come back, she rejects it. Again, she exults that she is back after receiving a stellar offer from the company, but as she makes her way back to the boardroom to seemingly accept the offer, she has another hallway epiphany. She returns to tell the men, "I'm not the tiger lady anymore. I mean, I have a crib in my office and a mobile over my desk and I really like that." The corporate round table asks her, "Do you realize what you're giving up?" She responds simply, "Yup." One board member continues, "There's nothing we can do to change your mind?" Again she simply answers, "Nope." She returns home and, instead of returning with the million dollar salary, the benefit of the corporate jet, the title of COO (Chief Operating Officer), she is greeted with a simple, first, "Mama" from her daughter, Elizabeth. The concluding scene of the film is one of a domestic ideal. Wiatt picks up the baby, sits in a rocking chair poised perfectly next to an open window through which sunlight streams in, and begins cuddling and rocking her daughter. The camera pans out, backing viewers slowly out of the living room space, and gradually the scene fades to black. Although we know a mother can be any figure who enacts the work entailed in the day to day, it is interesting how the child's presence trumps individual self-accomplishment and personal desire, reemphasizing the primacy of the child and the overarching power of the maternal instinct.

Others might opt to read this film as a feminist narrative. Wiatt forges her own path, making her own successful business rather than working as a drone for the male-

dominated business where she used to work in the city. Others, however, might see Wiatt as anti-feminist, choosing her family over COO! Imagine! In many ways this potential conflict in the reading of the film mirrors that of the aforementioned “mommy wars” and the issue of which choice is the best choice. Should Wiatt stay rooted in the corporate business world, or is she correct in situating herself in the home (and the business world of her own making)? Regardless of how this film is read, the aspect I want to emphasize is the maternal drive that dominates. No matter how it is done, the maternal instinct wins out, reinforcing the maternal imperative. It is this script of the undeniable maternal imperative I seek to examine.

Another film that follows in this vein of reinforcing the maternal drive, so much so that it can cause an individual to completely change her wants and needs, is the 2004 film *Raising Helen*. Helen Harris, played by Kate Hudson, is a single party-girl who works for a modeling agency. Her life changes dramatically when her sister, Lindsay, and her husband die, and Helen is entrusted with the raising of their three children, Audrey, Henry and Sarah, ages 15, 10 and 5, respectively. The natural choice would seem to be Jenny (played by Joan Cusack), the other sister, as both Helen and Jenny concur. Of Jenny, Helen notes, “She’s got the mom haircut.” Her corporeality exudes everything maternal. Jenny plays on her maternity, embodying it in every way, physically and conspiratorially, alienating Helen from the maternal circle. When Jenny speaks to a neighborhood mom and Helen stumbles into the conversation, Jenny brushes Helen aside, excluding her and dismissing their conversation as “just mommy talk.” Her dismissal is the ultimate in paradox as she belittles their discourse (It’s “just mommy talk”), but also treats maternal conversation and understanding as though it were a veiled

secret and a treasure-trove of knowledge to which she alone is privy. She tells Helen, “Being a mom is the greatest job on Earth,” yet also puts Helen in her place, confidently asserting, “Of course I’m a better mother than you.” Helen laments her inability to fit into a size 2, the loss of her social life and of her disposable income as the children, indirectly, cost her the job she loves. It isn’t so much that she doesn’t love the children, but she can’t “do” the mom role. She admits she fears she will be hated. The turning point comes when Audrey rents a hotel room with Helen’s credit card on prom night. It is Jenny that figures out where she is. Helen marvels at her deductive ability, exclaiming, “You’re quite a detective.” Jenny retorts, “No, I’m a mom.” The message is that motherhood is imbued with superhuman power, or seemingly so. When Helen can’t handle the work involved, she hands the children over to Jenny, but it is too late. Helen’s latent maternal instincts have been stirred, and it isn’t long after she gets her old life back that she realizes she needs the children.

Upon returning for the three children, Helen now acts the role of mother. She knows how to “do” it. She verbalizes her position and status, exclaiming, “I’m here for my kids.” She makes Audrey give her the fake ID she had, and Audrey pointedly tells Helen she hates her. Helen doesn’t fear her position anymore and tells Audrey, “Well I guess we are just gonna have to learn to live with that.” What is interesting in this film, however, is that although the maternal instinct is aroused in Helen, it isn’t a given that she knows how to be a mom. If viewers were confused as to why a mother would give her children to inexperienced Helen over “Supermom” Jenny, we are given insight into this at the film’s end when Jenny hands Helen a letter Lindsay instructed be given to

Jenny upon Lindsay's death. We hear Lindsay's voice reading as Helen peruses the letter:

Yes, it's a surprising choice, considering that you are the most incredible mother I've ever known.... You must know from experience that when it comes to picking somebody else to raise your kids, no one seems right. No one is you. And so you choose someone who is most like you. Someone that will give the kids a taste of their real mom, the mom they lost and never really got to know. In so many ways, we are so much alike, that's why I chose Helen. Of course, she'll have lots of fights with the kids, yet she'll find a way to make up. I know sometimes she messes things up and makes big mistakes. On the other hand, she also makes big comebacks. Respect her Jenny. Give her a shot. We're family and I'm counting on you to keep everyone together. I know, Helen will certainly need some help learning how to be a mother to my kids, but I've got you for that. And who could be better? After all, you raised Helen, you'll teach her how to be a mom.

What is stressed here is, truly, instinct, but also experience and learning. This is quite a shift from the aforementioned film, *Baby Boom*, but it is still the maternal drive that mediates and demands this learning and skill subset.⁵³

⁵³ It should be noted here, as in the previous film, *Baby Boom*, that the woman loses her current love interest, but is connected with another man who understands the care and responsibility of children and welcomes, albeit briefly in the narrative of the film, the woman and her assumed children. In *Baby Boom*, the small town veterinarian helps Wiatt achieve her parental epiphany. For Helen in *Raising Helen*, it is Pastor Dan who helps Helen see her parental potential. Regardless, male and female mediation seem to be a necessity in some aspects to the telling of a cohesive, structured, functioning family tale.

One work that plays on the maternal instinct and masculine maternity discussed in the previous chapter is a movie from 2007, *No Reservations*. Another career-obsessed woman is presented, Kate (played by Catherine Zeta-Jones), a chef at a fancy French restaurant. Her sister and her niece are on their way to visit, but Kate's sister dies in a car crash, leaving her nine-year-old daughter, Zoe, to move in with Kate. Kate is, of course, completely unprepared for any maternal functioning. What she learns is through her sous-chef, Nicholas Palmer (played by Aaron Eckhart). When Kate tries to feed Zoe fancy French food, Nick saves the situation by cooking her pasta. Kate fails miserably at motherhood, forgetting Zoe at school one day, but promptly makes it up to her by granting her wish of a day with Nick, and Kate, too, of course. Nick understands children, cooking pizza with Zoe, setting up the living room as a safari scene, playing pretend with her and charades as well. Zoe, noting the disparity between the Nick and Kate and missing her deceased mother, rejects Kate and runs away. Nick finds her, and Kate's maternal imperative comes into focus. She takes a day off from work, a momentous decision for workaholic Kate, and plays Monopoly with Zoe and even engages her in a pillow fight. She lets herself go and enacts the maternal. Although conflict arises when Nick is offered Kate's job (another instance where the female loses her professional position in accepting the maternal position), viewers learn Nick rejects the position. Ultimately, the two reconcile (another instance where the male and female merge in the betterment and establishment of the traditional family unit) and solve the work conflict by opening their own restaurant. Interestingly, it is the male here that teaches Kate to be a good mom to Zoe. The maternal instinct is in effect as Kate quits

her cut-throat job for the sake of Zoe, but her skills are learned through the male tutelage of the masculine maternal.

Another recent film that investigate the role of the maternal imperative is *Juno* (2007). In this film, viewers see maternity exhibited in two divergent ways. The title character, Juno (played by Ellen Page), unexpectedly finds herself pregnant. At sixteen, this is a less than ideal situation, and, after considering and then rejecting the option of abortion, Juno decides to give the baby up for adoption. What is interesting is that despite a rift with the baby's father and alienation from her peers, Juno elects to go through with the adoption process. In one memorable scene, Juno, very pregnant, waddles down the hall, parting the crowded corridor of her high school while the faces of her peers look at her in disgust, revulsion and almost fear, as if her pregnancy were catching. Juno exhibits a hallmark trait of maternity: sacrifice. Although she will only be the birth mother, putting in the physical labor to bring the child into the world, she sacrifices herself for the betterment of her child's life and even in the not so simple decision to give the child an option at a life, period. Juno selects Mark and Vanessa Loring (played by Jason Bateman and Jennifer Garner, respectively), to put in the labor (work) of raising her child. Vanessa has always wanted to be a mother; for her, the desire is less an urge and more an imperative. Physically unable to have her own children and having lost adoption opportunities before, Vanessa proceeds with caution, but it is ultimately Mark whose caution, or fear, almost puts a stop to the whole process. After Mark forms a friendship with Juno, he seems to reconnect with a younger part of himself and seems fixated on missed opportunities. As a jingle writer, Mark starts to think about creating "real" music as he and Juno bond over the course of her pregnancy through

discussing the merits of various musical legends and influences. When he tells Vanessa that the whole thing feels “a little like bad timing,” she tells him to grow up, asserting, “If I have to wait for you to be Kurt Cobain, I’ll never be a mother.” Mark retorts, “I never said I’d be a good father.” Is Mark acting selfishly, or is he simply being honest? Does Vanessa’s imperative override the primary relationship their union was founded on? The maternal imperative trumps the couple bond, for Vanessa must be a mother. Juno, initially upset over the demise of the traditional family unit, comes to recognize the crumbling structure that it often is and the illusion that is often created in such a union.⁵⁴ She leaves Vanessa a note that reads, “If you’re still in, I’m still in.” Vanessa, Mark-less, assumes responsibility for the little boy as a single adoptive mother. The maternal imperative in the sacrificial (Juno) and requisite (Vanessa) is shown through these two contrasted characters. As Mary Thompson observes, “the protagonist sacrifices her body to the gestation of the child she then gives to Vanessa, who in turn sacrifices her marriage in order to adopt the child her husband does not want” (162). The imperative, here in the form of sacrifice, affects both characters.

The maternal imperative also aligns itself with obsession. In many instances, maternity takes priority not only with coupledness or self-desire, but with reason, rationality, or right. This can be seen in the film *Rosemary’s Baby*, a horror film from the late 1960s. Here, the idea of the maternal imperative played against this horrific

⁵⁴ It should be noted that Juno herself is a product of a broken home. Early in the film, viewers learn that she was abandoned by her mother, who has moved to Arizona and started a new family, leaving Juno to be raised by her father and stepmother, Bren (played by Allison Janney). Interestingly, Bren is more of a mother than her biological one.

backdrop provides a segue to modern day obsessive and horrific maternal longings, which I will touch on momentarily.⁵⁵

Looking at *Rosemary's Baby* however, one sees two noteworthy points: First, the passivity of the body in possession of a child and, second, the push to actively fulfill the emotive mothering that pregnancy and gestation evoke. Rosemary (played by Mia Farrow) is child-like herself, as illustrated in her diminutive stature and child-like pleading, almost whining, conversations with her husband, Guy (played by John Cassavetes). She follows her husband's direction and spends her time ensconced in the domestic sphere. Her aim, from the onset of the film, is to become pregnant. Although she and Guy do attempt to conceive, it is Satan's child she ends up carrying. Rosemary doesn't know this, of course, but she suspects something isn't quite right with her baby and with the pregnancy. Her fears are insignificant, though, as she is pregnant and passive in her body. Any choice she seems to make (for example, going to the doctor and expressing her fears) is ruled out, as the power structure here (the doctor) hands her over to more capable, cogent individuals (Guy, neighbors, friends). Physically she gives up a portion of herself to develop the child and, with her self already subsumed in the domestic embrace of marriage, not much fight is left in Rosemary. It isn't until she gives birth that her agency returns.

Rosemary, upon seeing the child for the first time, is horrified. She queries the group, the coven who arranged for this monstrous creation, "What have you done to it?" She asks about his eyes, uttering an honest response about the distorted physicality of the infant (that viewers are left to imagine rather than witness on screen). Rosemary learns

⁵⁵ Another film that explores the horrific side to the maternal imperative is *Splice* (2009). Here the feminine geneticist pushes her male counterpart to move to human trials in splicing the DNA of different animals. The creation, horrific and oddly charming, is nurtured by both parties.

she has birthed Satan's child and succumbs to a paroxysm of tears. When she is told she doesn't have to join the devilish brood, but is implored to "be a mother" to the child, Rosemary is unmoved. It isn't until she hears the baby cry that her maternal imperative is aroused. At first it is only to admonish an older woman for rocking him too hard in the cradle, but once she begins to rock the child herself and makes contact with the infant, she surrenders to her maternal calling. The film closes with what sounds like Rosemary's "lalalas" as in a lullaby being heard as the camera zooms in on her face, beatific and serene in her role as mother.

Obsessive maternity often is exhibited when the maternal desire is thwarted, as it is in the 1992 film *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*. Peyton (Rebecca DeMornay) is unable to have any children due to a hysterectomy she had after her miscarriage. The tragic miscarriage of her infant son was a direct result of stress from a suit against her doctor husband, who was charged with sexually assaulting female patients. After his suicide and the loss of any financial protection because of his flagrant actions, Peyton vows revenge on the woman, Claire (played by Annabella Sciorra), who first filed a claim against her husband. Six months later, she seeks that revenge by posing as a nanny and inserting herself as an integral part in Claire's home.

Peyton goes to great lengths to keep maintain her maternity, even though she has lost her son. Viewers learn she has continued to pump her breasts to keep her milk supply steady and at the ready. Instead of using the pre-pumped breast milk Claire provides for her baby, Peyton secretly breastfeeds Claire's newborn son, Joe. He comes to recognize Peyton with coos and gurgles but rejects Claire's attempts at feeding, crying at her approach. Peyton wins over Claire's daughter, Emma, as well. Emma confides in Peyton

about a bully at school who has been harassing her. When Peyton asks if her mother did anything about this harassment, Emma tells her that her mother “tried, but she couldn’t help.” For Peyton, this is an unacceptable response, especially for a mother. Peyton takes it upon herself to visit the child at school and threaten him with brute force.

When Claire realizes who Peyton is, she orders her out of her home. In a classic Freudian slip, Peyton says, “Okay. I’ll just get my baby and we’ll be on our way.” Although she quickly corrects herself, the message is there. This family is her family. Peyton’s maternity overrules rational thought, so much so that she crosses any line of mourning and sadness that could explain away her behavior, and descends into madness. She sneaks into the home and attacks Claire with a shovel, knocking her unconscious. Her rationale is clearly stated: “This is my family.” Seeking out the daughter, Peyton reassures her that everything is okay, that “Mommy” is here. She continues her delusion by telling Emma that they will have “a real family now.” Peyton’s delusion continues as she refers to “my baby” in speaking of Claire’s infant son, Joe, but her obsessive maternal imperative is no match for the superhuman power of the real mother.

Claire comes to just in time to claim her family. Verbally, she asserts, “It’s my family, Peyton,” but she physically does so as well. An asthmatic, Claire is physically weak. In much of the movie, Claire is seen giving way to asthmatic attacks: after she leaves the doctor’s office and realizes she was assaulted; after she realizes she misplaced her husband’s work that she was responsible for mailing; and after she visits Peyton’s old home and finds her breast pump, recognizing Peyton has been nursing Joe all along. This frail version of Claire is one viewers have come to expect. When Claire claims her family and gets into an altercation with Peyton (she with a knife and Peyton with a

fireplace poker), we aren't surprised to see her collapse in an asthmatic fit. Peyton uses this moment to hunker down beside her and whisper in her ear, "When your husband makes love to you, it's my face he sees. When your baby's hungry, it's my breast that feeds him." But when Peyton turns her back to claim Joe, Claire strikes, knocking Peyton down and eventually pushing her out of the attic window to her death. Obsessive maternity is a powerful force, but one that can't trump the strong natural maternal instinct.⁵⁶

The maternal imperative is a frequent subject of film, but news stories also enforce the idea and belief of the maternal imperative. Headlines are full of obsessive women who will do anything to become mothers. Carmela Bousada managed to trick infertility doctors into believing she was only 55, the final age for such treatments. Bousada sold her home in Spain and underwent hormone therapy. Her imperative to have a child, even at 67, even as a single mother, was unstoppable. She now stands as the oldest woman to give birth as the mother of twins ("Oldest mom"). Rayshaun Parson, a 21-year-old woman from Clovis, New Mexico, desired a child so desperately that she even experienced pseudocyesis, or phantom pregnancy. Parson suffered two miscarriages in the span of two years, and the emotional toll of not being able to have her own baby is thought to have pushed her to the breaking point. On March 10, 2007, Parson, posing as a hospital worker in Lubbock, Texas, managed to snatch a baby girl from the maternity ward ("Family: Abduction"). In Missouri, Shannon Beck, a woman who had recently miscarried, broke into Stephenie Ochsenbine's home, slashed her throat and stole her

⁵⁶ One film that further explores the horror of maternal obsession is *Danika*, a 2006 work that explores the ideas of maternal protection and maternal mental breakdown. In many ways, the horror isn't just the mental deterioration of the maternal figure but the horrific role of mothering and protecting the children with whom she is entrusted.

newborn baby girl. Before police identified the abductor, she was profiled as “someone who had a child die recently or as someone who could not have children, [or] told people she was pregnant and needed to steal a child so her lie would not be found out” (“Abducted Mo. Baby”). These kinds of stories resonate within the headlines as the push for completed maternity for many women must be fulfilled, regardless of the cost.

Alongside the idea of obsessive mothering runs the notion of the super-intuitive mom. The notion is that a mother has eyes in the back of her head or that she is, somehow, always connected to her children. This connectivity and intuition are linked, much like the maternal instinct, always-already to motherhood. Adrienne McCormick calls films that exploit this idea “Supermother” films (144). Cinematically, *Flightplan* (2005) plays on the idea of the intuitive mother. The premise of the film is simple: a woman must convince the air crew that her daughter is missing even though there is no proof that her daughter boarded the plane or even exists. This woman, Kyle Pratt (played by Jodie Foster), is en route home to the United States from Germany to bury her husband. She travels with her daughter, but when Kyle awakes from her nap, her daughter is nowhere to be found. None of the crew recalls seeing her, she isn’t listed in the flight log, and, eventually, Kyle’s sanity is called into question. No matter the incredulity of the passengers and crew or the physical setbacks she faces, Kyle is determined to find her daughter. Here, Kyle’s maternity dominates and she essentially battles an extortion/hi-jacking plot to reclaim her daughter. At the close of the film, Kyle is shown walking away from the partially blown up plane cradling her daughter in her arms while the crew watches in disbelief, realizing she was right. Again, as Kyle leaves the airport, she carries her daughter to the awaiting car, cradling her in her arms as she

walks past the line of passengers on the plane who believed in her insanity. The exhibit of maternal knowledge and intuition is put on parade in these two scenes. This reverence for the maternal can best be seen in the words of praise heard murmured among the passengers as she completes her passage through the crowd. One person is heard saying, “She never gave up on her.” This insistence of one’s maternal knowledge, although ridiculed in the plot of the movie, is heralded at film’s end.

The same exaltation of maternal knowledge is shown in the 2004 film, *The Forgotten*. Here Telly Paretta (played by Julianne Moore) endures a life filled with fragmented memories of her nine-year-old son. Viewers see Telly go into her son’s room, say his name, “Sam,” almost as if she were saying a prayer. She holds his things reverently, mulling over the pictures and videos of her life with him. Believing that her son died in a plane crash on his way to camp 14 months prior to the start of the narrative, she is subsequently told he never existed by her husband, her doctor/psychiatrist, and her friends. Pictures are removed and videos are erased, leading Telly to question who would erase her child rather than to question her own sanity, of which she is sure. The turning point comes when she encounters a man, Ash (played by Dominic West), whom she recognizes as the father of one of her son’s friends. Ash doesn’t recall having a daughter and Telly, adamant in her conviction, pushes him to recall his child. While visiting his home, she discovers an odd piece of blue color peeking out from the wallpaper. She rips it off to reveal art work from his daughter’s room, triggering the seemingly repressed memory of his daughter, Lauren. Ash and Telly embark on an implausible attempt to evade the National Security Agency, who are apparently in on the cover-up, and prove their children exist. Of their existence, at least Sam’s existence, Telly is sure as she says,

“I can still *feel* him out there” (emphasis added). Through various memories, Telly winds up at the airport where she initially dropped off her son. She is soon confronted with the “alien” who has been conducting experiments on the mother-child bond. “Can it be dissolved?” he asks. The human extraterrestrial insists she give up her last memory of Sam, when she saw him as a newborn. He is adamant that she surrender her recollection as she is the only one who never doubted her child existed. The success of his experiment depends on her. Through choking her, he attempts to choke out the memory of life, but Telly rallies and remembers her pregnancy with Sam. She asserts, “I had life inside of me. His name is Sam.” The alien is destroyed, and when Telly returns home, it is to a life with her son, as though none of the previous events had transpired. Telly’s maternity showcases the bond between a mother and her child. As McCormick notes “[t]he focus is on the mother, in a movie that essentializes her role and portrays her as the quintessential supermother” (147). Much like Kyle in the previous example, Telly exhibits the persistence of maternal devotion. Here, Telly fends off extraterrestrial attacks to keep her maternity intact and rescue her child. A mother’s connectivity to her child is undeniable, even if extraterrestrial foes or hijacking dissidents with explosives are at the ready.

This overwhelming connection between mother and child is reinforced at an early age through children’s literature. Bordering on the obsessive, the super-intuitive mothers in many children’s works seek to keep their children always as children, and their maternal function always a necessary factor. In the popular children’s book Love You Forever by Robert Munsch, the narrative is built around a simple chant that the mother begins repeating to her newborn after she brings him home. The refrain is sung by the

mother: "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living my baby you'll be." This chant seems innocuous and endearing, but as readers continue throughout the story, we learn the mother continues singing this song to her child, often creeping into the child's room while he is asleep.

The boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a teenager. He had strange friends and he wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music. Sometimes the mother felt like she was in a *zoo!* But at night time, when that teenager was asleep, the mother opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep she picked up that great big boy and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang.... (12-14)

Again, the mother resumes the familiar refrain she sang to her child as a baby. In some sense, this repetition can play on the difficulty of letting go and the permanency of the maternal bond with her child, but the narrative takes the repetition one step further. As the boy continues to grow and becomes a man, he moves out of the house into his own home. The mother, we are told, drives across town at night and, "If all the lights in her son's house were out, she opened his bedroom window, crawled across the floor, and looked up over the side of his bed. If that great big man was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him...(19)." This persistence and insistence reflect obsessive maternity. It is notable, however, that most readings focus on the cyclical nature of the parent-child relationship, yet in this story when the mother becomes too old to repeat the familiar rocking and song with her son, he comes to her, rocking and singing the chant but

replacing “Mommy” with “baby” in the last line. The book concludes with the grown man singing the same thing to his daughter when she is born. This repetition of the bond between parent-child through various generations is a more common reading, but I would argue that this focus on regressive and infantile patterns established in childhood negates the new ages and stages the child passes through and positions the maternal alongside the perceived fixed nature of the child, keeping her stature in place.

Margaret Wise Brown’s classic The Runaway Bunny also delves into the issue of obsessive mothering. Presented presumably as a comfort to the child, the message is that wherever the child, or bunny, will venture off to, the mother will come and claim him/her. There is no escape. We read, “‘If you run away,’ said his mother, ‘I will run after you for you are my little bunny’” (1). What ensues is a series of one-upmanship as the little bunny issues a threat and his mother counters with a clever retort. Little bunny states, “If you are a gardener and find me ... I will be a bird and fly away from you” (11). The mother responds, “If you become a bird and fly away from me ... I will be a tree that you come home to” (15). This pattern continues and makes up the general focus of the narrative. Bunny becomes a fish so mother becomes a fisherman; bunny becomes a rock so mother becomes a rock climber; bunny changes into a crocus and mother works as a gardener. Again, the most common reading of this work is one that reiterates and reinforces that maternal bond. Of course the mother should go after the bunny and become whatever she needs to and reclaim her child. Yet, undercurrents of obsession run through this work as there is nowhere the bunny can go to escape the maternal clutches. The bunny, at book’s end, realizes the futility of escape, stating, “Shucks ... I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny” (30). From a literal standpoint, one can

see it would be in a child's best interest to stay under the mother's nurture and care, but what is missing here is a sense of independence and adventure. Instead, the narrative preserves the mother-child duality and constantly confirms maternal primacy.

For children, enacting "mommy" becomes an almost routine part of their play, especially for little girls. To push the play with dolls one step further, Spanish manufacturers have come up with a doll that mimics breastfeeding. Called Bebe Gloton (Baby Glutton), the doll makes sucking noises when placed to the chest of the child, who in turn wears a tank-like top with flower petals where the breasts would appear. Although not for sale in the United States for various reasons, the doll clearly gives the child the opportunity to move one step closer to the "real" with her pretend play.⁵⁷ With the emergence of this kind of doll, the child can further enact mothering in a physical sense, and the controversy that sometimes follows the act of breastfeeding can, possibly, be reduced. Feminists, while praising the doll, also take umbrage with it, asserting, "it promotes little girls playing the role of 'mommy' for a newborn baby and reinforces motherhood as expected and ideal" (Van Deven). On the one hand, encouraging the physicality and function of a woman's body is a good lesson for children, yet the fact that it is posited in the function of motherhood is less promising. Motherhood is the bastard child of the feminist movement, both reviled for its ties to tradition and heralded as the last bastion that is exclusively the realm of women. Not wholly demonized, maternity

⁵⁷ The reasons why this doll might not make an appearance in the U.S. are numerous. We tend to sexualize women's breasts, viewing them as a place of pleasure rather than of function. Despite the ludicrousness of this sexualization, the idea of seeing a child engage in breastfeeding further problematizes our concept of right and wrong where nursing, sexuality and gender are concerned. Note Ch. 2 and the issues for lactating fathers, a completely errant concept for most, and another point of contention for lactation advocates everywhere.

must first be elevated, praised and exalted, showcasing the role of mother, especially before it can be knocked down.⁵⁸

Script-like narratives of maternal dominance, that reinforce the importance of the mother approaching almost mythical proportions, move into popular culture with remarkable ease. Consider the celebrity figure of Angelina Jolie. Although heralded for her beauty and romance with Brad Pitt, what she is most noted for, in her current reinvention of herself, is her role as super-mom. Previously, Jolie was known as the ne'er do well, canoodling with the likes of bad boy Billy Bob Thornton, tattooing herself with the names of her lovers and carrying a vial of Thornton's blood around her neck. Now, Jolie is the proverbial mother figure, reinvented. New headlines speculate whether Jolie will adopt another child, making her family replete with seven children (three biological, three adopted). Pictures of Jolie found in tabloid magazines feature the star clutching one or many of her children. One interview has her asserting that she appreciates her looks more now that she is a mother. She notes, "Something else comes out of you when you become a parent and, as you get older, you start to see more character in your face" (Palmer). Jolie's transformation is complete: physical and emotional.

Jolie stands in stark contrast to another mother: Britney Spears. Whereas Jolie has successfully transformed herself from bad girl to mother, seemingly successfully blending celebrity, maternity and philanthropy, Spears has not made the required shift.⁵⁹ In May 2006, Spears lost her balance coming out of a New York City hotel and almost,

⁵⁸ I will look at the criticism of maternity more in the sub-section dealing with the rejection of maternity and anti-maternity in the ensuing pages, but I first want to continue with the imperative of the maternal as an important contrast.

⁵⁹ Another example of a celebrity who has failed to make this requisite maternal shift is Courtney Love.

almost, dropped her seven-month-old baby. Prior to this event, Spears was spotted driving with her baby sitting on her lap rather than in the required car seat. In defense of her actions, she claims to have been trying to escape paparazzi who were stalking her. These actions served to be only a starting point for what would be an all-out attack on the maternity of Spears. To defend herself, Spears sat down with Matt Lauer to address her mothering in June 2006, asserting, “I know I’m a good mom” (“Britney Spears: I Know I Am”). In the months that ensued, Spears engaged in debaucherous behavior, carousing and reveling as though she were single and childless. As Ayelet Waldman notes in Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace,

Her [Spears’] Bad Mother rap sheet is long and varied. It includes being committed to a psychiatric facility, losing visitation rights after failing to submit to court-mandated drug testing, driving with her infant son on her lap, and running in her car over the feet of photographers and sheriff’s deputies. And apart from her legal troubles, there are her miscellaneous crimes of lifestyle. Her constant partying, her spendthrift ways (\$737,000 every month!), and most notoriously perhaps, her inexplicable refusal to wear undergarments. (6)

Her breaking point came in 2007 when she shaved her head and lashed out at the paparazzi. Spears exhibited a rash, angry side not typically shown. It didn’t take long for the media to use Spears as a poster child for all that a mother shouldn’t be. Even though Spears lives her life in a fishbowl and she is a young, new mother, the maternal police

were on the scene, documenting every foible, every slip, until Spears surrendered custody to her husband, temporarily, and sought rehabilitation.

Conversely, with six children, Jolie exhibits what I dub uber-maternity. Seen with popular pop culture figures like Nadya Suleman (“Octomom”), Kate Gosselin (of “Jon & Kate Plus Eight”), or Michelle Duggar (of “18 Kids and Counting”), this trend toward mothering an extreme amount of children, and showcasing it, is a relatively new phenomenon. Not all of these mothers are heralded, however. Suleman’s pregnancy via fertility treatments and insemination calls into question the ethics of mothering a family that was already large, not to mention birthing multiple infants. The Gosselins recent divorce debacle raises questions about child rearing and development through a public lens, televised for all to see.⁶⁰ The Duggars, with their absurdly seemingly perfect family, seem compelled by religious reasons to repopulate and reproduce. Because their ideology seems archaic, these mothers attract criticism, but this comes more in the form of curiosity than outright detractors. These mothers and their families seem to be put forth as entertainment, but they are also, in many ways, the embodiment of the deification of maternity, something our culture takes part in by participating in the viewership of these shows.⁶¹

While coupling reality TV with motherhood seems a bit salacious, the “art” of magazine covers is, perhaps, a less prurient means of displaying this homage to maternity. Replacing the famed portraits from the late 19th century of mothers and

⁶⁰ In many ways, this spectacle of child-birthing and rearing as entertainment is reminiscent of the spectacle given to the public through the care and nurture of the Dionne quintuplets in the 1930s in Canada.

⁶¹ The deification of maternity can often be found in dystopian/utopian literature and film. Because of the extensiveness of this genre, one could study the role of maternity in this genre exclusively and see these trends. One film worth noting, however, is *Children of Men* (2006). Here, society is universally infertile except for one woman who miraculously conceives.

children that Mary Cassatt made famous are the pregnancy covers celebrities clamor for, heralding their uber-maternity. Most notable is Angelina Jolie's cover on *W* magazine (Nov. 2008) featuring her breastfeeding one of her twins. Compare this to Cassatt's 1890 portrait entitled *Maternite*. Although similar in content, the modern image seems to sell the idea of motherhood to the viewer. Another such image that sparked the uber-maternity push is the 1991 cover from *Vanity Fair* featuring a seven-months pregnant Demi Moore who, standing sideways, looks frankly at the camera while her hands carefully cover her breasts and cradle her belly. Taken by Annie Leibovitz, the image was the first to really showcase the pregnant celebrity body, reveling in her maternal development. Other celebrities would follow suit: Cindy Crawford posed at seven-months pregnant for the June 1999 *W* cover; Christina Aguilera showcased her pregnant body in a spread within the January 2008 issue of *Marie Claire*; and Britney Spears posed nude one of the 2006 covers of *Bazaar*. Displaying the maternal body is a new development for publishers, and one newly consumed by readers and viewers of these kinds of texts. While the maternal body seems to be revealed in, the way in which that body enacts mothering is often problematic.

It is pleasant to look at the beauty of the maternal figure, gestating a life within, but once that child becomes a separate entity apart from the mother's body, the same culture that seemingly deifies the maternal seeks to dictate how that mothering should be enacted. Similar media are used to instruct and admonish. Take, for instance, the spate of reality television shows that explore the flawed family dynamic. ABC's *Supernanny* presents an authoritative figure in Jo Frost, the British nanny who comes to observe, chastise, advise, and subsequently praise the families for following her suggestions and

advice. The formulaic routine of the show doesn't undermine its power as each week a new disaster unfolds before the viewers' eyes. Although the advice is often the same (implementation of the naughty chair, suggestion of getting down to the child's level for interaction and repetition and reinforcement of rules providing structure and routine), the bad behavior of the children (and the parents) is continually astounding. What is interesting is how the nanny is shown watching the video of the family on display at their worst at the onset of the show. During the viewing, comments about the family's behavior are often made by Jo directly to the camera. Jo is heard gasping or she looks directly at the camera, her eyes growing wide. Viewers are privy to the trials of the family, essentially witnessing the demise of effective mothering/fathering/parenting. The show begins in earnest when Jo closes her laptop where she has viewed the spectacle and asserts, "Hang on. Help is on the way," or some variant. Once Jo arrives, viewers see her interact with the family. The problematic behavior occurring during Jo's visit is interspersed with cutaways to Jo alone, reflecting on the problems and issues she has diagnosed within the household and, of course, how to solve them.

The show sets itself up as a didactic narrative, admonishing mothers not to be too exhausted, too unrealistic, too forgiving, too critical, too passive, too inconsistent and a whole host of other "too" behaviors. The families are used as illustrations of the pitfalls of such behavior, and the nanny, in her authoritative British voice, stands in as the instructional guide to further prevent any more issues. Each episode ends with an epiphany of sorts. The parent(s) take Jo's word when it comes to raising their children and, as proof, the children are reformed and renewed, relishing the structure and uniformity given by Jo. Viewers of the show are taken through a similar process,

heeding the careful mandates issued by the “supernanny.” The show reminds viewers that parenting is a skill set, learned and perfected, and that this skill set can be learned through a properly sanctioned authoritative voice. While much of Jo’s advice is good, what is being offered is a window into the inadequacy of the ma/pa-ternal figures.

Another reality show that explores this inadequacy is *Wife Swap*, also on ABC. The premise is two families, often polar opposites, swaps wives. In one episode, for instance, a regimented, orderly wife and mother is paired with a sloppy, spontaneous one (Orris/Flynn families). The wives must live within the rules of their new family for one week until the second week when the new wives get to make the rules, challenging the “norms” of the adoptive family. While the swap is interesting for the wives, children are often involved, and what is on display here is again a thinly veiled criticism of how ma/pa-rents are doing their job. As I mentioned, two extremes are often pitted against each other, leaving viewers to conclude that the goal of a successful family is to be somewhere in the middle.

Television and film aren’t the only venues where motherhood is often the topic of debate as politics also is a source for examining conflicts around the act of mothering, and choosing not to. Sally Field, in a 2007 Emmy acceptance speech, made it a point not so much to thank and applaud those who helped her win that spot, but rather to spout her political views. Criticizing the Iraq war by way of praising the character she plays, Nora Walker on *Brother and Sisters*, Field exclaimed, “Let’s face it, if the mothers ruled the [world], there would be no god-damned wars in the first place” (“Sally Field Gets Political”). Cindy Sheehan, a Gold Star Mother and anti-war protester, often uses her maternity and the 2004 death of her son, Casey, as a means by which to spout her

political views. No one denies a person's ability to support or reject a political position, but using one's maternity as a vantage point to do so is another means to perpetuate new or reinforce old scripts about what makes an effective mother and as a means to establish a preferred political behavior mediated through the lens of maternity. In 2007, Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had an exchange regarding this very issue, with Boxer heralding her maternity as a place of legitimacy to pontificate about the Iraq war. Boxer asked Rice, "Who pays the price?" and continued, asserting, "I'm not going to pay a personal price. My kids are too old and my grandchild is too young." To Rice, however, she pointed, "You're not going to pay a particular price, as I understand it, with an immediate family" ("White House Spokesman"). Reading between the lines, the *New York Post* critiqued the exchange, noting that Boxer "apparently believes that an accomplished, seasoned diplomat, a renowned scholar and an adviser to two presidents like Condoleezza Rice is not fully qualified to make policy at the highest levels of the American government because she is a single, childless woman" ("White House Spokesman"). Rice, befuddled, told the *New York Times*, "I thought it was okay to be single. I thought it was okay to not have children, and I thought you could still make good decisions on behalf of the country if you were single and didn't have children" (Cooper and Shanker). Not only is maternity a particular vantage point, it seems, but also one of superiority, again emphasizing the maternal imperative.

Female politicians are perhaps the most interesting case study, as their maternity often becomes a point of pride or detraction, depending on whether they are affiliated with the Republican or Democratic parties. In defense of her own political role, Hillary

Clinton, long before she was a presidential nominee, asserted, “I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was to fulfill my profession which I entered before my husband was in public life” (“Making Hillary Clinton an Issue”).⁶² The idea of staying at home, serving as a mother and social hostess for her family or going outside of the home and working in the public sector is one hotly debated even beyond politics. Known, as I mentioned before, as “The Mommy Wars,” this debate between staying at home or working outside the home persists even within the political sphere. Perhaps this is best illustrated with our current First Lady, or first mom as she designates. In a reflective piece, Michelle Obama considers her role as First Lady, asserting,

Now that Barack has been elected president, it will be an honour to be First Lady. I will work daily on the issues closest to my heart: helping working women and families, particularly military families. But, as my girls reminded me in Denver, even as First Lady, my No 1 job is still to be Mom. At 7 and 10, our daughters are young. My first priority will be to ensure they stay grounded and healthy, with normal childhoods - including homework, chores, dance, and soccer. (“My Number 1 Job as First Lady”)

Michelle Obama rejects the idea of choosing between staying home and being a mom and working outside the home, asserting she will do both. What is interesting, however, is that she prioritizes the maternal function. Heralding the maternal imperative in naming herself “mom in chief” rather than just First Lady, Michelle Obama crafts a unique

⁶² Clinton became notable for her work, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (1996). One key aspect of this work is the role of various facets of the community in raising a child. Rather than a maternal effort, solely, it becomes a community endeavor, completely.

maternal narrative within the political spectrum. There have been many political women and first ladies, moreover, who have maintained both roles, but Michelle Obama casts her maternity in a primary light, presenting her role as First Lady as a secondary position. Michelle Obama serves as an interesting contrast to Sarah Palin, former governor of Alaska and 2008 Vice-Presidential nominee. Palin's maternity is used, in a sense, as a badge of her ability to juggle myriad tasks, but her presentation of maternity is very different than that of Michelle Obama's depiction. As the *New York Times* reports, "No one has ever tried to combine presidential politics and motherhood in quite the way Ms. Palin is doing, and it is no simple task" (Kantor, Zernike and Einhorn). This is in reference to the fact that Palin hid her pregnancy with her latest child, Trig, until the seventh month, opting to keep her maternity an irrelevant issue in her role as politician. With her son, she took a three-day maternity leave. With her youngest daughter, Piper, she took only one. The article continues,

Many high-powered parents separate work and children; Ms. Palin takes a wholly different approach. "She's the mom and the governor, and they're not separate," Ms. Cole said. Around the governor's offices, it was not uncommon to get on the elevator and discover Piper, smothering her puppy with kisses. "She'll be with Piper or Trig, then she's got a press conference or negotiations about the natural gas pipeline or a bill to sign, and it's all business," Ms. Burney, who works across the hall, said. "She just says, 'Mommy's got to do this press conference.'"

While Palin didn't make a big production over her son's Down's Syndrome diagnosis, her knowledge beforehand of this disability and her decision to carry on with the pregnancy further fuel her political stance as a pro-life activist. While her personal choice is well and good, Palin's maternity in raising five children and having a political career isn't always cast in a favorable light.⁶³ The recent issue of motherhood in the political arena calls the Mommy Wars into play. Can Palin be an effective mother and an effective politician?⁶⁴ The *New York Times* quotes Phyllis Schlafly as saying yes: "It changes your life and gives you a different perspective on the world" (Kantor and Swarns). This seems vaguely reminiscent of the argument Barbara Boxer put forth.⁶⁵ On the other hand, an example like Cathy McMorris Rodgers, representative from Washington who also has a Down's Syndrome child, maintains in the same article that she feels torn between her work life and home life. Even beyond politics, the question of whether or not a woman can "have it all" seems to persist. Is the maternal imperative triumphant, usurping a woman's work outside the home, or can the maternal imperative sit in balance with other self-interests?

The aforementioned question is an interesting one. One might look at Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama and their accomplishments as examples of staunch feminist success. Clinton graduated from Yale Law and Obama graduated from Harvard Law. Hillary Clinton has helped pioneer pivotal health care legislation and currently serves as

⁶³ At the time of this controversy in 2008, Palin was serving as Governor of Alaska, running as John McCain's Vice-Presidential pick and working as a mother to five.

⁶⁴ Palin's maternal ability was further questioned as evidence that her daughter Bristol, 17, was unwed and pregnant. This information came out during the 2008 presidential campaign. How effective was a politician who ran on an abstinence platform if her own daughter is illustrative of the problem as a teenage mother?

⁶⁵ It is interesting to note the current language used in discussing the political debate du jour: health care. Pundits worry that the United States is becoming a "nanny state" and that we are moving toward a "Big Mother" kind of care. The language of maternity couples with the political to create a unique dialectic.

Secretary of State. Michelle Obama pioneers legislation in terms of healthy eating and quality food and is the first African-American First Lady. In addition to all this, they have children, respectively, functioning as mothers as well. Clearly, they have it all. What is fascinating, however, is that *they* call into account their maternity, almost with a sense of guilt and justification. See the aforementioned statements about what Hillary says she could have done or how Michelle Obama prioritizes her maternal function. Implicitly there is much of the guilt intrinsic in the Mommy War debates. Maternity serves as a personal source of guilt and conflict, but also as a vehicle of agency to promote political gain. As Marsha Marotta comments,

When mothers put their gender and their maternity front and center as they label themselves, they use their motherhood consciously in a way that is beneficial to their immediate reform efforts. Once they call the stereotypes of motherhood into play, however, they claim that as their identity.... They use their relationship with their children to claim a right to call for reform. (333-34)

Maternity becomes not just something that must be mediated personally, but publicly within the political sphere.

Even beyond key political figures, the language used to describe mothers who involve themselves in politics is telling. In “Political Labeling of Mothers,” Marotta notes that the term “soccer mom” is a political term. “[S]urfac[ing] in the 1996 U.S. presidential election” these swing voters were “mothers for whom motherhood is their lives” (328). While some women proudly sport “soccer mom” bumper stickers on the bumpers of their mini-vans reclaiming and owning the term, Marotta points out that

This political label was part of a campaign to tell mothers what they should be concerned about at the voting booth, but like other representations it was deployed in the service of reducing every mother to the mother who devotes her life to her children, reducing women to a maternal identity. (329)

While one's maternity is certainly a factor in making political decisions that affect the next generation, making it all about one's maternity diminishes and dismisses the issues at hand. Supplanting this term, or adding to it, was the nomenclature of "security moms." After the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., this label was put out there "to tell mothers how they should feel and how they should vote" (330). Maternity is used to prey on the fears of all and to mediate how voters should vote, enforcing a mother knows best kind of thinking. Although Marotta reads this labeling as a source of marginalization, boxing women in to narrowly defined and prescribed categories, I read this as an implied source of power. Motherhood is called into play as something one can't argue with, that can't be doubted. While the labeling and who labels these mothers might be for a different agenda in terms of reducing them to simple emotional reactions rather than clearly thought out political ones, the fact that these mothers often reclaim these terms and empower them for effective social change is more telling. Maternity is a source of power as even Marotta notes, "[t]here is no question that these movements achieved results" (332). Maternity, here, is agency to enact and inform policy.

