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Alternative Maternities

Non-traditional forms of motherhood in early modern England

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Alternative Maternities: Non-traditional forms of motherhood in early modern England

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Department of English
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This is for all of you.

Abstract

In this dissertation, I undertake an examination of a concept which I have termed ‘parodic maternity’, a phrase largely inspired by Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity, and specifically her use of parody as a means through which women can negotiate power from within traditional, patriarchal structures. I do so to understand how non-traditional forms of motherhood could prove to be subversive and destabilising within an early modern English patriarchal culture. Examinations of motherhood in early modern England have primarily focused on biological maternity – non-biological and other alternative forms have traditionally been regarded as interesting outliers but never examined to their full potential. This thesis seeks to redefine and reengage with how exactly we define and identify motherhood during this time by paying attention to early modern non-biological and non-traditional forms of motherhood. I believe that when we open up discussions of maternity to include surrogate motherhood (including foster mothers, adoptive mothers, stepmothers, nurses etc.), and consider performances of maternity outside the biological bond, we are able to discover new ways of thinking about what it meant to be a mother and how one could embody the role in early modern England and on the early modern stage and page. This recognition of a broader spectrum of identities which engage with culturally constructed concepts of maternity can also help us to recognise and engage with forms of biological maternity that failed to abide by the strict tenets of motherhood that existed during the early modern period, and gives us new frameworks through which to read the texts in which early modern motherhood is performed.

I divide my research into four sections, focusing on foster/adoptive mothers, stepmothers, women who experienced child loss and infertility, and ultimately returning to the biological bond in the final chapter to consider women who parody supposedly natural motherly love by neglecting their offspring. My research will span the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I (roughly covering the years 1560 to 1630), and consider letters, mother’s manuals, diaries, religious and political discourse, alongside early modern dramatic texts. Non-traditional maternal roles, I argue, are all able to parody motherhood as they both embody and reject it as an identity, and in doing so they complicate our traditional understanding of the maternal function within an explicitly patriarchal system. Through an in-depth and previously unexplored examination of these various roles, I show that there was a much broader variety of ways in which motherhood could be enacted and performed than early modern conduct literature and previous scholarship might lead us to believe, and that forms of motherhood which deviated from the patriarchal construction of maternity posed a destabilising challenge to dominant constructions of social roles, particularly with regards to gender, sexuality and social status.

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A Note on Referencing:

When referencing a source for the first time in a chapter, I include the full MHRA citation in a footnote. However, when citing the same work again in the same chapter, I utilise an in-text citation, noting the last name of the author followed by the page number after the reference. When I have cited more than one work by the same author, I include an in-text citation of the shortened title followed by the page number. When citing the same source multiple times in succession, I include only the page number in a parenthetical.

The first reference to all dramatic texts is given a full citation in a footnote; all subsequent references are given in-text following the quote in the format act, scene, line numbers. Unless otherwise stated, all references to William Shakespeare are Oxford Shakespeare 3rd edition. All plays are dated parenthetically and refer to the estimated date of their first performance. Unless otherwise stated, these dates derive from Martin Wiggins in association with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue*, 9 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012-2019).

When I quote from a manuscript copy, I retain the original spelling; however, when utilising a modern translation, I use the modern spelling. This thesis has been written using UK English, except when quoting a source which uses American English, where I retain the original spelling.

Introduction:

But she (who, besides she was grown a mother and a step-mother, did read in his eyes her own fault and made his conscience her guiltiness) thought still that his presence carried her condemnation; so much the more as that she, unchastely attempting his wonted fancies, found, for the reverence of his father's bed, a bitter refusal: which breeding rather spite than shame in her, or if it were a shame, a shame not of the fault but of the repulse, she did not only (as hating him) thirst for a revenge, but (as fearing harm from him) endeavoured to do harm unto him¹

The above passage, from Chapter Fifteen of Book Two of Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1590) details the story of Plangus and his lover Andromana, who marries his father and, through this marriage, becomes both queen and stepmother. This excerpt clearly and concisely expresses the anxiety that specifically surrounded the figure of the stepmother in early modern England. After being rejected by her stepson, Andromana plots to turn his father against him. She is clearly the villain, first 'unchastely attempting his wonted fancies' and then 'endeavouring to do harm unto him'. She serves early modern misogynist constructs of women as both sexual and manipulative, seeking to destroy the relationship between father and son, and is thus a threat to patriarchal structures of family and politics.

In Andromana, even from this brief extract, we are presented with a woman who is manipulative, jealous, and unloving towards her new stepson. In his presentation of Andromana, Sidney draws upon stereotypes that surrounded not just the stepmother, but any maternal figure who did not fit the strictly defined model of the ideal mother that pervaded early modern English culture. There have been numerous works of scholarship discussing the presentation of biological motherhood in culture during the period, but I argue that it is time for our conceptions of maternity to be expanded. In Sidney's story, the biological mother, the Queen, is mentioned only briefly, but

¹ Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. by Maurice Evans (London: Penguin Classics, 1977), 315.

conceptions of motherhood still permeate in the figure of Andromana. While Andromana specifically is a stepmother, it was not the only form motherhood could take that diverted from traditional, biological maternity.

It would be impossible to cover all the works written about biological motherhood during this period, and many appear throughout this thesis. The study of motherhood in early modern England, specifically, first appeared around the 1980s with the publication of *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, and particularly Betty S. Travitsky's chapter 'The New Mother of the English Renaissance: Her Writings on Motherhood' which lays out the changing nature of and focus on motherhood in the wake of the Reformation. Works that followed include Valerie Fildes' 1997 edited collection *Women and Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* and Linda Pollock's 1997 *Childbearing and Female Bonding in Early Modern England*. The 2000s saw a growth in works focused on motherhood and its implications, increasing the focus on mothers in literary culture and its function as a performance. Notable works of this time include Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh's *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period* (2000), although the early 2000s was a quite stagnant period for the field. The publication of Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson's 2007 *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England* radically changed studies of motherhood: their explicit focus on performance and motherhood as a role, I believe, influenced all those that came after. However, I would argue since Moncrief and McPherson's collection, the discussion around maternity has stalled, with scholars unsure of where exactly to go next. More recent works on motherhood – while still providing insightful analysis – have been unable to push the field further: some examples include Karen

Bamford and Naomi J. Miller's 2016 *Maternity and Romance Narratives in Early Modern England* and Mary Beth Rose's 2017 *Plotting Motherhood in Early Modern England*.²

As Sidney makes clear, Andromana is not simply manipulative, but vindictive and shameless in her actions, as Plangus's rejection leads to 'spite rather than shame' within her (315). As a character, Andromana presents an overwhelmingly one-dimensional portrayal of the surrogate mother, giving the impression that such non-biological mothers were always likewise unloving towards their surrogate children. Criticism has largely overlooked the importance of these alternative mothers, with few scholars writing works where the focus is specifically on these figures, rather than serving merely as a footnote or as a less-important antithesis to the more-prominent biological motherhood.³ It is not that previous scholars have not acknowledged that non-normative motherhood did exist, but most only gloss over it as something that certainly occurred but is not worth exploring.⁴ As a result, there has been very little written on alternative forms of motherhood that did not fit the mould of traditional maternity, and there have been no works dedicated to the idea of unconventional maternity as a whole. Even the few that have been written tend to focus on only one such form, and thus the overall impact and prominence of the common divergence from traditional, ideal motherhood has not been explored to its full extent.

² Motherhood in Shakespeare specifically has also been a topic of scholarship; two of the most important works are Mary Beth Rose's 1991 'Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare?: Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance' and Janet Adelman's 1992 *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*.

³ Some of the few examples (which I utilise extensively in their respective chapters) include Marianne Novy's book *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama*, Jack Goody's *Adoption in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Stephen Collin's article "'Reason, nature and order": The Stepfamily in English Renaissance Thought', and Tim Stretton's chapter 'Stepmothers at law in early modern England' in *Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400 – 1800* – although it is crucial to note that, with the exception of Novy's book, these sources all focus on historical context rather than dramatic depictions.

⁴ Consider, for example, Mary Beth Rose's 2017 *Plotting Motherhood in Early Modern England*, in which she writes that while her work '[acknowledges] the significance of the exceptions and distinctions' of non-normative motherhood, she instead chooses to focus on the 'tremendous power of the norm' (4). Similarly, Chris Laoutaris concludes his work *Shakespearean Maternities: Crises of Conception in Early Modern England* by noting the 'almost unimaginable power' of maternity is centred on 'biological determinism' (269).

My research, then, fills the critical gap that has been left by this absence of an extensive exploration into early modern motherhood that deviated from the norm. Alternative motherhood is not confined to non-biological; in this thesis, I consider numerous maternal figures who stray from the ideals of traditional motherhood. By ‘alternative’ motherhood, I simply mean any form of the role which deviated from the expected norm; this includes, but is by no means limited to, non-biological maternity.⁵ In this thesis, I examine a different role in each chapter, interrogating the early modern idea that there was only one way to truly ‘be’ a mother during this period. These ‘alternative’ maternities abounded, and while they are all unique in the ways in which they proved subversive, they all share the ability to parody and in the process rewrite exactly what motherhood could mean in early modern England.

I contend that such roles need to be examined, not just individually, but concurrently and in connection with each other to create a more complex and complete picture of what maternity truly meant during this period. While I am indebted to the work on biological motherhood that has come before, I believe it is time to move past more constrained views of what exactly motherhood could signify. I seek to inscribe other embodiments of motherhood into our overall narrative, to prove we must paint motherhood in wider strokes, that we cannot just relegate non-traditional maternity to a footnote, but we can and must include it in our definition of the role as it existed in early modern England. In this introduction, I set out these established ideals of motherhood before introducing the theories of performativity and parody that will help us integrate alternative maternity into the general discourse of how one could be a mother in early modern England.

⁵ As defined in the OED, ‘[o]f or relating to activities that represent an unorthodox style or approach; of a kind purported to be preferable to or as acceptable as those in general use or sanctioned by the establishment’. These forms of motherhood are ‘unorthodox’ and yet they, in theory, are as ‘acceptable’ as the conventional kind purported by patriarchal culture. ‘alternative, *A.adj.5*’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

I. Biological and Non-Biological Motherhood in Early Modern England

a. *Biological Motherhood and Gender Roles in Reproduction and the Family*

Sidney's story begins with the birth of Plangus and the death of his biological mother, referred to in the text simply as the 'Queene'. Sidney writes that 'not long after whose [Plangus'] birth, the queen (as though she had performed the message for which she was sent into the world) returned again unto her maker' (Sidney, 312). Although the biological mother is mentioned only briefly, this sentence is nonetheless telling regarding attitudes towards motherhood and its necessity in establishing female identity. It demonstrates that the two were explicitly intertwined, to be a woman was to be a mother, and a woman's sole purpose, customarily, was to produce children, as I will explore further. Sidney describes the Queen as having 'performed the message for which she was sent into the world' after giving birth to Plangus; her life's purpose fulfilled, she has no further use in the story and is removed to pave way for the wicked stepmother.

The insistence upon motherhood as a biological necessity was hardly unique to early modern England, but it was a time in which these values were troubled in ways they had not been before. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a period of transition in how gender difference and familial relationships were coming to be constructed.⁶ Changing notions of the family led to the rise of what Betty Travitsky terms the 'new mother' who contributed to the centring of motherhood as the only acceptable role for women. Concurrently, it saw the slow but steady move towards the development of the so-called 'nuclear family' and away from bonds of extended kinship, turning inwards and focusing on biological relationships. Lawrence Stone argues in the late sixteenth century, what he terms the 'Restricted Patriarchal Family' arose as the

⁶ Mary Beth Rose, 'Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.3 (1991), 291-314, (296). Betty Travitsky, 'The New Mother of the English Renaissance: Her Writings on Motherhood' in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. by Cathy N. Davidson and E.M Broner (New York: Ungar, 1980), 33-43, (33).

dominant family structure, in which loyalties became focused on the ‘conjugal core’ within the home, excluding those who were not cohabitating.⁷ Stone’s work on the family, while critical to the field of family studies, has been subsequently and rightfully deconstructed and criticised by scholars. Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster’s edited collection *The Family in Early Modern England*, published in 2007, summarises the debate over Stone’s contentions regarding the family, commenting upon the increasingly nuanced understanding that family life was an experience that varied significantly and could not be reduced to such wide-sweeping claims. While they agree that the structure of most households ‘was nuclear’, the notion of the ‘family’ could still apply to people who were not related by blood or marriage.⁸ Likewise, Stone’s contention that there was little emotional connection amongst families has been particularly contested, as I explore principally in my third chapter. However, critics have agreed with Stone’s general notion that the family was of ‘great political significance’ as well as a ‘public institution’ wherein any disorder within the home would have great influence beyond its walls, and this is what will prove most crucial to my own examination of how the actions of these women could disrupt structures outside the domestic sphere (Berry and Foyster, 8).

The reconceptualisation of the family was driven by a wide variety of discourses – moral, religious, legal – that negotiated and redefined the public and private spheres (‘Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare?’, 297). The shift towards the nuclear family was subsequently explored in the drama of the period, which potentially had the power to both challenge and confirm this remodelling of the family unit. Many dramatic works of the time featured as a major plot point the

⁷ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern England* (London: Penguin, 1990), 124.

⁸ Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster, eds. *The Family in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6, 7. Berry and Foyster acknowledge that the ‘experience’ of family life was dependent upon ‘age, economic self-sufficiency, marital status’ and, particularly crucial, the ‘ability to have children and to raise them in ways that met with societal approval’ and that Stone’s hypothesis on the trend of the nuclear family severely underestimates these factors (16).

desire to obtain or return to a traditional family structure, and conflict often arises directly from the disruption or destruction of familial relationships. Although Shakespeare himself rarely portrays a healthy nuclear household, family ties are still central to so many of his plays and across dramatic genres; Hamlet seeks revenge after the murder of his father and his mother's betrayal, *King Lear* centres on daughters and their complicated relationship with their father's affection, and *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* feature the uncommon ending of biological families being reunited, to name a few.

Biological reproduction was seen as so essential because it was crucial to the assurance of patriarchy; as David Cressy writes, it had great 'public significance' as it was vital for the perpetuation of familial lines, and the conception of male heirs.⁹ As I will explore further in Chapter One, financial, tangible inheritance was typically meant to be passed from father to son, a patrilineal system which eliminated women almost entirely. If inheritance and posterity was a male's legacy, then one might claim a woman's was intended to be little more than childbirth. The pain and suffering endured by women in childbirth was punishment brought on by Eve's original transgression as described in Genesis 3:16: 'unto the woman he said [...] in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children'.¹⁰ Eve, as the original mother, condemned women to bear the pains of labour and to love their children despite (or indeed because of) this suffering. In some ways, then, motherhood has always been understood as a sort of punishment, but it has also always been a latent source of power. Women throughout history have had the potential to assert authority through their maternity, to use their position as mothers to affirm a sense of power, but there has continuously been patriarchal pushback against these efforts. The authority maternity may grant a woman had

⁹ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor-Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

¹⁰ King's James's Version, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+3&version=KJV> [Accessed 5 April 2020].

to be suppressed, and the female body had to be regulated to assure women remained in their place; this became increasingly important with the onset of the Reformation.

There is perhaps no better example of the decline of maternal power than tracking the rise and fall of the worship of the Virgin Mary from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. Maternity, while being tied to Eve's punishment, was also the means through which women could be redeemed; this was often reflected in the purity of maternal nurture portrayed in images of Mary. The 'cult of Mary' gained traction during the Middle Ages and was influential all the way through to the Renaissance, as many indeed worshipped Mary as the ideal mother. Many churches throughout Western Europe, including Notre Dame in Paris, were dedicated to her, and countless works of art featured her likeness. Catholicism encouraged the veneration of saints and the construction of iconography dedicated to them, and Mary was one of the most popular figures, as there were hundreds of pilgrimage sites and shrines devoted to her in medieval England alone, the most famous being the one at Walsingham.¹¹ Tellingly, one of the most common Marian relics was Mary's breastmilk (of which the 'Holy Milk' was one of the main draws of the shrine at Walsingham), which was often thought to be imbued with magical properties and healing powers. The connection between a bodily representation of Mary's maternity and an overarching anxiety about the unrestrained female body and sexuality is clear; the fifteenth-century Dominican theologian Alanus de Rupe had a vision in which the Virgin 'gave him her breasts to be fondled and milked'.¹² This 'cult of Mary' reached its peak in the late Middle Ages, until the rise of Protestantism and the introduction of the Articles of Inquiry and Royal Injunctions of 1559 banned

¹¹ Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 203.

¹² De Rupe was a Roman-Catholic theologian who established a Confraternity to the Virgin Mary. Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*, 19. For a history of the cult of Mary and its spread throughout Europe, see Chris Maunder, *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008).

the worship of images and shrines and forbid direct worship to any religious figure other than Christ.

Mary was also a common subject for works of art, and there were numerous portrayals of her nursing the baby Christ. The term ‘Lactating Madonna’, or the *Madonna lactans*, is used to describe works of art from the period that depicted the Virgin breastfeeding. Artists used this traditional act of nursing, one which most women could connect with, to symbolise Mary as the ‘good’ mother who functioned, in some ways, to redeem women from Eve’s transgression while acknowledging their main function remained, as it always would, to serve as good mothers to their children.¹³ At the same time, there is a connection between Eve and Mary, with Mary often referred to as the ‘second Eve’. This was particularly true in dramatic works of the medieval period which commonly feature the motif of the *felix culpa*, or the fortunate fall: the idea that Adam and Eve fell so Christ and Mary could later redeem men and women, respectively.¹⁴

These references to Mary fall out of fashion in the early modern period, but they do not disappear. Robert Southwell, a Catholic during the reign of Elizabeth I, writes of Mary in his poem on the Annunciation, ‘[o]ur second Eve putts on her mortal shrowde’ (line 1).¹⁵ More common, however, during the reign of Elizabeth, was a connection between the Queen of England herself and the Queen of Heaven, unsurprising as Elizabeth’s own virginity naturally prompted an association with Mary. Helen Hackett traces the development of the rhetoric and iconography which surrounded Elizabeth’s reign, arguing that these images are filled with allusions to the

¹³ Felicity Dunworth, ‘A “bosom burnt up with desires”’: The Trials of Patient Griselda on the Elizabethan Stage’, *Paragraph* 21.3 (November 1998), 330-353, (334). For examples of such works of art, see Titian’s *Madonna and Child* (c. 1565-1570), and Joos van Cleve’s *Virgin and Child* (c. 1525).

¹⁴ Mary was a common character in medieval Passion and Mystery plays; the N-Town plays, for example, place a large focus on the Virgin and Marian devotion. The first Marian play, *The Conception of Mary*, emphasises her connection to Eve in a postlapsarian world, evoking her role in the redemption of mankind.

¹⁵ Robert Southwell, ‘The Conception of our Ladie’ in *Collected poems*, ed. by Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), 4-5.

Virgin while rarely mentioning her directly. One frequent example comes in allusions to the Immaculate Conception; in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590), Belpheobe – symbolising Elizabeth – is conceived when her mother, Chrysogonee, was 'pierst into her wombe' by the 'sunne-beames bright vpon her body' (3.6.7).¹⁶ Such comparisons were common with earlier queens consort who served an intercessory role similar to Mary's intercession between Christ and his worshippers, and like Mary fulfilled the most important duty of bearing sons and providing heirs. However, these associations become more complicated under the childless Elizabeth.¹⁷ I suggest that the connection between Elizabeth, as the Virgin Queen, and Mary, as the ultimate Virgin, exposes both the danger of the Virgin as a potentially powerful and self-sufficient maternal figure, and the contradictory rhetoric inherent during Elizabeth's reign; she is wife and mother, yet her 'maternity' comes without masculine intervention or interference and without appropriate control. Theodora Jankowski writes extensively on the position of virginity in Reformation England, as well as the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary, particularly notable for their ability to transcend the limitations of mortal virgins.¹⁸

Thus, I believe the decline in the veneration of Mary was about more than just the general Protestant rejection of the mythologisation of specific religious individuals; it also reflected a desire to discredit Mary and limit any potential authority her position as the mother of Christ and the Queen of Heaven might grant her. Jankowski notes that Mary was presented as the 'acceptable virgin', who was 'humble and obedient to all men' as well as 'easily controlled by parents, husband

¹⁶ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by Thomas P. Roche Jr. and C. Patrick O' Donnell (London: Penguin Classics, 1978).

¹⁷ Allusions to the Virgin were abundant, for example, during the brief marriage between Elizabeth's mother Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII. As Hackett notes, this was crucial for Anne as 'she had attained the throne primarily by virtue of being apparently able to give the King and the nation the male heir which his previous queen had failed to provide'. Helen Hackett, *Virgin mother, maiden queen: Elizabeth I and the cult of the Virgin Mary* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 33.

¹⁸ Theodora Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: queer virginity in early modern English drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 13.

and son' (Jankowski, 72). Increasingly, Mary became the symbol of not just the ideal mother, but the ideal woman, one who was chaste, silent, and obedient, largely confined to the household. Mary's status was diminished, a movement from images of a 'mother-queen goddess' to the 'meek and obedient vehicle of the father's will' (Waller, 95). William Crashaw, a post-Reformation English cleric, criticises the worship of Mary in his *Jesuits Gospel* (1610), declaring it is blasphemous to compare the mother and son, 'the pappes of a [woman] equalled with the [wounds] of our [Lord], and her [milk] with his [blood]'.¹⁹ Not only does Crashaw criticise the equation of Mary with her son – the suggestion that she is in any way to be worshipped on the same level – but he emphasises that her only role was to nourish and nurture her child. Similarly, Martin Luther made it clear Mary's only accomplishment was that she 'became the mother of God' and was not a figure to be worshipped independent of that relationship.²⁰ Such rhetoric was a clear attempt to counteract the latent threat of maternal power, which has the potential to exist independently of masculine influence. Julia Kristeva has commented on Mary's potential power and the suppression of that power extensively; religious texts present the possibility of 'pregnancy without sex' or male interference and subsequent depictions portray her as both an 'ideal that no individual woman could possibly embody' and at the same time 'an altogether human image of a mother of flesh and blood'.²¹ Waller demonstrates this association by remarking upon women who undertook pilgrimages to Marian shrines during the Middle Ages, where he suggests women likely felt a 'direct and personal relationship' to Mary and could look to her for guidance as a mother 'outside roles designated by the Church' and outside male influence or intrusion (Waller, 96). Any agency or authority Mary is shown to have, as a result, is dangerous, as she may serve as an image for

¹⁹ William Crashaw, *The Iesvites Gospel* (London, 1610), 32.

²⁰ Luther's commentary on the *Magnificat* (1521). Quoted in *Luther's Works* vol. 21, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan (St Louis: Concordia, 1956), 326.

²¹ Julia Kristeva and Arthur Goldhammer, 'Stabat Mater', *Poetics Today* 6 ½ (1985), 133-152, (36, 141).

women to aspire to, to believe they can push beyond the boundaries that were meant to confine them; as Kristeva notes, the Church specifically constructed Mary only as mother in order to ‘direct and control women’s embodied maternal power’ (Kristeva, 95).

The trajectory of the worship of the Virgin Mary demonstrates a larger point that is central to my thesis: that the early modern period was a time in which women’s roles were constantly being renegotiated and greater regulations were being placed upon their bodies. While childbirth was something only women could endure, the male and female each had a specific role to play in reproduction, which was influenced by both Christian doctrine and the works of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Galen. Humanist scholars translated classical medical tracts which explored the ways in which biology related to reproduction and the role men and women respectively played.²² Aristotle purported in his *Generation of Animals* that a male’s sperm releases itself directly into a woman’s menstrual blood, building that material into a new organism. Essentially, the male semen provides the form while the female provides the space/matter, and the female is always ‘contaminated’ and invaded by the male. This is a belief which carried over into England in the 1500s and helps us understand the growing concern over blood and, by extension, biological relationships; if blood is seen as the source of all reproduction, then blood innately gains greater consequence.²³ The 1597 work *Gynacea* collected and published translated medical tracts primarily for the instruction of physicians, allowing these ideas to spread more prominently

²² Patricia Crawford, *Blood, Bodies and Families in Early Modern England* (Harlow, England; New York: Routledge, 2004), 82.

²³ Aristotle writes that the ‘female always provides the material’ and the ‘male that which fashions it’. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. by A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 2.4.738b20-23. For a more in-depth account of Aristotle’s views on reproduction and biology than I am able to provide, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), particularly 28-29. Patricia Crawford’s *Blood, Bodies and Families in Early Modern England* also delves further into the significance of blood during this time.

through the public conscious. Included in this collection is Ludovic Mercatius' essay 'On the common conditions of women', which echoes Aristotle's perspective:

[...] the male to provide the motion and origin of the generation, the female to provide the matter) and is proved by Aristotle by many more reasons: for to give effect to what is generated it was necessary for the man's seed to be received in some part where it might fall to the task, for which, as it were a most suitable place, nature has created the womb²⁴

Mercatius also states that woman was 'given to man' for the 'sole function of generation', not only suggesting man alone was not 'sufficient' to reproduce, but also reinstating the belief that woman was created purely for the purposes of reproduction and motherhood (Mercatius, 52).

Plutarch's essay 'On Affection for Offspring' (translated to English in 1603) is another example of a source that helped to inspire and substantiate the belief that motherhood was natural and biologically determined.²⁵ To justify his argument, Plutarch refers to basic creatures he recognises as 'below' humankind:

For just as in uncultivated plants, such as wild vines and figs and olives, Nature has implanted the principles, though crude and imperfect, of cultivated fruits, so on irrational animals she was bestowed a love of offspring [...] has furnished noble and beautiful and fruitful seeds of all these in the joy we have in our children and our love of them, emotions which accompany their first beginnings, and these qualities are tied in the very constitution of their bodies²⁶

Plutarch argues that even the most 'primitive' animals have the natural instinct to love their offspring; this means, certainly, that this predisposition must also be true of the more developed humankind. This love is tied to the 'very constitution of [our] bodies' and inseparable from what makes us human; to have a child, he believes, is to love it and is nothing less than a biological

²⁴ Ludovic Mercatius, 'On the common conditions of women', in *Gynacea*, trans. by Stephen O'Connor (1597), 51. Quoted in *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Kate Aughterson (London: Routledge, 1995), 48-53.

