Classical Literature And The Conception Of The Monster-Mother

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Abstract

Second-wave feminism inspired classical scholars to willfully disengage from the conservative disciplinary focus on father-son narratives and to instead delve into the ancient literary, documentary and material remains of the lives of women in antiquity- wives and sisters, mothers and daughters. Matrifocal studies of classical antiquity then, is a relatively recent literary development. One such study-area is of monster mothers, who actually show up pretty early in ancient tales- Medea, who murders her own children to punish her faithless husband, Clytemnestra who stabs her husband Agamemnon in his bath for sacrificing their daughter on the altar to propitiate the gods and gain favourable winds for the Greek ships heading for Troy, Grendel's demonic mother who kills a Danish warrior to avenge Grendel's death at Beowulf's hands. This paper will explore the narratives of monster-mothers and the damage they inflict, which often tends to be more psychic than physical.

Keywords: matricentric, classical writings, monster-mothers.

Matrifocality and narratives

Throughout literary history, mothers have been the subject of numerous fictional works. Writers may venerate or confront, revere or critique, dismiss or embrace them, but innumerable pages have been devoted to attempting to comprehend them. Each woman adapts distinctively to the demands of motherhood. Each woman's fate was associated with a particular partner. Each reflects the author's time period and societal views.

In the Old Testament book of I Kings (3:16-28), the narrative of two prostitutes who give birth to sons serves as a well-known illustration of the bond between mother and child. One infant dies, and his mother swaps him with the other. Both claim ownership, and Solomon, King of Israel, is asked to settle the dispute. With a sword in hand, he commands, "Sever the living infant in half." One woman implores, "Please give her

the infant, but do not kill him." The other responds calmly, "Split it in half." Solomon discerns the truth from their responses: "Give the infant to the first woman." She is the mother of the child." The appreciative mother departs while carrying the infant. This archetypal story, rife with overtones of one mother's malice and selfishness and another's love and self-sacrifice, reveals two extremes of motherhood that authors have since reinterpreted.

Few good mothers appear in classical literature, primarily because the gods, who are immoral, punish tragic women who have been mistreated by men. Because her husband Jason abandons her for a princess, Medea murders her two children in Euripides' play. Clytemnestra is portrayed by Aeschylus as killing her spouse, Agamemnon, upon learning that he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, to the gods. Shakespeare creates a few surrogate mothers who are nurturing and protective, such as the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet, but the biological mothers are invisible, dominant, irrational, and even abysmal, such as Gertrude in Hamlet or Lady Macbeth, who is seduced by three witches into committing the most foul of murders.

In later writings, mothers are frequently naïve, inept, and even foolish. In Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen, Mrs. Bennet is more concerned with social status and propriety than with her daughters' struggles against the curtailments of antiquated customs. In Dickens' Bleak House, Mrs. Jellyby is so preoccupied with herself and her own philanthropic schemes that her motley children feel alienated and cut off from maternal care.

In the Victorian and modern eras, mothers are confronted with the dark issues of an industrialised society, such as poverty, globalisation, and conflict, which undermine traditional beliefs about relationships and parenting. Tolstoy's Anna Karenina pursues her lover and abandons her children. Emma Bovary in Flaubert's Madame Bovary finds no pleasure in her daughter, and ultimately ingests arsenic and abandons her to work in a mill. Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country by Edith Wharton marries and divorces so readily and heartlessly in pursuit of social advancement that she ignores and abandons her children.

In D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, Gertrude Morel is a devoted and selfless mother who devours her son Paul with her emotionally debilitating love. In Katherine Mansfield's The Garden Party, the morally corrupt Mrs. Sheridan bribes her young daughter with a new headwear so she can have her planned celebration despite the recent death of a close neighbour. In Ernest Hemingway's Soldier's Home, when the possessive parent exclaims, "I'm your mother. I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby," the hero "felt sick and vaguely nauseated." Brenda Last, a character in A Handful of Dust by Evelyn