Moving beyond politics, it seems the problems of balancing motherhood with any other outside interest reign, complicating the roles of mother and self and fueling the Mommy Wars. This can be seen across genres, in daytime talk shows, Hollywood films,

and 19th century literature. In an episode entitled “Can Women Have it All?” Oprah Winfrey investigated that very question with the focus on working mothers for her January 23, 2007 show. The show featured Elizabeth Vargas, the replacement anchor for Bob Woodruff on ABC’s *World News Tonight*, and during this episode, Vargas admitted that it was “hard to do that job and be the mother I want to be.” Because of this conflict, Vargas resigned her position as anchor, asserting, “I wish I could do it all, but that’s not physically possible.” So can women have it all?⁶⁶ Oprah’s survey found 66 percent of working mothers said they would quit their jobs and half of all mothers feel as though they are failing. Whether one works or stays home, it seems mothers feel they are doomed. During the show, one audience member, Peggy, a working mother, reflects, “I missed all their precious moments.” Another, Lynne, a stay at home mom, quips, “So much [given] to my family ... I was put on the back burner.” This conflict is not new, but persists. In a February 23 article from ABC News in 2006, the headline queries: “How to Raise Kids: Stay Home or Go to Work?” Presented as an explorative piece between the two sides, the headline seems to suggest that an answer lies within and, indeed, a side is almost presented. Looking at two women who chose each route, respectively, the article examines the pros and cons, concluding, “American Girls Need Working Moms.” Linda Hirschman, a law professor and working mother featured in the article, gets the last say in the piece, asserting, “I think that one could argue that these women are letting down the team. Consider a society in which the entire Supreme Court is male. We may actually experience that in our lifetime. What would it feel like if the

⁶⁶ A contemporary film that explores this very issue is *Motherhood* (2009) which explores how the character Eliza Welsh (played by Uma Thurman) manages to function as a writer, wife, friend, and mother, coupling all roles with imminent disaster.

entire Congress were male?”⁶⁷ Reminiscent of Hillary Clinton’s “It Takes a Village” sentiment of the societal and community mentality at play to raise a child, Hirschman’s observation reinforces the group mentality of furthering the feminist movement. Mothering, or how it is done, becomes less a personal issue and more a culturally or socially sanctioned one. Going back to the Oprah episode, Oprah concludes the show with a pronouncement that seems to halt further discussion: “I say you can have it all, just not all at the same time.” While a nice sentiment, many mothers don’t have that choice.

The conflict inherent in the profession of mothering is one that manifests itself in many ways: how to raise one’s child; to work or not to work; and, one that often gets pushed to the side, how to navigate self-interests. The notion of a mother pursuing self-interests often gets construed as “selfishness,” for mothers are (as defined for us through so many venues) supposed to be the ultimate in self-sacrificing. But at what cost? In Brooke Shields’s 2005 memoir, Down Came the Rain, she explores her bout with post-partum depression. Although centered on this very real form of depression, much of Shields’s memoir deals with the conflict between imagined motherhood (presented through societal narratives) and the very real motherhood with which she was now faced. Of breastfeeding, she writes: “I resented how easy and natural and beautiful they [the lactation specialist and nurses] made breast-feeding sound, and I almost expected to see little birds flying around their heads” (51). She continues, reflecting on how she imagined nursing to be: “The baby is on the mother’s breast, the mother’s hair is cascading down, and the infant is gazing up with complete contentment. I see the mother, head tilted, looking into her baby’s eyes with an expression of total peace and relaxation. The connection is seamless and perfect” (51). The beauty and ease with

⁶⁷ Hirschman authored the book Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World (2006).

which women become mothers are ideals ingrained in women. The maternal instinct will kick in, mothers are told. Your body is meant to do this, mothers are reminded. As Shields reflects: “Once I was a mother, the different parts of my world would all converge, and I would experience life as I’d envisioned it and in turn would know what I was meant to be” (69-70). For Shields, and many mothers, what is sold to them and what is experienced are two very disparate things. She acknowledges this as she struggles through the day-to-day trials of maternity, noting, “I’d always had this idea that women should be able to mother their children without help, but this was probably just another one of my idealized notions of motherhood” (101).

With help, Shields made it through her struggle with depression, but not without criticism from the media in the form of Tom Cruise. Appearing on *Access Hollywood*, Cruise leveled accusations at Shields, asserting that she could better cure herself with vitamins and exercise and chastising her for her use of anti-depressants to help get back on track. Although he eventually endured a firestorm of derision based on his uninformed comments and subsequently apologized, his attitude is reflective of many who dismiss a woman’s struggle physically, mentally or emotionally with motherhood in any capacity. For most, motherhood should utilize certain emotions that yield a specific emotional response. Shields, however, notes, “For me, becoming a mother also means that I feel happier than I could imagine and more sad than I thought possible. None of this indicates that I am crazy or in any way abnormal” (204). Shields comes out triumphant, in part because she recognizes the farce within idealized maternity.

Another conflict complicating maternity is the preservation of the self that I previously mentioned. Self-preservation is a means of keeping the individual one was

prior to the all-encompassing succubus nature of motherhood. The suffocating nature of family life and suburbia portrayed in the 1950s can be seen in the 2008 film *Revolutionary Road*. Based on the novel by Richard Yates, Sam Mendes's film tells the story of Frank and April Wheeler (played by Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, respectively), a disenchanting couple who have gotten away from their initial single selves. Frank is a salesman, just like his father, while April is a stay-at-home mom to their two children. Viewers see, through flashbacks, how the two met (at a party) and how they had plans prior to "settling" for the life they lead (she to become an actress; he to live in Paris). It strikes April one day that they can still partly live out their life the way they want to without the helplessness and emptiness they both have been feeling by using their savings and moving to Paris. April anticipates working as a secretary while Frank will figure out what it is he really wants to do. She argues,

It's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working year after year at a job he can't stand. Coming home to a place he can't stand, to a wife who's equally unable to stand the same things. And you know what the worst part of it is? Our whole existence here is based on this great premise that we're special. That we're superior to the whole thing. But we're not. We're just like everyone else! We bought into the same, ridiculous delusion. That we have to resign from life and settle down the moment we have children. And we've been punishing each other for it.

Frank concedes her point and the couple seems happy upon deciding to move, that is until April discovers she is ten weeks pregnant and Frank is offered a sizeable promotion at

work. April considers an abortion, arguing that it would be for Frank. When he rejects this idea, she pleads, “Then it will be for me.” When April realizes Frank is against the idea of abortion, she begs to have the baby in Paris, but, ultimately, Frank takes the job and the promotion.

April’s sense of self is in jeopardy. Blind to April’s needs, Frank doesn’t see her point of view when he stumbles upon April’s abortion kit. Instead, he chastises her, asserting, “You make it seem as if having children is some sort of a goddamned punishment.” April retorts, “I’ve had two children. Doesn’t that count in my favor?” Frank and April come to an impasse where she insists, “I love my children,” but Frank doubts, saying, “Are you sure about that?” Because April sees another child as a means of breaking her in spite of the love she feels for her current children, she decides she must take swift and final action. For Frank, these unexpected surprises, a promotion, a pregnancy, are all a means of making better the current situation—a situation April knows will break her. Frank is completely blind to her need for selfishness, calling into question her current maternal function. He chastises, “A normal woman, a normal sane mother, doesn’t buy a piece of rubber tubing to give herself an abortion so she can live out some kind of goddamned fantasy.... You don’t seem entirely rational about this whole thing....” He suggests a psychiatrist for her, yet the final insult comes when he proclaims, “I can make you happy here.” For April, her happiness has nothing to do with a promotion, a pregnancy, or Frank himself, but rather her own self-exploration and preservation. When she realizes Frank will never understand, she becomes the happy homemaker he wants, making him breakfast, seeing him off to work and chit-chatting before his commute. When he leaves, however, she breaks down and cries. Her final act

is to call her children who are with a friend before she goes upstairs to give herself an abortion. The last scene featuring April shows her slowly walking down the stairs and making her way to the picture window overlooking the suburban landscape she occupies. As the camera pans out, we see her dripping blood onto the white carpet. April's selfishness results in her own loss of life.⁶⁸

Sometimes, however, the virtue of selfish behavior can be an implicitly beneficial, selfless act for the child involved. In a 2007 episode of *Desperate Housewives* entitled "My Husband, the Pig," viewers see Edie Brit (played by Nicollette Sheridan) faced with the responsibilities of motherhood, something antithetical to the libertine she embodies. Here, Edie must mother her son, Trevor, who usually stays with his father. Since the father must tend to his Doctors Without Borders responsibility, Edie must become a parent for a month. Edie flounders and begs her neighbor Carlos (played by Ricardo Chavira) to watch him so she can go out on a date, but he declines. Later that evening, Carlos peers out his window and sees Trevor playing in the street; he quickly abandons his date to tend to the unsupervised child. When Edie returns, she finds a note on her door from Carlos that reads, "I have your son." Edie stumbles and fumbles for an explanation, pleading she only left him for an hour and that she didn't know he'd go outside. Carlos shuts her down quickly, informing her that she was gone for three hours and "you never know what an eight year old will do; that's why you supervise them." The dialogue that ensues hearkens back to the masculine maternity discussed in Chapter Two, as we see the maternal function mediated by the man. Edie retorts, "You don't get to judge me. You don't have a kid." Carlos explains, "Well if I did, I'd treat him a hell

⁶⁸ I use the term selfishness here in much the same way Ayn Rand uses the term in The Virtue of Selfishness. Selfishness isn't always a derogatory thing although, in relation to maternity, it is often held up as one of the antonyms to maternal function.

of a lot better than you do. Thank God he lives with his father. C'mon, what kind of mother are you?" As punishment and duty, he makes her return in the morning to get her son, opting to take care of him on his own for the remainder of the evening. Again, the *kind* of mother one is gets called into question by the man, who seems to mediate the *way* in which motherhood should be enacted. The maternal code has been breached and the masculine faction functions as the enforcer of the implicit code. When Edie returns the next morning, she tells Carlos that she knows he thinks she is a terrible person, which he denies. She continues, "Terrible mother, terrible person, it's the same thing because no matter what else she does, if a woman isn't a good mother, she's a failure, right?" Edie explains that she gave her husband custody when they divorced so Trevor could have the best life possible. By way of rationale, she maintains, "[It] doesn't make me a good mother, but I like to think it makes me a realistic one." Here, although her bad decision of leaving the boy might be called into question, we know there is a virtue to her overarching selfishness of opting out of her primary maternal function. It is, however, interesting to note the masculine role in primary maternity (with her husband) and in policing maternity (with Carlos).

Often this lack of maternal function or beneficial selfishness is presented as a foil to the masculine maternal desire. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Stanley in Gail Godwin's *A Mother and Two Daughters* desires to have a child of his own, figuratively and physically. This is in direct contrast to many of the women who battle against the maternal imperative and forge their own path, although acutely aware of the norms they are rejecting. Cate admits her lack of desire for a child to her boyfriend, Jernigan. Readers are told, "But after all these years, she still expected the sky to come crashing

down on her in punishment every time she said she didn't want children" (109). She later revels in what she thinks is menopause: "She would not have to be anybody's mother or grandmother. She would not have to be Anyman's idea of 'a real woman'" (189). When Cate finds out she is pregnant, she chooses abortion. Although she tries to feel a connection to children, observing and studying them at a local park prior to her appointment, Cate feels no connection. Of Cate, we are told, "[N]one of the children appealed to her. They were just not her type of people" (193). She proceeds with her abortion, remaining steadfast to her independent, non-maternal function that she desired to keep intact. Another female character, Renee, exhibits the selfishness that benefits the mother and child. Readers are informed that Renee's daughter, Camilla, was raised by Renee's mother so Renee could pursue her education and career. Renee tells how Camilla believed Renee was her sister, but the grandmother corrected her. Camilla cried and cried, believing the grandmother was her mother. Renee posits, "She writes me things in her letters that she won't tell Mamma. So maybe I got the best of both worlds, after all" (144). Both Renee and Cate are selfish in their maternity. They put themselves first, and their desires. Although there is conflict within these selfish/selfless actions, depending on how one reads the act, the two women ultimately defy the conventional notions of maternity.

Defying maternal convention isn't exclusive to the 20th or 21st century. Going back to the scripts of maternity, perhaps the best text to delve into the categorical delineation and the conflict within maternal imperative is Kate Chopin's 1899 work, The Awakening. This novel, published at the end of the 19th century, examines issues and ideas that would shape the discussion and debates around motherhood, the way it should

be enacted, and the way a woman should behave, well into the 21st century. As the novel opens, readers see Mr. Leonce Pontellier is dissatisfied by the way in which Edna Pontellier, his wife, cares for their children: “He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother’s place to look after the children, whose on earth was it” (24)? Leonce, the male, attempts to mediate Edna’s maternity, insinuating she isn’t “doing it right.” As Kathleen Streater points out, “Chopin reveals how women are being defined by a male construct of motherhood that not only denies their individual identity, but also continually reinforces a sense of inferiority” (407).

On the other hand, Edna doesn’t define herself as the ideal “mother-woman,” the typical type inhabiting Grand-Isle.

It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (26)

The chief example of this type of woman is Madame Adele Ratignole, who stands in contrast to Edna. We learn that she “had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one” (27). In contrast, we learn of Edna that

[s]he was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes

forget them. The year before they had spent part of the summer with their grandmother Pontellier in Iberville. Feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (37)

The two women are at odds in dealing with the topic of selfishness and maternity. We learn that Edna and Adele had discussed the topic of sacrificing one's self for the children and had, not surprisingly, disagreed. Edna maintained, "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (67). Adele doesn't understand the difference between life and self, stating, "[A] woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—... I'm sure I couldn't do more than that" (67). Edna laughs, "Oh, yes you could!" (67). For Edna, life and self are two different things; for Adele, her self is defined by her children. Francesco Pontuale observes, "[t]he new identity for which Edna is searching is an identity which transcends a feminine role confined to motherhood only" (41). When Edna witnesses Adele's most recent birth, she refers to it as "the scene of torture" (132). When Edna leaves Adele's side, Adele whispers to her, "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (132). Perhaps this admonition is given because of the danger Adele perceives of Edna succumbing to the third categorical mix, Mademoiselle Reisz, a musician, who represents the artistic portion of these women.

If Edna is the conflicted one, and Adele is the mother-woman, Mademoiselle Reisz represents the one who has the artistic life. Edna is drawn to Reisz's piano playing

and cultivates a friendship with the woman. Edna begins to draw and find her own inner artistic self beginning to develop. She seeks sanctuary at her own private bungalow, the pigeon house, where she can explore her self. Because of this exploration of self, Edna is often chastised, chiefly by her husband, Leon. He tells her if she wants to paint, paint, but “don’t let the family go to the devil. There’s Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn’t let everything else go to chaos” (77). Edna is constantly being compared to what she isn’t rather than being accepted for what she is. In part, because of this, Edna takes her own life in the sea. In her final moments she does take Adele’s advice, thinking of Leonce and the children, but decides, “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (137). This fragmented view of womanhood, of maternity, persists in the conflict within the maternal imperative.

In many ways, Edna is able to unable to situate herself between two polarities of womanhood. Pontuale posits that Edna’s inherent bisexuality (in her attraction to these myriad women) reflects her conflict. Calling on theorist Helene Cixous and her idea of deconstructing language, Pontuale contends Chopin inherently criticizes “the oppositional structure of male/female and displac[ing] the two terms so that neither of them has a privileged status” (44). Edna, in many respects, doesn’t embrace either the excessive femininity of Adele or the masculine mono-focus of Mademoiselle Reisz, putting her somewhere in the middle. Katherine Kearns writes of Mademoiselle Reisz that “[i]n Edna’s dichotomous vision, Reisz is necessarily a third sex, for by philosophical, historical, and intellectual tradition she cannot be female” (81). Because Mademoiselle Reisz is an artist, she must dissociate herself from the trappings of the feminine. She doesn’t embody any feminine qualities, and her maternity is non-existent. In many ways, Edna’s

inability to align herself with one “gender” function over the other is endemic of her conflict. Kearns claims that “Edna gradually capitulates to a disdain for femininity, which she defines by cultural imperative as an essentially negative condition and thus she is forced to articulate her increasing distance from Adele and all other women” (70).

What choice does Edna have? Two, it seems. As Ivy Schweitzer points out:

She can resign herself to her ‘fate’ as a woman, a position in this text always modified by the role of mother, or she can demand her practical and existential freedom as an individual, a freedom to explore the range of her desires conventionally reserved for men. (168)

Of course her decision comes much later in the novel when Edna finds that she just doesn’t have a place among the choices she is given and gives herself over to a birth (rebirth) in the sea.

Further illustration that this dichotomy, or trichotomy as it were, persists is Sylvia Plath’s 1971 novel The Bell Jar. Based largely on Plath’s own life, Esther Greenwood journeys through her early adult years trying to figure out where she fits among society’s prescribed roles. Her fractured and divided self is further revealed in the adopted and fictional personas she gives herself: Elly Higginbottom when she is out with her sexy, feminine friend, Doreen; Ee Gee when she imagines how her life could be like Jay-Cee’s, her smart boss; and Elaine, the fictional persona Esther creates to represent herself in her burgeoning novel. Esther tries on a wide range of personalities, all who function as the antithesis to her. We read, “My heroine would be myself, only in disguise” (120). To further complicate her character, Esther is conflicted by the representations of femaleness similar to Edna in The Awakening. Jay-Cee, the editor of *Ladies Day*, the woman who

has brains, parallels Mademoiselle Reisz. The same can be said for Esther's sponsor and provider of her scholarship, Philomena Guinea. Both women are rooted in the literary, the latter being a wealthy novelist. In part, Esther aspires to be a professional like these women as she wants to be a writer. On the other hand, she is plagued by the maternal as portrayed by Dodo Conway. She is pictured as a woman, "not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach, ... wheeling an old black baby carriage.... A serene, almost religious smile lit up the woman's face ..." (116). Dodo is almost beatific in her maternity. This mother-woman, we learn, attended Barnard, but didn't pursue any professional ambition, instead marrying an architect. For Dodo, her career is her children. Esther maintains, "Dodo interested me in spite of myself" (116). The constant squeak of the baby carriage Dodo wheels, seemingly directly below Esther's window, torments her, reminding her of this other aspect of herself she should consider. Linda Wagner notes that when Esther watches Dodo "that all the scatted images of childbirth and female responsibility [were brought] to a climax. Unless she accepts this role, Esther will have no life—this is the message her society...gives her" (61). Esther admits, however, "Children made me sick" (117). This conflict between maternity and an abnegation of this maternity drives much of the novel.

After she tries to take her life and is hospitalized, repeatedly, Esther makes an appointment to seek birth control to prevent any accidental pregnancy and ensuing maternity. She reflects, "How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway? If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad" (222). Esther's maternal imperative is juxtaposed with the artistic expression she experiences during her internship in New

York. Unlike Edna, she doesn't forfeit herself to this conflict, although she has tried throughout the narrative. Through counseling and therapy, Esther is reborn, figuratively, birthing herself: "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded, and approved for the road..." (244). It isn't clear what lies ahead for Esther; the narrative ends without any definitive conclusion and with Esther disappointed at this persistent indecision, noting, "all I could see were question marks" (243). In much the same way Edna struggles, Esther struggles, and so persists the very same question asked two centuries ago.

Although both endings can be read positively in terms of rebirth for both Edna and Esther, they can also be read negatively in regards to Edna's death and Esther's continual confrontation with question marks. The solution for both of these women seems to be, as Diane Bonds posits, a way of understanding the world and the possibilities beyond hierarchical choices. Instead of mother/individual, child/mother, or mother/father, the language by which we speak of possibilities for women, and men, needs to be revisited. Bonds writes, "[t]he way out of the dilemma is a relational conception of selfhood in a world of non-oppressive, non-hierarchical relations. But we do not live in such a world (yet), and our culture offers few means of imaging non-oppressive, non-hierarchical relationality" (63). Instead of a choice between Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, or Dodo and Jay-Cee, choices that are diametrically opposed and implicitly hierarchized are opened up and expanded. At least that is the ideal.

It is interesting to note how these questions and struggles were documented in the 19th century and how they persist into the 20th and 21st century. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Story of Avis (1877) seems to resolve the split of the conflicted woman. Avis

Dobell, at first, is uncompromising in her determination to live her life as an artist, painter and single woman. Her conviction holds steady even after she meets Phillip Ostrander who seeks her love, affection and hand in marriage. Avis tries to explain to him why she can't give in to his romantic delusions: "Success—for a woman—means absolute surrender, in whatever direction. Whether she paints a picture, or loves a man, there is no division of labor possible in her economy" (69). Although she adheres to her philosophy for some time, she ultimately succumbs to his advances and marries him, soon after to have a son. As Elaine Showalter posits, "[L]ove persuades her to change her mind, and the novel records the inexorable destruction of her artistic genius as domestic responsibilities, maternal cares, and her husband's failures use up her energy" ("Tradition and" 174). Avis is slow to surrender, however, and continues to hold out hope for her ability to "have it all."

Ostrander supports her philosophy and encourages her to "have it all" in their union, yet she soon finds out she is with child. Readers learn her pregnancy is a further deviation from Avis's plan: "[M]otherhood was a fact which had never entered...upon her plans or visions of life. It was to be learned like any other unexpected lesson" (151).⁶⁹ Avis struggles with this lesson: "Perhaps, indeed, she was lacking in what is called the maternal passion as distinct from the maternal devotion. She was perfectly conscious of being obliged to learn to love her baby like anybody else..." (150). Avis is not a mother-woman, but rather more in line with the artistic soul struggling to find and identify with her self, alone. She finds her child instead of a blessing, "a great deal of trouble" (152). As with most children, he demands, he cries, and he seeks continual

⁶⁹ Much like Chodorow and Rich, Phelps shows in this novel that successful mothering is learned rather than an innately possessed talent by the female species.

consolation. The burdensome nature of maternity is even more the case when Phillip leaves, traveling to a better climate to battle his failing health, and she takes on the care of her two children on her own. In one scene, we see Avis trying to return to painting, but her son, Van, perches outside her door, persistently asking her questions and trying to get her to come and give him kisses. Although loving and careful with her children, Avis “wished she were like other women,—content to stitch and sing, to sweep and smile” (206). She isn’t that woman and loses herself along the way, trying to be something she is not. Showalter concludes, “[b]y the end of the novel, Avis has become resigned to the idea that her life is a sacrifice for the next generation of women” (“Tradition and”174). Phelps creates Avis as the embodiment of an ideal, the artist-woman, but Avis falls short of that. As Carol Farley Kessler notes, “[W]ifehood, homemaking, and motherhood—for which Phelps shows a woman to have no particular instinct—use all energy, all time” (xxiii).