²⁵ *Moralia* was translated into English by Philomen Holland, making it widely accessible to a more public audience, but was likely already a source of inspiration for earlier thinkers who could read Greek and Latin. One of the more well-known translations was the 1572 by Henri Estienne, also known as Henricus Stephanus, a French scholar. *Plutarch's Moral Essays* (London: J.M Dent and Sons, 1911), vi.

²⁶ Plutarch, 'On Affection for Offspring', in *Moralia* (Vol. VI), trans. by W.C Hembold (Harvard: Loeb Classic Library, 1939), 328-357, (345).

certainty. This is echoed in early modern literature, which frequently stresses the duty parents (and specifically mothers) owe their children; this is something I examine in greater detail throughout this thesis.

Plutarch draws specific attention to the mother through his recognition that she plays a significant role in reproduction and nurture, justifying the maternal role as essential:

But there would be no benefit in these many kinds of equipment for procreation or in such ways and means, such zeal and forethought, if Nature had not implemented in mother's affection and care for their offspring (348)

Maternal affection, he believes, must be a product of 'Nature' or women would not have been given the 'equipment' for procreation if they were intended only to give birth but not to care for their offspring. He equates motherhood with biology, since women were designed with the biological features to bear children, they must inherently love them. He adds that, although they might initially feel contempt for their children after suffering through the necessary pain of childbirth, they are unable to escape the essentialism of motherhood, tracing back to Eve's punishment:

But even then the affection for offspring implanted by Nature would bend and lead the mother: still hot and suffering and shaken with her pangs, she did not neglect or avoid her child, but turned to it and smiled at it and took it up and kissed it, though she reaped nothing sweet or profitable there from [...] (351)

According to Plutarch, it is simply in the mother's nature to love her child, and this has been true since the creation of mankind. While the reasoning is clearly rudimentary and flawed, lacking the understanding that everyone experiences motherhood differently, that – as I will discuss in the next section – there is no such thing as a natural maternal instinct, it was the type of logic early modern society responded to. In a culture that increasingly needed to control and contain women, it was critical to push the narrative that women truly belonged in the home, that it was quite literally what

they were born to do: that, as Thomas Smith writes, it was the woman's job to 'tarry at home' and provide for the 'nutriture of children' and 'keep all at home neate and cleane'.²⁷

The other genre that substantially influenced how motherhood was understood and constructed was conduct literature; largely written by men, it attempted to define a woman's role within the private home. Both Catholic and Protestant writers shared the belief that a woman's duty was as wife and mother; Juan Luis Vives' *The Education of a Christian Woman* (c. 1529) writes at length of a mother's obligation, noting a mother is more of one when she has 'not only borne her in her wombe and given birth to her, but carried her continually in her arms as she slept [...] and pressed her to her bosom, praying for every blessing from heaven'.²⁸ He sums his perspective up best when he writes that 'above all, a mother shall consider that all her treasure lies in her children' (Vives, 269).

Later Protestant writers shared a similar sentiment to Vives in their own conduct books; Richard Braithwait, in *The English Gentlewoman* (1631) devotes a section of his work to commending women throughout history who he deems to be virtuous, and many of them are labelled so for their treatment of their children. He includes Zenobia, the 'Queene of Palmira' who, while she was noteworthy for '[compiling] an excellent History' was no less revered for being a '[constant] wife to her husband' and a 'nursing mother to her children', and Hortensia, 'the excellent daughter of a most eloquent orator' who '[deserved] no less fame, for her motherly care in nursing and breeding'.²⁹ Braithwait makes it clear that even if some (exceptional) women may have other accomplishments, they pale in comparison to their role as 'tender Nurses' and 'carefull Mothers' (109). William Gouge, in his conduct manual *Domesticall Duties* (1622) highlights that

²⁷ Thomas Smith, *The Commonwealth of England and the Maner of Gouernment Thereof* (London, 1609), 13.

²⁸ John Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, ed. and trans. by Charles Fantazzi (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 53.

²⁹ Richard Braithwait, *The English Gentlewoman* (London, 1631), 109, 108.

the father is '[the] mother's head' and the mother 'the weaker vessell [sp]'.³⁰ Although children owe their respect to both parents equally, it is clear the mother is subservient to the father, and they are equal in their 'cares' and 'pains' despite the mother's role in 'bringing forth' and 'bringing up' the child (Gouge, 484). Similarly, but even more harshly, Thomas Becon writes of the duties of a wife towards her husband:

God himself at the beginning said to the woman: "Thou shalt be under the power of thy husband; and he shall rule thee." St. Paul saith: "Ye women, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the wife's head [...]"³¹

Likewise, just as a woman must understand she has no choice but to be obedient to the will of her husband, she must accept her duty to 'diligently [...] look upon her own at home' (Becon, 343). Becon emphasises the desired separation of the public and private spheres, and that women must be contained and 'continually keep at home' barring some 'urgent, weighty and necessary [cause]' (343). He makes it clear that women were meant to be wives and mothers within the home, and were not intended to venture out into public spaces; this was, however, as we will see, very much not the case, as their physical presence and influence could extend well beyond the home. However, it is important to note that while Becon, like many of the writers I examine in this thesis, was male, and although men wrote most of the sources I examine, it was not only men who felt a woman's duty lay entirely in motherhood and the raising of children; women perpetuated the myth almost as much. Women wrote mother's manuals emphasising their responsibility towards their children, a genre I consider in detail in Chapter One.

I will end this section by commenting on a few of the main factors that affected how women experienced maternity, negating the notion of a universal ideal. Much like today, despite

³⁰ William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties* (London, 1622), 135.

³¹ Thomas Becon, *The Catechism of Thomas Becon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), 340.

individuals attempting to construct a definitive sense of maternity, it was not a universal experience that was shared by all who embodied the role. The main factors to bear in mind are class and social status, with different expectations placed on royalty / the aristocracy and all those of lower social status, who were the vast majority. While essentially all women, regardless of social standing, were expected to have children and become biological mothers, the duty was more complicated for higher status women due to more prominent issues of inheritance and succession. Because of their position, high-status mothers were typically constructed to be more emotionally distant towards their children, replacing maternal nurture with reproductive duty, a topic I return to in the final chapter of this thesis. As Dorothy McLaren notes, wealthier women faced immense ‘pressure to produce heirs’ which led them most notably to use wet-nurses so they could maintain a ‘reproductive pattern of ever-recurrent births’.³² There was thus a greater separation between these women and their children than one would find in families of a lower-class; infants could remain with wet-nurses for as long as a year to eighteen months. Mothers of lower social standing also might send their children out, although they did not do so nearly as frequently, which allowed them greater time to bond and led to a greater intimacy. However, they too often sent their children out around the age of seven so they could find work as domestic servants, labourers or apprentices in the homes of those of the wealthy, creating a system of exchange that suggests both the idea and the reality of the family was often fractured (Stone, 107).

This fractured familial unit tells us that the reality of lived biological motherhood, regardless of class or social status, was not as prevailing as conduct literature writers such as Vives or Gouge might make it sound. Households at all levels were often blended through the presence of nurses, servants, and relatives, so the notion of the biological nuclear family under one roof was

³² Dorothy McLaren, ‘Marital Fertility and Lactation, 1570-1720’ in *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, ed. by Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 22-46, (5).

a difficult concept to reproduce. Although the average size of the household between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries was 4.75 persons, one tenth had extended kin who lived with them, and a quarter had servants.³³ The domestic home was a space in a constant state of flux, with various inhabitants coming and going regardless of whether it was occupied by a traditional husband and wife and their biological children. Nonetheless, that did not stop writers of the time from attempting to construct the home as a sacred space with distinct roles for all occupants, with the biological mother as the ultimate, culturally acceptable goal for the women who inhabited it.

b. Performances of Maternity in Early Modern English Literary Texts

We can see religious and medical tracts – both classical and contemporary – largely served as the basis for the belief that biological motherhood was essential, but this was also both created and performed through fictional narratives. There are numerous dramatic works which accentuate the contrast between the biological and non-biological, and which do so largely to emphasise the superiority of so-called ‘natural motherhood’. While the *Arcadia* was intended to be read, dramatic works such as Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Cupid’s Revenge* (c.1607), which was influenced by Sidney’s story, were seen as much as heard, and could therefore appeal to a much wider audience, including the majority who remained illiterate.³⁴ The additional layer of the visual performance

³³ Antony Buxton, ‘The Early Modern Household in Context’ in *Domestic Culture in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 67-94, (74).

³⁴ Literacy rates in early modern England are not easy to deduce; we can never know for sure exactly how many people could read and write sufficiently during the time. David Cressy summarises this well in his article ‘Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530-1730’, *The Historical Journal* 20.1 (March 1977), 1-23. In a study of the literacy rates of a diocese in Norwich between 1580 and 1700, only 2% of the wealthier gentry were illiterate, while 85% of lower-class labourers could not read. While this is obviously a small sample size, it is representative of larger trends; literacy was more common among the upper-class, and overwhelmingly less frequent in the lower-class. David Cressy, 5.

The importance of the visual has been noted by scholars such as Natasha Korda and Jonathan Gil Harris, who push back against the idea that the early modern stage was ‘bare’ but rather filled with extravagant costumes and props – furthering the argument that ‘early modern theatregoers did not just *hear* plays; they also upheld the original, Greek root of “theatre” – *theasthai*, meaning to watch’. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

allows the maternal identity to be more clearly and deeply deconstructed onstage. Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson comment on this in their 2007 edited collection *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*, noting the ‘importance of the stage as a visible and enacted entity in the representation and performance of maternity and its meanings’.³⁵ It was not simply that the maternal role was enacted onstage, it was created there, just as it was through language and culture. Maternity was performed ‘on stage and off’, and we must consider both to paint the full picture of how it was constructed and portrayed (Moncreif and McPherson, 19). For example, it is important to bear in mind that all female roles would have been performed by boy actors, further destabilising what was already an innately unstable performance. The presence of the boy actor meant these stagings were dependent upon prosthetics as well as an ‘understanding of the symbolic gestures [...] related to maternity’ but along with this came an implicit, if unspoken, understanding that the maternal role was in fact not being performed by a ‘real’ mother, or indeed a ‘real’ woman at all (6). Cross-dressing was often self-referential: Viola dressed as Cesario declaring ‘I am the man’ in *Twelfth Night* can doubtlessly serve as a nod to the existence of the boy-actor, and its confusion of biological relations was likewise always an undercurrent to every performance (2.2.25). Many lines take on a double meaning when we remember the reality of the boy-actor; *The Winter’s Tale* (1611), as a play overwhelmingly concerned with paternity and hereditary relationships, is particularly ripe with these sorts of allusions. Suspecting his wife of infidelity and the illegitimacy of his son, Leontes tells Mamillius:

LEONTES:

Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I
 Play too, but so disgraced a part, whose issue
 Will hiss me to my grave. Contempt and clamour
 Will be my knell. Go play, boy, play (1.2.234-237)³⁶

³⁵ Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson, eds. *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 6.

³⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, ed. by Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Ostensibly merely a comment upon his suspicions, Leontes' words can also be read as a subtle allusion to the performance of the actors themselves. The 'boy' plays, as the boy-actor plays, 'thy mother plays' and 'I [Leontes] / [p]lay too' – they are all performing not just their characters, but their relations to each other. It reminds the audience that while Leontes suspects both his children are not his, these familial relationships are being performed for our entertainment and, later, the physical recognitions that supposedly prove his new-born child is truly his could not possibly have been visible. The performance, of course, does not end until the conclusion; the final lines of the play belong to Leontes, who proclaims they will 'leisurely / [e]ach one demand and answer to his part / [p]erformed in this wide gap of time' (5.3.188-192). Again, the insinuation of the 'part' they have each 'performed' is a final reminder of the constructed nature of the play, and, while the use of the singular masculine pronoun may merely be an indication of the lack of any real female power, 'his part' again at least alludes to the boy-actor. A more heavy-handed example of this deconstruction comes in Thomas May's 1620 play *The Heir*, which features a (double-) false pregnancy. As Sarah B. T. Thiel notes, the 'counterfeit' pregnancy (which is revealed by the dramatic removal of a cushion from underneath the boy actor's skirt) 'threatens to undo the fiction of gender altogether by tacitly gesturing to the boy beneath the belly'.³⁷ Whether subtle or theatrical, the presence of the boy-actor actively had the potential to expose maternity as a performative role rather than a biological reality.

Moncrief and McPherson's collection, however, focuses purely on the presentation of biological maternity onstage, and thus far I have only likewise touched upon the traditional form of motherhood; the question I ask in my research, then, is what happens when alternative maternity

³⁷ Sarah B. T. Thiel, "'Cushion Come Forth': Materializing Pregnancy on the Stuart Stage' in *Stage Matters: Props, Bodies, and Space in Shakespearean Performance*, ed. by Annalisa Castaldo and Rhonda Knight (Madison, New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018), 143-158, (149).

is presented on both page and stage? Further, what happens when we eliminate the biological bond that was already inherently performative, and completely confuse any readable signs of maternity? Although it has been little discussed in the criticism outlined above, non-biological motherhood was commonly written into dramatic works and was thus enacted in the playhouses; not nearly as frequently as biological motherhood, but enough to have an effect on audience perception and understanding of the roles. The story of Plangus in *Arcadia*, for example, influenced several subsequent plays; the previously-mentioned *Cupid's Revenge*, which I study in Chapter Two, in which the character of Andromana is changed to Bacha but the familial relationships remain the same, and the later anonymous *Andromana, or the Merchant's Wife* (1660).³⁸ Both plays develop the presentation of non-biological motherhood, and with it the dangerous potential of the surrogate mother to interfere in familial relationships over which, as I will make clear, they are presented as having no 'genuine' claim.

Both *Cupid's Revenge* and *Andromana* also develop the importance of social status in relation to how maternity, both biological and non-biological, is treated. They blur the distinction between maternal roles through both performance and language, mixing the visual and rhetorical signs that were intended to keep them separate. *Cupid's Revenge* in particular allows the language of biological motherhood and stepmotherhood to become muddled, with both stepson and stepmother implying that there should be no difference between the two. Upon Leucippus' (Beaumont and Fletcher's name for Plangus) discovery that his father has married his former lover, he declares, 'now she is my mother' (3.2.27).³⁹ Similarly, Bacha tells Leucippus '[...] and I will

³⁸ *Andromana* was written later than most of the texts I examine, however as it is a follow-on to the earlier *Arcadia* and *Cupid's Revenge*, I have included it in the introduction, but not in my discussion of stepmothers.

³⁹ Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Cupid's Revenge* in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon: Volume 2*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

be to you / [n]o other than a natural mother ought' as the rhetoric of both characters informs the audience that in theory there should be no distinction between a stepmother and a 'natural' mother (178-179). Bacha is clearly the villain, and her words are obviously untrue; her motivations are developed as she is shown to be scheming to make her biological daughter the king's heir at the expense of her stepson – it is not merely revenge, but her desire to obtain power for her biological daughter that drives her forward. Bacha is both a stepmother and a biological mother, and while she prioritises her biological daughter, her maternal love can never be truly virtuous because of her wicked ambition and manipulative character, and this is evident when she involuntarily brings about her daughter's death at the end of the play.

Like most of the women I examine in this thesis (both fictional and historical) the characters of *Arcadia* and the two plays are of high social status, specifically, they are royal. Bacha's interference in the private world of the domestic family gains greater significance due to the public nature of their positions and the potential consequence her meddling may have on a political level. Bacha reveals her intention to make her daughter 'the king's heir' and 'plant [her] issue / [i]n this large throne', disrupting the line of succession and rejecting her own claim that she will care for Leucippus as if she were his biological mother (397-398). *Andromana* likewise emphasises the importance of the transference of social standing, even more so than that of motherhood; Ephorbas, the king, having been convinced his son has betrayed him, remarks, '[o]nce disobey'd as father, the next thing / [w]ill be Rebell on to me as his King' (4.7.120-121).⁴⁰ The connection is made between Plangus as his son and as his heir, as well as potentially rebellious subject. Parental relations and legacy issues are intertwined and cannot be separated; if Plangus disrespects Ephorbas as his father, then he will inevitably disobey him as his king. Through the

⁴⁰ Anonymous, *Andromana, or, The Merchant's Wife* (London, 1660).

mixing of the domestic and political worlds, and the public nature of the performance, both dramatic texts expose the reality that maternity, particularly when it became non-normative, could not be confined to the home or the domestic.

Like Andromana, the women I explore in this thesis are primarily those of high-status and the nobility partly for practical reasons, as most primary sources we have were left by those who were able to read and write and our accounts are respectively limited.⁴¹ More than this practicality, however, is the fact that wealthier women were better able to negotiate their maternal positions because of their status, and their subversive expressions of unconventional motherhood could be enacted to greater effect. Almost all the plays I discuss feature noblewomen, which I do not believe is a coincidence, but rather an indication of their unique position within both society and the family to interfere and trouble the traditional bonds and conventions of motherhood. I do not want to suggest that women of lower status had no power or ability to be provocative, but I do believe that we, as twenty-first century scholars, are in a better position to understand how motherhood disrupted patriarchal hierarchies by examining women upon whom those hierarchies most depended.

Additionally, the boundary between the public and private was not as strictly defined among those who were wealthier, particularly following the notable accessions of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor to the English throne. As Judith M. Richards remarks, for such ‘great women’ the boundaries between the public and private ‘often proved a permeable membrane’ as they had the

⁴¹ The question of how many women could read and write in early modern England is not an easy one to answer and was undoubtedly influenced by both gender and class. There have been different methods used to try and discern literacy, including measuring how many could sign their name, but James Daybell believes an examination of women’s letter writing reveals a ‘more optimistic assessment of levels of female writing literacy [...] among elite, mercantile, and professional groups’. James Daybell, *Women letter-writers in Tudor England* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15. However, as David Cressy notes, ‘most women did not need to be able to [read and] write’ and never learned to. In a survey from the dioceses of Norwich and Exeter, over four-fifths of women were unable to sign their names. David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 128.

unique ability to move between the two with greater ease.⁴² Inevitably, that did not mean such women were without their critics, but there were also those who defended their claim to power. Despite some general criticism of a woman's ability to hold positions of authority, perhaps most infamously in John Knox's diatribe *The First Blast of the Trumpet* (1558), there were also those who argued for, if not the general ability of a woman to rule, at least for certain women's right to do so.⁴³ Thomas Smith, writing in justification of Mary's claim to the throne, remarks:

...those [women] whom natur hath made to keepe home and to nourish their familie and children [...] except it be in such cases as the authoritie is annexed to the blood and progenie, as the crowne, [...] for there the blood is respected, not the agee nor the sexe [...] These I say have the same authoritie although they be women or children in that kingdome, dutchie, or earledome, as they should have had if they had bin men of full age⁴⁴

Smith argues that it is generally a woman's role to 'keepe home' and 'nourish their familie and children'; however, in certain cases where they are the rightful heir to a position of power, that authority triumphs over concerns about their sex/gender. This did not necessarily mean powerful women were not also meant to become mothers, but it did indicate there was a wider berth for those who found themselves on the higher end of the social scale, a place outside the domestic home that most others were supposed to be confined to. Similarly, John Aylmer, writing in response to Knox's anti-female discourse in 1559, argues that while Knox's criticism of Mary's reign specifically may have been valid, it was incorrect to claim that the 'government of the whole Sexe was unnaturall, unreasonable, uniust and unlawful'.⁴⁵ Again, while some may have believed

⁴² Judith M. Richards, "'To Promote a Woman to Beare Rule': Talking of Queens in Mid-Tudor England', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 28.1 (Spring 1997), 101-121, (101-102).

⁴³ Knox opens his work with the following passage: '[t]o promote a woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion or empire over any realme, nation, or citie, is repugnant to nature, contumeelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance, and finalie it is the subversion of good order, of all equitie and justice'. John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 9.

⁴⁴ Sir Thomas Smith, *De republica Anglorum* (London, 1583), 64-65.

⁴⁵ John Aylmer, *An Harborowe For Faithfull and Trewe Subiectes* (London, 1559), sig. B2.

certain women had a right to power when they had a legitimate claim, they nonetheless had to be controlled in the same manner as any other woman. Writing on Mary Tudor, John Foxe purposefully notes her piety, chastity, and obedience despite her position as a female monarch:

Thou Lorde [...] thou knowest that thy servant never lusted after man, never gave her selfe to wanton company, nor made her selfe partaker with them that walke in lightnes; but she consented to take an husbande with thy feare, and not with her luste. Thou knowest that thy servant toke an husband, not for carnall pleasure, but only for the desire and love of posteritie, wherein thy name might be blessed for ever and ever⁴⁶

Written after Mary's controversial marriage to Phillip II of Spain and during her false pregnancy, Foxe assures the reader Mary is, to some extent, still subject to the same authority as the average woman. She married for nothing more or less than the 'desire and love of posteritie', i.e., the desire for a child and a (specifically male) heir. Even if she holds an unusual and anxiety-inducing amount of power, Mary (unlike her sister and successor Elizabeth) is presented as wanting the very thing that relates her to all women, and her inability to achieve it is entirely unintentional, but noteworthy precisely because of her unique position. What becomes clear, then, is that regardless of whether women were perceived as legitimate inheritors, the 'general preference was always for the prospect of a male heir and a return to the "proper" order of things' (Richards, 121).

High-status and noble women such as Mary and, most crucially, Elizabeth, were exceptional, and while they do not reflect the majority, they nonetheless still offer the greatest insight into how women could potentially interfere in public matters through private maternity (or lack thereof). Although neither queen appears directly as a character onstage during their respective reigns, and Mary is rarely mentioned candidly even after her death, their presence and

⁴⁶ John Foxe, 'A devout praier, for the prosperous state of our soveraigne Lord and Lady' in *Actes and monuments of these latter and perillous days* (London, 1563), 1015-1016.

exceptional situation are undercurrents that run throughout countless works of the time.⁴⁷ There are limited examples of female characters of high status who – like Mary and Elizabeth – do not have children of their own, but the historical queens’ influence are felt far more in how those with children are depicted. Older female rulers were often portrayed as either devoted more to their children than to their power, or as abusing their power for their own gain, to largely disastrous results. *King John*’s Queen Mother, Eleanor, is an illustration of a character who does both; she dedicates herself to her son while simultaneously using his power for her own manipulations. Much in the same way that Constance (who I consider in Chapter Three) is clearly pulling the strings for her son Arthur, so too is Eleanor undoubtedly influencing and exploiting John’s position as King. In advising her son to agree to a match between Philip of France and his niece Blanche, she tells him:

QUEEN ELEANOR:

Son, list to this conjunction; make this match.
 Give with our niece a dowry large enough,
 For by this knot thou shalt so surely tie
 Thy now unsure assurance to the crown
 [...] Urge them while their
 souls
 Are capable of this ambition [...] (2.1.489-498)⁴⁸

Eleanor advises her less astute son, seemingly driven by as much a desire for her offspring (and by extension herself) to retain his tenuous claim on power than by any sense of maternal care. She instructs him that if he approves the union, he will fend off Arthur’s claim to the throne, and his ‘now unsure assurance to the crown’. Eleanor, as Queen Mother, with no husband to control her, is portrayed as a shrewd, ambitious woman who clearly sees her son as a means to her own power.

⁴⁷ A notable exception is Thomas Heywood’s 1605 play *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, written soon after Elizabeth’s death. Elizabeth is here portrayed as a pious and charitable queen, while Mary is, by contrast, shown as being misguided in her Catholic faith.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *King John*, ed. by A. R. Braunmuller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we have Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII*. Although there are certainly ways to read Katherine as a strong character, much of her rhetoric in the play presents her as obedient and submissive to the will of her husband. In defending herself against Henry's desire for divorce, she argues, '[s]ir, call to mind / [t]hat I have been your wife in this obedience / [u]pward of twenty years' and that she specifically has 'been blessed / [w]ith many children by [Henry]' (2.4.32-34, 34-35).⁴⁹ Although she deliberately fails to mention that all but one of those children, the future Mary I, died before reaching adulthood, she calls attention to how she has fulfilled her duty as both wife and mother in remaining obedient and, most importantly, bearing children. Such portrayals of queens, then, typically ranged between two extremes, echoing the anxieties raised by the two English queens, rather than any realistic reflection of their rule.

Historical women in exceptional positions were able to find ways to subvert their maternity through non-normative motherhood; they can 'parody' the role by embodying it in ways that diverted from the norm, but still existed under the general umbrella of motherhood. This concept of 'parody' is essential to understanding the trajectory of this thesis, and I will introduce it fully in the third section of this introduction. The early modern period was a precarious time with regards to female power, with Elizabeth I on the throne and the subsequent transition back to a patriarchal monarch under James VI and I. Elizabeth, as an unmarried and childless female ruler, was perhaps the greatest exception of all during this time, as she negotiated her position and utilised the language of motherhood without ever actually becoming a biological mother in order to assert and maintain her power.⁵⁰ I discuss Elizabeth and James, their relationship to one another, and their

⁴⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII or All is True*, ed. by Jay L. Halio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Elizabeth was hardly the only female in a position of power who utilised such language; her sister Mary I once proclaimed, 'I cannot tell how naturally a mother loveth her children, for I was never a mother of anie; but certenlie a prince and governor may as naturalie and as earnestly love subjects, as the mother dothe hir child'. Of course, Mary's treatment of motherhood was very different from Elizabeth's, but she likewise connects maternal authority with political power to cover her lack of biological children.

respective constructions of the family in-depth in Chapter Two, but it is important here to note the impact that this historical context undoubtedly had on how maternity was portrayed during this time. Both Elizabeth and James were dependent upon the construction of familial relationships to establish their legitimacy to rule: Elizabeth rhetorically made England her husband and its citizens her children, and James navigated his rocky accession by generating a brother/son relationship with Elizabeth. While Elizabeth used this metaphorical maternity, James attempted to portray his reign as a return to the rightful order of the nation, with the king as the head of state and the father as the head of the family. On 21 March 1609 he delivered a speech in which he declared that in the same way a '[f]ather maye dispose of his inheritance to his children' likewise 'may the King deale with his subjects'.⁵¹ Both rulers, however, adapt the language of maternity and paternity to suit their own needs, and in doing so they unwittingly expose the ambiguous nature of such relationships.