Waugh, exclaims "Thank God" upon learning that her son, and not her lover with the same first name, has died. Sethe, the mother in Toni Morrison's Beloved, murders her daughter to liberate her from slavery. Since we tend to idealise motherhood, we are startled by women who deviate from that image.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are nurturing mothers. Understanding, altruistic, spiritual, tender, protective, reassuring or self-assured, they display heroic qualities with which readers can identify. In The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne uses her daughter Pearl, born out of wedlock, as an example of fierce love, patience, and protectiveness that challenges the social structure of her time. She refers to Pearl as "The infant model of great price" and her "only delight." In Anne Bront's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, we see Helen Graham's devotion to her son, and in L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables, Marilla Cuthbert's transformation from "narrow" and "rigid" to a loving, empathetic, and open person towards the orphan Anne. Mrs. March in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, is the tenacious, kind, quintessential mother who glides sentimentally and "quietly from bed to bed, smoothing a coverlet here, setting a pillow there," holding her family together while her husband serves as a chaplain during the Civil War. Mrs. Bennet's concern that her five daughters marry affluent men rather than face the embarrassment of remaining single and facing economic hardships is both self-serving and well-intentioned, despite the fact that she is "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper."

Maternal monstrosity and the fecund female

Monstrous mothers make an early appearance in literature: Euripedes' Medea and Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy are examples. Grendel's demonic mother nearly succeeds in murdering Beowulf before he subdues and kills her in the ancient Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf.

Rarely have the monstrous mothers of literary fiction had a straightforward explanation for their destructiveness. Nor do they perpetrate murder frequently. The damage they perpetrate is typically more psychic than physical, but that does not make reading about it any less terrifying or fascinating. Mothers, who are perceived as evil and monstrous in classical literature view their children primarily as a means to their own satisfaction or as obstacles to that satisfaction, without regard for the welfare of their children.

In the West, the image of the fertile woman has frequently been linked to monstrosity. An emblem of lust, the fecund female and her shreiking,

nauseatingly dependent offspring, conjure up the uncontrollable nature of femininity, and not surprisingly, the image functions as a locus of male disgust with, and fear of, sexuality and reproduction, a characterization that was established with the creation of Scylla in Homer's Odyssey. The Christian tradition has maintained a negative interpretation of fertility; the female body as the site of reproduction is a symbol of sin because reproduction invokes, if not re-enacts, the initial fall from grace. Even though the first commandment to mankind in Genesis is "Be fruitful and multiply" (1:28), the favoured females in the Bible (and those given significant narrative time after Eve) have difficulty conceiving (Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth), circumvent the standard method of conception, or are not shown as mothers (Miriam, Deborah, and Ruth). Both the childless matron and the excessively fertile mother receive disproportionate attention and censure for failing to meet societal expectations of appropriate sexual behaviour, thereby diminishing positive images of reproductive sexuality.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the problematics of maternal sexuality become fundamental to recurring depictions of the fertile female. Specifically, the depictions of Errour in Spenser's The Faerie Queene, Sin in John Milton's Paradise Lost, Criticism in Jonathan Swift's Battle of the Books, and Dulness in Pope's Dunciad illustrate the authority that women derive from their reproductive capacity, the patriarchal fear of this female power, and the demonization strategy that seeks to justify female containment as a social and moral imperative.

Errour, Sin, Criticism, and Dulness comprise a pattern of maternal misogyny that becomes encoded in English culture in an effort to purge anxieties regarding yearning, dominance, and anarchy. This pattern is notable not only as the prehistory of the domestication of maternity in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also in its developmental aspects, as the evolution of the monstrous mother in Swift and Pope demonstrates a marked intensification of misogyny. This acceleration of maternal misogyny is primarily attributable to the politics of literary culture, in which mass publication, literary paternity, and female authorship are points of contention. Swift and Pope reveal their apprehensions about the "feminization" of literature through their growing anxieties regarding the authority of authorship and its apparent loss in the face of mass reproduction. Swift and Pope, as publishing authors, are inevitably implicated in the processes of production and reproduction. However, through their invocation of the maternal producer and the literature of maternity, they attempt to redefine the literary marketplace in order to reject that which they cannot condone about modern literary production.