The novel ends not as a declaration of woe, but rather as one of hope through her implicit maternal function. As Avis reflects at novels end, she notes,

[s]he had her child. It would be easier for her daughter to be alive, and be a woman, than it had been for her; so much as this, she understood; more than this she felt herself too spent to question. She folded her arms about the little girl, and laid her cheek upon her hair, and closed her eyes. She had the child, she had the child! (247)

Although she rejected her maternal function initially, Avis now sees art in her child and the potential that might be available to her daughter, Wait. As Avis has had to “wait” for her opportunity to explore self, she now identifies her creation in the form of her child as

what she is waiting for. The subsequent generation will write a new path: “We have been told that it takes three generations to make a gentleman: we may believe that it will take as much, or more, to make a WOMAN” (246). This woman is a new creation “competent to the terrible task of adjusting the sacred individuality of her life to her supreme capacity of love and the supreme burden and perils which it imposes upon her” (246). Avis looks to the possibility of the next generation for hope.

Echoing a similar sentiment as the fictional texts touched on so far, Alta Gerrey’s 1974 personal memoir entitled Momma: A Start on All the Untold Stories further expresses the conflict between artistic self-expression and self-sacrificing maternity. She writes: “i am a mother. i am a writer. will i ever be able to really believe both those statements?” (16). For Alta, the conflict comes with time:

...one of the reasons our story is not told is that mothers have no time. i got to sleep late this morning, & that shot the wad.... i snatch quiet moments when i can, like all mothers i know, but those stolen seconds do not create a book. books happen when you have time to think, time to form words, & simultaneously applying bandages, rinsing out bottles, wiping bottoms, picking scraps of paper off the floor, answering telephones, fixing food, & stopping quarrels. somehow I forgot all that....
(34)

Reminiscent of Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing,” Alta chastises herself also for the use of the time she does have, noting, “all the times i’ve had a clean house, & no words on white sheets of paper. we must allow ourselves to live. no one else is going to free

us. stop ironing! stop it!” (9). Ultimately, Alta achieves a connection with her writer-self and success, and she ends her work with a poem that criticizes the primacy given to the maternal and what it does to women:

we live wrong.
our lives are wrong.
to trap us in houses with no help,
to be sole guardians for little people,
our lives are wrong.
& who will right them?
i am trying.
i cannot do it alone,
even for myself, I cannot
do it alone. (75-76)

The struggle to be the sole caregiver and to enact that maternal function in a flawless way by the maternal imperative is one battle; the internal struggle to reconcile one’s artistic intentions with one’s maternal duty is another.

Further, Alta chronicles another aspect of the story that has yet to be told: maternal anger. Much of what she discloses in her prose deals with her two daughters, Lori and Kia, and the treatment they received from her. Alta talks of slapping, hitting, ripping doors out of frames, and verbal abuse. Although she confesses to frustration and anger in a fresh and open manner, it is interesting to note that, stylistically, sentences of

apology often follow a paragraph, section or sentence of confession. Often she will chronicle how much she loves her children, or detail how she likes to watch them sleep, or some such recollection. In book two, section seven, she writes in a poem entitled “california/1972,”

i walk past those homes

& hear the

mothers striking the

children

(i am one of those

mothers

striking

the children)

& the screams, the screams

of us trapped animals

striking one another

& screaming

& screaming (54)

This image of screaming children presented above is juxtaposed in section 9, the section that comes after, where Alta begins, “the overwhelming love, their faces so soft; i lie next to them as they sleep & all my horror dissolves ...” (55). Here the maternal imperative is in effect as her maternal anger is overcome by the drive to be the nurturing mom.

Although Alta produces a deeply personal and moving memoir, her need to temper the bitter (maternal anger) with the sweet (maternal affection) further reinforces the script of the maternal imperative. The need to showcase the scripted mother is still in play, even in her personal poetry. What Alta allows herself to feel and write is still mediated by societal scripts. What is most telling, however, is Alta’s observation about her rage. For her, and many mothers, the burden of being the primary caregiver (assumed or otherwise) takes its toll. Alta writes, “men don’t understand. some men, if they care for the child all day, come to understand the growing bit, the thrill of seeing thru children’s eyes, the joy of being born, but how many men ever understand being the final mother? the one it all comes back to” (7). The notion of “the final mother” is an interesting one. This concept involves the idea of responsibility, burden, duty (maternal imperative), while the other actions she mentions men engaging in are temporal. The finality, the permanence of one’s maternal role here, is stressed.⁷⁰

Anne Tyler’s 1982 novel, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, depicts a fictionalized version of the maternal anger Alta recounts. In contrast to the mother-woman there is also the “non-feeder” (159), as demonstrated in Pearl Tull, who is 81 when the novel opens. Pearl looks back on her life and on her maternity as the narrative progresses. Of Pearl we learn, “[S]he’d been an angry sort of mother. She’d been continually on edge; she’d felt too burdened, too much alone. And after Beck left, she’d

⁷⁰ I will come back to the idea of the “final mother” in the discussion of the rejection of maternity.

been so preoccupied with paying the rent and juggling the budget and keeping those great, clod-footed children in new shoes” (19-20). Although Pearl seems to love her children in an obligatory fashion, she certainly doesn’t shield them from her anger. When the children offer excuses in response to her berating Cody for hanging around a young girl’s home or Jenny for admiring another girl’s dress, Pearl goes on a rampage, enacting some sort of violence against all three children, in turn: “You upstart.... You wretch, you ugly horror.... Stupid clod.... Parasites.... I wish you’d all die, and let me go free. I wish I’d find you dead in your beds” (53). Pearl’s maternal anger isn’t tempered and, though she has the burden of raising three children, her anger wins out over any maternal imperative to love them. When Jenny, as a grown woman, reflects on the mother of her youth, she considers,

Her mother was a dangerous person—hot breathered and full of rage and unpredictable.... Which of her children had not felt her stinging slap, with the claw-encased pearl in her engagement ring that could bloody a lip at one flick? Jenny had seen her hurl Cody down a flight of stairs. She’d seen Ezra ducking, elbows raised, warding off an attack. She herself, more than once, had been slammed against a wall, been called “serpent,” “cockroach,” “hideous little sniveling guttersnipe.” (70)

Pearl navigates a balancing act between her maternal rage and her maternal obligation. She confesses to Cody, “[I]t’s such a battle, raising children.... I know you must think I’m difficult. I lose my temper, I carry on like a shrew sometimes, but if you could just realize how...helpless I feel! How scary it is to know that everyone I love depends on

me! I'm afraid I'll do something wrong" (63). As mentioned in Chapter Two, Pearl stands in stark contrast to her son, Ezra, who functions as the symbolic feeder in the family, literally and figuratively. He tells his mother, "I like making meals for people," to which she responds, "But the obligation!" (94). For Pearl, her loss of self plays a part in her anger. She rails against what she has lost and who she has become. Again she tries to explain this to Cody:

I know it's selfish, but I can't help it. I want to ask them, "Who do you think you are, anyhow? Do you imagine you're unique? Do you really suppose I was always this difficult old woman?"...I was special too, once, to someone....And then while you children were little, why, I was the center of your worlds! I was everything to you! It was Mother this and Mother that. ... It's really not fair; now I'm old and I walk along unnoticed, just like anyone else. (141-2)

Pearl garners both sympathy and revulsion. We are appalled at the treatment her children receive, but we empathize with her loss of status, not once, but twice. As a mother, Pearl loses her individual identity to her children in part when they are born; as a mother of grown children who no longer need her counsel and care, she loses her status again.

Thematically, many of these issues persist: choosing the domestic sphere over the professional; embodying one's maternity and sacrificing one's self; harnessing one's emotional anger and fear over the choices given. Yet another theme that conflicts with the maternal imperative is that of boredom, boredom with one's children, with one's life and with the domestic/maternal sphere. The opening chapter of Tom Perrotta's 2004

novel, Little Children, entitled “Bad Mommy” chronicles the disenchantment Sarah feels at being just another mother. Sarah engages in self-deception to ameliorate the situation: “Smiling politely to mask a familiar feeling of desperation, Sarah reminded herself to think like an anthropologist. *I’m a researcher studying the behavior of boring suburban women. I am not a boring suburban woman myself*” (3). The first chapter of Perrotta’s novel sets the stage at a children’s playground. All the mothers stand around and talk, and Sarah is pointedly reminded that she isn’t like other mothers and, through the narrative in the first few pages, we see how Sarah went from being a women’s studies Ph.D. student to a mother, shamed by the juxtaposition of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Berenstain Bears Visit the Dentist* in her diaper bag (14). Throughout the novel to combat this boredom she engages in a rich fantasy life, actually beginning an affair with a stay-at-home dad and imagining, rather vividly, how they could run away from their hum-drum existence. The loss of individuality by the inherent monotony in caring for a child causes Sarah to supplant her boredom with imagination.

The boredom intrinsic to motherhood, on some level, isn’t exclusively the domain of fiction; Helen Kirwan-Taylor caused quite a stir when she wrote an article in 2006 entitled “Sorry, but my children bore me to death!” published in the *Daily Mail*. Women were outraged at her confession and the general thesis of her piece: “I spent much of the early years of my children’s lives in a workaholic frenzy because the thought of spending time with them was more stressful than any journalistic assignment I could imagine.” She discusses how many women are trained professionals in their fields, yet give it up for motherhood, noting, “[F]ew of these women will admit that they made a bad, or—worse—a boring career move to motherhood.” Continuing in this vein, Kirwan-Taylor

chronicles examples of mothers who were relieved by her confession, quoting other mothers who mention mental breakdowns, misery and depression as side effects of mothering. She takes particular aim at the media that sell the image of blissful maternity through images and celebrity example (consider my previous examples alongside stories of Gwyneth Paltrow, Gwen Stefani, Celine Dion, and others playing in the park with their children and discussing the joys and pleasures of maternity). She posits, “All those glossy magazine spreads showing celebrity mothers looking serene and at home with their children serve only to make women feel inadequate. What the pictures don’t show is the monotony, loneliness and relentless domesticity that goes with child-rearing.” Throughout the article, she touts, almost with pride, that she doesn’t attend sporting games or even play board games with her children. Rather than wrestling with maternal guilt over this, the author suggests her hands-off approach encourages her children to be more self-sufficient.⁷¹

Another autobiographical example is Ayelet Waldman’s Bad Mothers: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace. Here Waldman recounts her decision to stay home with her child and leave her job as a public defender. She writes,

Within a week...I had already begun to lose my mind...that the sheer monotony of caring for a baby was killing me. It turns out that entertaining someone with a two-minute attention span for fourteen hours is infinitely harder than trying to convince a jury....Negotiating with a prosecutor over a plea agreement had nothing on trying to convince a two-

⁷¹ Lisa Belkin in her 2008 article, “America and the Alpha Mom,” argues a similar point. Belkin suggests that “Slacker Moms” are currying favor as a response to Gen X’s maternity defined by excessive fawning and doting, and delineated by the name “Alpha Moms.”

year-old to go down for a nap....Worst of all, I was bored. I was just absolutely and completely, soul-crushingly bored. The playground became the purgatory of swinging, swinging, swinging.... (37-38)

This admission of boredom, of preferring her job over her maternal responsibilities, is one of the unutterable truths that many women struggle with but few admit. Such an admission borders on the verboten. Mothers are supposed to delight in all of the mundane details of their children's lives. To not be consumed by the maternal is presented in the works explored that espouse the maternal imperative as questionable.

While these examples all illustrate shades and gradations of complexity and intricacies involved in the job of mothering, so far the women, both fictional and otherwise, still retain their maternity, enacting it as best they can within the circumstances they are given. But what of women who are mothers in name but ultimately reject their function and the work involved? How does removing one's self from the maternal function fit in with the maternal imperative? How does the rejection of maternity function as a reaction to the roles prescribed for women, and is it justifiable depending on the circumstances? These questions will be explored and examined in the ensuing section.

Maternal Rejection

The media often function as judge and jury, and perhaps in no case is this more apparent than with crimes, tragedies and travesties involving motherhood. Information is posited in nuggets, tiny segments of facts tinged with bias through the information included, or the information omitted. Fundamental to the beliefs and scripts about

motherhood is the equation: child > self. Stories where a mother sacrifices her own life to save her child make headlines, reinforcing the “good” mother script. What else would a mother do? Through fires, tornadoes, car accidents or any number of tragedies, motherhood wins out. Consider the mother who declined cancer treatment so she could give birth to her fourth child, only to succumb to the disease two months after the infant’s birth (“Mother Delays Cancer Treatments”). These stories aren’t just reported but reiterated, shoring up an inherent belief in the maternal imperative. Not only does this reinforce long-held scripts, but the maternal imperative sells. As Mary Thompson posits, “[t]oday’s woman, according to the ideology of the new momism, is not complete without a child to whom she sacrifices herself as primary caregiver” (161). What happens, however, when the equation is reversed, when self > child?

Vociferously, details of women who overturn the maternal hierarchy are trumpeted through the media, whether this is done purposely or not. Brenda Slaby, an assistant principal and mother of two, prepared to take her two-year-old daughter, Cecilia, to the babysitter in August 2007, but she didn’t arrive there. After running an errand and mentally going through her to-do list for the day, Slaby pulled into the school parking lot. At work, she stayed busy with meetings and lunch until a teacher friend who had walked by Slaby’s car in the parking lot came running in to tell Slaby her baby was still strapped in the car seat. Temperatures had reached 100 degrees and, after eight hours in the car, the baby couldn’t be revived. Slaby notes, “It was very hard trying to be the perfect mom and the perfect employee. I try to be everything to everybody....Good mothers don’t do this. How could I not think of my daughter? I want to die. I just want to die.” Although Slaby was not convicted of a crime, her community and the school

district convicted her in their own way: “My community was in outrage. I was the most hated mom.” The way in which the story was reported seems clear. A good mother doesn’t forget her children. A bad mother does. It would be hard not to look at this scenario as a tragedy, but the media posits this as a teaching moment. Slaby parrots the lesson she should learn: “The house doesn’t matter, the perfect dinner doesn’t matter—the kids matter” (“An Overwhelmed Mom’s”). No one would dispute the importance of the children, especially in a situation like this, but what is fascinating is the opportunity the media takes to exploit such a tragedy. Discussions about why mothers are so taxed and tired ensue, but what is ultimately left is an “us vs. them” presentation. As viewers, as spectators, “we” are the good parents because we didn’t do that (the unnamed “that” filled in depending on the circumstances of the news report). Inherently, viewers read themselves into this story, observing, “I would never do that.” The othering that takes place during these news stories further reinforces the good mother/bad mother script, much like the divide in the Mommy Wars previously discussed.

Headlines abound with bad mothers. From a California incident in 2002: “Did Mom’s Meth-Tainted Milk Kill Baby?” In Michigan, regarding a 2005 death: “Coked-Up Mom Gets 9 Months in Jail for Killing Daughter with Breast Milk.” From an incident in Washington in 2004: “Cops Say Mom Starved Two Babies to Death.” In New York in 2006: “Baby Dies in Bucket of Mom’s Vomit” (Goldman). Sensational and horrific, reports further push the limits, highlighting the selfishness and depravity of mothers who appear monstrous and soulless. In 2008 headlines reported “Belgian Mother Accused of Selling Newborn Twins for Cosmetic Surgery.” In 2007, from Minnesota, one headline reads “Police Say Baby Drowned in Tub While Mom Shopped For Shoes.” A story from

Texas also in 2007 reveals “Mom Accused of Prostituting Her 2 Daughters” (Lezon and Glenn). Or consider a Florida report in 2006 “Mom Let Son, 7, Be Abused, Police Say” (Davis). These tragic stories bombard us in the media, yet we collectively sigh, shake our heads and move on. We do so until a situation so horrific and so multifaceted imbeds itself in our consciousness and calls out for a discussion of the seemingly implausible rejection of the maternal.

In some cases, women hide their maternity, ultimately rejecting it from pregnancy through birth. In others, women claim to not know they are pregnant. Both ideas confront the notion of the maternal imperative in the form of the maternal instinct. How can a woman not know she is pregnant? How can a woman reject or deny a life inside of her that she has carried to term? In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 2004, Shatoya Nelson gave birth to a baby girl on the toilet; she left the baby in the commode for several minutes before removing it. Her mother found the dead baby the following morning. Nelson reported that she wasn’t aware that she was pregnant (“Woman Gets Probation in Newborn’s Drowning”). More recently, in 2009, a Cambridge, Maryland, woman, Candy Vigneri, gave birth in a portable toilet, dropped the baby in the waste, went outside to have a cigarette and, when a man was about to use the facility, she advised him not to go in there as she had just given birth. Subsequently, she went to retrieve the baby girl who, miraculously, survived. Vigneri also claimed she didn’t know she was pregnant. It seems implausible that a woman wouldn’t know she was with child, but The Learning Channel’s (TLC) newest show, “I Didn’t Know I Was Pregnant,” explores this very topic. Showing that all mothers who don’t know aren’t necessarily deviant seems to be TLC’s aim. Although less horrifying than the obvious media reports, these narratives of

women who were unaware of their condition still begs the question: How could a woman, a mother, be so out of touch with her body? These narrative episodes often end with women rejoicing in the surprise of maternity, a contrast to the derogatory media reports that abound around unsuspecting expectant mothers. There is no cable show, however, to respond to women who hide their pregnancy like the “Prom-Mom” Melissa Drexler. On June 6, 1997, Drexler attended her senior prom in New Jersey where she gave birth in one of the bathroom stalls, cut the umbilical cord on the sanitary napkin dispenser, stuffed the baby in a garbage bag, and returned to the dance, all within the span of about thirty minutes. Drexler hid her pregnancy, participating in gym class and even shopping for a prom gown with friends. Her infant son did not survive (Fields-Meyer).

Although each story referenced so far is deplorable in its own way, there are three women who have transcended momentary mention in the press. These three women, Susan Smith, Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony, have pervaded the public discourse, and their respective tragedies stand as a testament to maternity rejected in the extreme. Why do these three cases stand as representative of the rejection of maternity? In the Smith and Anthony cases, both mothers reported their children were missing, leading the police and the public astray. With Yates, the magnitude of her filicide astounds, moving from murder to mass murder on a shocking scale.

Susan Smith is currently serving life in prison for killing her two sons, Michael, three, and Alex, fourteen months. Taking the sleeping boys to John D. Long Lake in South Carolina on October 25, 1994, Smith drove to a boat ramp, got out and shifted the car into drive. Smith told investigators that a black man had gotten into her car at a stop light in town, made her drive around and, subsequently, made her get out, taking her two

boys with him. Nine days later, Smith confessed (Montaldo).⁷² During that time, however, the public rallied around Smith, sympathizing with the unimaginable loss of her two boys. When the truth came out via her own confession that she watched the car sink into the lake and that the boys were alive when she let the car go into the water, the public quickly turned. How could a mother do such a thing? How could a mother place her children in harm's way and then watch the horror unfold? Unhappy that her wealthy lover rejected her, telling her he didn't want children, Smith was distraught. Some speculate Smith drowned her boys to be more attractive to Tom Findley, the wealthy man who jilted her. Others suggest myriad factors that culminated in ultimate dysfunction: sexual abuse by her stepfather persisting into her adult life, the suicide of her biological father when Smith was a child, lack of support from respected authority figures as a teen. It didn't matter in the court of public opinion, however. Susan Smith is one of the most monstrous mothers, approaching Medea type proportions.

In eerily parallel news stories, Amanda Hamm of Illinois is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence for letting her children (six, three and one) drown in Clinton Lake in 2003. Prosecutors argued Hamm and her boyfriend, Maurice LaGrone, planned the deaths because the children hampered their relationship. The two argued for their defense that the car accidentally rolled into the water ("Mom Gets 10 Years"). In 2008 in Iowa, Michelle Kehoe alleged that she and her two children, seven and two, were abducted by a stranger during a drive where the group was headed to visit family. Police found the van and the two boys with both their throats slit. Although the youngest had

⁷² *Freedomland*, the 2006 film based on Richard Price's novel of the same name, mirrors the Smith case, at least initially. The female character (played by Julianne Moore) claims she was carjacked and eventually discloses her son was in the back of the car, sleeping. The drama in the narrative comes when it is revealed she would give her child cough syrup to keep him quiet so she could go on dates. Her accusation is later revealed to be a part of an elaborate cover-up of the child's death due to an overdose of medicine.

died, the seven-year-old survived and was able to recount to police how his mother had attacked him and covered his eyes, ears and mouth with duct tape (Grinberg). Kehoe gave no reason for her actions.