It is crucial to bear in mind that early modern England was in a period of transition and change in how gender and other identities were understood; it was dynamic and constantly transforming and being transformed. Even within the time frame I consider under Elizabeth and James, maternity was not a stable concept, whether it was biological or non-biological, as the nation reconciled with an unmarried, childless female monarch followed by the attempted restoration of extreme paternalism.⁵² Elizabeth and James, as the two most powerful people in

⁵¹ James I Speech to Parliament (21 March 1609). Quoted in Judith M. Richards, 'The English Accession of James VI: "National" Identity, Gender and the Personal Authority of England', *The English Historical Review* 117.472 (June 2002), 513-535, (532).

⁵² I limit my discussion to works produced during the reigns of Elizabeth and James – I do so (not simply because it is impossible to cover everything) because it is such a period of transition, and I believe the dynamic and changing nature of maternity and its presentation is most evident during their reigns and in the shift from female to male monarch.

As Judith M. Richards notes, James assumed the people of England would be relieved to have order restored with a male monarch on the throne; however, the reality was that people were nostalgic for Elizabeth, and James's status as a Scotsman meant he was treated with scepticism. Judith M. Richards, 'The English Accession of James VI', 513.

England during their respective reigns, use these uncertain relationships and the fundamentally constructed nature of these identities while always trying to mask them as stable. Further, they expose the connection between public politics and private maternity that inevitably existed when we consider women in more privileged spaces. It is this uncertainty and instability that is both reflected and created in the dramatic works which I examine, and the maternal role is further destabilised through its function in both rhetoric and performance. While we must be careful when equating historical context with literary trends, it may not be a coincidence that so many contemporary works under the two monarchs feature royal or noble characters dealing with issues of inheritance and succession, specifically through the negotiation of non-biological or other forms of non-normative motherhood.

This destabilisation was always on the minds of early modern writers; to return briefly to the *Arcadia*, it is not surprising that the stepmother's true nature is ultimately revealed, and she ends up suitably punished; all wicked non-biological mothers must be dealt with to try and assuage the anxieties they raise. Eventually, after she has turned the king against his son, convincing him that Plangus sought to overthrow him, her treachery is exposed:

[...] withal discovering the very truth indeed with what cunning his stepmother had proceeded [...] In the meantime, his stepmother making all her gestures cunningly counterfeit a miserable affliction [...] that she was weary of her life, since she was brought to that plunge either to conceal her husband's murder or accuse her son, who had ever been more dear then a son unto her [...] (Sidney, 318-319)

Similarly, Bacha and Andromana experience their own downfalls; these women are rarely allowed to escape punishment. This is meant to send a clear message, that while these non-traditional mothers may exist, they may use language and rhetoric to impersonate caring maternal figures, they always fall short of embodying the maternal nurture that was supposedly characteristic of biological relationships between mother and child. In this thesis, I explore and interrogate these

claims, and the notion that a biological bond was always necessary for connection, and argue that portrayals of alternative motherhood are in fact far more nuanced than has been previously believed. It is easy to overlook these depictions, or to write these women off as villainous characters who all receive just punishment, but in a society that depended upon trying to masquerade stable maternity when the reality was far from secure, these portrayals easily become parodies that further subvert maternal identity when we take the time to read them.

II. The Function of the Maternal Identity

a. *Motherhood as Performance versus Essential*

The debate over the true nature of motherhood is one that travels from the early modern period to our modern-day discourse, where our understanding of the maternal identity has become increasingly nuanced and yet, in some ways, still depends upon those early modern constructions of motherhood as an institution rather than an experience.⁵³ In this section, I examine the critical discussion that has led to the understanding that motherhood is a performance, a role that must be enacted rather than an essential identity all women are predetermined to embody. The work I do in this section to understand the critical construction of motherhood will strengthen our understanding of the figure of the mother in early modern literature and culture and how these trends have continued across time.

⁵³ There is a difference between the ‘experience’ of motherhood and the ‘institution’ of motherhood. Institutions, as defined by Myrl Coulter in her entry on the ‘Institution of Motherhood’ are ‘established social mechanisms and significant cultural practices that regulate human behaviour according to the needs of a community, not individuals’. The institution of motherhood, then, is the implemented ‘set of ideals’ that is ‘determined by the established traditions and inherited history of a society’, this generally suggests that women are expected to live up to an impossible set of standards and that there is no alternative to which they can escape. Myrl Coulter, ‘The Institution of Motherhood’ in *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, ed. by Andrea O’ Reilly (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), 572.

One of the first, and, to this day, most noteworthy works to describe motherhood as an institution imposed upon women is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Published during the rise of second-wave feminism around the world, and translated into English in 1953, *The Second Sex* was in fact central to the momentum of the movement itself.⁵⁴ Second-wave feminism in the United States in particular rebelled against the stricter gender roles and norms that had arisen in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II. As a result, this cultural and critical movement was particularly tough on women who displayed any stereotypically 'feminine' qualities including maternal love and nurturance, and this harsh rejection of a socially constructed 'femininity' is especially prominent in *The Second Sex*. While second-wave feminism has since proved controversial for its extreme rejection of any sort of femininity, it did notably lead to the fight for easier access to birth control.⁵⁵ For the first time, women argued for their right to choose when they became pregnant, and indeed if they became pregnant at all. Motherhood increasingly was seen as an option, rather than an inevitability.

One of the original books to illustrate this point, certainly in the United States, was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which acknowledged that women had been taught to believe marriage and motherhood was the only path to true fulfilment and pushed back against those expectations. Generally speaking, second-wave feminism explicitly tied women's personal experience to their political reality, opening up questions about how women were treated on the public stage and how that impacted their individual lives. One of the main points of contention for second-wave feminists was the role of desire and female sexuality; could the expression of

⁵⁴ For a good overview of second-wave feminism (albeit with a particular focus on American feminism), see Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

⁵⁵ Birth control pills were first approved in 1960 and put on the market in 1961 in America. 1961 also saw the establishment of The Society for Humane Abortion in California, another indication that women in America were becoming increasingly concerned with their right to choose when, and if, to become mothers. Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, xvii.

sexuality ever be used as a feminist political weapon, or was it always merely ‘catering to a male-dominated view of desire’?⁵⁶ As a result, questions of sexuality and reproduction were at the forefront of the debate; how, if at all, could women be sexually liberated from the constraints of male domination? Ultimately, second-wave feminism has been criticised for its focus on white women, ignoring the different – and often far more difficult – realities for women of colour, lesbians, and other non-traditional groups in the 60’s, 70’s, and beyond. In trying to create a political definition of ‘woman’, many were inevitably erased and marginalised. The movement, then, while doubtlessly important for the development of women’s rights, was largely one without nuance, that focused only on the experiences of a very particular type of ‘woman’.

De Beauvoir therefore not only enters a discourse, but she also helps to begin that discourse in her discussion of maternity as a performative act, as motherhood was still a relatively new focus in debates over women’s rights and subjectivity when *The Second Sex* was first published. Like much of second-wave feminist thought, her perspective veers significantly in one direction; she largely targets maternity as an identity that seeks to subject and oppress women. She argues that, in a patriarchal society, because motherhood is the means through which women can be venerated and ‘held in awe’ it must also be the means through which women are ‘transfigured and subjugated’.⁵⁷ Utilising real-life examples, she makes the argument that there is nothing natural about woman as mother, and that there is, in fact, no such thing as the ‘maternal instinct’ but rather that every mother’s experience and relationship to her child(ren) is different (de Beauvoir, 629). Motherhood, she believes, has been used as a tool by the patriarchy to subject women and confine them within domestic spaces by inventing the ‘ideal’ mother who must act a certain way or be

⁵⁶ ‘Second-wave feminism’ in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2nd ed.), ed. by Ian Buchanan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 225.

rejected by society. Because motherhood is not a necessity for women, they must be 'enclosed' in situations where 'motherhood is [their] only option' (92). Her rhetoric clearly portrays motherhood as an institution entirely controlled and dominated by patriarchal ideology, and she suggests there is no space for negotiation within these structures. In a manner fitting for second-wave feminist thought, she insists the only option is for women to reject motherhood and its associations entirely. Unsurprisingly, this central argument is one many critics have taken issue with.⁵⁸ However, one critic who praised de Beauvoir's theories is Judith Butler, who, prior to the publication of *Gender Trouble*, wrote an article in defence of her ideas, laying the foundation for their own work four years later. Butler connects the two theoretical strands of motherhood and gender, arguing that the fear of 'leaving a prescribed gender' is similar to the fear of 'accepting motherhood [...] as an institution rather than an instinctual reality'.⁵⁹ Butler echoes the belief that the 'optional character of motherhood' is 'denied' and motherhood is instead 'promoted as the only option for women', in order to hide the reality that motherhood is, or should be, a choice. This leads Butler to ask: if motherhood is a choice, 'what else is possible?', making clear the connection between an understanding of both gender and motherhood ('Sex and Gender', 41).

While some perceive de Beauvoir's arguments as outdated and hyper-critical, there has been an effort to recuperate her ideas and maintain they are still relevant for modern-day post-structural feminist theories which have sought to expand the definition of maternity, who can be a mother, and how one can be a mother.⁶⁰ Many such critics do so by comparing her to another well-

⁵⁸ For a more in-depth summary of Beauvoir's views on maternity, see Yolanda Patterson, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I Research Press, 1989), particularly the chapter 'Motherhood and *The Second Sex*.' She writes, on criticisms of de Beauvoir's work, that it is 'closely linked to the point of view of the critic in question. The more conservative thinkers portray [her] as a monster out to destroy the world as we know it [...] while the more liberal and feminist writers hail her insight into the problems confronting the modern woman in her search for fulfilment' (130).

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*', *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986), 35-49, (42).

⁶⁰ Beyond Butler, some critics who have defended de Beauvoir include Linda M. G Zerilli, who largely favours her over Kristeva. She defends de Beauvoir's theories as those which 'rethought the elements of the maternal' that

known scholar of maternal identity, Julia Kristeva. Kristeva, a psychoanalytic feminist, wrote numerous works with a perspective quite opposite to de Beauvoir, suggesting maternity was something that existed prior to discourse and signification. I mention Kristeva here not only because she is often discussed in contrast to de Beauvoir, but also because she epitomises a perspective I largely reject in this thesis. In her 1980 work, Kristeva considers maternal images of the Madonna and Child in the artwork of Bellini and Leonardo da Vinci. Through these images, she argues that the maternal body is ‘the place of a splitting’ that ‘remains a constant factor of social reality’ and even if it is not instinctual, maternity is nonetheless made into ‘the stakes of a natural and “objective” control’.⁶¹ It is the function that is most commonly used to assert and ensure male dominance, but Kristeva believes it is also something entirely independent of that construction, arguing that women become mothers because of a natural instinct rather than personal choice or patriarchal hegemony. The female body is the site ‘destined’ to ‘insure [sp] reproduction of the species’ and, although it has been re-appropriated by patriarchy and (specifically) the Christian Church, this remains an inevitable fact (Kristeva, 238).

Unsurprisingly, Butler rejects Kristeva’s arguments in their article ‘The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva’, for many of the same reasons they approve of de Beauvoir’s work. Arguing against the notion that there is an inherent ‘maternal instinct’, Butler writes:

transforms a ‘female body consigned to the muteness of its location’ into a site of ‘feminine resistance’. Linda M. G Zerilli, ‘A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity’, *Signs* 18.1 (1992), 111-135, (113, 120).

The rise of postmodern/post-structural feminism has sought to reincorporate maternity as an aspect of woman’s identity, while redefining what exactly it means to be a mother, or a woman at all. In denying that ‘woman’ is a fixed category, they also deny motherhood must be one as well. Gerda Neyer and Laura Bernardi, ‘Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction’, *Historical Social Research* 36.2 (136: Fertility in the History of the 20th Century: Trends, Theories, Policies, Discourses), 162-176, (167).

⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, ‘Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,’ in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Language and Literature*, ed. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 237-270, (238, 241).

In traditional psychoanalysis, motherhood is regarded as a desire instilled within a symbolic, instinctive patriarchal order driven by penis envy within the woman; a desire to, as Kristeva writes, ‘bear the child of the father.’ In these terms, motherhood and patriarchy are therefore fundamentally inseparable.

Whereas Kristeva posits a maternal body prior to discourse which exerts its own casual force in the structure of drives, I would argue that the discursive production of the maternal body as pre-discursive is a tactic in the self-application and concealment of those specific power relations by which the trope of the maternal body is produced. Then the maternal body would no longer be understood as the hidden ground of all signification, the tacit cause of all culture [...]⁶²

To suggest that the maternal body is ‘pre-discursive’, that it exists prior to discourse, is to suggest there is something biological or inherent about the role. Indeed, Kristeva believes there is a natural quality to motherhood, a connection that exists between mother and child that cannot quite be explained, which both Butler and de Beauvoir strongly dispute.⁶³ My own arguments, within an early modern context and based on my readings of plays and other literature of the time, fall decidedly more in line with the latter in rejecting Kristeva’s notion that motherhood is in anyway natural or inherent. Motherhood is, rather, as Butler suggests, an attempt to conceal the true constructed nature of maternity in order to hide the patriarchal structures which depend on them. However, Kristeva’s approach certainly speaks more to the early modern perspective, which is the focus of this thesis, and is therefore important to bear in mind. As Jane Sharp wrote in her 1671 midwifery manual *The Midwives Book*, ‘[t]o conceive with child is the earnest desire if not of all, yet of most women, Nature having put into all a will to effect and produce their like’.⁶⁴ Sharp unwittingly reveals the falseness of her own claim; if ‘Nature’ has put into ‘all’ a desire to ‘produce their like’, then why is it only ‘most’ women who desire children? Nonetheless, most early modern writers agreed with Kristeva that motherhood was a natural instinct all women were expected to uphold, but as I will demonstrate, the reality was, as Sharp exposes, that motherhood was merely

⁶² Judith Butler, ‘The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva’, *Hypatia* 3.3 (1989), 104-118, (116).

⁶³ In Kristeva’s own words: ‘So if we suppose that a *mother* is the subject of gestation, in other words the *master* of a process that science, despite its effective devices, acknowledges it cannot now and perhaps never will be able to take away from her; if we suppose her to be *master* of a process that is prior to the socio-symbolic linguistic contract of the group, then we acknowledge the risk of losing identity at the same time as we ward it off’. Julia Kristeva, ‘Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini’, 238.

⁶⁴ Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book* (London, 1671), 93.

constructed to be so and – as in Sharp’s writing – these fissures were often unknowingly revealed through discourse.

However, De Beauvoir’s views are not unproblematic, for she presents motherhood as a rigid institution: a societal constraint designed to limit the role of women, and from which there can be no escape. The idea that motherhood functioned as an institution that sought to contain and control women is one that is essential for my own arguments about the construction of motherhood in the early modern period, but it is of course not true to say this is all motherhood could or can be. Adrienne Rich, writing about thirty-five years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, reconciles the restraints imposed by motherhood with the reality that many women did, and still do, desire to become mothers. She suggests there are two different ‘meanings’ of motherhood: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children, and the institution, which aims at ensuring that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.⁶⁵ In doing so, she does recognise that motherhood is inherently a social role that may adapt and change, but that does not negate the experiences of women who choose to take on the role:

But is a woman who bore a baby she could not keep a ‘childless’ woman? Am I, whose children are grown-up, who come and go as I will, unchilded as compared to a younger woman [...] What makes us mothers? (Rich, 251)

Motherhood, Rich argues, is not as simply defined as the experience or condition of bearing or rearing a child; it is an experience or condition which can be adapted, shifted, and potentially taken away. This concept is one I build upon in this thesis, focusing on how motherhood could be performed in alternative ways in early modern England and how maternal identity could be transformed across time. The institution of motherhood has been imposed upon maternal experience, experience is often disregarded at the expense of a maternal instinct, a ‘right’ way to

⁶⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam, 1977), 13.

‘do’ motherhood. Subsequently, maternal power is restricted by these limitations, but the potential for maternal agency is nonetheless always present. Rich’s text is primarily concerned with this dichotomy, how motherhood can be both empowering and oppressive and how both have persisted through history. Turning to the early modern period is no exception, where close analysis of maternity reveals all women experienced motherhood differently, that there was in fact no one way motherhood was embodied; and yet, the persisting belief was that all women should function as mothers in a specific, regulated way. In my research, I focus on both areas – experience and institution – but it is the ways in which patriarchal forces in the early modern period worked to construct motherhood as an institution that most drives my work. These attempts at constructing motherhood as the inevitable reality for all women, I will demonstrate, in the process exposes the truth about the myriad of personal experiences of motherhood which existed during the time, just as they do today. The scope of this thesis is more invested in the structures imposed upon motherhood, and how the varied performances of the maternal role that Rich alludes to were able to subvert and destabilise those structures, but the constructions depend upon the individual experience, and the ability of these roles to prove threatening is dependent upon the prominence and insistence upon these constructions.⁶⁶

Motherhood is still a diverse and fruitful topic for scholarship, with criticism adapting to changing societal norms and expectations. In her edited collection *Twenty-first Century Motherhood*, Andrea O’ Reilly notes the range of works that have been written on the subject,

⁶⁶ While it is beyond the scope of this introduction to cover all the seminal works that have influenced our changing perceptions of motherhood, I chose Rich as I believe she most clearly and concisely outlines the conflict between motherhood as a personal experience for women that is open to interpretation, and as an oppressive institution. Other works which discuss similar ideas and have been particularly notable in the history of maternal studies include Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), Elisabeth Badinter, *Mother Love: Myth and Reality. Motherhood in Modern History* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* (London: Burnett, 1982) and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

commenting that almost all of them are indebted to Rich's division between the institution and experience of maternity; criticism, she suggests, has since split into discussions of 'motherhood' as institution, and 'mothering' as experience.⁶⁷ These recent works have amplified the focus on motherhood as a personal choice and made further efforts to de-essentialise maternity, particularly with the increase of potential parents in non-heterosexual relationships and those who identify outside of the gender binary. These changes inherently complicate how society interprets biological motherhood; the 2006 collection *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century* notes that the increasing reality of single mothers, 'busy working mothers', teen mothers, men who adopt a maternal function, etc., have all complicated how we inscribe motherhood in our modern world.⁶⁸ However, as I will discuss now, our contemporary thinking on motherhood's purpose within a twenty-first century society still has a long way to go.

b. Critical Gaps Around Alternative Motherhood

I would like here to briefly mention the discussions of alternative motherhood in today's critical field. In many ways, it is still an underrepresented and underdiscussed topic, despite the scientific and social advancements that have entirely re-inscribed what it means to be a parent and how one might become a mother. Comparatively few critics have really attempted to introduce the concept of non-biological motherhood into theories of how we understand maternity or try to engage with these new advancements and understandings. De Beauvoir mentions the stepmother briefly in *The Second Sex* to note 'in every country, legends and tales have also personified the cruel side of motherhood in the stepmother' but she, like many, sees the role as merely an extension of the 'bad' biological mother and not a complete identity in its own right (de Beauvoir, 228). While there has

⁶⁷ Andrea O'Reilly, ed. *Twenty-first Century Motherhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

⁶⁸ Mariam Alizade, ed. *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), x.

been much written on how motherhood can be embodied in a myriad of ways, these explorations overall do not specifically consider the identities of women who adopt, foster, or take on any maternal role that is not traditionally biological. When non-biological motherhood is discussed, it is often in relation to queer studies.⁶⁹ A notable example is Shelley M. Park's *Mothering queerly, queering motherhood* which discusses how alternative forms of motherhood can help us to queer maternity.⁷⁰ Park's work focuses on mothering in non-heteronormative circumstances, such as within a lesbian or queer relationship. These are not roles I consider as non-heterosexual unions – while certainly present during the early modern period – would not have been able to assume, on-record, the maternal role as they do in modern society. However, she dedicates a section specifically to adoptive mothers, writing:

Many feminist critiques of motherhood, like queer critiques of breeding, presuppose the biological paradigm of motherhood that accompanies conservative idealizations of motherhood. In so doing, they erase the possibility of “unnatural” forms of motherhood that may embody resistance to conservative discourses and practices of mothering. Here I suggest that taking biological maternal bodies as the paradigm from which we think about issues of mothering and family obscures important facets of mothering more readily visible from the (slanted) perspective of more marginal maternal bodies – bodies marked as “deviant” in some fashion (Park, 58)

The use of the terms ‘unnatural’ and ‘deviant’ are particularly pertinent to early modern discussions and suggest our understanding of maternity has not come as far as we might like to imagine. In many ways, we still use this sort of language to identify any woman who, in whatever fashion, does not embody the ideal of motherhood that is still predicated on giving birth and taking on the traditional image of nurture. This is, naturally, dangerous in many ways, but by ignoring

⁶⁹ While the intersection of queer studies and motherhood is a valuable and exciting critical strand, and we may read some of the women in this thesis as ‘queering’ motherhood, I believe it is counter-productive to considering the generally heteronormative relationships I describe and the ones we have on record in early modern England.

⁷⁰ Park, writing in 2013, correctly notes at the beginning of her work that she was ‘struck by how infrequently the scholarship of motherhood questions the heteronormative boundaries of kinship and maternal practice’. Shelley M. Park, *Mothering queerly, queering motherhood: resisting monomaternality in adoptive, lesbian, blended, and polygamous families* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2013), 1.

non-normative forms of motherhood we also, as Park notes, ignore the very real ways in which these women may ‘embody resistance to conservative discourses and practices of mothering’ (58).⁷¹

There has been more of an effort to introduce the childless woman into discourse, with works such as Mardy S. Ireland’s 1993 work *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity* which argues for the basic fact that a woman might choose not to have children and still define themselves as a ‘woman’. Similarly, Myra J. Hird, in a 2003 article ‘Vacant Wombs’ situates the increasingly common narrative of the woman who chooses not to have children at all within the context of the demonisation of any woman who does not fit the model of normative motherhood:

Childless women are inferentially excluded from adulthood. The presumption that parenthood is instinctual, founded on human physiology (rather than a product of stringent, institutional control, pro-natalist policy and ideological presumptions about gender, the body and sexuality) pathologizes women who choose not to have children⁷²

Although Hird’s article is almost twenty years old, I would argue that even now, her words still ring true. More recently, studies have demonstrated that despite greater opportunity, women still feel they must prioritise motherhood; in her 2018 book Petra Bueskens comments that it is still the collective opinion that women were ‘quite foolish’ to think they could ‘have it all’.⁷³ In a 2017 article ‘Reconstructing Family Images: Stepmotherhood Before Biological Motherhood’, Caroline Sanner and Marilyn Coleman similarly note that ‘not all forms of motherhood [...] are created

⁷¹ Other works which discuss non-biological motherhood and its connotations include Helena Ragoné, *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception in the Heart* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), Olga van der Akker, *Surrogate Motherhood Families* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), Susan Markens, *Surrogate Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁷² Myra J. Hird, ‘Vacant Wombs: Feminist Challenges to Psychoanalytic Theories of Childless Women’, *Feminist Review* 75 (2003), 5-19, (9).

⁷³ Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contracts* (London: Routledge, 2018), 66.

equal' and, even still, stepmotherhood is considered inferior to biological motherhood.⁷⁴ We still must work to de-essentialise motherhood, as in many ways, women who choose not to have children at all, as well as women who do not embody motherhood using the 'traditional' method of heterosexual biological reproduction, are still understood in terms of their deficiency and failure: they are not-quite 'real' women.

There has been a move towards greater deconstruction of what it means to embody an identity, and what it means to be human, however, I believe we still have a long way to go when it comes to deconstructing our societal understanding of maternity and a woman's role within it. There still remains a prevailing sense in culture and media that a woman without a biological connection to a child will not feel as strongly for them, despite numerous studies and reports which suggest this belief is unfounded.⁷⁵ Disney, for example, is notorious for perpetuating these stereotypes; from the early years of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950) to the more recent *Tangled* (2010) and *Frozen* (2013), these films are notable for (not) featuring a dead or absent mother, often replaced by the caricatural wicked and manipulative surrogate mother.⁷⁶ Another notable modern example is Olivia Colman's nameless stepmother in *Fleabag*, who is in many ways evocative of the one-dimensional stepmother of early Disney. Like the Queen in *Arcadia*, and like so many of Shakespeare's own works, media continues to propagate

⁷⁴ Caroline Sanner and Marilyn Coleman, 'Reconstructing Family Images: Stepmotherhood Before Biological Motherhood', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 79.5 (2017), 1462-1477, (1462).

⁷⁵ There have been many sociological and psychological studies conducted about the nature of the relationship between a stepmother and her stepchild(ren). See, for example, Anna Miller, Claire Cartwright and Kerry Gibson, 'Stepmothers' Perceptions and Experiences of the Wicked Stepmother Stereotype', *Journal of Family Issues* 39.7 (2018), 1984-2006 and Danielle Shapiro, 'Stepparents and Parenting Stress: The Roles of Gender, Marital Quality, and Views about Gender Roles', *Family Process* 53.1 (2014), 97-108.

⁷⁶ Both *Snow White* and *Cinderella* have stepmothers who have become synonymous with the 'wicked' stepmother trope; *Frozen* features the early death of both father and mother, while *Tangled* has both parents alive but separated from their daughter until the very end of the film, the mother being replaced by an evil adoptive/foster mother for much of the story. Neither the mother in *Frozen* nor in *Tangled*, however, are given a name or speak at all throughout the film, so even if they are not entirely absent, they are silent.

the idea that, in some ways, the perfect, ideal mother is the silent or absent one. While my research is not focused on modern-day trends, I am interested in how these trends have roots in the early modern period, and how the values from five hundred years ago may still influence twenty-first century understanding.