Identifiable characteristics of the fertile monstrosity are readily apparent. Errour, Sin, Criticism, and Dulness all appear as mothers with numerous offspring, distinguishing them from grotesque characters such as Grendel's mother, who does not display unusual fertility. They all engage in mothering behaviours that are portrayed as physically revolting or psychologically detrimental, and frequently both. They are therefore monstrous not only because they propagate frequently, but also because they are poor parents. Since the monstrous mother refuses to be sexually and socially passive, she violates the codes of appropriate female behaviour, resulting in a condemnation of the quality and abundance of her actions. The teratological nature of these mothers is also reflected in their appearance, as they have the physical traits of animals, particularly dragons, canines, and asses, which connects them to female demons such as Medusa. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, they all operate within the context of allegory, in which their maternal and monstrous characteristics obtain theological and literary significance.

This literary depiction of fertile maternity reflects the then-contemporary view of female sexuality, according to which a woman's inability to control her fertility (and lack of desire to repress her sexuality) renders her obscene.

Monstrosity has been the subject of a great deal of interdisciplinary research for a very long time, particularly amongst scholars concerned with concerns of meaning-making and identity formation. The 'monstrous' has been deconstructed by theorists as a broad category of diversity, exclusion, dehumanisation, deviance, and even potential autonomy and emancipation.

Cohen observed in his book Monster Theory (1996b) that “any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body”. Stories which portray the monster as a harrowing and abject Other who must be killed by a hero to re-establish the prescriptive order—a narrative structure ingrained in mythology and common to all media forms—can therefore be read as methods to distinguish and police the boundaries separating what is considered to be the regular, reasonable, healthy Self from the irregular, irrational, unhealthy Other. This malevolent Other is frequently portrayed as a woman. While female monstrosity has been exhaustively examined in art, literature, and horror films, female monstrosity in video games is an emerging area of interest in media studies.

As an oppressive tool, the monster polices the boundaries of what is allowable and are either attacked by a monstrous border patrol or turns

into something monstrous (Cohen 1996a: 12). This is especially true for women, who are not only frequently the targets of monstrous hostility in popular culture, but are also frequently depicted as the monsters. As Cohen observed, “the woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, […] or Gorgon” (Cohen 1996a: 9).

Female fecundity has always been tightly regulated in patriarchal societies, and male apprehension of female reproduction and virility has led to maternal bodies being rigorously controlled or scorned as abject (Kristeva 1982 [1980]). The connection between motherhood and monstrosity in mythology, religion, folklore, narrative, and popular culture is well documented (Kristeva 1982 [1980], Creed 1993, Huet 1993, Caputi 2004, Wood/Schillace 2014, Santos 2017; Harrington 2018). Even the ostensibly 'normal' female body parts which are directly involved in the reproductive process, particularly the uterus and vagina, are associated with monstrosity as the monstrous womb and the vagina dentata, or 'toothed vagina' (Creed 1993; Caputi 2004). Creed observed in her adaptation of abjection to the monstrous-feminine in film that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed 1986: 44). Her evaluation included the primitive Archaic Mother in Alien (Scott 1979) and the Monstrous Womb in The Brood (Cronenberg 1979), both of which depict the dread of female generative power; the Possessed Monster in The Exorcist (Friedkin 1973) and the Witch in Carrie (De Palma 1976), both of which encapsulate the cultural correlation of female sexual puberty with malfeasance and sin; and the Vampire in The Hunger (Scott 1983) as well as the Castrating Mother in Psycho (Hitchcock 1960), which both directly threaten male sexual identity. Creed discovered that it was the female physiology of these cinematic monsters that made them so repulsive and disquieting, particularly creatures that give birth, possess phalluses, and penetrate or decapitate their prey.

Monstrosity in mothers- whether physical, emotional or both, have a jolting effect on the reader. However, Barbara Creed, in her book, Return of the Monstrous-Feminine, has an unusual take on this. She sees the increasing representation of the monstrous-feminine in visual discourse as ‘a figure in revolt on a journey through the dark night of abjection.’ She parallels the revolt in representation to the emerging social protest movements that have gathered momentum in the new millennium. These include: third and fourth wave feminism, the #MeToo movement, queer theory, race theory, the critique of anthropocentrism and human animal theory.

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