Maintaining a lifestyle representative of freedom that comes with being young and unencumbered was allegedly Casey Anthony's motivation for killing her daughter, Caylee, two, in 2008. Anthony's case was suspicious from the beginning, but, like Smith, Anthony alleged Caylee was missing and abducted, in this case by her nanny, Zenaida Gonzalez. Her disappearance, however, wasn't reported for a full month after Anthony reported the child missing. Investigators quickly proved Gonzalez was a fictional creation and caught Anthony in web of lies: discrepancies with dates, lies about where she was employed, and missteps about details. Decomposition was detected in her car's trunk through forensic odor testing, and although investigators couldn't determine the source of the decomposition, on December 11, skeletal remains were found near the Anthony home, which were later confirmed to be Caylee. Although much is still unknown about how Caylee died, it increasingly seems Casey Anthony is to blame. Speculation fueled by photos of Casey dancing in clubs, cavorting and shopping with seemingly no worries or concerns, provides support indicating her guilt. If one's daughter was missing, would a mother act this way? Where are the grief and sadness?⁷³ Anthony awaits trial, but the image of her in skimpy dress, drink in hand, and surrounded by various men with whom she poses in myriad photos, contradicts the image required by

⁷³ Interestingly, as a means to explain away the myriad inconsistencies of Anthony's erratic behavior, defense attorneys are using "ugly coping," a term adopted by Columbia University professor George Bonanno to illustrate, in his words, "behavior that is generally not healthy or socially acceptable, but it is one's way of getting through an undesirable event" ("The Rot of Ugly Coping").

the public of the grieving, mourning, doting mother. In society's eyes, her guilt has been determined.

A mother of five children, ages seven, five, three, two and six months, Andrea Yates struggled with her maternity, considering suicide as an alternative. Instead, in Texas in 2001, Yates held each of her children under water in the family bathtub until they drowned.⁷⁴ Yates, when asked what she thought would happen to her after the crime, stated, "I broke the law, and I had to be punished for it, for being a bad mother" ("Yates Considered"). In another interview, Yates was asked if she loved her children, to which she responded, "Yes. Not in the right way, though" ("Yates: Kids 'Didn't Do'"). Yates called into question her ability to raise her children effectively. Coupled with her own self-doubts, Yates suffered from depression and psychosis. Some experts blame her husband Rusty for encouraging her to have more children, not to mention the religious background that some speculate fostered unreasonable expectations ("Yates Considered"). Regardless of her motivation, a jury sentenced her to life in prison. As a public, we sentence her to much more as instead of seeking to understand what brought her to this point; public scrutiny vilifies her without investigation. As Waldman notes, "Even if we sympathize with Andrea Yates's postpartum depression, ... We condemn Yates for having succumbed to her despair. She valued her own misery more than her children's lives" (14).

Are these women "bad" mothers? Can we dismiss these women, or is it imperative to look at societal, physical and psycho-social issues? Is mental instability relevant? What role do narcissism and/or psychosis play? Is a pattern of abuse and

⁷⁴ Texas seemingly is a hotbed for maternal crimes. In 2003, Deanna Laney beat her two young sons with stones. In the same year, Lisa Ann Diaz drowned her two daughters. In 2004, Dena Schlosser severed the arms of her ten-month-old daughter with a kitchen knife ("Police: Mom Hangs Kids").

neglect present, revisited upon the child? Are drugs a factor? Beyond psychological issues, what effect do these maternal scripts have on the cultural dialogue about mothering as a whole? Regardless of the answers, even though these questions should be asked, these women are illustrative of the rejection of maternity. The danger comes when women dismiss these figures without reading into their own lives. It isn't ever right to kill one's children, of that it is certain, but an investigation into the lives of these women, a feminist reading as it were, might be enacted before a verdict is given. These cautionary tales, implicitly given, of the danger of forsaking one's maternal role must be examined in a new light. In "Anger and Tenderness," Adrienne Rich writes of an evening she spent with several women discussing many things, but namely "the case of a local woman, the mother of eight, who had been in a severe depression since the birth of her third child, and who had recently murdered and decapitated her two youngest, on her suburban front lawn" (13). Rich discusses how the group of women discussing the event felt a connection to the local woman; they could "identify with her." Rich asserts "[w]e spoke of the wells of anger that her story cleft open in us. We spoke of our own moments of murderous anger at our children, because there was no one and nothing else on which to discharge anger" (13). As we look at women in the media today who exhibit similar anger and rage, viewers must consider the role of anger and the placement of such an emotion within the pantheon of hallowed motherhood. For now, Smith, Anthony and Yates are three cases that form a triumvirate of maternal bogeywomen, perpetuating the bad mother archetype.

Narratives recounted by the child, whether memoir or fiction, also contribute to the conversation about bad and good mothering. David J. Pelzer's 1995 memoir, A Child

Called "It," recounts his abuse as a child at the hands of his alcoholic and mentally unstable mother. Pelzer was made to go without food, endure beatings and verbal lashings, eat feces, and clean the bathroom while locked inside with a mixture of Clorox and ammonia, along with other torturous incidents. As Pelzer writes of his mother, readers see the juxtaposition between good mother and bad mother: "When she yelled at us, her voice changed from the nurturing mother to the wicked witch" (30). Later, we read, "Mother became more like a monster" (51). Pelzer's mother targets Dave, nurturing his four brothers. When Pelzer delivers a letter home from his teacher recounting how Dave came up with the winning name for the school paper, his mother reacts with fury rather than delight. She states, "Get one thing straight, you little son of a bitch! There is nothing you can do to impress me! ...You are a *nobody!* *An It* ...I hate you and I wish you were dead!" (140). For Pelzer, his mother's admission marks a realization: "Mother's words were no longer coming from the booze; they were coming from her heart" (140-41). What is interesting is the dichotomy between the behavior shown to her other boys versus the behavior shown to Dave. Pelzer reflects at the end of his narrative on his purpose: "to inform the reader how a loving, caring parent can change to a cold, abusive monster venting frustrations on a helpless child..." (164). The shift from good parent to bad is unpredictable, and the warning is that the bad mother can emerge at any point, unexpectedly.

The idea of the ever-lurking "bad" mother is also present in the 2002 memoir Running With Scissors by Augusten Burroughs. Although Burroughs does not experience physical or verbal abuse by his mother, he does experience abandonment and neglect. Readers learn the relationship between writer/mother Deidre and Augusten is predicated

more on friendship than care giving. He recounts, “My mother had told me not to call her *Mom*, to call her by her first name instead. She liked to think of us more as friends than as mother and son. It was healthier and more mature, she claimed” (95). Deidre deposits twelve-year-old Augusten at the home of Dr. Finch, the psychiatrist who is treating her. Finch is not much of a substitute mother; he divines inspiration by reading his feces. He criticizes overattentive parenting, or being the kind of mother he deemed as being a mothermind.⁷⁵ For Deidre, mothering doesn’t fit in with her desire to get in touch with her self. She tells her son, “It has taken me all my life to find myself as an artist. And to find myself as a woman. I have struggled against the oppression of my mother. And the oppression of your father. And for the first time in my life, I feel I am truly able to claim myself” (89). When Augusten begs her to heed his misery and seeks some normalcy from his mother, he is rebuffed. His mother claims she lacks the emotional energy to deal with him: “You are an adult. You’re thirteen years old. You’ve got a mind and a will of your own. And I have my own needs right now. My writing is very important to me and I should hope that it would be important to you” (121). Even Deidre’s lover seems to chastise Augusten for being “mundane” in his desire for a mother who takes care of him rather than forsaking him and focusing exclusively on her artistic, sexual and social needs. Dorothy, Deidre’s lover, berates Augusten: “She is a brilliant artist. If you want Hamburger Helper, go find some other mother” (206). For Augusten, a child, he must deal with a sexual relationship with a man twice his age, living in filth, and making decisions on his own, decisions he is too inexperienced to make. He notes,

⁷⁵ In Burroughs’s words “A *mothermind* was a Dr. Finch-ism. It was one part busy-body and one part manipulator. It was based on the principle that mothering is unhealthy after a certain point in life. Like the age of ten. A mothermind wanted to oppress and control you” (188-89).

“The problem with not having anybody to tell you what to do, I understood, is that there was nobody to tell you what *not* to do” (264).

As if exposing the maternity, or abandonment of said maternity, in this memoir wasn't enough, NPR exploited it further, interviewing Margaret Robinson, Burroughs's mother, for a piece exploring her perspective. As lead in, authors Shapiro and Wahl write, “There have been few mothers as monstrous as the one in his memoir *Running with Scissors*. In it, Robinson is described as so cold and self-absorbed that she gives away her young son to her psychiatrist.” The real-life mom opts to move beyond the past, identifying the book as her spiritual healing and a means of forgiving herself, yet dismissing it in turn. Of his memoir, she states, “It's not a part of my life. That book really touches me very little. It's not my focus. My focus is on my spiritual growth, and largely through poetry. And that is what my life is about. That plus, certainly to do everything I can to hold my family in love” (qtd. in Shapiro and Wahl). Here, the artist-mother abandons her son. She is not conflicted but rather rejects the work of maternity, all the while embracing her ideal of it, which of course means not mothering at all.

Fictional stories of abandonment abound as well. V.C. Andrews's 1979 novel Flowers in the Attic was remade and released for mass consumption in the 1987 film of the same name. Here, mother Corrine Dollanganger (played by Victoria Tennant) returns, with her four children, to her family's mansion upon the death of her husband. Her family spurned her since she married her half-uncle and, to repent, she must keep her children locked in the attic while she seeks to win over the affection and forgiveness of her dying father. In an attempt to win his forgiveness, Corrine is horse-whipped by her mother while her father watches. It soon becomes apparent, however, that Corrine isn't

there to secure a better life for her children, but to secure a better life for herself. She learns if she is to inherit anything, she mustn't have produced any children during her marriage. She essentially abandons the children, turning their care over to the grandmother (acted by Louise Fletcher), who is another study in maternal rejection. Not only does she believe in physically abusing her own daughter, but in starving her grandchildren, poisoning them with arsenic, and keeping them shut up in an attic, hidden from detection by her husband and others. The mother and grandmother are in unmaternal collusion, plotting to find Corrine a new husband so she can inherit the family fortune.

It is interesting how this collusion plays out in real-life. Consider eleven-year-old Jaycee Dugard, who was kidnapped in 1991 by Phillip Garrido and his wife Nancy, only to be subsequently recovered in 2009. Garrido fathered two children with Jaycee. Reports of her abduction indicate that a woman pushed her into a car while Jaycee was waiting at a bus stop. Phillip Garrido, a convicted rapist and sex offender, seemed to be repeating a pattern that was escalating. For Nancy Garrido, however, one wonders how a woman could assist in the abduction of a young child and stand by for 18 years while her husband raped and fathered two children with this young girl. What is even more disturbing than the overarching incident is the fact that Nancy Garrido held the child hostage on her own for four months while her husband was in jail for an unrelated charge. It was shortly after his release from jail that he fathered the first child. The Elizabeth Smart case offers another interesting parallel. Smart, 14, was kidnapped from her Utah bedroom by Brian Mitchell and recovered nine months later. Wanda Barzee acted in collusion with her husband, ceremoniously joining Mitchell and Smart in

“marriage,” washing Smart’s feet and dressing her in robes only to repeatedly witness Mitchell rape Smart. What kind of women can lose sight of their maternal humanity and leave these children to fend for themselves?

Fiction also explores this question: What kind of mother forsakes her child? In Dorothy Allison’s incendiary novel Bastard Out of Carolina, we witness Anney’s oldest daughter, Bone, in the care of “Daddy Glen,” Bone’s stepfather. While Bone’s younger sister Reese sleeps, Daddy Glen molests Bone in the hospital parking lot as they sit in the car waiting for Anney to deliver their new child (which subsequently Anney loses). Things deteriorate for Bone as Glen takes to lashing out at her, literally, beating her with a belt. In one instance, after Glen unlocks the bathroom door, Anney snatches up Bone in what seems to be an attempt at rescue, only to query of Bone, “What did you do?” Bone fantasizes about her mom’s reaction: “I wanted her to go on talking and understand without me saying anything. I wanted her to love me enough to leave him, to pack us up and take us away from him, to kill him if need be” (107). This doesn’t happen because, “When Daddy Glen beat me there was always a reason, and Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door” (110). Initially, it seems there might be hope for Bone, especially when Anney leaves Glen after he breaks Bone’s tailbone. Two weeks later, however, she is back with him. Although she leaves him repeatedly throughout the narrative, one scene stands out. Bone seeks out Anney’s maternal affection, but she reflects, “Mama’s hand moved automatically, stroking my head as if I were a wounded dog. I knew from the way she was touching me that if I had not come to her, pushed myself on her, she would never have taken me into her arms. I shuddered under that unfeeling palm...” (252). Anney promises Bone she won’t go back to Glen until she is

sure Bone will be safe. Anney seems to be in a position to protect her child and enact her maternal duty. Glen, however, shows up and, through a verbal exchange with Bone, becomes heated and irate. He rapes her, but Anney returns just in time to see the devastation. On one hand, Anney ushers a bruised and battered Bone to the car for a quick escape; on the other, she hears Glen's recriminations and apologies, and she is literally torn between the two. Bone tries to reach for her mother but Anney reaches for Glen. Bone observes,

I could see her fingers on Glen's shoulder, see the white knuckles holding him tight. My mouth closed over the shout I would not let go. Rage burned in my belly and came up my throat. I'd said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that? (291)

Anney does take Bone to the hospital but Anney leaves before she can explain what happened. She elects to leave her daughter to go back to Glen. Before the narrative concludes, Anney does return, giving Bone a fresh copy of her birth certificate with the word "bastard" removed, yet her peace offering is marginalized by the fact that she leaves. She tells Bone, "You're my own baby girl. I'm not gonna let you go" (307), yet she does just that, abandoning her maternity to be with the man who raped her daughter. Anney's declaration of love is muted and distorted; it is something she says rather than something she does. Anney says she is a mother, but she doesn't do the work, and Bone is another victim of a mother who rejects the maternal.

Rejection of the maternal need not always be rooted in abuse. In some instances, this rejection is a choice made by the mother who doesn't want to put in the work the job requires. Opting out of maternity can be seen through the mothering, or lack thereof, by the character Ingrid Magnussen in Janet Fitch's White Oleander. Astrid, her daughter who narrates the tale, feels she is a burden to her mother, a famous poet who lives by her own code of conduct. Although observant of the world around her as only an artist can be, Ingrid is mostly oblivious to the obvious needs of her daughter. Astrid reflects,

I couldn't tell my mother I'd outgrown my shoes again. I didn't want to remind her that I was the reason she was trapped in electric bills and kid's shoes grown too small. ... She was a beautiful woman dragging a crippled foot and I was that foot. I was bricks sewn into the hem of her clothes, I was a steel dress. (9)

Although Ingrid drills Astrid on the next line of a poem, reading her favorite poems aloud to Astrid, or converses with her as a girlfriend, she doesn't mother, taking no account of her daughter's well-being into mind when she enacts revenge upon a traitorous lover. When the police arrest her for the man's murder, Ingrid tells Astrid that she will be back. Astrid comments: "I...slept and waited, the way dogs wait, all day, and then the next. A week went by, but she didn't come. She said she would, but she never did" (41). For Astrid, her mother's not coming is thematic as she is shuffled from one replacement home to the next. Ingrid and Astrid exchange letters during Ingrid's time in prison, often featuring belittling remarks aimed at Astrid for finding any normalcy or connection in her new homes. Ingrid writes to Astrid in one letter, "You have proved every bit as retarded

as your school once claimed you were. You'll attach yourself to anyone who shows you the least bit of attention, won't you? I wash my hands of you" (149). At the novel's close, Astrid visits Ingrid, who says, "When I get out, I'll make it up to you. Even in two or three years, you'll still need a mother, won't you" (366)? One has to question what *kind* of mother Ingrid will be, even at that time. As Laura Callanan points out, "[t]he ideologically fraught projection of the selfless, nurturing, and natural mother... exists in stark contrast to the all-too-human actual mothers in the text who all fall dramatically short of the ideal" (496). Even the replacement mothers Astrid is given through her myriad stays in foster care all fall short of that magical ideal.

Astrid rejects her mother in turn, mirroring the rejection she faced from her mother multiple times. We learn that Ingrid is a tortured artist who abandoned her daughter, not only as she serves her time in prison, but once before, leaving Astrid as a small child with a neighbor, Annie. By way of seeking understanding and forgiveness, Ingrid muses to Astrid.

Imagine my life, for a moment....Image how unprepared I was to be the mother of a small child. The demand for the enactment of the archetype. The selfless eternal feminine. It couldn't have been more foreign....I was used to having time to think, freedom. I felt like a hostage....And you, you just wanted, wanted, wanted, Mommy Mommy Mommy until I thought I would throw you against the wall. (373)

Ingrid maintains that she didn't intend to leave Astrid, seeking only to go to the beach for the day, but instead winds up being gone for a year "give or take a few months" (374). Again, she defends her choice to Astrid:

[I]t felt wonderful, Astrid. To be free! You can't imagine. To go to the bathroom by myself. To take a nap in the afternoon. To make love all day long if I wanted, and to walk on the beach, and not to have to think, where's Astrid? What's Astrid doing? What's she going to get into? And not having you on me all the time, Mommy Mommy Mommy, clinging to me, like a spider.... (374)

Astrid is now in the position to leave her mother waiting, and she does. Astrid pursues her own artistic life, designing art within suitcases symbolic of the baggage we carry. Astrid notes that all the mothers, real and stand-in, who ultimately reject her (Starr who tries to shoot her for fooling with Ray, Starr's boyfriend; Marvel who disapproves of Astrid's hedonistic friends; Amelia who withholds food; and Claire who nurtures and cares but ultimately commits suicide) left her with something, some lesson. Astrid, however, despite the maternal rejection, is constantly shaped by the desire for her mother. She contemplates, "To be my mother's daughter again. I played with the idea like a child with a blanket, running it between my fingers" (387). Even though the actual rejection already took place, figuratively Astrid lives with the rejection of the maternal over and over: "There were suitcases inside of suitcases I had not even begun to unpack" (389). Ingrid's rejection is a constant.

Looking at the function of this rejection, one might call on Karen Swift's work, Manufacturing 'Bad Mothers': A Critical Report on Child Neglect. Here Swift posits that the notion of the neglectful mother serves an important societal purpose. She writes that these categories "produce a group of scapegoats, giving us somebody to blame when society is not working well. They also provide legitimation for designed authorities to

enter into the private affairs of individuals and families” (12). In other words, society can point to the “them” of the bad mothers, defining and delineating how families, individuals, mothers and women are to behave. In a sense, it is a means of social control. The author, Janet Fitch, has referred to Ingrid as monstrous in characterizing her and as Callanan points out, this triggers associations to “Frankenstein’s monster to Dracula’s women. Ingrid’s cold, calculating, survivalist and poetic sensibility garners her a place in a long tradition of problematic mothers beginning, one could argue, with Medea herself” (506). Because Ingrid chooses herself over her maternal function, she is held up as that societal scapegoat. She doesn’t put in the maternal work but rather chooses selfish ambitions (pursuit of affection from her lover, Barry; success as a writer; and personal freedom as a woman). The work she chooses, implicitly, is wrong.

The repetitiveness of maternal rejection and the mother’s inability to put in the work of the maternal is also present in the 2006 film *Sherrybaby*. Viewers are introduced to Sherry Swanson (played by Maggie Gyllenhall), a woman just released from jail for stealing money to buy heroin. We learn Sherry has a little girl, Alexis, who has been raised by Sherry’s brother, Bobby, and her sister-in-law, Lynn. Sherry sincerely desires to reunite with her daughter, even taking classes in prison so she can obtain a job at a day care center upon release. Sherry asserts, “I want to become a better mother,” and we believe her, but when the man at the employment agency refuses to give her the position she desires, she instantly falls into old patterns. She tells him, “I’ll suck your dick if you give me the job I want.” This regression in behavior is quickly forgotten when we see Sherry singing, playing and nurturing the children at the center. She works well with the children, but when it comes to her own daughter, she struggles, on the one hand with

Lynn, and on the other with her ability to do the work involved in mothering. Lynn, the maternal stand in, takes issue with Sherry and sees her as an unfit mother. Lynn seems engaged with Alexis and encourages the little girl to call her mom while having her call Sherry by her name. Lynn has put in the work and has become the mother. Sherry's parole officer also calls into question Sherry's willingness to do the work, maternal with her child and personal in terms of her sobriety: "You want your daughter, but you don't want to do the work. You want to get clean, but you don't want to do the work." Sherry and her daughter don't immediately bond. She brings Alexis presents and tries to connect with her and, partly, they do, but always with Lynn in the background. As though to dispel the maternal rejection she has received, Sherry seeks permission from Bobby to take her daughter for the day. Although Alexis cries that she doesn't want to go, and Sherry doesn't know the simple fact that the car seat must go in the back, the trip seems to eventually work out, that is, until Sherry gets into an altercation with a woman at the diner where the pair stop to eat. When Sherry finds Alexis hiding from her, it is revealed Alexis urinated in her pants. Sherry laboriously helps her to change her clothes, but when she tells Alexis "left foot up" as she dresses her, she flashes to being searched in prison. Sherry has an epiphany of sorts, realizing her place isn't in the maternal. Perhaps the most poignant scene occurs when Sherry asks Alexis to say "I love you, mommy." The child complies, but the exchange is uninspired. When Sherry reflects on her position, she maintains that she is a mother because of her stretch marks. She gave birth. Despite the labor she initially endured, Sherry realizes she lost the opportunity given to her because she isn't able to put forth the labor involved in being a mother each and

every day. She implicitly rejects the maternal because she is unable and unwilling to do the work it requires.

Is the obvious maternal presence always the best person to enact maternal care? Certainly one's biological function doesn't automatically dictate one's skill, unless we concede we are defined by our sex. In the non-fiction essay "Out of the Stream: An Essay on Unconventional Motherhood," Shirley Glubka reflects on severing her maternal connection with her son, Kevin, when he was three, opting instead to have his day care teacher, Gretchen Ulrich, become his mother.

Yes, I left the mother role because in a radical way I did not like the job of being a mother; and because I believed that Kevin would be better off if he were raised by someone who wanted to do that kind of work....It was not Kevin I disliked; it was the work of being his mother day by day. (254)

Glubka recognizes the maternal scripts in play that encourage and enforce the role of mother, but, rather than cow-towing to these prescribed notions, she recognizes the truth as simply that, the truth. She asserts, "I am not the best person to raise my child; only a powerful myth can make me think that I am" (257). In a sense, she is taking part in rescripting this mythology and overturning the idea that only "bad" mothers reject their maternity.