It is interesting and relevant to consider that, even in the twenty-first century, in many ways we still retain (perhaps unconscious) biases and perceive motherhood, and biological motherhood in particular, as the norm for women. Many of the stereotypes that were prevalent in early modern England are still resonant today, even if we would like to believe we have moved beyond them. In this thesis, although I focus on the early modern period, I demonstrate that these traditional ideas of motherhood have never been indestructible or non-negotiable. There is clearly still a lot of work that needs to be done to remove the stigma from these alternative forms of motherhood, and indeed from the choice to not become a mother at all, although women who choose to remain childless are not the focus of this research. We must look to the past, then, to better understand the present moment, and to ask ourselves where and how such stigmas and stereotypes originated and thus how we may be able to finally move past them.

III. Critical Theories of Gender Parody

a. Judith Butler and the Performance of Gender

All the issues I have considered thus far in this introduction are dependent upon an understanding of motherhood as a role that is performed, rather than an essential identity all women possess. Alongside this understanding is the implicit recognition that while the experience of motherhood varies for all women (including the choice to become a mother at all), is that the institution of motherhood has allowed it to be constructed as something all women must become. The scholar

whose work has been most central to the development of my own arguments in this dissertation is Judith Butler, and their ground-breaking theories on gender performativity and gender as a performance. Although my thesis is focused on motherhood, there is no question that we cannot fully understand the construction of maternity without also understanding the construction of gender, and so I will end this introduction by introducing the concepts that help frame my own arguments. The fact that gender is something that is performed, rather than an essential identity given at birth is one that has entered the mainstream in recent years, beginning with the publication of Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990. Of course, Butler was not the first and certainly not the last scholar to develop the idea that gender is a socially constructed performance, but they introduced the term 'gender performativity', popularised the theory, and remain the most influential theorist on the subject.⁷⁷ As Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

[...] Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self⁷⁸

Gender, then, is neither stable nor static, but rather something one enacts and produces through time and in repetition. It is an identity 'tenuously constituted in time' and enacted through 'bodily gestures, movements, and styles'. Thus, not only is gender open to transformation and change within oneself, but the signs and symbols that signify a supposed 'abiding gendered self' shift as society adapts and changes as well. The signs that symbolised a gendered identity in the early modern period, for example, may not be the same as the ones we recognise today. These symbols

⁷⁷ The notion that gender was artificial has been around since the classical period, and feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow and Anne Fausto Sterling provided works arguing, on some level, that all gender is constructed. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 140.

are repeated and become engrained in culture over time, giving them the appearance of an essential identity, but, as Butler argues, gendered identity is clearly constructed through performances that may be both subtle and dramatic.

Equally important to remember is that gender is not only established through these more visual signs, but through language as well, and for Butler, language serves as a specifically performative action. Butler refers to the ‘speech acts’ that constitute performative language, utilising a term developed by John Austin in the 1960s.⁷⁹ Butler describes the significant power language holds in constructing reality:

The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression. Language works neither magically nor inexorably: “there is a plasticity of the real to language: language has a plastic action upon the real” (116)

In this passage, Butler quotes the French feminist Monique Wittig’s work *The Mark of Gender*. Wittig emphasises the significant effect language has on societal understandings of gender and how it constructs gender into being.⁸⁰ Language can both reflect and create the ‘real’, it has a ‘plastic action’ that may be both the cause of and solution to sexual oppression. The implication here is that we can only use the language of oppression to find a way ‘beyond that oppression’, as there is no language that exists outside of these systems to describe the system itself. My research is largely focused on dramatic texts: those that would have been performed onstage and thus enacted these visual signs and symbols in front of a live audience. However, just as important as the performance is the language which serves as a performative act in and of itself. Drama,

⁷⁹ Austin, in a series of lectures later published under the title *How to do Things with Words*, argues these speech acts, sometimes also referred to as ‘performative utterances’, have the ability to change the social reality they describe. It is not just a reflection of reality, but the creation of that very reality. John Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁸⁰ Monique Wittig, ‘The Mark of Gender’, *Feminist Issues* 5 (1985), 3-12.

therefore, as a medium that utilises and combines language and performance, is, I believe, the area with the most potential to both imbed and challenge the systems it perpetuates.

Although I am dependent upon Butler's theories and align my own views largely with theirs, their work has certainly been challenged in recent years. Butler's theories have been accused of being too abstract, and of not considering the actual lived experience of 'women' (however they choose to define the term). Susan Bordo, for example, comments that Butler's theories on acts such as drag performance only really work so long as we regard the body as an abstract, as 'pure text' that exists outside of any actual experience.⁸¹ For Bordo, Butler's failing comes in their inability to 'locate the text in question' to consider how 'different readers may respond to it in different circumstances based on their own value judgments' (Bordo, 292). It is perhaps true that Butler grounds their theories largely in the conceptual, but that is in fact the approach that is most relevant for my own discussions. While it is easy enough to collect accounts of the actual experience of embodying these gender roles today, we do not have the same kinds of self-reflective life-writing produced during the early modern period.

I refer here briefly back to postmodern feminism; although it has in many ways been an uneasy alliance between the two critical threads of postmodernism and feminism, as postmodern feminists face the difficult challenge of how to negotiate with an individual's lived experience when notions of gender construction are so central to their argument.⁸² Postmodern feminists have tried to resolve this issue by asserting that discussing women as a group does in fact have 'great political potential' and still leaves open the question of what exactly a 'woman' is, rather than

⁸¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 292.

⁸² Petra Bueskens notes the 'three-fold' argument against postmodern feminism; the need to 'recognise the validity' of the category of women, the need to 'retain the sovereign "I"', and it attempts to speak for women who are 'still in the process of becoming subjects'. In other words, postmodern feminists depend on the existence of some category of 'woman' while also acknowledging such a category can never truly exist. Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities*, 164.

suggesting any sort of collective experience shared by all who choose to define as ‘woman’.⁸³ Butler analyses this alliance in their article ‘Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism’, arguing that feminism necessarily speaks ‘as and for women’, however it is only through an understanding that ‘woman’ has no strict definition that we are able to ‘displace them [women] from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power’.⁸⁴

This thesis, then, depends upon representations of womanhood – and specifically motherhood – in a range of texts, both historical and literary, with a focus both on how mothers were constructed as versus how they actually experienced motherhood. Although it is imperative we resist ‘essentialist and reified versions of women’, there was in fact a clearly defined concept of what a woman was ‘supposed’ to be in early modern England with which we can engage, and this notion of womanhood was reflected in and created by cultural and dramatic representations (Zalewski, 70). In other words, although every woman’s personal experience was different, there were certain qualities that all ‘good’ early modern women were supposed to possess, and those qualities were invariably tied up in ideas about motherhood. As with the Queen in Sidney’s *Arcadia*, countless early modern authors write of motherhood as a woman’s sole purpose, as I explore throughout this thesis. For example, echoing the language of Sidney, William Perkins writes that ‘the female is woman of an inferiour sexe, fit to conceiue and beare children’, and Robert Cleaver, in his advice book, asserts that ‘God gaue the woman to the man’ not only to be ‘[a] helper’ but specifically to ‘bring foorth fruite and multiplie’.⁸⁵ Butler’s theories help us

⁸³ Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism After Postmodernism: Theorising Through Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000), 70.

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, ‘Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism’ in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (Routledge: New York, 1992), 3-20, (15, 17).

⁸⁵ William Perkins, *Christian oeconomie* (London, 1609), 24.

Robert Cleaver, *A godly forme of houshold government* (London, 1603), 128.

understand how women who fulfil this purpose are able to circumvent the restrictions imposed upon them and exert influence far beyond the domestic home through their individual experiences; they are able to do this, partly at least, through their utilisation of parody, which I am going to introduce now.

b. The Subversive Effect of Performance as Parody

Of greatest relevance to my arguments is Butler's concept of parody in relation to performances of gender, and it is this concept which I am going to engage with through my consideration of the maternal role as it was constructed in the early modern period. I believe that Butler's theories on parody as performance do not need to be limited to gender presentation and construction, but can and should be applied to other identities as well, including that of the mother. Butler writes:

[...] [S]o gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is any without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignation and decontextualization: parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of an original, they imitate the myth of originality itself. In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meaning subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction (*Gender Trouble*, 138)

Essentially, Butler suggests that a parody is a performance which reveals its instability from its position within the structures that shape it, rather than trying to move beyond or work from outside of those structures. A parody is an imitation 'which effectively [displaces] the meaning of an original' and in doing so '[imitates] the myth of originality itself'. Through reworking and

distorting the signs of identity one may try to claim are stable and essential, its inherent instability is naturally exposed. Butler expands on what exactly makes parody so potentially subversive:

Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and rearticulated as instruments of cultural hegemony. A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered. What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? [...] And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire? (140)

Butler makes it clear that parody itself is not inherently subversive, but it necessitates a ‘context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered’. There needs to be an effective displacement of (in this case) gender identity for the parody to prove truly destabilising. I do not believe there is a simple answer to Butler’s question, ‘what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire?’, nor do I think such a subversion depends upon the ‘parodic laughter’ to which they refer. Parody is traditionally understood as something that elicits laughter: a humorous re-working of a text/image/etc. with which the audience is all-too familiar.⁸⁶ However, I do not believe parody must be funny to be subversive, and I suggest it may be most powerful when it is not. Butler’s main example of drag performance, for instance, may be construed to provoke laughter, but that is not necessarily the goal or motive of such performance, certainly not for the performers themselves. While some may use drag as a means of drawing laughter from an audience, it can also serve as a powerful statement in and of itself. Butler notes that drag and cross-

⁸⁶ There have been countless forms of parodies that fit the more contemporary definition, including numerous films such as the Austin Powers series which parodies the James Bond films and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which is a parody of the King Arthur myth. These examples, by and large, were produced largely for comedic effect, rather than intending to provide any sort of social commentary.

dressing are often written off as being ‘degrading to women’ or an ‘appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality’ (137). However, both drag and crossdressing can be tools of empowerment, a form of expression for those who do not wish to feel constrained by traditional gender norms. It thus utilises and confuses the conventional images of gender and gender presentation to blur the distinction between ‘the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed’ and in doing so, it ‘implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself’ (137). Drag, certainly in this context, can best be understood as a rejection of conventional norms through the subversion of those norms, and not merely an attempt to rouse laughter from its audience.

While these may seem like very modern-day concepts, in actuality they can readily be applied to help us understand performances of gender and motherhood in early modern England. While this thesis is focused more on the specific versions of motherhood which I examine, this concept of parody is crucial to understanding how I believe these roles were destabilising within a patriarchal culture. Each type of motherhood I examine, I argue, deviates from the traditional construction of the identity while utilising its conventions, and therefore proves parodical. Just as drag or crossdressing uses the readable signs and symbols of established gender norms, so too do these non-normative embodiments of motherhood confuse the signs that were so ingrained in what constituted maternity, and in the process completely disrupt them. Although each chapter has a different central argument about what exactly makes that specific form of maternity so disruptive, it is crucial to always bear in mind the context of parody – that each of these roles, in some way, takes what was accepted about maternity and rewrites these customs and thus becomes what I have termed parodical maternity.

Some early modern scholars have directly used Butler's ideas to support their work on issues of gender and gender performance; Katherine M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson write that their 'consideration of performativity, particularly when applied to the gendered aspects of maternity so apparent in the early modern period, draws on the work of Judith Butler' (Moncrief and McPherson, 19). Indeed, Moncrief, McPherson, and the contributing authors depend on Butler to shape their arguments on the 'embodied, repeated and public nature of maternity' which 'helps define it as inherently performative' (4). Even if the majority of discourse, unlike Moncrief and McPherson, does not mention Butler directly, most discussions of gender performativity can be implicitly connected back to them. One example where Butler's influence can be unmistakably observed is in discussions of the early modern practice of crossdressing onstage. David Cressy's 1996 article literally combines the two discourses in his title, 'Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England'; indeed, he brings in theories of parody without actually using the word:

The prevalence of the disguise motif in early modern literature, with its jokes about sex and costume, suggests that the inner and outer signs of gender identity formed a topic of continuing concern, at least among playwrights and playgoers. It may even reflect anxiety. When the comedy invites us to laugh, is it the laughter of idle amusement, the laughter of venom, of disquiet, or uncomfortable self-recognition?⁸⁷

Although Cressy does not explicitly mention Butler or their theories, the idea of crossdressing functioning as something that potentially generates anxiety and laughter can clearly be connected to Butler's own ideas of parody as something that is theoretically subversive and associated with prompting laughter from the audience. Casey Charles does reference Butler directly in a similarly titled article 'Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*' which focuses specifically on crossdressing in Shakespeare's play; he claims that Butler's 'critique of the notion that there are fixed identities

⁸⁷ David Cressy, 'Gender Trouble and Crossdressing in Early Modern England', *Journal of British Studies* 35.4 (Oct 1996), 438-465, (458).

based on the existence of genital difference' is useful in considering the disruption of sexual difference in *Twelfth Night*.⁸⁸

Butler's ideas, therefore, can prove just as relevant to early modern society as to our own, provided we know how to utilise and apply them. However, that does not mean their ideas have not been met with critical disagreement when it comes to the potentially revolutionary nature of parody. Susan Bordo presents a compelling counterargument in *Unbearable Weight* in which she does not disagree with Butler's overall theories but pushes back against some of their finer points. She acknowledges that Butler's idea that 'gender is challenged [...] from within the resources of the system itself, through parody' is an 'ingenious and exciting' idea, but she suggests this idea again places these performances in the abstract, rather than situating them within the space and time in which they exist (Bordo, 292). Although I do not fully agree with all Bordo's assertions against Butler – she claims that performances which are 'thoroughly ambiguous' about gender are more destabilising than those that parody it – I do agree when she writes that 'subversion is contextual, historical, and above all social [...] whether those texts are subversive or recuperative or both or neither cannot be determined in abstraction from actual social practice' (293, 294). Specifically, what constituted as subversive, and what was understood as subversion, was inherently different during the early modern period, and similarly, the means through which subversion could be achieved would have proved fundamentally different, as was the case with embodiments of maternity.

It is a pertinent reminder that we must be careful when applying contemporary concepts to early modern history and drama. Gender is an identity constituted in time, and so, therefore, is motherhood, and every other identity that has been demonstrated to be a social construction.

⁸⁸ Casey Charles, 'Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*', *Theatre Journal* 49.2 (May 1997), 121-141, (122).

Similarly, what could function as a parody during the early modern period would not necessarily constitute one now. I argue that the roles I label as parody in this thesis, such as stepmothers and adoptive mothers, would not fit the classification today, given our greater acceptance of the wide-ranging definition of the maternal identity. I contend that during the early modern period these alternative forms of motherhood could function as a parody exactly because they contradicted how motherhood was supposed to function at the time, and thus they were able to exist within overall domestic structures while never really being a part of them. While one could make the argument that non-traditional motherhood is still, in some ways, not as widely regarded today, it does not have the same subversive effect as it did within a society that attempted to completely negate the validity of such roles. It is fair to say that the parodies Butler write about do exist in an inherently privileged space, where one's life is not at risk, or at least one does not quite realise it is. Nonetheless, that does not mean the roles undertaken by the women I explore in this thesis are not still subverting and destabilising the system on which patriarchy was constructed, and that those subversions do not have a significant effect on how we may understand motherhood in early modern England.

Parody, then, in the context of this thesis, is any performance that works within the structures that shape it in order to destabilise those structures, whether intended for humour or not. It does so by utilising the traditional signs – both visual and rhetorical – that are used to establish supposedly 'rigid' identities such as gender and maternity, and in the process, confusing them. In this thesis, I take Butler's theories on parody and apply them to alternative forms of motherhood in early modern England and early modern English drama. I argue that, contrary to previous suggestions, there was more room for negotiation of the maternal role through the existence of such parodies that use the conventions of patriarchy to subvert it. Of course, I do not suggest their ideas can be

perfectly applied to early modern England. The most important distinction is that, while Butler's theories suggest a knowing parody or subversion, most of those I discuss are unintentional, yet with similar results and to similar effect. I contend that even when these subversions are, for the most part, performed unknowingly by the women who embody the roles, they are nonetheless still able to interfere and destabilise the patriarchal systems upon which they are built through their presence in both society and drama. Taking Butler's established theories on performance and parody and applying them to a new context, in a different time, expands our understanding and provides us with new ways to interpret gender and, specifically, the maternal role beyond traditional biological motherhood.

IV. Conceiving Maternity: Chapter Structures

This thesis is divided into two sections which broadly cover two different categories of alternative maternity; chapters one and two are concerned with surrogate motherhood, while three and four discuss biological motherhood which is impeded, or which subverts the ideal. Chapter One focuses on women who adopted or fostered children, identifying the wet-nurse as a type of foster-mother. These are women who took in children (either temporarily or permanently) who were not biologically theirs. In both practice and discourse, fostering and adoption are frequently merged in a manner which makes it practically impossible to discuss one without the other. After discussing how biological motherhood itself was threatening for its potential to disrupt the structures of primogeniture and male inheritance, I argue that foster-mothers, including the wet-nurse, raised fears over their ability to impact a child's characteristics and qualities and erase evidence of their biological parentage. I look at ideas of transference, the complications that arose from the idea that nurses could pass qualities on to the children they nursed, finally considering Dionyza in *Pericles* as the epitome of this wicked surrogate mother who attempts to negatively influence her foster child. I then suggest that adoptive mothers similarly raised fears over transference, but that this

fear was predicated on ideas about what mothers could tangibly pass on to their children.⁸⁹ I look at Anne Clifford's attempts to assert her legacy through her mother, before considering the Countess in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Sapho in *Sapho and Phao* as adoptive mothers who both try and establish a specifically matrilineal inheritance.

In Chapter Two I examine another type of surrogate maternity, that of the stepmother. Stepmothers were a unique figure with a unique position within a family, as they were both integrated and yet always inherently separate. I argue that stepmothers found themselves in an almost impossible position; they were always suspected of plotting against their stepchildren, but if they demonstrated any sort of affection, they may be accused of trying to perpetuate incest. Both narratives are connected to a stepmother's ability to disrupt traditional lines of inheritance through either their manipulations or their sexuality. I connect these fears to the anxiety raised by Elizabeth I's own use of metaphorical maternity, and the subsequent attempt to restore paternalism under James I, by considering a multitude of plays written under both rulers. I do so in order to suggest that not all dramatic stepmothers could be properly labelled as either manipulative or amorous. I interrogate the proliferation of stepmothers in drama and consider these in tandem with what we know of stepmothers in society; in doing so, we see how their unique position gave them a distinct power over public affairs that made them inherently dangerous and constructed as such. They were not, merely, the image of any immoral woman who manipulated and misused her sexuality, but a particular figure who had the ability to negotiate inheritance and succession in an even more damaging manner than the adoptive and foster mothers of Chapter One.

⁸⁹ It was men alone who were meant to control and benefit from these systems, as the 'bulk of real strategic property' in early modern England was 'held by men'. Nancy Murray, 'Primogeniture, Patrilineage, and the Displacement of Women' in *Women, Property, and the Letters of the Law in Early Modern England*, ed. by Nancy E. Wright and Margaret W. Ferguson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 121-136, (126).

I then segue to other embodiments of non-normative maternity; Chapter Three is focused on women who experienced either child death or infertility. I examine these identities in tandem as they both constitute a loss, or a failure to embody the expected ideal. Additionally, both conditions were seen as punishment for the sins of the parents, and one was meant to respond with a sense of resignation and acceptance, and when a woman failed to do so, she became inherently disruptive. These respective losses subsequently allowed them access to a language that made them threatening. Dramatic women who mourn their children (or lack of children) become sites upon which fears of not just the vocal, emotional mother, but of religious, political, and economic transgressions could be written. I consider child death through the mourning and anti-Protestant rhetoric of Constance in *King John*, the mothers of *Richard III* and their political manipulations, and the Kix's infertility as an economic and sexual concern in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

The final chapter again reconsiders the strict definitions that have been imposed on mothers during the early modern period, ultimately suggesting that a complete reassessment of these categories is essential. Focusing in on the notions of the 'ideal' mother and the 'monstrous' mother which have pervaded the entire thesis, I demonstrate that restricting ourselves to such distinct classifications inevitably limits our understanding of the maternal role. I consider, specifically, a figure which I term the 'negligent' mother, women who did not meet all the criteria of the ideal mother but who, I believe, are not so extreme in their actions to be named monstrous. I look at Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, arguing that in largely ignoring her maternal duty, she creates space for the surrogate mother to fill the role, blurring the two categories that were always meant to be distinct. Finally, I consider Cleopatra as a negligent mother who places her queenship above her maternity, allowing her to successfully embody all maternal identities at once without being defined by any of them.

From these examinations of the different ways in which women could ‘be’ mothers in early modern England, and in considering how they all parody traditional maternity in unique ways, I seek to redefine how we understand motherhood in the early modern period, and begin the move away from a restricted, one-dimensional view of the maternal role. While alternative motherhood has always been recognised in early modern England, it has largely gone unexplored and uninterrogated and taken a backseat to discussions of traditional, biological motherhood. I want to suggest that when we add the myriad of configurations of maternity into how we understand early modern motherhood, we create more spaces for early modern women to exert influence, parody maternity, and in the process destabilise the foundations of patriarchal society in which they lived.

Chapter One: ‘I am a mother to you’: The Foster and Adoptive Mother and Transferrable Identity in Early Modern England

I. Introduction

In John Lyly's 1584 play *Sapho and Phao*, Cupid boldly declares he will 'be Sapho's son' once she has willingly adopted him as her own child. His biological mother, Venus, does not express sorrow at the loss of her son once this adoption has been confirmed, but rather is angered by his betrayal in adopting another woman as his new mother. This choice rhetorically works to transfer all the qualities of the 'Queen of love' onto another woman: Sapho asserts that she has usurped Venus's position through this adoption. Cupid's rejection of Venus has implications not simply for the relationship between himself, his biological mother Venus, and his newly-adopted mother Sapho, but for our scholarly consideration of the nature of relationships between mother and child and their supposed 'stability' in early modern drama and society.

What *Sapho and Phao* suggests is that the concept of motherhood and the identity of the mother is in fact unstable and changeable. Furthermore, it leads me to propose that through the analysis of dramatic presentations of non-biological motherhood in the early modern period (which are themselves, in many ways, volatile) alongside other non-dramatic texts concerned with maternity, we can begin to recognise the ways in which the instability of the identity of motherhood was in fact an unavoidable and increasingly complex social reality.

In this chapter, I focus on adoptive and foster mothers such as Sapho, interrogating how these specific non-biological maternal figures deconstruct and parody traditional ideals of motherhood, particularly through their portrayals in drama. Through these deconstructions, they can parody motherhood in the manner I outlined in my introduction; by taking on a maternal role without completely embodying motherhood, they work within the structures of maternity that existed in

the early modern period, and in the process, I argue, deconstruct them. Drama, as a genre, is inherently disruptive, as it paradoxically shapes the culture by which it is shaped. It works both within the discourses that permeate it, while also exposing disruptions in these supposedly established systems, even as it seeks to reaffirm them and in most cases – on the surface level at least – seems to do so. Written and performed mostly by men, the drama of early modern England was deeply embedded in a dominantly patriarchal society. Nonetheless, plays of the period sometimes allow us to catch a glimpse of the potentially subversive elements of a culture, even if they ultimately reassert the norms upon which culture depends. Through plays like *Sapho and Phao*, we can detect a potential for the resistance of biological norms that may not be readily apparent, but that undoubtedly exists below the surface. The play complicates preconceived notions of the image of the mother which is presented in the early modern period in a range of genres.

This was a period that struggled to enforce definitions of maternal identity according to patriarchal values which emphasised things such as biological reproduction, legitimacy, and the stability of identity as passed on from parent to child. Many works of the period, both dramatic and non-dramatic, made strong efforts to code maternity as static and integral to the identity of all women. Building upon classical sources, a wide variety of texts including medical and religious discourse, as well as conduct literature and advice books, were published with the explicit goal of establishing these identities as essential and unchangeable. While there was an understanding that women were not and could not always be mothers, these texts tried to create stability for an identity that could never truly be stable; and, as a result, had to work particularly hard to portray motherhood as the ultimate experience for all women. Ideas about what truly made a woman a

mother were tied up in concerns over patrilineage and ensuring the perpetuation of patriarchy and paternal inheritance, making motherhood a tool upon which to build male-dominated hierarchies.

However, as works such as *Sapho and Phao* demonstrate, that is not to say these identities could not be shaped and altered, that this narrative could not be disrupted and complicated. In the first two chapters of this thesis, I argue that non-biological maternity was an aspect of early modern culture which has often been overlooked, through which women could parody traditional narratives and social roles. While patriarchal discourses attempted to ground motherhood and gender identity through the essentialist idea that there had to be a biological connection amongst family members, the reality seems to have been quite different. The identity of the mother, in fact, becomes entirely dynamic when we consider the roles of those women who intentionally or unintentionally performed maternity for those with whom they did not share a biological relationship. These women in particular, as I previously mentioned, were for the most part not intending to subvert the conventions of motherhood through their embodiment of this surrogate motherhood, and yet it does not limit the impact that their performance has.

Anxieties over the unstable nature of motherhood, as embodied through these surrogate roles, were revealed through a variety of discourses. In this chapter, I focus on three play-texts, alongside religious texts, medical tracts, mother's advice books, diaries, and letters, in order to explore the concerns that surrounded the construction and performance of maternity – and specifically, non-biological maternity – in the early modern period. Through my analysis, I want to suggest there is something drama can do that these other genres fail to achieve: that plays are able to understand and manipulate performances of non-biological maternity, and by extension the performance of motherhood in general, in ways that might not be possible in non-dramatic material. Drama opens up questions of identity, making the maternal role more problematic and revealing its natural

performativity. These works can help expose contemporary and popular public perceptions and attitudes to motherhood which help extend our understanding of the conceptualisation of maternity beyond that which we can gather from the works of a handful of elite women who kept records of their lives and were able to leave behind written evidence, as well as the majority of men who wrote the conduct books and manuals. While we must remember that it is still men who wrote these plays, dramatic texts force us to think about the maternal role as a performative one, about the traditional conventions of motherhood and how they can be appropriated.

As I explored in my introduction, the function of motherhood in early modern England has been written about extensively by scholars. The common factor in all the works I have cited, however, is that they all focus on biological maternity, and surrogate motherhood – if mentioned at all – is often relegated to a passing mention or a brief inquiry, its full implications left unexplored. There are, in fact, few scholars who have taken non-biological motherhood as their entry-point into investigating maternity and the part motherhood, in all its complex guises, played in the gender politics of early modern England. Scholars in the field have not yet extensively explored the portrayal of non-biological motherhood in drama, a genre which readily exposes the mutability and transformability of those maternal identities. There are very few works on adoption or fostering specifically as a role that destabilises maternity; Patricia Crawford mentions adoption in her *Blood, Bodies, and Families* (2004) only from the perspective of its impact on fatherhood, but such references are extremely rare in criticism. Jack Goody has written on the cultural context of adoption in both ‘Adoption in Cross-Cultural Perspective’ (1969) and *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (1983), but he does not consider early modern England specifically nor does he consider fictional portrayals. Perhaps the most relevant scholar in this field is Marianne Novy, who has looked at both the history and dramatization of adoption across all

time periods, and her monograph, *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (2005), is particularly useful. She considers adoption as a general practice, rather than considering the gendered aspects of the process, and how it may specifically impact how we read the construction of not simply the family, but the maternal role. Erin Ellerbeck has also written on the topic in her article ‘Adoption and the Language of Horticulture in *All’s Well That Ends Well*’ (2011). However, although she focuses on the female character of the Countess, she takes adoption and its implications as a general social process rather than one that inherently engages with the performativity of motherhood. While their research examines drama, it does not assess the ways in which dramatic texts impact how we think about the construction and performance of the surrogate mother in early modern society.

Although some of the work carried out in this critical field considers non-biological motherhood in one way or another as I have suggested, there are subtle but crucial distinctions to be made in terms of the kinds of non-biological maternity that are being explored and which previous work in the field tends to homogenise. There are three key types of non-biological mother I examine throughout this chapter: the adoptive mother, the foster mother, and the nurse. According to the OED, the term ‘adoption’ was already in use from as early as the 1300s to denote the ‘action or practice of legally or informally taking a person into any relationship’, especially the ‘taking of a minor who is not one’s offspring into the legal relationship of a child’.¹

Adoption, as opposed to step-parenting, does not involve marriage as part of the process of undertaking the responsibility of a non-biological child. The distinction between fostering and adoption, however, is more difficult to disentangle. While today we would typically distinguish

¹ ‘Adoption’ and its connotations was certainly a term Shakespeare was familiar with – not only does he utilise adoption as a plot device, but he uses the term itself in *Othello*: Brabantio, angry over Desdemona’s marriage to Othello, declares ‘I had rather to adopt a child than get it’ (1.3.90); ‘adoption, *n.*1a’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

between adoption and fostering in temporal terms, as fostering tends to be a temporary arrangement and adoption a permanent one, such a distinction was not as important to early modern England: the OED defines fostering as ‘guardianship’ with no mention of time or temporariness in relation to the practice.² In both practice and rhetoric, the two are frequently merged in a manner that makes it practically impossible to discuss one without the other – to send a child away from his or her biological parents could mean either to adopt or foster them without strict definitions on time, which is why I have included both in this chapter. However, I do make a distinction between not simply the modern day understanding, but between ‘fostering’ as a process that is of most relevance towards younger children, and adoption as a process that impacts older children and their inheritance. I use ‘surrogate’ as an all-purpose expression which encompasses both roles, as it indicates ‘a thing that acts for or takes the place of another’, in this instance the replacement of the maternal role in any shape or form.³ Finally, the term ‘nurse’, which can refer to any figure who cares for others, was once a common term for the wet-nurse, a woman who was employed to take care of young children, and particularly, employed to breast-feed them.⁴ When I use the term ‘nurse’, I am referring to these specific figures as they existed in early modern England.⁵

In this chapter, I examine the roles of the foster mother (including the nurse as a type of foster mother) and the adoptive mother, which are defined by a lack of biological maternal connection. I

² ‘foster, n.1.2’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. This definition first appeared around 1500 in the *Towneley Plays*, also known as the *Wakefield Mystery Plays*. None of the definitions given by the OED refer to the amount of time in which a child may be fostered.

³ ‘surrogate, n.2a’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

‘Surrogacy’ has different connotations in the twenty-first century; it can refer to any woman who uses non-traditional means to get pregnant, specifically one who receives a fertilised egg or embryo from another woman, or who acts as a carrier for another person/couple’s child. These definitions, of course, did not exist in early modern England, and I refer here only to the general meaning of the term without its modern-day associations.

⁴ There was potentially a distinction between the ‘wet-nurse’ and the ‘dry-nurse’. The wet-nurse was responsible for breastfeeding, while the dry-nurse was in charge of all other duties. As defined in the OED, the dry-nurse ‘cares and attends to a child’, but does not ‘suckle it’. ‘dry-nurse, n.1.’ *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

⁵ ‘nurse, n.1a’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

consider the ways in which these roles worked to confirm, but also to significantly trouble patriarchal constructions of motherhood. In the first section, I start by examining the social importance of the biological mother in early modern England and the crucial role biological motherhood played in ideological attempts to affirm strict frameworks of inheritance and legitimacy. I will begin to unpack the corrupted nature of non-biological motherhood as it is presented in Shakespeare's *Pericles* in this section. In section two I introduce the often-overlooked role of the foster parent, a figure who complicates conventional ideas about motherhood in the early modern period. I argue that foster parents were common in early modern familial structures, and yet they were often ignored in contemporary discourse, such as mother's manuals, in order to devalue non-biological motherhood. Building on this, I consider the wet-nurse as a type of foster mother, and specifically as an identity that complicated the idea that maternal nurture, and maternal care for babies, must be inherently based on biological connection. I then go on to explore the vilification of these personas. To do so, I return to *Pericles* as a text that reveals the anxieties bound up in these women, but which affirms rather than challenges these assumptions that non-biological mothers are inherently bad. In section three, I turn to the adoptive mother of the older child, arguing that the presentation of adoptive mothers focuses not on issues of maternal nurture, but on notions of legal inheritance and legacy. I begin by considering Anne Clifford's fight for her biological inheritance. I then analyse the ways in which non-biological mothers complicate patriarchally-dominated genealogical processes, through my readings of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and John Lyly's *Sapho and Phao*. Shakespeare's play negotiates the complications of inheritance through the figure of the adoptive mother, but ultimately rejects non-biological matrilineal legacy to reaffirm traditional familial hierarchies. I end the chapter with an analysis of *Sapho and Phao*, a play which I argue challenges ideas of patriarchal, normative biological

motherhood through its successful transference of identity between mother and non-biological child. Ultimately, I suggest that *Sapho and Phao* does something different in its portrayal of maternity identity; while the other dramatic works find ways to either marginalise or incorporate these alternative mothers into traditional discourse, Lyly's play leaves his unrestricted and unbound to any patriarchal figure that would try to contain her.

II. Constructing the Ideal Mother

In Shakespeare's *Pericles* (1607), the surrogate mother is negotiated into a world of corrupted familial relationships.⁶ The play opens with the revelation of the incestuous affair between King Antiochus and his nameless daughter. There is a clear comparison to be made here to King Lear, as Antiochus seems to long for his daughter to fill the role of the absent mother and provide maternal nurture.⁷ Through Lear and his 'pelican daughters', incestuous undertones run throughout the text, but in *Pericles* they are brought to the surface to indicate that something is not entirely right with the way patriarchal familial relationships operate. The incestuous relationship between Antiochus and his daughter is haunted by the absence of the mother; they long for maternal nurture and in the process taint it through the monstrous nature of their actions. Pericles tells Antiochus he has now become 'both a father and a son' and his daughter is now 'mother, wife, and yet his child' as well as the 'eater of her mother's flesh' (1.1.133, 71, 136).⁸ In becoming the 'eater' of her

⁶ By 'corrupted', I mean something that has been 'perverted from uprightness and fidelity in the charge of duty'; something that has been (in this case) figuratively contaminated by improper behaviour. I use this term specifically for its connection to the idea that one's blood could be 'corrupted' through infidelity and immoral relationships. 'corrupt, *adj.* 5a', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

⁷ The absent mother and Lear's relationship with his daughters has been discussed in Coppélia Kahn's 'The Absent Mother in *King Lear*' in *King Lear (New Casebooks)*, ed. by Kiernan Ryan (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 92-113. Its potential connection to Antiochus and his daughter has been mentioned only a few times, including in Kay Stockholder's 1985 article 'Sex and Authority in "Hamlet", "King Lear", and "Pericles"', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 18.3 (Summer 1985), 17-29, (see 25 for the Lear/Pericles comparison).

⁸ The exact importance of this scene is unclear; it may be from the source material, and it drives the plot in exiling the titular character, but what exactly does it contribute to the play, considering it is essentially dropped after this

‘mother’s flesh’, Shakespeare conjures a warped image of breastfeeding and a perversion of traditional nurture, while also conflating mother and daughter by gesturing to the idea of husband and wife as being of one flesh. By beginning the play with this incestuous relationship, Shakespeare suggests there is an order that must be restored, one that can only be achieved through the (in this case impossible) return of the mother.

The presence of incest (whether subtle or explicit) inverts the hierarchies of the family at the same time as these hierarchies are somewhat asserted. The traditional ‘nuclear’ family is destroyed, punctuated by the absence of the nurturing mother, suggesting the family cannot function properly without the biological mother. One can thus attempt to occupy the space she leaves behind, and this is where the surrogate maternal figures I examine in this chapter become central. Before I turn to these figures, however, I must first discuss how the ideal family was composed, and the mother’s intended role within the domestic home. I have begun this section by considering these plays because they engage with some of the debates about the role of the mother in conduct and medical literature which I examine now.

I have previously alluded to the two main qualities that were considered crucial to proper biological motherhood; childbirth and breastfeeding, although it is the latter of the two that will prove more crucial in the context of the surrogate mother. These two qualities, along with the nurture and education of a child (which I discuss in the final chapter of this thesis) were considered the obligation of the mother, as outlined in conduct and medical literature of the period. It is important to consider both types of sources, as the two worked in tandem to construct people’s understanding and behaviour’s: additionally, I reference some non-English sources, as these were

opening scene? Its main function seems to be to expose a dysfunctional family and warn the audience this will be an important and recurring theme throughout. W.B Thorne examines the significance of this scene to later plot details in his article ‘*Pericles* and the “Incest-Fertility” Opposition’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22.1 (1971), 43-56. William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, ed. by Roger Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

often translated and influenced the English works that will be the basis for this thesis. There was believed to be a direct connection between childbirth and nursing; French physician Laurent Joubert wrote that '[o]f the sympathy between the breasts and the womb we have plenty of evidence and many solid arguments', as the blood from the womb was believed to flow into the breasts after birth and become 'white blood' in the breasts, or breast milk.⁹ Erasmus, in his *The New Mother*, similarly comments 'if Nature gave you the strength to conceive, undoubtedly it gave you the strength to nurse, too'.¹⁰ There was a perceived scientific connection between childbirth and nursing, as well as a correlation in how both were the responsibility and part of the construction of the emerging good mother.

Christopher Newstead sums up this duty in his *An Apology for women: or women's defence* (1620):

Educing, education and affection are the threefold cords that should tie each child to the love of its mother: first by educing and inducing to this world, wherein every mother is a good landlord to her child, giving it both house-room and nutriment when it, like an unruly tenant, doth grieve and vex her [...] nourishing our bodies as the pelican, though not with the blood, yet with the substance of their breasts, and when they are able instruments to exercise the faculties of the soul they (and that is, the greatest benefit which perfects the soul) suckle our minds with the milk of good manners [...]¹¹

Newstead's writing is ostensibly a 'defence' of women, but it is clearly a very specific type of woman he is defending. He calls upon what is supposed to be the unconditional love a mother feels for her child, by loving 'them that hurt them' both in childbirth and as they nourish their children through breastfeeding. Newstead admires women for their affection and devotion, but in presenting this type of woman as a given, he implies that this is their natural state and binds them

⁹ Laurent Joubert, *Popular Errors* (1578), trans. and annot. by Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 224.

Valerie Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, 112.

¹⁰ Desiderius Erasmus, 'The new mother' in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. by Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: The University Press, 1965), 267-285, (272).

¹¹ Christopher Newstead, *An Apology for women: or women's defence* (London, 1620). Quoted in *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Kate Aughterson (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 116.

to this construction. Similarly, Robert Cleaver implores women in *A godly forme of houshold gouernment* (1603) that ‘nature giueth milke to the woman for none other end, but that she bestow it vpon her child’ and any woman who does not may be called ‘vnnaturall mothers’.¹² The idea of being ‘unnatural’ suggests they are acting against their own disposition, and rhetorically shames any woman who may act outside of what was coming to be constructed as the norm.¹³

As we observe in examinations of conduct and medical literature, mothers were those who gave birth to the child and, subsequently, those who nursed them. This focus on biological maternity was the result of the increasing need for the regulation of the female body due in large part to the anxiety over transgressive expressions of female chastity, particularly as it related back to issues of assuring paternity as well as the ‘preservation [...] of an ideal of class purity’.¹⁴ As paternity could not be ‘read’ in the same fashion as maternity, men instead had to construct readable signs which they could map onto the female body to pre-emptively prevent being made a cuckold and unknowingly passing their bloodline onto an heir that was not biologically theirs. This was further complicated by the standard belief that a woman had the ability to shape a child’s appearance and identity in crucial and troublesome ways. The mother could impact their child’s physical features through their thoughts and actions while they were in the womb. It was understood, for example, that if a woman stared at a picture of someone with a darker complexion for long enough, her child may actually be born with dark skin, even if both biological parents were white.¹⁵ Juan Luis Vives, in his instruction manual *The Education of a Christian Woman*

¹² Robert Cleaver, *A godly forme of houshold gouernment* (London, 1603), 236. I discuss this idea of the woman who does not breastfeed as an ‘unnatural mother’ further in Chapter Four.

¹³ ‘Unnatural’, beyond contrary to nature, means not in ‘accordance or conformity with the normal physical nature of humans’ or someone who is ‘lacking normal human feelings or sympathies’. ‘unnatural’, *A.adj.1* and *A.adj.2a*, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 70.

¹⁵ Valeria Finucci, ‘Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth: Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*’ in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, ed.

(translated to English in 1529), writes that the ‘power of the imagination’ is equally as important during pregnancy as not indulging in alcohol:

[...] pregnant mothers should take care not to entertain violent thoughts of anything monstrous, foul or obscene. [...] And if they are exposed to such dangers, let them think beforehand of what they may encounter so that no harm may befall the child in their womb from some unexpected sight¹⁶

He makes indistinct the difference between thoughts and action; thinking of something monstrous is as dangerous to a child’s wellbeing as excessive drinking. Women could shape a child even before its birth, in a manner over which men had no control; specifically, it was a woman’s engagement with the outside world which put them at risk and validated men’s attempts to keep them within the home. This raised fears not only with respect to legal inheritance, but it generated concerns over what may be passed between mother and child, and how a mother interacting with the external world may alter a child in ways that made it impossible to discern paternity. It was therefore particularly difficult to assess whether a man was truly the father of a child, as looks were believed to be malleable and could not be accurately relied upon.

Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* is particularly preoccupied with this concern; much of the drama centres on Leontes’ paranoia that Perdita is not his biological child, despite Paulina’s insistence on not only his wife’s virtue, but the undeniable resemblance between father and daughter; the child is the ‘copy of the father’ although ‘the print be little’, asking the audience to trust the word of the woman and imagine a resemblance that could not actually exist (2.3.126-127). The baby Perdita would have likely been a prop child, which may have been shaped to bear

by Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2001), 41-79, (56). It was even thought that black skin itself was the product of the maternal imagination, of a to-be mother focusing on something black and thus giving birth to the first black child. Something ‘monstrous’ then, was believed to produce something equally ‘monstrous’.

¹⁶ Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth-Century Manual*, ed. and trans. by Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 268.

a vague resemblance to the actor but certainly could not have accurately captured a supposedly undeniable biological connection, certainly not from the perspective of the audience.¹⁷ Here, physical characteristics are called upon to convince a father of paternity, but he does not find this argument persuasive. Even if Perdita was indeed the image of her father (visually impossible, given that the two actors portraying them would not have been related), it cannot provide the necessary assurance of paternity. Ultimately, Leontes must be convinced of his wife's fidelity in order to fully accept the child as his. The maternal body must therefore be strictly controlled to ensure paternity, as paternity becomes increasingly vital to guaranteeing the development of the nuclear family structure and ideas of patrilineage. *The Winter's Tale* exposes this anxiety through its very form, suggesting that paternity is shaped and controlled by male anxiety and female sexuality. So, just as it is becoming progressively important, its inherent instability is being revealed through dramatic performance.

As Mark Breitenberg writes, the 'proper and legal dissemination of property from father to eldest son' was 'one of the most fundamental ingredients of masculinity' in early modern England, a large component of what made a true man (Breitenberg, 70). This 'dissemination' necessitated a biological bond, as men would congratulate each other on their posterity, calling the birth of sons 'an increase of [their] Blood'.¹⁸ Patricia Crawford focuses explicitly on the importance of these blood-ties during the early modern period, noting that blood was both the biological concept through which relationships between men and their children were defined, and a symbol for the assured continuation of their lineage (Crawford, 114). Such assurance was only possible if men

¹⁷ Infants were represented onstage by either a bundle of blankets – which would have left any physical similarity entirely to the imagination – or dolls. In both cases, the 'body beneath the bearing cloth' was dependent upon the language of the actors. Jennifer Higginbotham, 'Female Infants and the Engendering of Humanity' in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters: Gender, Transgression, Adolescence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 104-143, (104).

¹⁸ Patricia Crawford, *Blood, Bodies, and Families in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 114.

were in full control of their wives, and specifically their wives' sexuality. Simon D'Ewes wrote on the death of his son Clopton that he feared 'God would not vouchsafe [him] any male offspring to 'inherit [his] name and perpetuate [his] family' (115). To not have a male successor of one's blood was perceived as a failure on the part of the husband, and a wife's duty was to provide such an heir without fear of adultery. Unsurprisingly, this desire correlated to one's wealth and status, as there was more to pass on and the rules of primogeniture were more strictly adhered to; Crawford notes it is feasible that inheritance laws were more equal below the gentry, with the same amount passing to all legitimate children (116).

Concerns over biological relationships, particularly between father and child, have been present since before the period in question. Yet even this biological, essentialist narrative of parenthood, was not, as I have shown, a stable or static structure. Biological maternity was important in trying to ensure legitimacy and inheritance, but it was difficult to control and always potentially vulnerable to external influence. What I intend to demonstrate is when we take away the biological relationship entirely, it destabilises these systems even further; in other words, what happens when women take on a maternal role without giving birth to or breastfeeding the child? Structures that were supposedly stable were fragile enough on their own, even within a patriarchally acceptable construction of motherhood. Paternal relationships were, in reality, balanced upon a delicate framework that was always at risk, particularly from non-biological familial relationships. I want to examine these fractures in familial relationships as they were presented on the early modern stage, to interrogate how our understanding of maternal performance is affected when we remove the biological bond and the biological signs that dictated one's ability to read maternity as essential.

III. The Foster Parent in Drama and Discourse

Despite the overwhelming focus on biological parenthood, and on biological motherhood, in the early modern period, foster parenting was not an uncommon practice, albeit in different ways than we might recognise, as we observe if we return to *Pericles* and the figure of Dionyza. In this section, I examine the role of the foster parent and their often disregarded but potentially crucial contribution to the development of the child, focusing on the fears over the elimination of a biological connection through contagion and transference. I will return to *Pericles* to argue that it contains that fear, in constructing the foster-mother as a figure that is either dangerous or marginalised, eventually renegotiating the biological mother into the family unit.

Foster parenting was common in the early modern period. Children were frequently sent away from home for anywhere between a ‘couple of days or weeks’ to a ‘number of years’ for reasons which ranged from undertaking apprenticeships to receiving formal education.¹⁹ This fact must inevitably influence how we think about parenting and the family during this time – ‘good’ motherhood was not necessarily defined as spending time with your child or keeping them close. Oftentimes those in the lower- and middle- classes were sent off to work as servants, while upper-class families in turn received children as labourers, although upper-class children were sent away as well, sometimes at their bequest (Stone, 107). Margaret Cavendish begged her mother to allow her to serve at court, to which her mother acquiesced out of a strong desire to please her child.²⁰ Mary Markham’s son William joined Lady Arbella Stuart’s entourage as a servant to work ‘as it pleas your honour to have him go’.²¹ Families, at all levels of society, were consequently often

¹⁹ Illana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 54.

²⁰ Margaret Cavendish, *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life* (1656), in *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen*, ed. by Helen Wilcox, Elaine Hobby, Hilary Hind, and Elspeth Graham (London: Routledge, 1989), 87-100, (90).

²¹ Mary Markham to Lady Arbella Stuart, 11 April 1608 in *The Letters of Lady Arbella Stuart*, ed. by Sara Jayne Steen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 288.

fractured, and there is debate over whether the bond between mother and child actually got the chance to develop at all.²² The validity of such a claim – most prominently made by Stone – that the mother-child bond was often non-existent, is difficult to measure. It is certainly inaccurate to say that women did not feel grief when distanced from their children; Lady Anne Clifford, upon being forced to send her child away to live with her estranged husband, wrote in her diary that she ‘wept bitterly’ at their separation.²³ Alice Thornton experienced a similar grief, documenting the tribulations of losing several of her children; when one of them fell ill, she herself ‘was at death’s dore’ as her ‘strength departed from [her]’.²⁴ She cannot, however, argue with the ‘chastisement of the Lord’ though it grieved her to part with the ‘suckeing child of [her] wombe’ (Thornton, 151).²⁵ Similarly, Lady Anne Halkett laments on the death of her young daughter Betty, expressing her hope that the Lord ‘would haue beene pleased to haue spared her’, while simultaneously acknowledging:

[N]either sex nor condition can bee secured when death aproaches [sic] w^{ch} shall make mee vse this as a continuall prayer Lord teach mee so to number my days that I may aply my hart to wisdom²⁶

While mothers may have certainly felt pain and anger at the loss a child, whether temporary or permanent, many attributed that loss to God’s will which they may not have understood, but had to accept. Elizabeth Bury assures in her diary that the death of a child must ‘make a wound in your [h]eart’ but that the ‘[g]race and [l]ong [e]xperience of God [...] is better to you than your own or

²² Debates over the nature of the relationship between mother and child are abundant; it is a subject I cover more in Chapter Three with regards to child mortality.

²³ Anne Clifford, *The diaries of Lady Anne Clifford*, ed. by D. J. H Clifford (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1990), 32.

²⁴ Alice Thornton, *The autobiography of Mrs. Alice Thornton* (Durham: Publication for the Society by Andrews and Co, etc., 1875), 92.

²⁵ She refers here to the ‘suckeing child of my wombe’ implying it is this biological connection that makes her grieve so strongly.

²⁶ Lady Anne Halkett, ‘Vpon the death of my dearest Child Betty [...]’. Quoted in Jennifer Heller, *The Mother’s Legacy in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2016), 160.

your child's lives'.²⁷ Considering the construction vs. reality of biological maternal relationships and the true nature of the bond between mother and child, I am now going to consider how such relationships were further impacted by the foster-mother, by focusing on one specific type – that of the wet-nurse.

a. The Wet-Nurse as Foster Mother

As I have illustrated, there were specific qualities biological mothers were meant to embody, and as a result, foster mothers became figures of mistrust as women feared the loss of their children's affection along with, as I will show, a fear that their child may be contaminated with the qualities of the foster mother. The OED even defines 'foster' as both a 'foster-parent' and a 'nurse' and another definition suggests to supply 'food' or 'nourishment' as in the nursing of a child.²⁸ One of the main reasons children, particularly those of high-status, were sent away from home was to be nursed by a woman other than their biological mother.²⁹ Wet-nurses, then, were a kind of foster mother, but they were also servants, generally employed by those of high-social status, and so we must bear in mind the importance of class to these ideas of non-biological mothering. When this happened, they were typically sent away from birth for approximately twelve to eighteen months.³⁰ I argue that fostering, including the wet-nurse, was frequently either overlooked or vilified because it posed a realistic threat to biological maternity and the construction of the ideal mother, and was in fact a space where women might be able to find individual autonomy in the maternal role. It also provided a particularly tricky situation for those in early modern England, as it forced them

²⁷ Elizabeth Bury, *An account of the life and death of Mrs. Elizabeth Bury* (Boston, 1743), 162.

²⁸ 'foster, n.1.1' and 'foster, n.2', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

²⁹ There were numerous reasons upper-class women did not want to nurse their children themselves, many of them related to vanity. Elizabeth Clinton details some of these reasons; that 'it is troublesome, that it is noisome to one's clothes, that it makes one look old'. Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie*. Quoted in David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, 88.

³⁰ Patricia Crawford, "'The sucking child': Adult attitudes to child care in the first year of life in seventeenth-century England", *Continuity and Change* 1.1 (1986), 23-51, (36).

to negotiate the implications of a non-biological mother who could function without a man. A wet-nurse can commodify her services and her own body and, with minimal male intervention, become a nurturing maternal figure to a child that is not her own.