Certainly women do reject their maternity and they aren't necessarily "bad" for doing so. Consider two novels, Gail Godwin's Father Melancholy's Daughter (1991) and Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping (1980) where the two main women characters reject their maternal responsibilities. Both these women reject the maternal simply, naturally,

without there really being any disclosure as to why. Both women die in these narratives, the mother in Father Melancholy's Daughter in a car accident and the mother in Housekeeping in an apparent suicide. Their maternal presence forms a powerful force in these narratives even though their physical absence is apparent. In Godwin's narrative, readers witness the unfolding of events through the narration of Margaret Gower, the child who is upset over the arrival of her mother's friend who takes up most of her mother's time. Her mother, Ruth, is content with her maternal role, until her friend Madelyn Farley shows up. In the novel's opening, Margaret recounts going shopping with her mother and desiring a dress with a lot of buttons, to which her mother objects. Margaret maintains she can handle the buttons herself, and Ruth replies, "I'm not doing it for you. I've got enough buttons of my own to worry about" (8). This assertion stands as a sort of overarching comment on Ruth's maternity. Ruth doesn't want to be bothered by the intricacies and mundane tasks that motherhood often demands. When Madelyn encourages Ruth to come with her, she does, leaving Margaret behind for a short trip. The trip eventually turns into forever, however, as Ruth is killed in a car accident. In Robinson's novel, we see Lucille and Ruth who are abandoned by their mother, Helen, when she drives off a cliff after dropping them off at their grandmother's home. Subsequently, they are raised by other female figures who try, and fail in various ways, to replicate the maternal: a grandmother, two aunts, and finally, their Aunt Sylvie. Ruth reflects on Helen's maternal rejection: "She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone—she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned....At last we had slid from her lap like one of those magazines full of responsible opinion about discipline and balanced meals..."

(109). The daughters left in the wake of the maternal rejection are forever shaped by the present absence.

In Robinson's novel, the mother leaves the home, the sphere of influence that defines who she is as mother. Paula Geyh observes that the novel is about "the social process of sustaining the structure of the household, of the family, and by extension the structures of traditional society" (135). Their mother breaks herself free from the home (stable, fixed) space and situates herself within the space of a vehicle (freedom, movement), driving herself off a cliff into a lake. She separates herself from the domestic sphere. The two girls come to situate themselves in two different spheres, Lucile a "master of the distinctions of housekeeping...understand[ing] the socially constructed connections between property and propriety" goes to live with her home economics teacher (139). Yet Ruth aligns herself with Aunt Sylvie, their "adoptive" mom in the wake of their biological mother's death. Sylvie is a transient and although she adopts the maternal care, she doesn't situate herself within the domestic sphere, further illustrating the rub between what is accepted by society and what is shunned. Sylvie and Ruth ultimately set fire to the house where Sylvie grew up, the father's house as it were, and attempt to live outside of the domestic sphere.

Why do women reject the maternal? If the maternal imperative is so omnipresent, how can a mother reject her child/ren? The aforementioned examples put the blame on myriad outside factors: the influence of drugs, narcissism, psychosis, mental instability, previous abuse, and other causes. For many, however, it comes down also to being the "final mother," a term coined by Alta Gerrey, previously mentioned. When one person, often the mother, is the responsible party for the care of another person, how can both

selves, the individual and the mother, be reconciled? This is the burden of being the “final mother.” These maternal decisions aren’t easily reduced into good and bad camps; often the rejection is much more multifaceted and complicated than that.

There is a fragile line between the rejection of maternity and anti-maternity, or the option not to define oneself through maternal work at all. Some women reject their maternal responsibilities while others know, implicitly, that no maternal imperative resides within, pushing them to fulfill maternal expectations. It is difficult, however, for the idea of anti-maternity to reconcile with the maternal imperative. In the 2007 film *Waitress*, viewers are presented with a new, modern imagining of the maternal, playing on the “happily ever after” endings traditionally scripted, yet re-enforcing the maternal necessity. Jenna (played by Keri Russell) embodies the feminine. She works as a waitress and derives pleasure from making her famous pies. Married to Earl (played by Jeremy Sisto), she endures his abusive, distorted affection. When the film begins, we immediately see Jenna taking a pregnancy test. Her reaction at the positive result is dismay: “I don’t need no baby. I don’t want no trouble.” Jenna visits a doctor for her check-up and decides to have the baby but acknowledges she doesn’t want it.⁷⁶ Her friends give her baby books and try to encourage her to embrace the maternal, but Jenna asserts, “Not everyone wants to be a mom. That don’t make me a bad person.” Later she tells her doctor, “It’s an alien and a parasite. ...I’m the anti-mother.” In many ways this admonition and confession are uttered as a sort of apology. Jenna realizes how she should want the baby based on what she is told, but she doesn’t. She laments how the

⁷⁶ It is interesting that Jenna’s character never contemplates abortion. The discussion begins with her not wanting the baby, never the possibility of terminating the fetus. Jenna does tell her friends that she respects the baby’s “right to thrive” but feels nothing like affection for it. One could read the maternal imperative in this confession as well.

baby makes her tired and weak and complicates her life. Jenna decries that she resents it and that she has no idea how to take care of it. Before the baby is born, Jenna finds she has no real connection to the child except to acknowledge the complication it brings to her life. Jenna saves money to escape Earl and start a new life, planning on selling the baby, but when Earl finds her money, she is forced to embrace the maternal in the form of buying baby things. In her baby journal (the one her friends foisted on her), Jenna writes to the child,

Dear Damn Baby, If you ever want to know the story of how we bought your damn crib, I will tell you. Your crib was bought with the money that was supposed to buy me a new life. Every time I lay you down in that damn crib, I'm gonna think, Damn baby. Damn Crib. Me stuck like a pin in this damn life.

All of this changes, however, in an instant. When Jenna goes into labor, she continues with her maternal rejection, telling her husband, “I don’t want no baby, Earl,” yet immediately after her little girl is delivered, Jenna takes charge, asserting, “Give her to me.” Her anger and rejection abruptly end as she takes the baby and the infant stops crying. “Oh my God,” Jenna exclaims. Awe and reverence of the maternal function occur as the camera slowly zooms in on Jenna and her child, music plays, and everything else blurs and fades away, literally, within the camera frame. Enabled and empowered by her maternity, Jenna finds strength to turn to Earl and tell him that she wants a divorce and that she hasn’t loved him for years. Earl begins to yell, but viewers can’t hear anything derogatory as soothing music and the focus of Jenna and her child, Lulu, take

over the screen. Jenna finds strength in her maternity. Here any anti-maternal sentiment is overturned by the overwhelming and all-consuming power of the maternal imperative.

It seems the maternal imperative wins. Women who reject or display animosity, fear or conflict about raising or having children seem somehow afflicted and “bad,” while those who succumb to the maternal imperative, something that is portrayed as a natural, requisite part of womanhood and femaleness, are “good” in the mythos surrounding maternity. What about women, however, who reject the notion of maternity completely and wholly, so much so that having children isn’t even an option? What about those women who don’t accept the maternal imperative and choose to remain child-free?

Anti-Maternity

In a 1972 *Time* story, “Down With Kids,” the National Organization for Non-Parents (NON) received coverage and a chance to dispel the idea that couples, people, women specifically, who choose not to have children are not selfish.⁷⁷ Despite this coverage, and media scrutiny for forty years after the fact, the selfish woman, the idea of the cold-fish career woman or overly-sexed single gal continues to pervade media depictions of women who don’t have children because of a simple choice not to. In the aforementioned examples of the maternal imperative, these childless women are often softened and humanized by the maternal response that is exhibited once a child or children are entrusted to their care. On the other hand, women who opt not to have

⁷⁷ Today the organization is known as the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood.

children are often seen as immature or selfish and are derided for their choice.⁷⁸

Samantha Jones and Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City* are two such examples.⁷⁹

In speaking about women who opt not to have children, it is interesting to note the language used to describe them. *Childless* is often rejected as there is a connotation associated with infertility and a woman's inability to have children.⁸⁰ While that is a tragedy for those woman who can't conceive, *childless* seems to denote something missing, as if having less than a child is not enough. As Laurie Lisle notes in her book *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness*, "The existing vocabulary is unrelentingly negative...descriptive expressions for childlessness have evolved from barren to sterile to infertile, terminology that almost always applies to the female, not the male" (5). To counter this negative connotation, many women refer to themselves as child-free, a term that indicates choice. For my purposes, I will use the term *matriodeniality* as the converse of child-free. For many of the women examined in this section, they see themselves as child-free, but the way in which their decision is received seems to categorize it as a denial of their implicit maternity, or matriodeniality. It should be noted, however, that men don't have this designation. Adrienne Rich points out, "the term 'nonfather' does not exist in any realm of social categories" (11). Akin to the old

⁷⁸ Women who decide to opt out of maternity as a means of participating in the environmental dialogue, dialing back one's carbon footprint and limiting one's drain of resources might be more favorably received in our "green" society and the push to be more environmentally conscious. While See the article "Meet the Women Who Won't Have Babies: Because They're Not Eco-Friendly" by Natasha Courtenay-Smith and Morag Turner. Also, note Michele Patenaude's "Saving the Earth One Less Baby at a Time." While not socially accepted by all, the rationale to save Mother Earth is a legitimate one for many women.

⁷⁹ I will examine Samantha Jones and Carrie Bradshaw, along with other characters of *Sex in the City*, in Chapter Four.

⁸⁰ I will not be discussing the extensive issue of infertility here as my focus is primarily women who don't want children, regardless of whether they can have them or not. If such a discussion of infertility was explored, it would be much more suited for the maternal imperative as these women often go to great lengths to reproduce, regardless of their physical abilities or the financial costs incurred.

maid/spinster vs. bachelor paradigm, the way we define and view men and women who make similar choices is often painfully different.

Regardless of the nomenclature to define this status, many women are exercising their choice to remain child-free. In a 2008 *New York Times* story entitled “More American Women Choose Not to Have Children,” report results from the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that women who have advanced degrees are more likely to be without children. Also, the article reveals that “[t]wenty percent of American women from the ages of 40 to 44 have no children, double the level of 30 years ago” (Zezima). Studies from the Pew Research Center reveal that “[n]early one-in-five American women ends her childbearing years without having borne a child, compared with one-in-ten in the 1970s” (Livingston and Cohn). In spite of the numbers, society doesn’t necessarily respond favorably to this trend: “A notable share of Americans (38%) say this trend is bad for society, an increase from 29% in a 2007 Pew Research survey” (Livingston and Cohn). True, both sets of numbers are below 50%, but that doesn’t change the disfavor felt by the women who embrace this choice. How is this disfavor shown?

The reception of women who opt not to have children isn’t positive. Although not experts in feminist studies or sociological scientists, the women who live the decision merit just as much mention as any scientific study. Cameron Diaz told *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 2009: “I think women are afraid to say that they don't want children because they're going to get shunned,” admitting her own ambivalence about having children. Polly Vernon, a journalist for *The Observer*, made her own admission about not desiring children, and reflects in her article, “It Takes Guts to Say ‘I Don’t Want Children,’” that

she received hate mail and phone calls, decrying her as “bitter, selfish, un-sisterly, unnatural, evil.” She goes further and reflects on the fascination with the maternal:

how difficult it is to be child-free, when popular culture fetishises parenthood in general and motherhood in particular. When the dramatic arc of all TV dramas, of all rom-coms, is dependent on someone becoming pregnant and finding true happiness as a consequence. Babies are the newest archetype on the happy ending, therefore not wanting them is tantamount to not wanting to be happy.

If one accepts this premise, one can see how the maternal imperative works to suppress the choice of being child-free. Instead the response is more on par with matriodeniality, painting these women with language that is disparaging.

A woman is presented as implicitly selfish if she opts out of child-bearing. In Evelyn Rosser’s “January 1953,” she writes: “I don’t want a baby. I want a mink coat, a red convertible, and a big house on the beach” (15). While there is nothing wrong with asserting one’s desires, there is an implicit disdain for a woman who would put her desires over her child’s, even if the child is, at the moment, imaginary. Remember the equation: child > self. In “Reminded of My Biological Clock—While Looking at Georgia O’Keefe’s Pelvis One,” Denise Duhamel asserts that she doesn’t want to have children. She is chastised by her mother for having child-bearing hips and not using them. Her mother tells her that career women are selfish and that “they’ll grow old and die alone” (16). It is interesting that her mother is the one chastising her in this piece. Her daughter’s decision to not use her hips might be perceived as an indictment on

registering her own maternity. As I mentioned earlier, choice is the hallmark of the women's movement, but women can still be bitter about having to make a choice at all. Why can't a woman have it all? It could be interpreted that the mother is wistful of her own missed choices. What woman can't identify with that?

It is interesting that the media in the form of mainstream entertainment prefers to espouse the maternal imperative rather than child-free narratives. If one looks, however, at a genre not commonly surveyed by the mainstream, poetry, and women's voices within, specifically with regards to giving birth, a different story is told. Conflict is further revealed upon that moment one traverses from non-mother to mother. In Anne Stevenson's poem "The Victory," a woman wrestles with her initial impressions of motherhood versus the reality with which she is faced. Stevenson writes, "I thought you were my victory / though you cut me like a knife."⁸¹ What she initially hoped to hold up as her achievement is dismantled by this "tiny antagonist." She calls her child a "scary knot of desires" and a "hungry snarl," questioning, "Why do I have to love you? / How have you won?" Modernist poet Mina Loy also characterizes this transition from non-mother to mother with instant disdain. In "Ava Gives Birth to Ova," the speaker characterizes the child as a "clotty bulk of bifurcate fat" (qtd. in Burke 351).⁸² In Krista Franklin's poem "Mother," she writes "afterbirth ejects individualism..." noting ambivalence in holding her child who is "In my arms, ...a receiving blanket of giving,/around my ankle, a shackle—/10 tiny digits/squeeze." Hardly the glowing Anne

⁸¹ Another poem, "The Language of the Brag" by Sharon Olds, also equates birth with success and achievement but in a manner that further enforces the maternal imperative. A woman's "brag" comes from her maternity.

⁸² Loy's poem "Parturition" was one of the first to explore the actual process of labor, capturing the gender divide, pain, ambivalence and stream-of-consciousness in the work of giving birth.

Geddes pictures, these women depict their children as oppressors and show little, if any, affection for them.

Women may also elect to adopt out their child. While an emotional decision by all accounts, the portrayal of the child isn't always one fraught with mourning and sadness. In Anne Sexton's piece, "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," the speaker traverses from affection for her new child toward an emotional evacuation of feeling. Sexton begins with the observation: "Your lips are animals, you are fed / with love. At first hunger is not wrong" (144). In the same stanza, however, the speaker recognizes that even though the child "sense[s] the way we belong," that it is mere maternal illusion. Sexton writes "[b]ut this is an institution bed. / You will not know me very long" (144). The use of the word institution is two-fold. In one sense, she is in a hospital, an institution that services the needs of birthing and laboring women. It is perfunctory, the connection given in the institution of the hospital. On the other hand, the use of the word "institution" seems to also connote the institution of motherhood. To that end, the removal of the mother is alluded to immediately. Of the speaker, readers see that she is simply a vessel, an incubator, for even she asserts "[a]ll I did was let you grow" (144). Throughout the poem, the reader sees how the speaker in the poem "prize[s] [the] need" of the child, but recognizes that the child is nothing but a "fragile visitor" (145). As the poem ends, the woman has turned the child over and the process is one of separation but also devoid of emotion. Sexton writes "[w]e unlearn. / I am a shore / rocking you off. You break from me. I choose / your only way" (145). The images of breaking and disruption play with the concept of evacuation of the institutional framework of maternity. The last line of the poem: "[G]o child, who is my sin and nothing more"

undercuts any emotional leaving. The imperative statement is issued as a directive. Naming the child as “my sin” rather than asserting “Go my child” removes the speaker as maternal agent, equating the child with the act of creation and not a creature of his/her own making. The emotional removal here is telling and, although the poem can also be read as a means of maternal sacrifice, it also aptly fits the parameters of women who reject maternity.

To make the choice not to have a child often casts a negative light on the woman who makes such a choice. Although a marginal scene in the 2003 film *Under the Tuscan Sun*, viewers see lesbian couple Patti (played by Sandra Oh) and Grace (played by Kate Walsh) celebrate their successful in-vitro insemination. The friends of the main character play a small role in the narrative, but what is interesting is how the breakdown of a traditional life and traditional roles (as exhibited by main character Frances, played by Diane Lane, as she leaves her home and husband) is juxtaposed with the confession later in the film by Grace that she just can’t do it. She just can’t be a mother. She walks away from her pregnant partner, abandoning her maternity and the very pregnant Patti.⁸³ Although no explanation is given beyond the statement that she can’t do it, she can’t be a mother despite her initial thoughts, the decision to stay child-free and the change in initial commitment to maternity, implicitly cast her as the villain.

Another narrative following a similar trajectory of personal exploration and rebirth, *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006), follows Elizabeth Gilbert as she abandons her marriage

⁸³ One could read Grace’s decision in multiple ways. Is she the “dominant” partner enacting the male role of abandonment, or are both of these women truly partners, initially anticipating mothering and fathering, parenting, the child together? Homosexual relationships present another interesting facet of exploration as the parameters of neatly prescribed gender roles are negated, in some sense, by the homogenous nature of the couple. In this instance, I am reading Grace’s rejection as one of matriodeniality, further reinforcing the theme of the rejection of the traditional echoed throughout the entire film.

to find herself. When the narrative opens, readers find Gilbert huddled in her bathroom sobbing because she realizes and admits to herself that she doesn't want to be married anymore and she doesn't want children. Gilbert writes, "But I was supposed to have a baby. I was thirty-one years old...I kept waiting to want to have a baby, but it didn't happen" (10). Gilbert's narrative verbalizes the maternal imperative, yet she eschews such assumptions. Echoing in her head is her sister's admonition: "Having a baby is like getting a tattoo on your face. You really need to be certain it's what you want before you commit" (10). Gilbert concedes this is not what she wants and admits, "[E]very month when I got my period I would find myself furtively in the bathroom: *Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for giving me one more month to live...*" (11). She further realizes that she doesn't possess the joy in potentially becoming a mother when she sees a friend of hers who has gone to extensive lengths and great cost to become pregnant. The joy Gilbert sees on her friend's face is akin, she realizes, to the joy she felt when she was offered a writing assignment to go to New Zealand and write about the search for giant squid. She recounts, "Until I can feel as ecstatic about having a baby as I felt about going to New Zealand to search for giant squid, I cannot have a baby" (11). Gilbert's anti-maternal sentiment is on full display. In an interview about the book, Gilbert further delineates the work involved in mothering and fathering as currently defined. She states, "I've often thought that if I had been married to somebody who wanted to be a mom, I could have done it. I used to say, 'Man, I think I'd be a really good dad. I'll be a great provider. I'm funny; I'll go on trips with them — I'll do all sorts of stuff.' But the momming? I'm not made for that" ("Elizabeth Gilbert: Not Made"). Gilbert's narrative rejects traditional maternal birth and instead follows various stages of her own personal

rebirth. Gilbert's bestselling book has been adapted to a 2010 film starring Julia Roberts, and one wonders if the mantle of anti-maternity will be championed and the attitude toward child-free decision making will be revisited. Will the cultural pendulum swing in the other direction?

Having children isn't necessarily always a sacred proposition, and, perhaps, some of these anti-maternal choices are rooted in that. As Margaret Atwood notes in her poem "Christmas Carols," "Children do not always mean / hope. To some they mean despair" (330). Atwood chronicles children conceived through rape, abuse, torture:

This woman with her hair cut off
so she could not hang herself
threw herself from a rooftop, thirty
times raped & pregnant by the enemy
who did this to her. This one had her pelvis
broken by hammers so the child
could be extracted. Then she was thrown away,
useless, a ripped sack. This one
punctured herself with kitchen skewers
and bled to death on a greasy
oilcloth table, rather than bear
again and past the limit.

Here Atwood mentions horrific circumstances of conception, birth and abortion. Because of rape and bearing children past some sanctioned limit, these women either end their

lives by brutal means, or have their lives ended for them. Issuing an admonition, Atwood continues

Think twice then
before you worship turned furrows, or pay
lip service to some full belly
or other, or single out one girl to play
the magic mother, in blue
& white, up on that pedestal,
perfect & intact, distinct
from those who aren't. Which means
everyone else. It's a matter
of food and available blood.

Atwood warns of the problem of heralding maternity without thinking of the background of the woman who is carrying the child. By trumpeting the sanctity of motherhood, or, more aptly, the primacy of the child, we deny the woman her story. Atwood alludes to the most sacred mother, Mary, in the reference to the “magic mother...on that pedestal.” By comparing all women to that sanctified figure, we do a disservice to the women who aren't that hallowed Mary. As Atwood says, that precious, deified image of motherhood largely depends on “food and available blood.” Atwood concludes her poem, asking readers, “If mother-hood is sacred,

put your money where your mouth is. Only
then can you expect the coming

down to the wrecked & shimmering earth
of that miracle you sing
about, the day
when every child is a holy birth.

For Atwood, she questions the accuracy in viewing motherhood as a holy event. If maternity is so hallowed, “every child” should be a holy birth. Instead, the “miracle” comes to a “wrecked & shimmering earth.” Here the juxtaposition of something broken with something glittering mirrors the tone of the poem. While almost didactic in nature, Atwood seems to hold up the mythos of motherhood with the darker contrast of its genuine reality. Even if one hasn’t been subject to the atrocities mentioned at the poem’s onset, readers can still see the maternal script called up for ridicule in her poem as she holds up the darker side of maternity in contrast to its lightest, revered ideal, Mary.

In “Extrapolating Childhood,” Krista Franklin speculates on a similar theme, wondering if all children should be born, or if all women are meant to be mothers. She begins her piece reflecting on the limitations and bitterness that come to reluctant mothers.

I think of Paulette,
years ago at the Christmas Party, newly
pregnant with a boy named Gabriel,
pissed off at everything she could not
have: the bottle of vodka the Russian broke out,
the stinky mushrooms sneakily circulating.
This is the story Gabriel will never know;

the first night he stood in the doorway
of his mother's true nature. How she departed
abruptly to grapple with his arrival. How many
women never speak of this.

Franklin writes of the depravation of motherhood, how it limits and confines. While in narratives revolving around the maternal imperative, viewers see how a woman's world is opened up and expanded in light of an unexpected child, here Franklin writes of the converse. She speaks frankly in her writing, too, of the transformative nature of motherhood.

Forgive my
vulgarity: when a woman pushes a person
out her pussy, it transforms her. This is what
I'm telling you. It's not always good. When I
was just a girl, my mother made this clear
while feeding every child in the neighborhood,
dragging every unwanted kid off the street.
There are so many children, but mothers
are scarce. Or scarcely sane, plowing their
seed with every insecurity they dream up. There
are multiple narratives to every story. Why not
those of mothers?

Implicit in Franklin's poem is the allusion to the role of labor (work) in the role of mothering. Here, the mothers aren't feeding their children or tending to them, but the

speaker's mother does that work, "feeding every child in the neighborhood, / dragging every unwanted kid off the street." Her labor (work) is what makes her a mom. Again, Franklin mentions the multiplicity of maternal narratives, rejecting the idea of the sacred maternal imperative. She asserts "There / are multiple narratives to every story. / Why not those of mothers?" Even though she mentions the possibilities of various kinds of maternity and maternal stories, she also uses the poem to deride maternity that is unsound.

Only a woman no one calls
mama should stand outside at two in the morning
teaching how to say "motherfucker."
These are vulgarities one should not
reproduce. Some folks don't get that, and have
kids anyway. It's one of the reasons my mother
fed them. There are times those children
and I lock eyes. Being a child like them,
I cannot tell you what they tell me.

Franklin addresses women who should not mother, who do, and also the loss of an integral part of self. She posits a scene where women take up the labor (work) of those who have labored (birthed). Dark and dismal portraits of childhood and maternity are given here, but what recourse is there? If maternity is prioritized and continually hailed, negating any other choice as acceptable, what about child-free voices? What space/place is given between the line of child-free and matriodeniality? Alison Solomon posits in "An

Empty Womb,” “I have never seen a poem / suggesting...that even an empty womb / is beautiful” (30). Where is that literature? Where is that space?

Ultimately, women are conflicted. Women who choose not to give birth to children often elect to give birth to themselves. As Sula notes in Morrison’s classic novel by the same name, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (qtd. in Lisle 210). Yet, if a woman does that, she is spurned and looked at askance. Michele Patenaude writes in “On Not Having Children” that women have babies because they are told that’s what women do:

We have babies not out of instinct but because we’ve been told from day one and in a million little ways that having babies is normal, desirable, and good, from the dolls that are put in our cribs to the flowers we receive in the maternity ward. As women, we are creators of life. Motherhood, we are told, is the ultimate experience. Female nirvana. Who can resist such a promise? (36)

Considering the lure of the maternal imperative coupled with the very real issue of maternal rejection and matriodeniality, where do women go from here? What about men? If men assume the maternal and women reject the appointed societal roles, how do we reconcile these emerging shifts and changes and engage in a dialogue of difference?

Chapter Four

MERGING THE TWO

“Six married men will be dropped on an island with one car and 3 kids each for six weeks. Each kid will play two sports and either take music or dance classes. There is no fast food. Each man must: take care of his three kids; keep his assigned house clean; correct all homework; complete science projects; cook; do laundry; and pay a list of ‘pretend’ bills with not enough money. ... A test will be given at the end of the six weeks, and each father will be required to know all of the following information: each child’s birthday, height, weight, shoe size, clothes size and doctor’s name. Also the child’s weight at birth, length, time of birth and length of labor, each child’s favorite color, middle name, favorite snack, favorite song, favorite drink, favorite toy, biggest fear and what they want to be when they grow up. The kids vote them off the island based on performance...[H]e can play the game over and over and over again for the next 18-25 years eventually earning the right to be called Mother!”

-circulated email joke entitled “The Next *Survivor* Series”

While it seems thus far that these divisions, men who mother and women who don’t, are neat and separate, there is an attempt to merge these ideas and raise new ones. Perhaps this is an attempt to craft a future possibility, a means of envisioning a future when these issues are no longer incendiary and controversial, but normal and natural. To examine this transition and to look ahead at the direction maternal discourse is taking, it is interesting to explore two disparate genres: popular television and dystopian fiction. One attempts to reflect and mirror popular issues and culture while the other attempts to look ahead, offering a prognostication of what may come. What issues are discussed in these genres? Where is this maternal conversation taking us?

One “text” that seeks to showcase these prevalent concerns is *Sex and the City*, based on a column by Candace Bushnell. HBO’s hit television series running from 1998 through 2004, along with movies in 2008 and 2010, traces the lives of four New York

single women as they seek love, romance and sex. What is most profound in this series, however, is how each woman, and each gender, grapples with the very concept of maternity.

In one sense, the characters, specifically Samantha Jones (played by Kim Cattrall) and Charlotte York (played by Kristen Davis), are extreme caricatures of women, showcasing the classic Madonna/whore split. Charlotte is the stereotypical Madonna, and the only single girl who actively seeks a husband. Also, Charlotte seeks motherhood after she marries her wealthy doctor husband, Trey McDougall. She blanches at the idea of looking “down there” and often chastises her friend, Samantha, for being a “slut”. Samantha is the clichéd vixen, prattling on about her latest tryst and even going as far as attending church to potentially fornicate with the father, whom she nicknames “friar fuck.” When Charlotte admits in an episode from season four, “Ghost Town,” that she is trying to get pregnant, Samantha responds with a sour expression and asks, “Why?” Here the two extremes of maternal imperative and anti-maternity come face to face, but the focus becomes, instead, the role of sex in making a mother.

The woman’s body is problematic, especially if she is a mother.⁸⁴ How does she reconcile her body as a sexual entity and a source for life? How does a woman function as both a Madonna, mother sacred, and whore, or sexual agent in her own pleasure? As Adrienne Rich comments, “I know no woman...for whom her body is not a fundamental problem” (284).⁸⁵ The women and their respective bodies are put on display by the

⁸⁴ This notion of the mother’s body is an issue that merits further exploration, especially within the context of maternity and the ramifications that come along with a sexualized mother. Along with this are issues like breastfeeding and agency in giving birth.

⁸⁵ One could argue the same for a man, especially considering the physical agency as discussed in Chapter Two when it comes to physically and emotionally putting in the work of being a mother. The corporeality of masculine maternity is a problem for this gender as well.

fashion they showcase. Charlotte, the prototypical mother, is “a caricature of 1950s values complete with headbands and proper hemlines” (Stewart). She sports sweater sets and pearls, often looking demure and sweet. When she decides she wants to have a baby, her sexuality, something that was subdued, has now been virtually extinguished. With Samantha, her dress is always seductive. She is “unapologetic, crude...nothing more than a good old-fashioned slut” (Stewart). Her body is a locus for pleasure; for Charlotte, her body is defined primarily by her empty womb.

Charlotte’s body is scripted as a source of maternal potentiality. In the first film, however, when Charlotte does become pregnant, she worries something will happen to her baby all throughout her pregnancy because her life is now “too perfect.” Her comment further plays into the maternal imperative. Perfection is mediated for the female body by the child’s presence in the previously absent womb; without this, her maternal body can’t be defined. In the second movie, the perfection having spawned, literally, another daughter, Charlotte’s body becomes of concern in a different manner. In the second film, Charlotte is overwhelmed. Despite the nanny and the husband, Charlotte resorts to hiding in the pantry where she weeps because her life seems out of control. Her body is overwhelmed by the physical and emotional demands of maternity. When she heads off to Abu-Dhabi with her best girlfriends, she confesses to Miranda (played by Cynthia Nixon) that motherhood is “just so hard!” This doesn’t seem like much of a revelation, but it marks a turning point in this character, one of the two that is presented in pure stereotypical form. Can one imagine June Cleaver or Donna Reed admitting such a thing? The real dynamic and interplay, however, is shown within the other two female leads: Miranda and Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker).

Miranda seems to merge this difficult terrain with the maternal body and also pattern a new kind of motherhood. Miranda is a business professional, and being a mother isn't something she aspires to. She doesn't want to mother (anti-maternity), but, in season four's episode, "Just Say Yes," she finds out she is pregnant with her ex-boyfriend Steve's child. She considers abortion, rejects his proposal of marriage, and embraces single motherhood, albeit tentatively. In many ways, she enacts what I call maternal tolerance. Miranda isn't the stereotypical nurturing iconic mother, and yet she also doesn't blatantly reject motherhood because it doesn't fit in her life. What she does reject is the notion that love, marriage and motherhood are inextricably linked. She embraces the maternal, but in her own fashion. When Charlotte offers to throw her a baby shower, she reluctantly acquiesces, asserting, however, that she wants no overly cute duck motif or crustless bread. When she does give birth in season five's episode, "I Heart NY," she wants no gushing sentiment from the nurse, or from Steve about their new baby, Brady. She conducts the birthing of her child with the same brisk efficiency that she deals with clients and cases at her law firm. For Miranda, this is another job.

Miranda's pregnancy seems to function as a means to heal the maternal and sexual (self-focused) split. Miranda often finds herself conflicted with her new role, with what she wants as a woman and what she should be doing as a mother. As Helene Cixous puts it in "Laugh of the Medusa," she, woman, is "guilty of everything...for being too motherly and not enough" (1093). In the episode, "The Good Fight," pregnant Miranda wrestles with wanting to accept a date with Walker Lewis in the likelihood that sex will ensue and wondering whether such action could be harmful to the baby. Much of her pregnancy, in fact, is spent trying to reconcile her desires and wants as a sexual,

single woman with those of a pregnant, responsible mother. In another episode of this season, Miranda visits her obstetrician/gynecologist for a sonogram. When she fails to muster the requisite excitement the doctor seems to expect, she decides to “fake her sonogram,” feigning delight over the news that her child is a boy. This language mimics that of the sexual, another way in which the sexual, self-focused and maternal merge. Later, when by herself at her apartment, Miranda studies the printed sonogram picture, trying to muster the same thrill that even her maid, Magda, displays. Inadvertently, Miranda sets her coffee cup on the picture, leaving it stained and wet, exhibiting not so much indifference but her conflicted, realistic sentiment toward the discourse of motherhood in which she is now entrenched.

Self-focus and mother-duty are further explored throughout the series. In the episode “Plus One is the Loneliest Number,” the sexual and maternal are merged once again. When Miranda’s date ends back at her apartment with an intense goodbye on her couch, Brady breaks the mood with an ear-piercing cry. When her date stops and asks if she’d like to go and get him, she looks at him and quips, “Can I come first?” Needless to say, this is a tongue-in-cheek look at the blend of motherhood and sexuality but one that affords a more realistic depiction than seen before. In “Critical Condition,” Miranda cannot stop Brady from crying. As a mother, she doesn’t intuitively know what her son needs (a further refutation of the maternal imperative), so she relies on advice from a neighbor who suggests using one of the battery-operated vibrating chairs to calm him down. It works. While Samantha is babysitting Brady, the chair stops and Brady resumes crying. Samantha, unfamiliar with the maternal, seeks to solve the problem in her own way. Fortunately for her, she had just bought a new vibrator before she came over to

baby-sit, and she places it behind his back in the chair to help stop the tears. While unconventional, this modern merge of the maternal and sexual is a step away from the previous split seen thus far. In many ways the use of sex and sexualized language is a trope for self-exploration, illustrating that a woman need not sacrifice herself in the 21st century if she also chooses to be a mother.

Miranda's career is a source of conflict throughout the series. In the episode from season six, "Hop, Skip and a Week," Miranda struggles with mother-guilt when she has to leave in the morning for work instead of staying with her son, Brady. On top of this, Miranda is implicitly chastised for being a mother. Her male employers question whether she is capable of handling an important case since she now has other responsibilities. Miranda does stand up for herself, telling those in the office that she will be cutting back to fifty hours a week, fifty-five at most. Simone de Beauvoir writes, "[F]or many women the obligation to choose between motherhood and a creative career entails a bitter struggle" (19). In the second movie, Miranda illustrates this conflict between motherhood and career asserting, "Sometimes, as much as I love Brady, being a mother just isn't enough. I miss my job." Miranda does face this bitter struggle, and this series illustrates how this maternal issue persists.

Another aspect that the show deals with is maternal anger. Miranda is certainly not the imagined kind, gentle mother. As Deborah Connelly posits, "[M]ythical mothers do not experience rage at their children; they never lose control..." (273). Adrienne Rich writes, "[M]other-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood" (46). Yet, in season five's episode "Anchors Away," Miranda displays frustration, anxiety and anger

at herself and Brady for his inability to breastfeed. While she is never abusive or violent, she isn't patient, calm or quiet, traditionally the mythical qualities a "good" mother should possess. In the aforementioned "Critical Condition," Brady will not stop crying. Miranda is again frustrated and angry. She must take a break from her maternal role for a few hours to regain her composure. While this doesn't seem extremely shocking, what is unique about this depiction of maternal anger is that it overthrows long held assumptions as presented by Rich and Connolly about this emotion in women, specifically mothers.

While Miranda stands as a commentary on maternity and the complexity of engaging in such a role, Carrie presents the conflict within the selection of anti-maternity. Most of the series involves Carrie finding love, but when she does, and after she gets married in the first film, what is left but for her to become a mother?⁸⁶ In the second *Sex and the City* film, Carrie feels the pressure of the maternal imperative. When she meets a fan of her newspaper column at the wedding of some friends, the woman tells her that they are like twins. The woman proceeds to recount all the ways in which the two of them are alike, but when she informs Carrie that she and her husband are pregnant, Carrie can't confirm the same. When the woman queries as to whether they are trying, Carrie admits she doesn't want children. Her fan, the woman who looked at her all smiles and awe before, now turns a confused look to Carrie, asking, essentially, you mean it will just be the two of you, forever? Carrie's status shifts in this woman's eyes because of Carrie's rejection of the required maternal. Although initially hurt by the judgment, Carrie plays with this language and prescribed norm, giving her husband, Big (played by

⁸⁶ It should be noted that Carrie struggled with a variety of "norms" throughout the series. Carrie was a reluctant convert to matrimony, literally ripping off her wedding dress during a try-on session in one episode and refusing to wear her engagement ring on her finger, opting instead to wear it around her neck ("so it will be closer to my heart").

Chris Noth) a watch engraved with the sentiment, “Me and you, just us two.” Because Carrie is a part of the hetero-normative model, she is victim to the required expectations and pursuits. She, however, rejects this notion of prescribed maternity, forging her own path.

The men of *Sex and the City* exhibit maternal work and care in a way that many of the female characters cannot. Steve Brady (played by David Eigenberg) enacts the work of the maternal. In many ways, Miranda, unaccustomed and unsure as to how she wants to embrace her unexpected maternal role, is balanced by Steve’s enthusiasm and devotion. In the most recent film, Steve encourages Miranda to put down her Blackberry and be present for Brady. It is Steve that dispenses advice and is often the one who goes to school contests and meetings. Steve is truly a nurturing male parent. After taking his advice, Miranda tells her boss to “take this job and shove it,” essentially, and arrives in time for Brady’s award of first place in the science contest. Miranda is overwhelmed with her victory, marveling at her ability to actually deliver her maternal presence. She tells Steve, “I never make it.” In many ways, this declaration is a self-criticism of her maternity. Steve mediates Miranda’s maternity through the masculine nurturance he brings to the relationship.

Aiden Shaw (played by John Corbett) is another pivotal male figure, one to whom Carrie is temporarily engaged. Carrie can’t commit to him, even after accepting his proposal and moving in with him. His desire for a marriage and family is tempered by Carrie’s reluctance. The couple end their relationship and when they encounter each other again in episode six, “To Market, To Market,” we see Aiden turn around to reveal he is wearing a Snuggie and his new baby, Tate. Although Carrie couldn’t give Aiden the

family and stability he sought, Aiden has found it on his own with “Tate’s mom,” who is only later in the exchange given a name, Jackie. She is never pictured. As Aiden is presented in the frame, face to face with Carrie, he stands representative of male maternity, gushing about the nickname he gave his son and why. Carrie stands as the contrast, the anti-maternal. When Carrie marvels at Aiden immersed in the maternal, Aiden acknowledges the shift, stating, “I had a baby.” The onus is on him. Carrie quips, “I have a date.” Her disconnect with his world is painfully apparent.

Standing almost 90 years apart, *Sex and the City* and Dorothy Canfield’s The Home-Maker both explore men in the perceived female realm and vice-versa. Dorothy Canfield, a woman whom Eleanor Roosevelt named “one of the ten most influential women in America,” is a writer worth examining in this context, for it is interesting to see how popular works then and now grapple with similar issues (Keeping Fires 2). In Canfield’s novel, readers are introduced to Evangeline Knapp, a woman who manages to keep a spotless house, recycle old clothes into new apparel for her children, and contribute to her community and church with flawless enthusiasm. In many ways, this is Knapp’s mask of motherhood, for behind the façade she shows to the world, Evangeline Knapp suffers from a dreadful case of eczema and laments that her life is merely, “a hateful round of housework....Loneliness; never-ending monotony; blank, gray days, one after another, full of drudgery” (47). Readers are privy to her internal thoughts as she navigates her household duty:

A profound depression came upon her. These were the moments in a mother’s life about which nobody ever warned you, about which everybody kept a deceitful silence, the fine books and the speakers who

had so much to say about the sacredness of maternity. They never told you that there were moments of arid clear sight when you saw helplessly that your children would never measure up to your standard, never would be really close to you, because they were not your kind of human beings, because they were not *your* children, but merely other human beings for whom you were responsible. How solitary it made you feel!” (48)

Canfield’s novel, written in 1924, still resonates today. The fact that this myth and mask of motherhood are still just as powerful and pervasive now as it was then further reinforces the entrenchment in the culture and the silence of women’s voices when it comes to the discourse of motherhood.

Lester Knapp, the masculine foil in The Home-Maker “loathed his life-long slavery to the clock” (68). Mr. Knapp hates his job of selling artifice in the form of clothes and “essential” home-wares to the wives and mothers that come into the store. Described by Mrs. Prouty, a local townswoman, as a “sickly-looking man! Bent shoulders, hollow chest, ashy-gray skin...no physique at all,” and, perhaps most damning, “the father of a family! Such men ought not be allowed to have children” (83). His ability as a provider and his physical prowess are all subject to debate among the community which the Knapps inhabit.

Both characters are miserable, but, ironically, it is tragedy that illuminates their miserable situation and offers a way out, acceptable because of the context of the situation. When Mr. Knapp falls off a roof and breaks his back, he becomes unable to walk, reduced to life in a wheel-chair. Because he can’t go to work, he stays home with the children while Knapp’s old boss offers a position to Evangeline to help the family out

during their dark times. What ensues is complete bliss for both parties. Lester enjoys and embraces the maternal role while Evangeline thrives and succeeds in the professional forum.

Each gender mediates success. Although Lester utilizes tricks like putting down old newspapers on the floor so as not to get it dirty and simply crumpling them up before his wife returns, he manages. No, he thrives, as do the children who, heretofore, were sickly, rebellious and/or withdrawn. He learns how to cook and how to sew and navigates the home realm with ease. Eva thrives, too. Readers see that “[w]hat she thought was her duty had held her bound fast in a death-like silence and passivity” (221). At the store, Eva rapidly moves up through the ranks, contributing as though she were on par with the owners of the store.

This success is not without cost, however. When it seems Lester might walk again, the Knapp family spirals into decline, fearful of losing their footing and regressing to normative gender function. Eva is burdened under maternal guilt: “The place for a mother is with her children—She was a bad woman to rebel so against it” (290). Lester contemplates the brute force of tradition: “Why the fanatic feminists were right, after all. Under its greasy camouflage of chivalry, society is really based on contempt for women’s work in the home” (312). Their savior comes in the form of Dr. Merritt, who perpetuates the lie that Lester will not be able to walk, enabling the Knapp family to put on a tragic, and acceptable, mask to the outside world, all the while functioning in a re-envisioned state that behooves both the New Male and New Female of Canfield’s imaginings. The novel ends with one of the children, Stephen, realizing that he gets to keep his father as the functional primary parent, with his words: “Father! *Fa-a-ather!*” (320). The

beckoning of the masculine parent is essential here; while the female is important, even the child recognizes the rescripted role of the masculine figure as the functional primary.

Both *Sex and the City* and The Homemaker examine similar issues: maternal guilt and frustration, masculine desire to be the nurturer and the conflict of work and maternity. The difference within these texts resides primarily in the nature of the discourse, for in Canfield's text the reversal of gender roles is one that is covertly enacted. True, the small-town community does witness and acknowledge the gender role reversal but only because of the necessity of the situation. When the Knapps realize their private revolution might have to be terminated due to Lester's healing and the doctor recognizes the harm such a change would bring to the new dynamic of the Knapp family, there is a covert agreement implicit in the continuance of the gender reversal. With the *Sex and the City* narrative, the conflicts are overt in their presentation. Women and men openly discuss the conflicts inherent in maternity, but not only is the discussion more frank and open, but the subjects of the woman's body, sexuality and masculine desire are now added to the exploration.

So, while popular narratives carry on an open discourse about motherhood and many of the issues presented within this dissertation, what of dystopian literature, literature that imagines the worst of our future society? Where does motherhood fit in the current literary imagining of the worst case scenario? Cormac McCarthy explores the end of the world in his 2006 novel, The Road. Here the main characters are a son and his father, both of whom spend the majority of the novel traveling along a desolate road, following a battered map, all in an attempt to reach the ocean, the symbolic element of the edge of the known world and the beginning of hope. The father, in this narrative,

enacts mothering, primarily because the mother abandons the family. Through flashbacks, readers learn that the mother can't take any more of the desolation and loss within the bleak world they inhabit, a world where cannibalism, sexual violence, hunger and cold are normal. She tells her husband, "My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now" (57). This admission allows her to remove herself from the situation. When the husband asks her to say goodbye to the boy, to wait until morning to leave, she rejects this, him, and the child, saying, "I cant help you" (58). Her disconnect is complete. The father is left to nurture the boy, but the nurturing here is somewhat different. At the outset of the novel, readers are told, "No one traveled this road" (16). In many ways, this is symbolic, as the path of hope, the path of human kindness and nurture, is one that is absent in this imagined world. The road they travel is literal and symbolic and, in many ways, the two make their own way.