It is not surprising that breastfeeding was a controversial subject in early modern discourse about motherhood. As discussed, most agreed it was imperative for a woman to nurse her own child, but had to reconcile with the fairly common frequency with which upper-class women sent their children away to be breast-fed.³¹ David Cressy comments that in Elizabethan and Stuart England there was constant debate over the ‘advantages and disadvantages of mother’s milk’ with most of the debate intended to persuade those high up the social scale not to send their child out to nurse (*Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 87). Medical tracts such as Thomas Reynalde’s *The Birth of Mankind* (1540) insisted that mother’s milk was more ‘[appropriate] and agreeable’ for the infant than that of a nurse.³² William Gouge suggests that mothers ‘love such children best as they have given suck unto’ as the child who ‘sucked their mother’s breast love their mother’s best’. For Gouge, there is a clear connection between nursing and the affection a woman feels for her child, and vice versa.³³

However, it was not just men who argued for the importance of breastfeeding, and the connection between maternal love and biology. When women wrote about motherhood, they did so from a position of authority, one which was dependent upon the biological relationship between

³¹ There is some disagreement over exactly how common the practice was – Valerie Fildes believes it likely that a ‘substantial number’ of women did not breastfeed their children (Valerie Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986], 99) as does as Dorothy McLaren (‘Martial Fertility and Lactation’ in *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, ed. by Mary Prior [London: Methuen, 1985], 22-46, [28]). Others, such as David Harley, believe the ‘English campaign for maternal nursing’ convinced many women to breastfeed their children themselves (David Harley, ‘From Providence to Nature: The Moral Theology and Godly Practice of Maternal Breast-feeding,’ *Bulletin of History and Medicine* 69.2 [1995], 198-223, [200]). The frequency with which it has been deliberated, however, certainly suggests it was a topic open to debate and therefore a relatively standard practice.

³² Thomas Reynalde, *The Birth of Mankind* (London, 1540), 156.

³³ William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties* (London, 1622), 509.

mother and child. Dorothy Leigh's advice book to her sons stresses the importance of the biological connection in generating this love:

My deare Children, haue I not cause to fear? The holy Ghost saith by the Prophet,
Can a Mother forget the child of her wombe? As if he should say, Is it possible that
 shee, which hath carried her child within her, so neere her hart, and brought it forth
 into this world with so much bitter paine, so many grones and cries, can forget it?³⁴

The connection to Eve's punishment is unmistakable; she even quotes the Bible in asking *Can a Mother forget the child of her wombe?*, reiterating that it is the mother who has carried the child and brought her into the world. As Kristen Poole notes, Leigh's biological maternity serves as the 'key source of authority for her literary activities' – she feels she can speak only because she gave birth to her children.³⁵ Elizabeth Grymeston, in her dedication to her son in her own mother's manual, makes the point that 'there is no loue so forcible as the loue of an affectionate mother to hir naturall childe'.³⁶ Her usage of the phrase 'natural child' again implies an ordinary, biological relationship, for it is this which produces the strongest and most intense love.

This natural relationship is formed not only through giving birth to a child, but through the act of nursing that child. To deny a child the 'blessing of the breast', as Alice Thornton and others referred to it, was to deny a fundamental part of being a mother (Thornton, 124). Childbirth and nursing thus became the two images that defined maternity, inextricably tying it to womanhood itself. Because some women stressed this biological connection just as much as men, they therefore also attempted to convince their fellow mothers not to employ the use of a wet-nurse. Some manuals, such as Leigh's, do not even mention the option of using a wet-nurse. Others, like Elizabeth Clinton, wrote advice books with the explicit intention of convincing other women to

³⁴ Dorothy Leigh, *The Mother's Blessing. Or the godly counsaile of a gentle-woman* (London, 1616), 9-10.

³⁵ Kristen Poole, "'The Fittest Closest for All Goodness': Authorial Strategies of Jacobean Mother's Manuals", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 35.1, *The English Renaissance* (1995), 69-88, (74).

³⁶ Elizabeth Grymeston, *Miscelanea, meditations, memoratives* (London, 1604), sig. A3.

breastfeed; in Clinton's case, she wants to persuade others not to make the mistake she did in deciding not to nurse her children. She, unsurprisingly, also calls upon God in substantiating her argument, as it is 'the express ordinance of God that mothers should nurse their own children' and so they are given no choice in the matter.³⁷ She writes to repent, and to 'make amends for neglect of this part of love to them' as she cast them away 'when they should have hung on [her] breasts'. She insists that she has somehow deprived her children of her maternal affection because she did not '[nourish] them in [her] own bosom' (Clinton, 16).

Implicit in her writing is the concern over the consequences of this lack of maternal nurture: the worry that a child will feel less affection for a mother who did not nurse it herself. After all, as mothers so often insisted, the 'mother's affection' is 'so knit by nature's law to her tender babe', and if a child is not breastfed, they may feel abandoned by the very person who is, by blood, supposed to love them the most (11). If mothers 'refuse this office', they cannot be surprised if they are in turn 'refused, despised, and neglected' by their offspring (13). Unlike Leigh, Clinton does reference the wet-nurse, but predictably, she does so only to disavow their usage and label them as universally careless and inattentive:

Trust no other woman, whom wages hire to do it, better than yourselves which God and nature tie to do it. I have found by grievous experience such dissembling in nurses, pretending sufficiency of milk, when, indeed, they had too much scarcity [...] as I fear the death of one or two of my little babes came by the default of their nurses (18)

The nurse is 'dissembling', and it seems she is motivated only by money rather than the love that should drive the biological mother. Clinton offers no sympathy for the nurse, nor any understanding for a woman who may employ their services. The nurse is driven not by nature, but

³⁷ Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countess of Lincolne's Nurserie: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Kate McPherson (Emory Women Writer's Resource Project, 1999), 7.

by greed, and so cannot provide the same care as the mother, nor are they required to. This makes them inherently bad for the child, with no conceivable exception:

I know not how they should, since they will shut them out of the armes of nature, and leave them to the will of a stranger; yea to one that will seeme to estrange herselfe from her owne childe, to give sucke to the nurse-child (18)

The arms of the mother are the ‘armes of nature’, while the nurse is the ‘will of a stranger’, so the child is completely at the mercy of this supposedly careless and potentially devious woman. The nurse is even so unnatural as to abandon their own biological child in favour of the ‘nurse-child’. Clinton’s usage of the term ‘nurse-child’ is particularly interesting as it suggests that the child, once nursed, becomes something else. It is no longer the mother’s child, but in fact belongs to the woman who nurses it. The child is changeable, shaped by outside forces beyond the control of the mother or biology.

Notably, it is not merely the love of the mother that is at risk of being transferred, but other characteristics of identity which are threatened. The nurse may contaminate the child and shape it to her image, so that both paternity and maternity may be called into question. Jacques Guillemeau’s medical tract (1612) strongly advocates that a mother should breastfeed her child, citing four reasons why it is inadvisable not to do so:

1. First there is danger least the child be changed and an other put in his place.
2. Then that naturall affection which should be betwixt the mother and child by this meanes is diminished.
3. Thirdly, it may be feared, that some bad conditions or inclinations may be deriued from the Nurse into the child.
4. Lastly, the Nurse may communicate some imperfection of her body into the child³⁸

His reasoning expresses the typical anxieties we find in medical discourse; filled with fears of replacement, substitution, contagion, and transference. He is concerned the child itself will be lost

³⁸ Jacques Guillemeau, *Child-birth, or, the happy deliuerie of vvomen* (London, 1612), sig. li2.

and another substituted, that affection will be transferred from child to surrogate, and that the qualities of the nurse will contaminate the child through breastmilk. These anxieties are predicated on alteration, on mutability; the fear of the nurse becomes exactly the fear of, as Guillemeau writes, ‘being chang’d’ or even the mere possibility of being changed (Guillemeau, sig. Kk). The very disposition of the child is at stake, that they may take, not just bad conditions, but ‘bad inclinations’ from their nurse along with the ‘imperfections of her body’. The identity of the child is threatened, and there is the implication that their birth will not necessarily triumph over their nature. As Juan Luis Vives writes, ‘I wot not how, but so it is, that we suck of our mother’s teat, together with the milk, not only love, but also conditions and dispositions’ (Vives, 40).

Exactly, I believe, because of this fear of changeability, of contaminating the child with not just maternal affection, but the qualities of the nurse, the wet-nurse was a persona that was often cast in an overwhelmingly negative light in contemporary sources. Gail Kern Paster notes that breastfeeding could represent an icon of either ‘devoted maternity, or its demonic opposite’ – devoted when undertaken by the mother, demonic when performed by the nurse.³⁹ This perspective was not without legitimate reason; nurses were often known to be inattentive, and children sent out to wet-nurses had double the mortality rate of those who were nursed at home (Stone, 81). There are frequent mentions of nurses who injured children due to carelessness; Alice Thornton recalls her new-born being fed by a wet-nurse, who was discovered by her mother ‘fallen asleepe, with her breast in the childe’s mouth, and lyeing over the child’ (Thornton, 91). Similarly, Anne Clifford, in a letter to her mother, describes how her employed wet-nurse was ‘one of the most

³⁹ Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 163.

unhealthfullest women' who 'fell very ill as 'she had but little milk left'.⁴⁰ Nurses could indeed prove dangerous, but there is much more going on with their representations in these accounts.

The fear that if a child was nursed by a woman who was not their mother, they might absorb the qualities of that woman, most preoccupied these writers. Scholars have disagreed on the extent to which the wet-nurse was perceived as a dangerous figure, but I believe the negative portrayals of these nurses and the insistence upon maternal nurture have far more to do with the concerns they generated regarding the potential 'transference' of motherhood rather than any potentially legitimate concerns over the child's wellbeing.⁴¹ Although wet-nurses could be negligent, there was also the explicit risk the infant would become attached and never fully recover after its separation and the relationship between mother and child would be permanently strained. In 1581, Stephen Guazzo harshly criticised his mother:

You bore me but nyne Monthes in your belly, but my Nurse kept mee with her teates the space of two yeares: [...] so soone as I was borne, you deprived me of your company, and banished mee your presence, but she graciously received mee [...]⁴²

There was a clear and real threat that the child would resent the separation and, indeed, perceive the nurse as a more nurturing figure than its biological mother, and continue to blame their mother for sending them away once they had returned home. This fear of the transfer of affection, along with the transfer of qualities of identity, is the true alarm raised by these figures. The nurse consequently became a site upon which patriarchal society expressed anxieties about not only the female body, but the fear of the non-biological mother.

⁴⁰ Anne Clifford to her mother, Margaret Clifford, 1 May 1615. Kendal Archive Centre, WDHOTH/3/44/6/37.

⁴¹ Linda Campbell has noted that scholars have tended to confuse 'parish nurses' with professional wet-nurses who were typically 'well-paid and well-respected' while Patricia Crawford believes the nurse was 'not so careful of another's child'. Linda Campbell, 'Wet-Nurses in Early Modern England: Some Evidence from the Townshend Archive', *Medical History* 33 (1989), 360-370, (360) and Patricia Crawford, "The sucking child", 31.

⁴² Stephen Guazzo, *The ciuile conuersation of M. Steeuen Guazzo* (London, 1581), 24.

b. *Pericles and the Wicked Foster Mother*

Although these mother's manuals highlighted the importance of natural motherhood, in doing so they undermine – if not eliminate completely – the potential power of the wet-nurse in arguing that all mothers should breast-feed. These texts cast nurses as careless and inattentive when they mention them at all, but they never expose the true power such a disruption may cause. Performance can destabilise identity in ways other genres cannot; onstage, identity is visually and rhetorically changed before the eyes of its audience. To further examine the figure of the nurse in early modern literature and culture, I now return to *Pericles* and its depiction of both a 'good' and 'bad' nurse, demonstrating how Shakespeare presents them to both draw attention to and subsequently ease the anxieties raised by their presence. Both nurses may potentially influence Marina's development, but Shakespeare negates this fear, and in doing so reaffirms the cultural superiority of biological motherhood, through his renegotiation of the biological mother at the play's conclusion.

Pericles ultimately ends up marrying the daughter of another royal, Thaisa, who gives birth to their daughter, Marina, but tragically 'dies' shortly after. Rather than bring his new-born on his journey, believing it to be too dangerous, he decides to leave her 'at careful nursing' with Cleon and his wife Dionyza, who remain in his debt after he saved their city from famine (3.1.85). It is clear that Pericles, should he survive, intends to return for his daughter, and so their guardianship is intended to be temporary; in our contemporary terms, they are fostering, not adopting, although this distinction may not have been made during the time. He charges them to raise his daughter 'as she was born', as if understanding the risk that she may be changed by developing in an environment different to her birth. Although she inherits noble status from both parents, he

recognises the integral role the foster mother will play in his child's development, speaking to Dionyza:

PERICLES: Good madam, make me blessed in you care
In bringing up my child

To which Dionyza responds:

DIONYZA: I have one myself,
Who shall not be more dear to my respect
Than yours, my lord (3.4.30-40)

Although Marina will not become Dionyza's biological child, she claims there will be no distinction between the two in the affection she feels for them. However, this is not at all how their relationship develops. As Marina grows, we are told that she quickly surpasses Dionyza's own daughter (who never appears onstage) in beauty and brains, which leads Dionyza to grow envious. She decides the only solution is to murder Marina so that her daughter may be able to flourish. Gower informs the audience of her plan, framing it in terms of pregnancy; she holds the 'pregnant instrument of wrath' which prepares her for the 'unborn event' of Marina's murder (4.1.43-44). As with the relationship between Antiochus and his daughter, Dionyza's wickedness is defined by an absence; she is 'pregnant' in a manner of speaking, but not with a child, reminding us of her lack of affection for her foster-daughter. The 'instrument' of her wrath is 'pregnant', and the event is 'unborn'; what Dionyza gives 'birth' to is the exact opposite of maternal affection.

We are not given much insight into the actual nature of the relationship between Dionyza and her foster-daughter, but they share one short scene together. In this scene, she feigns the role of concerned foster-mother, but even so, her language makes it clear she is not Marina's actual mother:

DIONYZA:
How now Marina? Why do you keep alone?
How chance my daughter is not with you?

Do not consume your blood with sorrowing.
Have you a nurse of me! (4.1.23-26)⁴³

‘Nurse’ is, naturally, the key word here.⁴⁴ Marina ‘consumes’ her own blood, and in doing so she rejects the milk, or affection, that Dionyza offers her. The ‘blood’ of the biological family is positioned against the milk of the nurse, and Marina retains the qualities of her natural parents, as far as she remains pure, in contrast to Dionyza’s wickedness. There is no indication that Dionyza ever breastfed Marina – although, considering she cared for her from infancy and has a daughter of a similar age, it is not impossible to think she might have done so – but she uses the term to indicate her general role as Marina’s foster mother. As Marianne Novy points out, Shakespeare does not use the term by accident, as it deliberately connotes the wet-nurse and the images associated with it.⁴⁵ It also gestures to the figure of Lychorida, who stands mostly silent in the background as Marina’s ‘genuine’ nurse. It is Lychorida who carries the baby out after her birth and passes along the information to Pericles that his wife has apparently passed away. Further, she accompanies Pericles to visit Cleon and Dionyza, and carries the child onstage, filling in for the absent Thaisa. It is then suggested that she stay with Marina, as Pericles tells her she may ‘depend’ upon her ‘little mistress [...] hereafter’ (3.4.47-49). However, her role in Marina’s upbringing is, I believe, deliberately side-lined, as she does not appear onstage again, and at the beginning of Act Four, Gower simply reports that ‘Lychorida, our nurse, is dead’ (4.1.42). While other characters

⁴³ The phrase ‘consume your blood’ is again reminiscent of Lear and his ‘pelican daughters’, echoing the notion of drinking the mother’s blood and receiving a twisted form of maternal nurture.

⁴⁴ Marianne Novy comments upon the importance of this word choice: she writes that ‘this usage both connects the couple to the common practice of wet-nursing and points up their opposition to Marina’s good foster parent – her nurse Lychorida’. Marianne Novy, ‘Adoption and Shakespearean Families: Nature, Nurture, and Resemblance’ in *Reading Adoption*, 56-86, (60).

⁴⁵ Novy’s essay ‘Multiple Parenting in *Pericles*’ discusses the dichotomy between Cleon and Dionyza and Lychorida as the evil and virtuous foster parents, respectively, but I believe she overlooks the implications of gender and the role of women in favour of a more general overview of the foster parent.

may refer to Lychorida as nurse, her silence makes it difficult for the audience to visualise her as such.

So who is truly Marina's 'nurse', in the context of breastfeeding specifically, and in terms of the woman who nurtured and cared for her? If Dionyza did breastfeed her, she did not pass any qualities onto the child, either through her breast milk or through maternal nurture. Marina is not 'corrupted' by Dionyza's cruelty; even if she does consume her breast milk, she successfully avoids contamination. However, Shakespeare also ensures that the good nurse almost never speaks, is never seen to interact with Marina, and therefore suggests it is Dionyza who truly becomes the foster-mother, not Lychorida.⁴⁶ In referring to herself as nurse, she assumes and completely distorts the term, associating it with her lack of care; she exposes the dichotomy between the image of 'devoted maternity' and its 'demonic opposite'. Unlike Lychorida, Dionyza is given a voice, she speaks – albeit briefly – to Marina, and refers to herself purposefully as the girl's nurse. Shakespeare here differentiates between nursing as a service and nursing as a maternal replacement; while we might expect the woman who is paid to be less invested in the child's welfare, he is particularly critical of the higher status fostering that Dionyza represents, one that should be characterised by care but instead validates the cultural stereotype.

To enforce the point that Dionyza is truly the evil foster mother, when Cleon learns of what she has planned, he is horrified, crying that if he were 'chief lord of all this spacious world' he would 'undo the deed' (4.3.5-6). Dionyza, however, justifies her decision by arguing she must kill Marina because of the love she bears for her biological child:

DIONYZA: And though you may call my course unnatural,
You not your child well loving, yet I find
It greets me as an enterprise of kindness

⁴⁶ Novy believes Lychorida's power comes from her transference of memories of Mariana's biological mother, but I see this as a fairly weak argument as Mariana and Lychorida never speak onstage, and this information is confined to a single line in the final scene. 'Adoption and Shakespearean Families', 60.

Performed to your sole daughter (4.3.40-44)

Although there is no redemption in her character, and she is clearly meant to be the villain, Shakespeare does make the point that she is acting, not for herself, but in the interests of her biological daughter, as severe as her actions may be. Dionyza's behaviour actually echoes early modern writer's attempts to assert the biological bond between mother and child as the true source of legitimate and nurturing motherhood. Dionyza's behaviour towards Marina is, in her own words, all for the 'sake' of her nameless biological daughter. Dionyza is willing to take extreme measures, even murder, because she believes it is necessary to allow her child to succeed. In this version of the maternal instinct, Dionyza displays little love or affection for the girl she agreed to take in and raise, and in her use of her biological child as justification for her behaviour, she supports the emphasis on natural and biological love. This seems to suggest, again, that the maternal instinct can be harmful and affection between biological mother and child may itself be destructive.

By contrast, the figure of the loving nurse is cast to the margins in *Pericles*. Upon Cleon asking what she intends to tell Pericles when he returns for his child, Dionyza coldly remarks that '[n]urses are not the Fates/[t]o foster is not ever to preserve' (4.3.14-15). She once again labels herself as the 'nurse', tainting both the image of the wet-nurse as an affectionate figure, along with the figure of the foster-mother to which the term alludes. With Lychorida largely silenced, this is the image that will most likely linger in the audience's mind after the play has concluded – not of the kind, caring nurse, but of the wicked and deceitful one. Shakespeare gives Dionyza a voice only to validate a stereotype, whereas Lychorida, like the Shepherd's wife in *The Winter's Tale*, is pushed to the fringes because, ultimately, the nurse who is loving presents a greater risk of replacing the biological mother. The play therefore presents, and to a large extent justifies, social

anxieties about non-biological mothers in both the vilification of Dionyza and the silencing of Lychorida.

Ultimately, though, Dionyza too must be silenced. Although she is clearly the mastermind behind the scheme against Marina, it is Cleon who receives much of the blame in the play's final scenes. In fact, Dionyza is last seen in the dumb-show, where she shows Pericles his daughter's grave, and is then mentioned when Gower informs the audience of how she wrote Marina's epitaph, cementing her cruel and deceptive nature but robbing her of the ability to speak for herself (4.4.34). When Marina recounts what has happened to her, she claims it was the 'cruel Cleon and his wicked wife' who attempted to murder her, and Pericles later tells Thaisa of how their daughter was 'nursed with Cleon' who 'at fourteen years/[h]e sought to murder' (5.1.202, 5.3.8-9). This shift is unexpected; why does Cleon receive so much of the blame when we have seen that it was clearly Dionyza's plan, and Cleon merely helped to cover it up? Further, why is all mention of Dionyza eliminated once Marina is reunited with her biological parents? I suggest she disappears much as Lychorida did, to make room for the biological mother as the only living, present maternal figure. In the end, neither the good nor the bad nurse can stand alongside Thaisa, as the biological bond must trump all others (whether these surrogate bonds be affectionate or destructive), and neither figure truly influences Marina. In doing so, Shakespeare shows that it is only through biological bonds that true connection can be made, and identity be passed.

With that in mind, *Pericles* ultimately 'fixes' the broken familial structures and accentuates the loving connection between mother and child that can only be created through biological maternity. Even the reunion scene between father and daughter is saturated with the importance of maternity, so much so that I would argue it actually diminishes the oft-emphasised predominance of paternity at its expense. When Pericles sees Marina, he comments upon her likeness to, not

himself, but his (presumed) deceased wife. He sees reflected in Marina ‘my queen’s square brows, her stature to an inch’ along with her ‘jewel like eyes’ (5.1.122-124). Unlike Leontes, Pericles sees his offspring as the reproduction of her mother, defining her by what she has inherited from her maternal side. This not only subverts ideas of proving paternity through resemblance to the father, but suggests that Pericles is certain of his wife’s chastity; the unsaid assumption is that if Marina is Thaisa’s daughter, then she must be his as well. Further, he only fully believes she is his daughter when he asks ‘[w]hat was thy mother’s name?’ and she answers ‘[i]s it no more to be your daughter than/[t]o say my mother’s name was Thaisa?’ (234, 242-243). We know early modern England was overwhelmingly concerned with assuring paternity, so *Pericles*’ insistence upon the maternal relationship as proof of hereditary is atypical – but in a play that has spent the majority of the time haunted by the absent mother, in this final scene it restores the natural order, even at the ‘expense’ of the father.

When mother and daughter are finally reunited shortly after, Marina cries ‘[m]y heart/leaps to be gone into my mother’s bosom!’; this imagery, the desire to be ‘gone’ into her mother’s breast is clearly reminiscent of breast-feeding (5.3.52-53). Unlike Antiochus’ daughter ‘feeding’ off the absent mother at the beginning of the play, in the end Marina longs to fulfil the expected and accepted love between her and her biological, present mother. She has moved from rejecting the milk of the nurse and instead consuming her own blood, to embracing the nurture of the biological mother. This once again confirms the stability of the biological bond, but rejects the notion that breastfeeding is integral to ensuring that love, and to pass the responsibility off could somehow transfer motherhood onto another woman. Thaisa, presumed dead immediately after giving birth, could not breastfeed Marina as a child, but here Marina (at least rhetorically) returns to her mother’s breast to fulfil this natural bond. In the end, it is not the nurse, nor the foster-mother, who

assumes this responsibility, but the ‘flesh of thy flesh’ (54). In a text that has resisted the influence of the nurse, as Marina has avoided contamination, she can now safely return to the woman who, we are assured, will love her as only a biological mother truly can.

IV. Adoption and Fears of Maternal Inheritance

As I have demonstrated, fostering was a practice that raised concerns over an infant’s development and nurture, revealing the potential for contagion by a non-biological maternal presence. It was feared that this contagion had the power to alter one’s character and potentially conceal true paternity. Concerns over matters of identity and identity transference did not disappear once a child had grown, and I now consider older children and adoptive mothers and again ask how their presentation in drama affects how we understand the maternal role. Although adoption – as it was loosely defined – was really an authority only men were granted, adoptive mothers are present personas in both early modern society and drama. Like fostering, adoption serves a complicated purpose in early modern England; there was a stark disconnect between social directives and actual practice. While those who discuss both fostering and nursing are primarily concerned with their function with respect to a child’s development, adoption, I believe, was perceived as having a greater impact on children once they reached maturity, particularly regarding matters of legal inheritance and legacy. This impact can be seen in both *All’s Well That Ends Well* (1605), a play that presents an adoptive mother who transgresses boundaries of both maternity and social standing before ultimately reaffirming patriarchal control over inheritance, as well as *Sapho and Phao*, where this identity transference is fully realised.

In the opening line of *All’s Well*, the Countess mourns both her deceased husband and her son, who is leaving for France; she laments that ‘in delivering my son from me, I bury a second

husband' (1.1.1).⁴⁷ Interestingly, the first line of the entire play connotes images of biological maternity in 'delivering' her son, but the Countess will come to forcefully reject the notion that motherhood is dependent upon biology. Following the death of Helena's biological father, the Countess remarks she has been 'bequeathed' to her care. She believes Helena's education will enhance the 'dispositions she inherits' from her deceased father, with no mention of a biological mother from whom she may also have inherited (1.1.41). The similarities between the Countess's biological son Bertram and her own deceased husband are also emphasised; she tells him to 'succeed thy father in manners as in shape' as 'thy blood and virtue contend for empire in thee' (63-66). The Countess suggests that both physical traits, as well as behaviour and personality, may be passed down, specifically through paternal inheritance. However, that blood and virtue 'contend for empire' and Helena's education may 'enhance' her inheritance is the first sign that there is in fact space for development; for influence by environment and non-biological forces. Later in the play, the Countess will come to insist that adoptive bonds are just as legitimate as biological ones and threaten the breakdown of the distinction between a biological and adoptive mother which had the potential to further complicate issues of inheritance.

I will return to *All's Well* later in this section, but before I come to my reading of Shakespeare's play, I want to spend some time discussing the historical context of adoption, which is significant to understanding its function in both *All's Well* and *Sapho and Phao*. There are references to adoption in early modern discourse, but considering the frequency with which it took place, they are comparatively uncommon. As Patricia Crawford writes, adoption was typically 'dismissed' as

⁴⁷ William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. by Susan Snyder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). This line can be read as echoing the incest of *Pericles*, with the merging of identities as mother, husband, wife, son, etc. Katherine Schwarz, however, reads it not as incestuous, but as 'relentless generational replication'. Katherine Schwarz, "'My Intents are Fix'd': Constant Will in *All's Well That Ends Well*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.2 (Summer 2007), 200-227, (217).

largely irrelevant due to the lack of a blood connection, and as such there was no legal process for adopting a child. Jack Goody succinctly covers the history of adoption, making the point that although the Church condemned non-biological relations, these practices still continued and proved an ‘intrinsic part of the domestic scene’.⁴⁸ Although there was strong resistance to such forms of parenting, and although adoption was eliminated from legal codes in England, the act of one person taking in another to care for them remained a common occurrence.⁴⁹ One of the more well-known examples is Sir Thomas More’s adoption of Margaret Giggs, who he raised alongside his biological children. In a letter written to his children in 1522, he addresses ‘his dearest children and to Margaret Giggs, whom he numbers amongst his own’.⁵⁰ He numbers her amongst his biological children as he rhetorically separates her from them. His rhetoric implies there should remain a distinction between biological and surrogate child, even if they are equal in his affection. Elizabeth Delaval was likewise raised largely by her aunt, of whom she writes ‘yet by adoption I may recon myself to be her child’.⁵¹ Although neither Margaret Giggs nor Elizabeth Delaval were legally adopted, they demonstrate that adoption was a part of early modern society which had an impact on people’s lives, affecting who they saw as their true parental figures, while proving parenthood was a dynamic, changeable identity.

It was adoption, not fostering, which was ‘drastically reformed in the post-classical period’ – fostering, by contrast, remained relatively unchanged into the early modern period (Goody, 72). This is largely to do with the fact that adoption deals with matters of inheritance in ways fostering

⁴⁸ Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 69.

⁴⁹ The first law on adoption was not formally introduced in England until 1926. Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family*, 73.

⁵⁰ Sir Thomas More to his children, 3rd September 1522 in *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More* by Thomas Edward Bridgett (London: Burnes & Oates, 1892), 132-133.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Delaval, *The meditations of Lady Elizabeth Delaval: written between 1662 and 1671*, ed. by Douglas G. Greene (Durham: Surtees Society, 1978), 112.

does not. While the effects of fostering may, potentially, be negated if a child is returned to their rightful parents, adoption largely deals with a different, more permanent kind of transference and contagion – not of qualities or behaviour, but of familial lines and patrilineage. As Goody comments, the Church began to resist adoption because it created an economic problem: when someone without biological children adopted, their wealth would be left to those surrogate children rather than to the Church (75). The Church could therefore only benefit from the exclusion of these ‘fictional heirs’ from legal codes and documents, and as a result, it was fundamentally against the process. However, the practice continued, despite its absence from official legal codes.

The term adoption, when it was used, was often employed within a specifically religious framework, and this was the context in which it was most widely accepted as a genuine practice – rhetorically if not legally binding. God sent his ‘legitimate’ son, Christ, down to earth, so that he could in turn adopt all of mankind as his children. Through their redemption, they metaphorically become his true children. James Melville, a Scottish minister, in his *Spirituall Propine* (1589) writes, ‘I thanke thee for his [God’s] glorious resurrection [...] powring down the haly Spirite according to his promise, vpon me his childe of adoption’.⁵² About thirty years later, Anthony Wotton, an Anglican clergyman, writes that ‘wee are the children of God’ and shall receive ‘the last the inheritance of sonnes, because of our adoption’.⁵³ Both religious writers, but particularly Wotton, insist that the adopted sons of God are as good as biological; Wotton even remarks that they will receive the ‘last inheritance’, contradicting the opinion that non-biological children should not rightfully inherit anything from their non-biological parents. Of course, Melville and Wotton’s arguments are spiritual rather than literal; a spiritual inheritance may be permissible, but a literal one is more difficult to accept.

⁵² James Melville, *A spirituall propine of a pastour to his people* (Edinburgh, 1589), 27.

⁵³ Anthony Wotton, *A defence of M. Perkins booke* (London, 1606), Book iv. 159.

John Merbecke includes a section on ‘Adoption’ in *A booke of notes and commonplaces* (1581), engaging with the topic from a non-religious perspective. He writes that adoption is defined as an endeavour that is ‘legitimate an [sic] imitating nature’ for any man who, for whatever reason, did not have biological children of his own. His justification is still similarly based in religion, believing God sent his ‘naturall and legitimate sonne into the world’ to adopt all of mankind, and therefore the act of adoption can be lawfully replicated within an earthly setting.⁵⁴ Although it is legitimate according to ‘[the] Lawiers’, it only ‘[imitates] nature’, and is not itself a natural action, but merely a substitute for biological parenting. Merbecke also specifies that his argument only applies to those who do not have children of their own, contradicting Goody’s contention that adoption was most taboo for those who did not already have biological heirs to inherit their assets.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, William Clerke, in *The Triall of Bastardie* (1594) echoes Merbecke’s assertion that adoption is a ‘bare imitation of nature’ with no claim to ‘legitimate issue’ and inheritance.⁵⁶ Unlike Merbecke, this ‘imitation’ completely undermines adoption and any claims to legitimacy or even cultural acceptability. Something these writers have in common is that they all, in one way or another, focus on inheritance; on what is passed down and the manner in which it may be passed down, whether through biological or surrogate bonds.

a. Matrilineal Inheritance in the Works of Anne Clifford

Motherhood, both biological and adoptive, poses a significant threat to these questions of inheritance. A large part of the anxiety surrounding both biological and surrogate motherhood is

⁵⁴ John Merbecke, ‘Adoption: How the Lawiers define adoption’ in *A booke of notes and commonplaces* (London, 1581), 15.

⁵⁵ Goody argues that ‘a man could not adopt a son and heir when he had none of his own’ as if he did, it was less likely he would leave his possessions to the Church. Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family*, 75.

⁵⁶ William Clerke, *The trail of bastardie* (London, 1594), 39.

rooted in these issues of both literal and figurative inheritance. While fostering is more concerned with figurative inheritance, adoption deals with literal inheritance – what is passed down between parent and child. As titles and lands were typically passed between male heirs, daughters were often eliminated from the process of inheritance as a result of primogeniture.⁵⁷ In a legal case from 1565, dealing with the inheritance ‘in the name of the Baynton’s’, records state that the family intended to ‘exclude all females from inheriting this land’ as men are ‘more reasonable’ and ‘more apt than woman in all government and direction’ (Spring, 21). As Eileen Spring writes, women of the upper-class, or ‘heiresses’, were perceived as risks who threatened to ‘divide estates’, ‘leave titles bare of land’, and ‘alter the name tags associated with estates’ (35). Inheritance was therefore complicated enough even when dealing with biological maternity. Lady Anne Clifford fought back against this masculine-dominated practice, fighting for the inheritance she believed to be legally and rightfully hers despite the resistance of her male relatives and the king. Clifford’s work, both her diaries and her *Great Books of Record* in which she details her family’s extensive history, demonstrate her efforts to take control of her inheritance and her family’s legacy. I turn here to a non-dramatic text to demonstrate the difficulty women faced in trying to legally claim anything of their own. To understand how the Countess’s active attempts to make Helena her own inheritor can be read as such a transgressive act, we must first consider how, historically, women found it almost impossible to inherit from the matrilineal side, and in turn to pass their own legacy down through non-patriarchal lines.

⁵⁷ It was not unheard of for women, specifically heiresses, to inherit prior to this period; sometimes ‘in the absence of male heirs in the same generation, [the daughter] was the only means of continuing the lineage’ and could inherit only if there were no sons. However, between 1540 and 1780 only 13% of inheritances went ‘either through or to women’, which Eileen Spring claims is a rate that is ‘little above what was biologically avoidable’. Eileen Spring, *Law, Land, & Family: Aristocratic Inheritance in England, 1300 to 1800* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 15.

As the only surviving child of George and Margaret Clifford, Anne expected to inherit her father's estates after his death despite her gender, but they passed instead to her uncle Francis.⁵⁸ Clifford respected both her parents, and, as we observe in her diaries, a part of her anger stemmed from the fact that she saw herself as her father's rightful heir. She was pleased that 'never was there child more equally resembling both father and mother than myself', as she recognises her identity in both her parents and sees herself as a balance of the two (*Diary*, 34). However, as Barbara Lewalski remarks, of the utmost importance to her character was her 'identification with her mother', based on notions of matrilineal inheritance.⁵⁹ In her *Great Books*, she acknowledges the 'essential contribution of women to the Clifford dynasty', putting a deliberate emphasis on her female ancestry.⁶⁰

Clifford very much controls the narrative of her lineage, as she meticulously orders and organises the documents she chooses to include in the *Great Books*. She thanks her 'religious and excellent mother with great industry and dignity' for helping her collect these documents relating to her family and her inheritance.⁶¹ Her mother likewise supported her daughter in her fight to gain control of the Clifford lands, and saw this right as granted, not from her forefathers, but from women: in 1608 she wrote a letter claiming that her daughter's right to the lands came from 'women, heretofore and now going to women again'.⁶² Clifford demonstrates her debt to her

⁵⁸ Inheritance under 'common law' decreed that lands passed to the eldest son, or, if families did not have a son, to the eldest daughter. However, there were ways around this, and in 1540 the passage of the 'Statute of Wills' allowed fathers to ignore common law rules of inheritance, and instead pass their lands onto 'collateral males'. Mary Chan and Nancy E. Wright, 'Marriage, Identity, and the Pursuit of Property in Seventeenth-Century England: The Cases of Anne Clifford and Elizabeth Wiseman' in *Women, Property, and the Letters of the Law in Early Modern England*, ed. by Nancy E. Wright, Margaret W. Ferguson, and A.R Buck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 162-182, (164).

⁵⁹ Barbara Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 133.

⁶⁰ Jessica Malay, 'Constructing a Narrative of Time and Place: Anne Clifford's *Great Books*', *The Review of English Studies* 66.277 (November 2015), 859-875, (871).

⁶¹ Anne Clifford, *Great Books of Record*, ed. by Jessica Malay (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 229.

⁶² Margaret Russell to Edward, Lord Kinloss, 11 December 1608. Longleat House, Portland Papers, PO/VOL.XXIII. ff 2-42.

female ancestors, and to her mother specifically; her mother's entry in her *Great Books* runs for eleven and a half folio pages and the heading proclaims 'A summary of the Records & also memorial of that Religious and blessed Lady, Margaret Russell [...] by whom she had their sole daughter & heir to the Lady Anne Clifford' (*Great Books*, 719). Her father, by contrast, receives only seven and a half pages, and his heading merely declares him to be the 'last heir male of the Clifford that was rightfully possessor of those ancient lands and honours' (709). Not only does Anne give her mother a longer entry, but she associates herself specifically with her mother, including herself as the 'sole daughter & heir', while disconnecting herself from her father in saying only that he was the '[rightful] possessor' of the inherited lands.⁶³ She effuses about her mother's moral virtues, calling her a woman who 'had more truth, justice, and constance in her heart and mynd then [sic] can be expressed by words', whereas she is more concerned with how her father validates her claims to the land (729). In her father's section, she even includes mention of both the jointure between the 'verteuous and blessed Lady Margarett Russell made to her by [...] the desire and consent of her husband', as well as two 'digressions' on Francis Clifford, her father's brother, and Henry Clifford, his son, describing how they came to inherit instead. In doing so, she dedicates space to further her own cause rather than exalt her father as she does her mother (656, 713).

Clifford expresses a similar debt to women, and especially her mother, in her diaries. She flew 'in the face of both public opinion and royal prerogative' in fighting even King James himself on the matter.⁶⁴ In January of 1617 she was called upon by the King, who was hoping to resolve the conflict. She recollects her meeting with him in her diary:

⁶³ Mihoko Suzuki, 'Anne Clifford and the Gendering of History', *Clio* 30.2 (February 2001), 195-229.

⁶⁴ Julia A. Eckerle and Michelle M. Dowd, eds. *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 67.

The King asked us all if we would submit to his Judgement in this case. My Uncle Cumberland, my Coz. Clifford, & my Coz. Clifford, & my Lord answered they would, but I would never agree to it without Westmoreland, to which the King grew in a great chaffe [...] (*Diary*, 47)

She refused to back down in the face of the King's admonishment, demonstrating persistence and stubbornness of a kind that women simply were not supposed to display in the early modern period, particularly not against their male superiors. While Clifford was doubtlessly an exceptional woman and her resistance has been appreciated by many scholars, her fight for her inheritance was not merely a fight for what was justly hers, but a fight to recognise the importance of her mother's legacy. Upon her mother's death, Clifford wanted her to be buried in the estate she was meant to inherit, and was devastated when she discovered her body would instead be 'carried away' rather than kept in the 'inheritance of [her] forefathers' (87). Not only that, but she took this as a 'sign that [she] should be disinherited' of the estates, and again, although her land comes from her 'forefathers', she feels if she is not able to ensure her mother's legacy, then she cannot claim the lands (87). Eventually, once she finally does gain access to the lands, it is indeed her mother who she memorialises with an alms-house, elaborate tomb, and 'the Countess's pillar'.⁶⁵ The symbolism behind her actions is clear; her mother, although she is not the legal successor, nor did she claim any titles of her own, provides the legacy that Anne Clifford hopes to pass on.

In her diary, which she kept for the better part of her life, Clifford continually emphasises not only her rightful claim to her inheritance, but the importance of a specifically matrilineal inheritance, and her desire to leave behind a legacy for her own daughter as her mother did for her. She holds great respect for her mother, from whom she '[sucked] the milk of goodness' and in

⁶⁵ The pillar was erected in 1656 on the spot where she and her mother saw each other for the last time. Paul Salzman, *Reading Early Modern Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 92 and English Heritage, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/countess-pillar-brougham/> [Accessed 1 October 2021].

whom she sees her own positive qualities reflected (*Diary*, 133). Once Clifford successfully gained the titles and lands she fought for, she writes:

[...] which humour of mine I do [wish] with all my heart (if it bee the Will of Almighty God) may be conferred on my posteritie that are to succeed me in these places, for a wife and Lady oneself [...] all which benefits have been bestowed upon mee for the heavenly goodness of my Deare Mother, whose fervent prayers were offered upp with greater zeale to Almighty God for mee and mine [...] (112)

She repeats almost the same sentiment in a later entry:

The numberousness of my posterity and all other Benefits whatsoever, I believe were bestowed upon mee for the Heavenly Goodnesse of my Deere Mother [...] (115)

Not only does Clifford wish to pass her hard-earned inheritance onto her own daughters, but although her right to these lands came from her father, it is her mother she thanks; she sees these ‘benefits’, of which her children, her ‘posterity’ is the major one, as coming, not from the paternal side, but from the maternal affection and ‘fervent prayers’ of her mother. It is this which she truly inherits, and which she in turn wishes to pass down.

Clifford sees not only these lands as her natural, God-given inheritance, but even more importantly, her offspring as well. For this, and for the issue of her own children, she too thanks her mother. She is thankful God made her child a ‘fruitful Mother, according to the prayers of my Blessed Mother’ (88). Clifford places great significance on her two daughters, and her grandchildren, seeing them as blessings from her mother as well as the perpetuation of the legacy her mother left behind. Even near the end of her life, she often mentions visits from her daughters and grandchildren, commenting on the great joy it brings her to see them in ‘any of the lands of myne [i]nheritance’ (121). Clifford’s fight for her inheritance demonstrates how difficult it was for a woman to pass inheritance via biological bonds, which will help shape how we read the struggle for non-biological transference in *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

b. *Non-Biological Matrilineal Inheritance in All's Well That Ends Well*

As Clifford's struggle establishes, women were not meant to inherit, nor were they meant to be the source of inheritance. Such bonds were tenuous enough between biological mothers and their children, and so inheritance between adoptive mothers and children would naturally have proven even more dangerous. In a society preoccupied with ensuring legitimacy, measures were taken to keep those with no blood relation out of wills and titles. As Patricia Crawford writes, it was a child's legal blood link with their father (through the appropriate bonds of marriage) that most affected their future, as illegitimate children were typically disavowed or bought off (*Blood, Bodies, and Families*, 131). In order to find such an example of a non-biological mother attempting to pass on inheritance, I will return to *All's Well That Ends Well*, a play overwhelmingly concerned with familial relationships and particularly focused on biological and non-biological parenthood and reproduction and, consequently, inheritance.

Although the play opens with strong images of biological maternity, after speaking to the Fool, who insists upon the importance of having biological children, and who claims he will 'never have the blessing of God' until he has a child of '[his] body', the Countess suggests that genetics are in fact not at all important in creating familial relationships (1.3.22-23).⁶⁶ She tells a Steward that Helena, as her adopted daughter, can now 'make title to as much love as she finds' and she will be 'paid' more than 'she'll demand' (1.3.104, 106). Suddenly, there is a noticeable shift, as not only does the Countess suggest she will love Helena as her own, but she indicates that Helena will be entitled to what the Countess has, inheriting not from familial lines, but from the love she bears for her adoptive daughter. This segues into her familiar dialogue with Helena:

COUNTESS:

You know, Helen, I am a mother to you.

⁶⁶ Erin Ellerbeck, 'Adoption and the Language of Horticulture in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 51.2 (2011), 305-226, (314-315).

[...]

COUNTESS:

Nay, a mother.

Why not a mother? When I said “a mother”

Me thought you saw a serpent. What’s in “mother”

That you start at it? I say I am your mother

And put you in the catalogue of those

That were embwombéd mine. ‘Tis often seen

Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds

A native slip to us from foreign seeds.

You ne’er oppressed me with a mother’s groan,

Yet I express to you a mother’s care.

God’s mercy, maiden, does it curd thy blood

To say I am thy mother? [...]

Why? That you are my daughter? (1.3.140-156)

The Countess’s speech has been analysed numerous times for its presentation of maternity, and Erin Ellerbeck specifically considers the Countess’s role as adoptive mother. She comments that ‘[t]he Countess’s own agency in her adoption of Helena is frequently overlooked in criticism’ (Ellerbeck, 307).⁶⁷ I agree with Ellerbeck’s contention that the Countess finds authority in adoption, and suggest she clearly understands the power of rhetoric in creating these familial bonds and relationships. She knows that by claiming she is Helena’s mother, and by putting her in ‘the catalogue’ of ‘those / [t]hat were embwombéd mine’ she essentially takes Helena as her own. Unlike in *Pericles*, the Countess does not believe a woman must give birth to a child to love it like a mother; she ‘[expresses] a mother’s care’, implying there is more to motherhood than biological reproduction, although she clearly understands its significance.

The Countess continues to insist upon the strong bond between herself and Helena, as she comments later in the play:

COUNTESS:

[...] If she had partaken

Of my flesh and cost me the dearest groans of a

Mother, I could not have owed her a more rooted

⁶⁷ Ellerbeck considers adoption and the language of grafting used throughout the play to argue that this language helps create a space for female power.

Love (4.5.10-13)

Here, the Countess calls upon the two traditional images of motherhood I have discussed: childbirth, ‘the dearest groans of a Mother’, and breastfeeding, which is, at the very least, heavily implied by the phrase ‘partaken of my flesh’. She does so, however, only to eliminate the distinction entirely; she neither gave birth to nor breastfed Helena, but she may still call herself Helena’s mother. While acknowledging the conventional ideals of motherhood that permeate discourse, she in turn dismisses them as effectively irrelevant.

The problem with the Countess as a mother arises because Helena, her would-be daughter, stubbornly and determinedly rejects the Countess’s motherly love, largely due to her own love for the Countess’s (biological) son Bertram. Ellerbeck notes that Helena ‘treats the adoptive bond seriously enough’ to worry about the consequences if she were truly the Countess’s daughter, and I believe her resistance has an even greater impact in that it reveals just how changeable and transferable maternity has the power to be (Ellerbeck, 316). Helena, despite her defiance, believes she would not be able to marry Bertram because they would be siblings, a bond that would be just as legitimate as if they were biologically related:

HELENA:

You are my mother, madam, would you were –
 So that my lord your son were not my brother –
 Indeed my mother! Or were you both our mothers,
 I care no more than I do for heaven,
 So I were not his sister. Can’t no other
 But I, your daughter, he must be my brother?

COUNTESS:

Yes, Helen, you might be my daughter in law.
 God shield you mean it not! “Daughter” and “mother”
 So strive upon your pulse (1.3.167-175)

Despite Helena’s protests, the Countess remains adamant, and we see here a stark subversion of the notion that the surrogate mother does not feel any love for her non-biological child. This makes

her an inherently dangerous figure, threatening to patriarchal assumptions that stressed the biological imperative of motherhood in that she offers Helena access to inheritance that was meant to be reserved only for biological offspring.

Helena rejects the Countess's offer to be 'paid' and granted higher standing through her maternal adoption because she believes her lower rank prevents her from marrying above her station. It is not that Helena's status cannot be elevated, it is that the Countess cannot be the source of that promotion, as that would make her an influential adoptive mother, even if that influence is seemingly positive. Instead, Helena uses the medical knowledge she has acquired from her biological father to heal the King of France and is so granted her choice of husband. The King in some ways mirrors the Countess, allowing Bertram into his court as a ward and telling him 'my son's no dearer' (1.2.76). Helena, however, does not need to resist his offer, because not only does he not share the Countess's relationship with Bertram, he is also a man, and King, and his power is therefore acceptable. When Helena selects Bertram to marry and he refuses due to her lack of title, the King scoffs and tells him he can easily 'build up' her rank (2.2.129). It is, after all, nothing more than a name, not who she truly is; she is 'young, wise, fair / [i]n these to nature, she's immediate heir / [a]nd these breed honour' (142-144). Like the Countess, the King connects his admiration for the girl to biology (she is 'immediate heir' to these virtuous qualities that 'breed honour'), while at the same time overriding it. His language is full of biological references as he rejects the need for a natural bond, and because Helena is free from the (surrogate) bonds of maternal nurture that connect her and the Countess, she is easily able to accept this patriarchally-enforced promotion of status. It is only when it is the Countess, and her assumption of maternity, that offers such an opportunity that it must be presented as dangerous, and so Shakespeare, as he does in *Pericles*, circles around the notion of corrupt non-biological motherhood, in this case

suggesting that such a woman may not have bad intentions, but must still be kept from influencing her surrogate child.

Much of criticism has emphasised Helena's denial of the Countess as mother due to her relationship with Bertram, but we can see there is more to her rejection; it is tied to anxieties over what Helena may inherit from a non-biological mother.⁶⁸ Shakespeare neatly settles this trouble through Helena's marriage to Bertram, so she indeed ends up as the Countess's daughter-in-law. It is only once she has married Bertram that she may call the Countess mother, as she does in Act Two, saying 'my mother greets me kindly' (2.3.1). The Countess even disavows Bertram upon discovering his desertion, claiming Helena as 'all [her] child', but her words no longer have the same consequence as they did prior to Bertram and Helena's union (71). While their marriage is dubious at best, what matters most is that it doubly adheres to patriarchal values. Not only does it avert the risk previously presented by the relationship between Helena and the Countess, but in a play that comes as close as possible to presenting a mother with no need for a husband/father figure, the man is here renegotiated into the family structure, ensuring the perpetuation of, not matriarchal, but patriarchal lineage. This is further demonstrated at the play's somewhat ambiguous conclusion, when Helena 'claims' Bertram through her pregnancy, and the safe continuation of the family line. *All's Well* affirms that what may be inherited must come from the male predecessor, and women do not have the power to pass on traits, social status or rank, particularly when they share no biological relationship with their would-be inheritor.

⁶⁸ Examples include Kathryn Schwarz, "My Intents Are Fix'd": Constant Will in "All's Well That Ends Well", David S. Berkeley and Donald Keese, 'Bertram's Blood Consciousness in *All's Well That Ends Well*', and David McCandless, 'Helena's Bed-trick: Gender and Performance in *All's Well That Ends Well*'. Janet Adelman's discussion of the play focuses rather on Bertram's rejection of Helena because of the closeness between her and his mother. The Countess's maternal power is 'extended' through an 'alliance of women' but its goal is to return Bertram to her at the play's conclusion, rather than to transfer any identity to Helena. Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Routledge, 1992), esp. 79-80. Critics often focus on the threat to patriarchy imparted by the relationships between women, but do not fully explore the implications of those relationships, particularly the one between Helena and the Countess.

c. Sapho and Phao *and the Transfer of Maternal Identity*

Building on these ideas, and to conclude this chapter, I now turn my attention to the play with which I began; one written some years before both *Pericles* and *All's Well*, but one that most coherently demonstrates the instability of the maternal role, and the potential power of the adoptive mother. John Lyly was famed for writing dramatic works which (not so subtly) alluded to the Queen, and as was true of many of his plays, *Sapho and Phao* (1584) was performed before Elizabeth and her court. Sapho is the unmarried queen of Syracuse, a peculiar position in early modern drama, but one made particularly pertinent by the contemporaneous rule of Elizabeth I. Largely overlooked in criticism, Sapho's position as a surrogate mother has drawn the attention of only a few scholars. Jacqueline Vanhoutte, in her article 'Elizabeth I as Stepmother' remarks that Lyly 'evokes the monstrous stepmother only to distance Sapho from her', but I would argue it is incorrect to label Sapho as a stepmother.⁶⁹ A stepmother, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, implies some sort of marriage (or at least union) between two partners, one of whom thus assumes responsibility for a child as a result. Sapho, crucially, does not marry; she stands alone as a single parent at the play's conclusion. While the distinctions are subtle, these nuances are essential to my argument; Sapho is not a stepmother – she is an adoptive mother, and Cupid her adopted son. This, I contend, makes her actions threatening in a very particular way.