The masculine nurturing exhibited here is much more practical in care, focusing on survival. When the two encounter a man who has been burned by lightning, the boy cries and wants to help but the father rejects this. He tells the boy "[W]e have nothing to give him. I'm sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it. You know that, dont you" (50)? The nurturing here is selfish, an every-man-for-himself kind of care. Much is made of delineations between good and bad. The father constantly reassures the boy that they are the good ones and that nothing is going to happen to them because, as he tells the boy, "We're carrying the fire" (83). As the nurturer here, the father focuses on keeping the child safe from harm, feeding him, keeping him warm, essentially the most basic elements of nurture, but he also tells the boy stories, as in the case of being the keeper of the fire. The stories are, perhaps, their only luxury.

Language here, however, along with other comforts, is sparse:

The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (89)

The loss of the traditional (comforts, language, family structure) reduces human interaction and experience to its basic elements. This reduction, however, instills meaning. The omission of traditional words for things, place names for the space in which they occupy, and specific, concrete names for the people within the narrative allows for a new crafting of the world in which the father and the son occupy. As Ashley Kunsu observes, “*The Road* frees both character and reader from the chains of the old language. Eliminating the old suggests the coming of the new and creates a space in which the new world can be imagined and called into being” (59). While the loss of traditional language might be read as a negative development, in some respects this loss can also be read as an opportunity to rescript and revise the way in which words, people and places mean.

Throughout the novel, the father understands and interprets signs and signals, a language that is, in many ways, dead, available to only the few who are fortunate to survive. His special brand of knowledge, of language, of learning, nurtures the pair. It is the father who knows how to read the hollow sound in the ground and interpret it as a hidden bunker, a space he digs up and finds full of food. It is the man who listens to the sounds in their desolate landscape and can decipher the presence of marauders. The

father is able to navigate the pair through the charred landscape, reading the topography until they reach the ocean. Here, success is measured in survival and the father succeeds in his care mediated through his masculine and learned ability.

In much the same way that the road can be interpreted as a symbolic means of navigating an unfamiliar space, so, too, can the journey itself be interpreted as a figurative birth. Ultimately, the father dies shortly after the pair reaches the ocean as he succumbs to a sickness he fought off throughout the journey. The son unites with another group of survivors, this time embodying traditional family structure:

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (286)

In many ways, the correlation with God, the assumed giver of life, and the father, the boy's father, is pivotal. His breath, the father's breath, is truly what enabled the boy to survive, to "carry the fire," as it were. Although dark and somber in tone, the narrative tells a dystopian creation story by tale's end. The pair arrives at the literal end of the world and the boy is handed off to the mother. Is the reconciliation with the traditional a means of ameliorating the situation? Or is this new world a sign "of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again?" (287). Kunsu reads this as an optimistic novel and one that is "a linguistic journey toward redemption, a search for meaning and pattern in a seemingly meaningless world--a search that, astonishingly, succeeds" (57).

Regardless, the work does explore masculine maternity in the absence of the mother, also tinkering with the idea of words, language, and meaning.

Absent mothers and present fathers serve as the focus of Margaret Atwood's dystopian series, Oryx and Crake (2003) and The Year of the Flood (2009). The first narrative in the collection centers around the end of the world, brought about by man's scientific manipulation of mankind, and the individuals left, primarily Snowman (nee Jimmy), who seek to survive. Much of the story is told in flashback, with Jimmy recounting how things got to be so desperate. We learn that Jimmy's mother leaves and abandons Jimmy because of her own moral principles regarding the scientific manipulation of food, people, and animals that her husband participates in. She writes to Jimmy that she "suffered with conscience long enough" and that she can't "participate in a lifestyle that is not only meaningless in itself" but full of social implications. She concludes by telling Jimmy that she will always love him. Jimmy questions this: "Maybe she had loved Jimmy...In her own manner. She must have had some sort of positive emotion about him though. Wasn't there supposed to be a maternal bond?" (61) When Jimmy is interrogated regarding where she went, he offers little information: "His mother was just a mother...She did what mothers did. She smoked a lot" (63). He personally characterizes her as his "real, strange, insufficient, miserable mother" (67). When he does reflect on her, he remembers her as being that absent presence. He recalls coming home from school for lunch only to find her sitting at the kitchen table in a magenta bathrobe with an untouched cup of coffee in front of her. She would be smoking and no lunch would be prepared for him. As with other characters I've mentioned throughout this text, her absence defines Jimmy's present, especially with Crake, the "male mother"

of this text. While Jimmy is essentially motherless, his friend Crake becomes the prototype for maternity, in a twisted, Frankensteinian way.

Crake, a title character of the first book, is Jimmy's childhood friend, a classmate with whom he later comes to reconnect during Crake's work on the "Paradise Project," a complex gene splicing and creating process whereby Crake was essentially producing quality-specific individuals, babies:

Whole populations could be created that would have pre-selected characteristics. Beauty, of course; that would be in high demand. And docility: several world leaders had expressed interest in that. Paradise had already developed a UV-resistant skin, a built-in insect repellent, an unprecedented ability to digest unrefined plant material. As for immunity from microbes, what had until now been done with drugs would soon be innate. (304)

While this seeming utopian creation of Crake is reminiscent in many ways of the Biblical paradise (in name, with Crake serving as deity), this is a far cry from the first man, first woman archetype. Although Crake has created these new creatures called Crakers, "each one naked, each one perfect, each one a different skin color—chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey—but each with green eyes," Crake has also created a pill that destroyed the rest of, or much of, humankind (8). Crake was also working on the BlyssPlus pill, a pill that would "protect the user against all known sexually transmitted diseases...provide an unlimited supply of libido...and prolong youth" (294). Although the pill Crake creates seems a positive creation, we learn at novel's end that Crake has also imbued the pill with

JUVE, a virus also made in Paradise that eradicated a large portion of the population. Crake kills himself, leaving Jimmy in charge of his creation.

Even though the Crakers were Crake's creation, it is Jimmy who nurtures them, enacting a maternity that he never was shown himself as a child, but yet understands how to emulate. Crake, in many ways, sees Jimmy as a pseudo-maternal figure. He associates with Jimmy many feminine attributes that he doesn't possess. Earl G. Ingersoll posits, "Jimmy and his defense of "the arts" are positioned as "feminine" and self-indulgent, while Crake and science are gendered "masculine," in a blatantly masculinist performance of power" (163). Jimmy didn't ask to be in charge of the Crakers, but Crake brings Jimmy to Watson-Crick and exploits his feminine sensibilities, using them and him as a pseudo-mother to his creation. Jimmy answers the innocent Crakers' questions, careful to create a narrative that will make sense to them, realizing that "although the Crakers weren't his business, they were now his responsibility. Who else did they have" (350)? As Elaine Showalter observes, "Jimmy [becomes]... their St Paul and surrogate father" ("The Snowman..."). He is, as he says, an "improbable shepherd," and he is, but he fulfills his function and does the work required, shepherding the Crakers to food and safety (353).

Another take on Atwood's novel reads into not the masculine supplanting of the feminine maternal role, but the loss of that mother-love as one of the greatest devastations in this imagined world. Lorrie Moore writes "Atwood takes the feminine view; here mother love is the great sustainer, the protean protector, the tender magician, and its loss the great loss." Calling on Jimmy's loss of the maternal figure, and Oryx's as well, Moore notes that this absence is the true catastrophe, second only to the revising of

Mother Nature in the hands of man. Moore describes “Mother Nature herself--captured, tortured, and mocked, in classic gothic fashion, but elusive and indestructible, in her way.” The shift of mothering, who does it and how, is perhaps the biggest commentary read in Atwood’s novel, at least according to Moore.

In the follow-up novel The Year of the Flood, the theme of absent mothers and maternal men persists, if it is not as pronounced. Telling of characters that exist in a different place yet concurrent to Jimmy in the previous novel, Atwood gives readers a glimpse at how two women, Ren and Toby, are dealing with the demise of the world and how their lives eventually intersect. Readers learn that Ren’s mother, Lucerne, ran off with Zeb, a God’s Gardener (a fundamentalist group of Christian environmentalists), but, when he began to show affection for another woman, Lucerne returned to her home life and husband, swearing she and her daughter had been snatched off the street, taken so Lucerne could be Zeb’s sex slave. She had to go along with Zeb, she tells everyone when she returns, for “What woman...wouldn’t have done the same?” (Kindle edition, location 3127). The implication is that Lucerne does this as a good mother, protecting herself and her child. Lucerne threatens Ren, forcing her to perpetuate Lucerne’s lie, which she does. When the two encounter each other at AnooYoo spa, where Lucerne is coming for another face lift, we see Lucerne’s rejection of Ren:

She blew me off like I was a piece of lint. Although I hadn’t ever wanted to see her or talk to her, it was a very bad feeling to know that she didn’t want to see me or talk to me either. It was like being erased off the slate of the universe—to have your own mother act as if you’d never been born.
(Kindle edition, location 4484)

Lucerne is consumed with Zeb, ignoring Ren when Zeb is gone. Zeb, in many instances, functions in the maternal way that Lucerne cannot or will not, teaching young Ren the ways of God's Gardeners. But, grown up Ren gets involved with the sex dancing club Scales and Tails, finding nurture in her boss, Mordis, of whom she says, "He made me feel safe, maybe because he was the closest thing to a father I was ever going to get: Zeb had vanished into thin air and my real father hadn't found me very interesting, and in addition he was dead" (Kindle edition, location 4499). Although named as father, these men nurture in oddly discordant ways. As much of the narrative discusses the role of naming, so, too, does naming play a role here, for *father* is the only word Ren knows for the behavior enacted by these men.

Toby, on the other hand, is left adrift without a mother, who dies of illness, and without a father, who kills himself. Because many of the women were sold as sex-slaves to pay for family debts, Toby flees and tries to make money on her own, selling her eggs on the black market. As Robert Charles Wilson notes of the narrative, "Everything from love to art has become a commodity, its value determined solely by the price it commands in the marketplace." Toby makes a commodity of her potential maternity, but finds, when she goes back to sell more eggs, that there were complications and she couldn't donate or "incidentally—have any children herself" (Kindle edition, location 444). For Toby, her maternal imperative is realized and then dismissed as she notes, "[W]hen she was told she'd been accidentally sterilized she could feel all the light leaking out of her" (Kindle edition, location 455). For women, their bodies become a source of commodification in the future, as in selling their sex or their maternity, a bleak future at best.

Looking at popular television and literature from the previous century as a barometer of what issues are relevant and then contrasting these issues with fears chronicled in current dystopian fiction, readers can see much of what is being grappled with as narratives navigate the divisive realm of mothering and fathering and what it means to do either, or both. Although not representative of all dystopian fiction or all popular television and film, these brief examples show how the absent mother-present ma/father, figuratively or symbolically, intersect and weave a complex narrative of relevant discussion.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ For another less contemporary work dealing with masculine maternity, see Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1976). Suzette Haden Elgin's Native Tongue (2000) also does an excellent job delving into the issue of women, language and change.

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION

“Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about.”

-Benjamin Lee Whorf

As I look back on this dissertation, it seems natural I arrived here, examining popular culture and gender and where they intersect with my current worldview, as a mother. As a child of the seventies, I grew up with the television. In many ways, it was like another member of the family, and the stories and tales it would tell helped shape my attitudes and ideas about masculinity and femininity and the cohabitation of the two. I remember being transfixed with Jack, Janet and Chrissy on *Three's Company*. Jack acted feminine (playing the part of the gay man) so he could live in the apartment and share the rent with the other two girls. He performed his preconceived role to achieve an end result, grossly overacting feminine qualities and characteristics. In many ways, many of the other shows I gorged on exhibited this same kind of exaggerated performance. The women of *Charlie's Angels* called on their femininity to gain information and solve crime, vamping it up well during those full sixty minutes. *Wonder Woman* was another such exaggeration, with a cartoonish caricature of femininity (with cape and snazzy arm bands!) juxtaposed with the demure and silent Diana Carter. Even today her character is called on to represent a woman who takes on myriad superhuman feats such as mothering, working and being it all. Although I didn't recognize it at the time, *My Three Sons* patterned the ideal of masculine maternity, showcasing three male children being parented by their father, a widow. Women often sought the father's attention, but the

focus was family, not finding romance. Gender was always at the forefront of these shows, and because I spent so much time with works that explored the relevancy of gender issues, it isn't any surprise that gender issues have been the focus of my dissertation.

When I came to graduate school, a mother myself trying to balance school work, infant care and part-time work, I encountered a new species of woman I had never come across before: those who didn't want children. As an only child, I was obsessed with children, probably seeking a sibling myself, but I always knew I wanted a passel of kids of my own. These women were different. They didn't define themselves by their potential reproductive ability. They didn't hope to have children, but rather hoped to have lives, individual, solitary lives that involved travel and books and all the life that happens out there when moms, like me, were tending to life in the home. It seems a neat division, something I know it's not, but the division was clear and one I had never, ever thought possible. I grew up where women "like that" were old maids, much like the card game, outcast, discarded, and rejected. I learned that was society's pronouncement on them, not a declaration these women made on their own. What an eye opener THAT was.

For these women who don't take on this maternal role, what happens to them? As Sarah Blaffer Hrdy notes, "Wherever women have both control over their reproductive opportunities and a chance to better themselves, women opt for well-being and economic security over having more children" (9). While this might be a bit of a sweeping generalization, it definitely is a recognizable trend carried out in our own society and in many of the texts examined within this work. But what does this trend mean? Kaplan

questions, “Does the new insistence on fathers as parents reflect a new despair about the mother’s ability to satisfy? The need to situate fathers in the symbolic to safeguard the child from the neglectful mother” (268)? While this seems to be the underlying fear, I choose to look at it from a different perspective. I see this symbolic shift presenting the possibility to mother in new ways, allowing women to mother themselves, their ideas, their creativity and their environment. As Eyer suggests, “If we, as a society, are to live well—as our tremendous wealth promises—we must all become like mothers” (247).

Further, along into my studies when I began teaching, making feminist principles and works an integral part of my curriculum, I was again shocked at the animosity such a word as “feminist” aroused. Students, female students who must have been products of the feminist movement and its aftereffects, rejected the word. George Carlin does a bit about “The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television,” and I felt I should compose my own list of words that sparked hostility and shut down a conversation in my classes, feminism being at the forefront. Where did this come from? What did feminism sell that society wasn’t buying? I found that even my son, MY son, wasn’t immune when at eight he stood at the top of our stairs angry at me for some such thing and said, “You, you, feminist!” That said it all.

I could recount dozens of anecdotes that served for me in bas relief of the writing on the wall. What was written in the anthologies and what I encountered in the classroom weren’t always in correlation with what I was seeing in my beloved popular culture. Sometimes they merged, sometimes the messages were similar, on the surface, but in many ways there was a rub between what we were given for frank and intense discussion of complex issues and what was passed off as pat revelations and pronouncements.

As I said in Chapter Two, it was, finally, sitting in a production of *Seussical the Musical* that I saw Dr. Seuss's character Horton in a new light. What was once just an elephant, a responsible, dutiful creature taking on the role for flighty bird, ne'er do well Mayzie was now a prototype for masculine maternity, a new figure, a new Adam, a new man in this feminist revolution.

And what of men who take on this role, not in a dramatization of a children's work or in fictional texts, but in real life? Isn't it important that we open up our possibilities rather than constrict them based on gender? As E. Ann Kaplan states in "Sex, Work, and Motherhood," "Fathers are beginning to steal the show in regard to parenting: that they are the new heroes in this role is fascinating...." (268). With as many advances as women have made in the domestic and professional spheres, shouldn't we applaud the gender opportunities presented to the masculine gender in the domestic sphere, a realm in which they were largely shut out? If individuals are going to embrace this new fourth stage that Showalter deems "free," then an acceptance of all types of mothering from both genders must be put in play.

While the women were interesting to me for the variety of reasons I mentioned before, the men came later, truly inspiring this dissertation. Largely, they are the key because these masculine maternal figures are often buried under the feminist movement yet conversely propelled onward by it. In Meg Wolitzer's 2008 novel, The Ten-Year Nap, she writes of women who have lost their position in the work world as they have taken time off to have a family, rarely, if ever returning to their world pre-child. Within the pages are the men, however, and Wolitzer notes how the husbands given to these forty year old women, working full time and forgetting socks, are different than the men

in their thirties who confidently wear baby slings and assume maternal functions. She writes, “The husbands they lived with were part past, part future. They were not the future itself. They were not, apparently, the fruits of feminism, offered up to the daughters of its founders as a perfect gift” (55). Further in the novel, we do get a chapter devoted to one of the male figures, a rarity as this is a woman’s story. What we see is Henry Lamb, father to Amy, one of the central characters, reflecting in 1973, the year of my birth interestingly enough, that he wished to say to his wife that she should go off to work while he would stay home all day with the children. In Chapter Fourteen, Henry returns home early from his work as an economics professor, and we read an interior monologue of sorts as Henry Lamb watches his three daughters play. He reflects:

If only he could find a consciousness-raising group for me, then he would immediately go sit in some other husband’s living room and tell everyone, “I wish I could just stay home and raise my daughters, and cook lamb chops and bake cakes, and watch my wife march off into civilization the way she wants to....” But supposedly men did not need such a group. Men were happy with the way the die had been cast....The world was changing but not fast enough. Maybe soon a mother could go off and write all day without thinking of anyone or anything else, while a father could stay home and make a house smell like chocolate and play dollies with his daughters. But for now, as far as he could see, that couldn’t yet happen. (290-92)

It is my hope, that thirty-seven years later beyond the fictional Henry Lamb’s declaration, that this can happen, that the men, and women, today are the future itself, patterning,

redefining, recrafting, rescripting and rewriting the way we know masculine and feminine specifically within the confines of parenting. It is my hope that by understanding the past, we can reshape the future, understanding mother and father in more than just gender prescribed ways of defining parents, looking instead to the capacity of nurture and work within each gender.

I began this dissertation with the intent of showing how masculine maternity and feminine nurturance were depicted in film, text and popular culture, seeking to illustrate that these depictions reinforce the narrative formula that men cannot and women can mother. When men do mother, it is often as an agency to dictate to the neglectful or absent female who isn't functioning within her prescribed role. When women don't function in maternally prescribed ways, they are often demonized and vilified. As I've shown, exceptions occur, but despite the narrative rehashing of the heteronormative construct within the role of tradition, there is a breakdown here, one often centering on language rather than simply behavior.

Men can mother and do, and women, often, do not, whether by choice or circumstance. Our language needs to reflect this. Cixous called for a "new insurgent writing" while Friedan sought a "second stage" of exploration. I referenced de Beauvoir in my introduction and her call for an affirmation of brotherhood, but what we need is an affirmation of our combined motherhood. We all possess within us, if we so choose, both men and women, the capacity to mother. It is a choice, not a biological referent. Our language must move beyond the reductive and include the possibility for this allowance. I have bandied about a wealth of terms to allow for this inclusion: functional primary, ma-pa/rent and biternity. I've also recognized that women can engage in matriodeniality,

a rejection of any perceived or artificially prescribed maternal imperative. Women are often pressured as they are what Alta Gerrey calls “the final mother,” the one ultimately responsible for the child’s care. But because our world, science, and legal and cultural advances have allowed for so many possibilities for our binary system of understanding gender and parenthood, our language now needs to catch up and mirror these advances.

Viewing motherhood as a uniquely female task is problematic. Andrea O’Reilly posits: “[G]ender essentialism underpins modern motherhood and gives rise to its many oppressive practices” (377). O’Reilly calls for “a repositioning of the word *mother* from a noun to a verb so that the work of mothering is rendered separate from the identity of mother—so that care is divested of biology” (377). Moreover, she encourages the work that is involved in mothering to be degendered. A removal of this notion of mothering might dismantle the idea of the maternal imperative or the idea that mother-work is “defined as women’s calling and vocation” (378). Language must mirror the actions men and women undertake in caring and nurturing their children.

It is upon completion of this work that another news story merits mention. Appearing on the September 29th 2010 episode of *Oprah*, Christine, the mom who fathered her own child, explained her maternity. Christine was formally Chris and, before he had his sexual reassignment surgery, he froze his sperm. When Christine met her partner, Lisa, they decided to have a baby. Lisa became pregnant with twins, Eden and Lucas, from sperm Chris, now Christine, stored (“The Mom Who”). Christine can breastfeed the children and is a mom and father to both her children, playing with our definition of such outmoded terms.

Further, on popular entertainment news television show *Access Hollywood*, Ricky Martin, the now openly gay male superstar/singer, discussed his role as parent to two twin boys. Having used a surrogate to give birth to the children he fathered, he functions as the parent-primary. In a November 2010 interview with Mario Lopez, Martin doesn't refer to himself in his biological capacity, as father, but rather as his role as parent-primary. He defines himself by the work he does, asserting, "I am the mom." His use of the term "mom" to define himself is the push needed to formalize a language that moves beyond biological determinism and into one that mirrors the task and work being done.

So where do we go from here? How do we reconcile and engage in a dialogue of difference? We must speak it and acknowledge that if our science, culture, and community have the possibility to offer such advances and progress so, too, does our language. Butler imagines that possibility where

identities were no longer fixed...and a new configuration...would emerge from the ruins of the old. Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarisms of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness. (149)

To achieve this, we must live it, engaging in the possibilities that are available to us rather than constraining ourselves to previously limited ideals. Our actions must be reflective of the changes called for in the language used to speak of mothering. We must write with that white ink Cixous calls for, man and woman, a new chapter for us all.

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