Unlike the previous texts I have examined, *Sapho and Phao* completely breaks down the distinction between biological and surrogate mother, as Sapho knowingly and purposefully takes Cupid from Venus in a power play to enact revenge on the goddess. Venus herself is not portrayed as a particularly affectionate mother, threatening that her son will be 'whipped with nettles' for

⁶⁹ Jacqueline Vanhoutte, 'Elizabeth I as Stepmother,' *English Literary Renaissance* 39.2 (2009), 315-335, (334). See Chapter Two for more on Elizabeth I's use of metaphorical maternity during her reign.

disobeying her and hardly expressing the motherly care we have seen from biological mothers in other texts (5.2.75).⁷⁰ It is appropriate then, that Sapho uses Cupid, and the maternal role, as a weapon which not only grants her greater power but allows her to assume responsibility for Cupid. Maternity becomes a device that can be passed around, as Cupid, angry with his biological mother Venus, claims he could ‘be even with [his] mother’ if he were to ‘call [Sapho] mother’ instead:

CUPID:

I could be even with my mother, and so I will if I shall
Call you mother.

SAPHO: Yea Cupid, call me anything so I may be even with
Her (5.2.15-18)

In order to retaliate, Cupid suggests he call Sapho his mother, to which she easily agrees, although not seemingly out of any genuine maternal affection, but merely to achieve her own retribution. Not only will she become Cupid’s mother, but as she informs us, if she indeed ‘gets Cupid’ from Venus successfully, she will in turn become the ‘Queen of love’ (5.2.26-27). Thus, there is the strong insinuation that, in adopting Cupid, Sapho will also adopt Venus’s own qualities – in other words, she will literally become Cupid’s mother. The distinctions that have been maintained in other works are here broken down entirely and identity is vulnerable to transference between surrogate mother and child.

Indeed, Cupid declares that ‘[he] will be Sapho’s son’ and Sapho informs Venus that ‘Cupid is [hers]’ and that she is ‘not worthy’ of her position as ‘the lady to love’ (5.2.52-59). By calling Sapho his mother she embodies the role entirely; she has now become the so-called ‘Queen of love’ in a strange twist on inheritance. Rather than Cupid, the son, adopting the qualities of the mother (through biological lineage or nursing), it is the mother who adopts the qualities of both the son and the biological mother instead. Motherhood becomes a role that is indeed easily

⁷⁰ *Sappho and Phao*, ed. by David Bevington and George K. Hunter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999). Although Bevington spells Sappho with a double ‘P’, most productions utilise a singular ‘P’ spelling.

transferrable, that changes hand almost effortlessly, dependent upon nothing more than language: Sapho ‘calls’ Cupid her son, and so it becomes the reality.

The final image of Sapho is with Cupid perched on her knee, intentionally summoning recognisable images of nursing and maternal nurture. Once more the surrogate mother also becomes the nurse, but this time the image is an affectionate one. This contrasts with Venus, who curses Sapho by saying, ‘when I nursed thee, Sapho, with lettuce / [w]ould it have turned to hemlock!’ (4.2.10-11). Why exactly Venus would have nursed Sapho, and why she would have done so with lettuce, is unclear, but nonetheless Venus turns the conventionally nurturing image into something destructive, wishing it to have poisoned Sapho.⁷¹ Sapho becomes the positive maternal figure, nursing a child who is not hers while the biological mother wishes harm on not only the new mother, but on her own son, as she threatens Cupid with ‘[blowing] Vulcan’s coal’ for his betrayal (5.2.76).

Theodora Jankowski believes this ending tableau suggests that Sapho has gone from a relatively strong ‘detached and educated virgin’ queen to little more than a ‘comforting mother figure with her surrogate son’ and thus that she has in fact lost power by adopting Cupid.⁷² I disagree with this assessment, as it is precisely through Sapho’s adoption of Cupid that she in fact gains greater power; she has become not only the Queen of an earthly realm, but (at least rhetorically) she is now the ‘queen of love’ as well (5.2.27). She purposefully retains her hold on her human territory in Syracuse by refusing to hand power over to a man, instead sending her suitor Phao away to mourn her loss as she holds ‘Cupid in [her] arms’ instead (5.3.16). She refuses

⁷¹ There seems to be little obvious connection between lettuce and nursing or nurture: in his annotation, David Bevington references that Phao is described as hiding among ‘long lettuce’, and lettuce could also be considered an ‘anti-aphrodisiac’ as well as a nourishing food to ‘stir up appetite’, but none of these I think are fully sufficient to explain the term.

⁷² Theodora Jankowski, ‘The Subversion of Flattery: The Queen’s Body in John Lyly’s *Sapho and Phao*,’ *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 5 (1991), 69-86, (79).

to do the one thing that would most limit her power, and it therefore seems unlikely she would adopt Cupid if it also implied a similar loss of authority. Not only that, but she knowingly uses the mutability of the maternal role as a tool to achieve her goals; she does not adopt Cupid because she longs for a child, but because he is a convincing weapon against Venus. She is, thus, against all odds, both a powerful woman and a loving, nurturing adoptive mother.

It is important that we conclude this chapter by considering why *Sapho and Phao* allows for this transference of identity in a manner none of the other plays I analysed have done. Sapho is, of course, an exceptional character as she is not only a female ruler, but an unmarried one, and the connection to Elizabeth I is striking. She is an unmarried queen with no one to temper her power: although Venus forces her to fall in love with Phao, she ultimately rejects love and marriage for her title in the same way that Elizabeth became (in)famous for her own rejection of suitors. But unlike Elizabeth, Sapho comes to understand motherhood not as metaphor, but as literal; her rhetoric allows her to assume maternal responsibility while deliberately sending her potential husband and king away, ensuring she retains her power and forcing the assumption that she likely has no children of her own. She has rejected marriage, but not motherhood, and assumes responsibility for Cupid with absolutely no male involvement. Sapho, then, successfully undertakes a maternal role entirely of her own volition and achieves the transfer of identity that has thus far only been alluded to.

There are numerous reasons why Sapho may succeed where others have failed – we must recognise that Cupid is not a human child, but a God and as such perhaps does not adhere to the typical limitations placed upon mortal children. Sapho is not only an allusion to Queen Elizabeth, but she is also a classical figure and a remnant of a different age, allowing for a separation between character and audience that cannot exist in either *Pericles* or *All's Well*. I believe, however, that

the true meaning lies in the fact that *Sapho and Phao* was written specifically for the court of Elizabeth, so it is notable that Lyly chooses to end with a powerful unmarried queen, but one with a child. He seems to suggest both that Elizabeth should and should not marry, or acquire an heir without tying herself to a husband. The play was also presented to the public at the Blackfriars, so while Sapho may have been intended to represent an extraordinary woman, the characteristics she demonstrates are relevant and presentable to a more public audience (albeit an elite and well-off one).⁷³ What makes *Sapho and Phao* in particular so interesting is it offers us insight into both a political and cultural moment with regards to motherhood – while Lyly may have wanted to please (or criticise, if one agrees with Jankowski’s argument) Elizabeth through his portrayal of Sapho, he can also speak to the general public and reach a wider audience. The message he sends, then, to both queen and public, is that surrogate motherhood can successfully lead to transference of motherly affection, identity, and inheritance.

V. Conclusions

As I have demonstrated, these anxieties surrounding motherhood and female sexuality, already potentially disruptive forms of female identity in themselves, become even more contentious when we introduce these substitute mothers – the foster mother, the adoptive mother – who can, in a variety of ways, alter children over whom they have no ‘lawful’ claim. Fostering and adoption were two ways in which women could parody the maternal role: where they could both embody and resist its construction and, in the process, challenge the stability of motherhood as it is presented in conduct literature, et cetera. They perform a maternal function, yet they share no

⁷³ Different quartos of *Sapho and Phao* were alternatively given two different prologues, entitled ‘The Prologue at the Blackfriars’ and ‘The Prologue at Court’ but, as David Bevington discusses, there are no significant changes between these versions, and we can therefore assume what Elizabeth saw was what the public audience saw as well. David Bevington, ‘The First Edition of John Lyly’s “Sappho and Phao (1584)”’, *Studies in Bibliography* 42 (1989), 187-199, (198).

biological bond with their child, and that bond was meant to inextricably label the female body as mother. When we remove these readable signs, fears of instability of identity become abundant, anxieties over transference of both qualities and inheritance are disrupted and open to constant change and interpretation. While systems of patriarchal hierarchy were always present, when we take away the easily readable processes on which those hierarchies are built – childbirth, nursing – we trouble the inherent values that male-dominated society was dependent upon in upholding the status quo. Because these processes were not defined or systemised, they expose the mutability not only of motherhood, but of social standing, wealth, and identity in general. They grant control to women in an area that was fast becoming the site upon which to establish patriarchal dominance, and this tension increases substantially when played out on the stage, exposing relationships between parent and child as dramatic constructions.

All parent-child relationships performed within theatrical spaces are in some way inauthentic, or surrogate, as we are asked to image a connection that cannot truly exist. Actors portray parent and child, trying to convincingly act out the relationship with those to whom they share no biological relationship.⁷⁴ When the audience is then forced to imagine a non-biological familial relationship played in front of them, the lines between reality and fantasy, between what is natural and what is constructed, become even harder to distinguish. Drama presents us with the performances of familial bonds which demonstrate the performative nature of these bonds outside the confines of the theatre and leave identity open to transference.

At the same time, drama can also be a way in which these playwrights attempted to reinforce these norms and contain anxieties by ultimately eliminating, in some way, the threat posed by these

⁷⁴ Marianne Novy comments on the lack of similarity between actors who play parent and child, something I have already referred to. She asks, ‘is there a theatrical aspect to parenthood?’ and the answer must be yes, in both theatre and society, but theatre reveals these constructions in ways society cannot. Marianne Novy, ‘Multiple Parenting in *Pericles*’, 245.

alternative mother-figures. However, although oftentimes the threat is contained (with the notable exception of *Sapho and Phao*), the reinforcement of the status quo is, I believe, forever tainted by the mere presence of these alternative mothers who present the potential to destabilise traditional norms. It is evident that drama, always a product of its historical moment, also had a hand in shaping these understandings, while destabilising them and exposing the fractures that exist in ideological constructions of motherhood. While most texts, including drama, ultimately seek to affirm these essential notions of identity, they often inherently reveal the very instability they try to conceal. To suggest not only that markers of identity were mutable, but to connect surrogate motherhood with traditional images of biological maternity and inheritance, as these texts do, is to suggest there was a way in which women may be able to negotiate and gain control of their own maternal (or distinctly non-maternal) bodies. These works demonstrate that struggle, and in the process suggest maternity was (and still is) constructed not by biology, but by the discourse and performance that surrounds it. Bearing this in mind, in the following chapter I examine how we may see these anxieties reflected in the contemporary political discourse that surrounded Elizabeth I and the transition to the patriarchal James I on the English throne through the persona of the stepmother.

Chapter Two: ‘The slander of most stepmothers’: The Myth of the Manipulative and Amorous Stepmother in Early Modern England



Figure A: David Des Granges, *The Saltonstall Family* (c. 1636-1637)

I. Introduction

David Des Granges' painting of The Saltonstall family (Figure A) depicts Sir Richard Saltonstall and his two wives; Elizabeth Basse, lying in the bed, was his first wife who died in 1630, and the woman sitting in the chair he married after her death. Obviously, this is an imagined scenario which condenses time, as Des Granges' work represents a temporally-distorted blended family in early modern England. Given the high mortality rates of the time, it was extremely common that a man or woman would remarry, and that their children would find themselves with a stepmother or stepfather. The painting shows Richard linking hands with the children of his first marriage, their mother lying in bed and reaching out to them, while their stepmother sits with her own biological child, spatially demonstrating the estrangement that was often depicted between a

stepmother and her stepchildren. It is this estrangement and the culturally constructed coldness of the stepmother I wish to interrogate in this chapter.

Foster and adoptive mothers performed a type of surrogate maternity that permeated early modern English society, but which was often pointedly undermined within conduct literature and advice books. It was this absence which I found particularly intriguing, and which I explored in my first chapter. In this second chapter, I explore how stepmothers, by contrast, permeate contemporary discourse and become central to a range of cultural representations of the family. These women served a specific maternal function within what we might today term a ‘blended’ family. Their centrality as mothers was dependent upon the notion of the family as culturally constructed, but they were also expected to behave in a way which enabled such households to maintain a sense of their propriety - in fact, they were key to the assertion that those families were no different than those that were entirely biological. This paradox is one early modern society continuously negotiated, and it warrants further examination to expose the ways in which these figures troubled, but also constituted, not just maternity and the family, but the public structures upon which early modern England was built.

The stepmother represents a distinct type of non-biological motherhood. Stepmothers may share similarities with the foster and adoptive mothers discussed in my first chapter, but they can be defined in contrast to those other maternal figures in significant ways. The OED defines a stepmother as ‘a woman who has married one’s father after one’s mother’s death or divorce’ – in the context of the early modern period, this was far more likely to be the result of the death of the mother, rather than divorce.¹ Step-parenting necessarily indicates a marital union between two

¹ ‘stepmother, *n.*1.a’. *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

It was uncommon for couples to be granted a divorce in early modern England, as marriage was meant to be a permanent union. Lawrence Stone argued that following the Reformation up until the Restoration, it was almost impossible to break the bonds of marriage. It is true that by the late sixteenth-century, England was the only

people, whereas fostering or adoption can be undertaken at the discretion of one person, including one that may be unmarried. A foster or adoptive mother may, in theory, act alone and of her own volition (although in reality their power was, as I have explored, quite restricted). A stepmother's relationship with their stepchild(ren), by contrast, is predicated on her marriage to a man with children from a previous marriage.² It is, therefore, a role that works to preserve the familial unit and stepmothers are those who explicitly work from inside the domestic space they inhabit. This, I want to suggest, creates a certain obligation that was not present in the types of parenting I explored in Chapter One. When we introduce a bond that is both legitimate and not, in some ways naturalised but also recognised as artificial, what happens to the construction of maternity?

As with other types of non-traditional maternity in early modern England, stepmothers have not been a common topic of discussion for historians or literary critics, however, there has been some important scholarship on the subject. Many discussions of stepmotherhood have centred around Queen Elizabeth I's construction of maternity, and her connection to the rhetoric of surrogate maternity, and specifically that of the stepmother. These works include Lena Orlin's

Protestant country without some 'form of legalised divorce'. There were various reasons for this, including the shaky ground onto which England converted to Protestantism following Henry VIII's own long-sought divorce from Katherine of Aragon, and Elizabeth I's contentious relationship with marriage. However later critics have disagreed with Stone over the exact 'contours' of marriage law and practice. Tim Stretton notes that the 'best most spouses could hope for was a separation' which would allow them to live separately but neither could remarry while the other was still alive. Lawrence Stone, *Road to divorce: England 1530-1987* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 301, 305 and Tim Stretton, 'Marriage, separation and the common law in England, 1540-1660' in *The Family in Early Modern England* ed. by Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18-49, (20).

Mortality rates in early modern England were dependent upon geographic and economic factors, and the exact rates can never be known due to poor record keeping. There was always danger in childbirth and so women were at particular risk of early death; the maternal mortality rate in the 1600s was around one percent. In a record of sixteen English parishes between 1550 and 1559, Roger Schofield estimates there were about eight deaths for every thousand births; this rises to around ten between 1600-1644. While this may not seem as significant as one might expect, it does indicate that maternal mortality was always a concern. Many children were likely to face the loss of at least one parent, as average life expectancy varied between the late twenties and late forties. Illana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 48 and Roger Schofield, 'Did the Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality' in "The World We Have Lost" in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. by Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 231-260, (248).

chapter on ‘The Fictional Families of Elizabeth I’ (1995) and, most recently, Jacqueline Vanhoutte’s ‘Elizabeth I as Stepmother’ (2009).³ These scholars discuss the ways in which Elizabeth used rhetorical motherhood as a weapon against those who insisted she marry, but how it similarly became a tool used against her in an attempt to delegitimise her rule.

Less has been written on the nature of ‘ordinary’ stepfamilies, and virtually nothing on stepmothers specifically. Stephen Collins’ article “‘Reason, nature, and order’: The stepfamily in English Renaissance thought’ (1999) is the most comprehensive account of how stepfamilies might have functioned during this period. As a cultural historian, he puts forward the argument that stepparents complicated issues of the family and threatened ‘the relationship between the private domain and the wider social order’.⁴ When he discusses stepmothers specifically, he notes the two different portrayals in discourse I explore shortly, but does not interrogate these categorisations in a way which I think is necessary. Collins makes the link between the fear of the stepparent and anxieties over the disposal of inheritance that will form a large part of my own argument, and his study of this historical context is essential, as it enables me to analyse the fictionalised stepmother on the early modern stage.

Most recently, Lyndan Warner’s edited collection, published in 2018, entitled *Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400-1800* includes a chapter on ‘Stepmothers at law in early modern England’. Stretton’s chapter is one of the only studies that focuses on stepmothers specifically, again taking an historical as opposed to a literary approach. He utilises sources such as court proceedings and legal records

³ Lena Orlin, ‘The Fictional Families of Elizabeth I’ in *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women*, ed. by Carole Levin (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 85-122 and Jacqueline Vanhoutte, ‘Elizabeth I as Stepmother’, *English Literary Renaissance* 39.2 (2009), 315-335. See also, Christine Coch, “‘Mother of my Country’: Elizabeth I and Tudor Constructions of Motherhood’ in *The Mysteries of Elizabeth I: Selections from the English Literary Renaissance*, ed. by Kathleen Swaim and Kirby Farrell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 134-161.

⁴ Stephen Collins, ‘Reason, nature and order’: The stepfamily in English Renaissance thought’, *Renaissance Studies* 13.3 (1999), 312-324, (313).

to examine the prejudice against stepmothers, despite the fact there was relatively little space for stepmothers to exert influence over wealth and inheritance.⁵ These scholars have made the point that there is a disconnection between the reality of stepmothers and how they were actually portrayed; they do not, however, fully examine this disconnection, nor do they consider it with respect to the portrayal of the stepmother in early modern drama. I believe there is much to be gained from an in-depth analysis of how the stepmother is depicted in the drama of the time, to – along with the surrogate mothers of the first chapter – demonstrate how these non-biological mothers were constructed as threatening, not because they were inherently so, but because they elicited fears that their influence could transcend far beyond the domestic home and parody the maternal role.

In this chapter, I first explore the stepmother in the classical imagination of Ancient Greece and Rome to place the figure of the early modern stepmother in its historical and cultural context, specifically examining the two narratives of the ‘manipulative’ and ‘amorous’ stepmother. I then turn my attention to the early modern period, considering how dramatic works during this time subverted and nuanced these narratives. To begin my discussion of stepmothers in early modern England, I first consider their portrayal under Queen Elizabeth: I argue that Dido in Christopher Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage* is connected to Elizabeth through her position as an ‘almost’ stepmother who both embodies and yet does not fully adopt the qualities expected of a stereotypical stepmother. I consider Elizabeth’s own use of maternal rhetoric, and analyse Dido alongside Elizabeth to reveal the ways in which both unmarried rulers are victims of a cultural fear

⁵ Tim Stretton, ‘Stepmothers at law in early modern England’ in *Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400-1800*, ed. by Lyndan Warner (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 91-108, (94). Stretton notes it was easier for stepfathers to influence the ‘lives and property’ of stepchildren, but it is the stepmother who is frequently vilified. Stephen Collins disagrees with this assertion, as he claims the stepmother could persuade her husband to disinherit the children of his first marriage (‘Reason, nature and order’, 322).

of women who try to exist in both the domestic and political worlds. Then, after analysing how portrayals of stepmothers were reflected in the cultural stereotypes which surrounded them, I examine incest as a context for the depiction of the stepmother's transgressive sexuality, which is another indicator of the dangers they present. I look at Thomas Hughes' *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, another Elizabethan drama, to consider the implications of Elizabeth's own immersion in incest narratives.

I then turn to her successor, King James, and interrogate how the representation of stepmothers changed in the shift from a female to a male monarch; looking first at the amorous stepmother under James, in *The Atheist's Tragedy*, *Cupid's Revenge*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* and how these different women all use their sexuality as tools of manipulation in public affairs. In the final section, I finally ask what made a 'good' stepmother during this time and, indeed, whether such a thing was even possible, through an examination of Heywood and Rowley's *Fortune by Land and Sea*. I end the chapter by suggesting that all stepmothers were surrounded by the anxieties raised by transgressive women exerting both domestic and political power, by considering Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and the manipulative Queen. All these portrayals create a more complex narrative of the stepmother, beyond just the amorous and manipulative, and reveal how their negative portrayals are connected to the anxieties they raise over their influence in domestic and political issues.

II. The Wicked Stepmother in the Classical Tradition

The stepmother was a prominent figure in classical Greek and Roman drama and society, and much of the so-called 'wicked stepmother' stereotype that infiltrates the twenty-first century popular imagination can be traced back to these classical worlds. Early modern culture was

influenced by stereotypes and traditions inherited from the classical period, and the tropes of the amorous and manipulative stepmother do not suddenly emerge during the early modern period, but have their roots in classical discourse. Crucially, I suggest early modern constructions of the stepmother are significantly complicated, negotiated, and most importantly, subverted from their classical archetypes to reflect concerns unique to the time.

a. Stepmothers in Greek Mythology, Drama, and Society

Stepmothers were common in the Greek imagination, featuring in at least twenty-one myths, all of which presented stepchildren being mistreated by these usually villainous figures. In her book *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality*, Patricia A. Watson skilfully traces the depictions of stepmothers in ancient works, considering how these archetypes may have arisen, and whether they had any basis in the reality of step-relationships. Watson notes that there were typically two key ‘archetypes’ found in myth; two categories stepmothers could be separated into, which were defined by the varying motivations of their behaviour. It is these two categories I will comment upon in this section: the woman who mistreats her stepchildren (usually a stepson) due to jealousy (the manipulative stepmother), and the woman who lusts after her stepson, which Watson terms the ‘amorous’ stepmother.⁶

These two so-called archetypes have shaped and defined the narratives that have surrounded stepmothers in both culture and literature for years. While I am going to push back against these critical archetypes and argue that they limit how we have read a stepmother’s role, understanding these stereotypes is crucial to understanding how ideas of the stepmother have been

⁶ Watson’s book is split into sections on Ancient Greece and Rome, and further into chapters on drama vs. society. While I will only provide a brief overview, for a full examination of stepmothers in the classical world, see her work. Patricia Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality* (Leiden, New York, Colm: E.J Brill, 1995).

presented in line with cultural anxieties. In subsequently breaking down these stereotypes, we can see how they are responses to the anxieties which they generate.

The first type of stepmother, who I refer to throughout this chapter as the ‘manipulative’ stepmother, was the more culturally prevalent of the two.⁷ This stepmother typically manipulates her husband and stepchild(ren) out of jealousy over the fact that they (usually he) will inherit the husband/father’s wealth and/or title instead of her own biological child. This manipulation often turns malicious, with a stepmother attempting to harm, or even kill, her stepchild. Perhaps the most well-known example of such a figure who appears in Greek mythology is Medea, who plots against her stepson Theseus to ensure that her husband Aegeus’s kingdom will pass to her biological son. She was, like many stepmothers, motivated by a desire to see her own biological child recognised as the true heir of the father.

Medea was famously depicted in Euripides’ drama of the same name, although he does not tell the story of Medea as a stepmother, but rather of her marriage to Jason and subsequent murder of her own, biological children from that marriage. However, critics have argued that Medea’s role as stepmother is nonetheless present throughout the text, as Jason – at least symbolically – casts Medea as a stepmother to her own children when he deserts her and marries another woman.⁸ She then constructs herself as one; in order for Medea to summon the ability to kill her children, she has to separate herself from them, and separate them from herself, to view them as stepchildren rather than her biological offspring. Euripides must cover her with the shadow of a stepmother, as this is the only way an audience can imagine such extreme action of mother against child. This

⁷ I have chosen to use the term ‘manipulative’ as I believe it best encompasses both the actions and motivations of this type of stepmother; see the OED definition, ‘[e]xercising control or influence over others, esp. in a malign, devious, or underhand way.’ ‘manipulative, adj. and n., *A.adj.2*’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

⁸ Pavlos Sfyroeras discusses Medea’s role as stepmother in *Medea*, arguing that Aegeus’s appearance alludes to her role as a stepmother, and through his marriage to the Corinth princess, Jason effectively turns Medea into the stepmother of her own children. Pavlos Sfyroeras, ‘The Ironies of Salvation: The Aigeus Scene in Euripides’ *Medea*’, *The Classical Journal* 90.2 (Dec 1994-Jan 1995), 125-142.

precedes, and foreshadows, her future marriage to Aegeus and her plot against her actual stepson, Theseus. In a fragment from Euripides' lost play *Aegeus* (in which he seemingly told the story of Medea as actual stepmother), she declares:

For it is only natural that a woman will be hostile to the children
of the first marriage bed, when she is the second wife of their father⁹

There is a sense of inevitability here, a feeling that it is only 'natural' a woman will resent her stepchildren, due to jealousy or fear that they will be preferred to her own children. This is a trend that pervades classical portrayals of stepmothers; the notion that stepmothers cannot help but hate and plot against their stepchildren, that it is something embedded in the role itself.

Another example of such a stepmother is Ino, who similarly schemes against her stepchildren in most accounts of the myth that she appears in.¹⁰ In these versions, her stepchildren, Phrixus and Helle, are appropriately saved from her conspiracy by their biological mother. In her chapter on filicide in tragic drama, Fiona McHardy makes the point that in all the different adaptations of the Ino myth, problems arise when a man remarries, as a result of 'jealousy and insecurity over whose children are being favoured' (McHardy, 135). Myths were intended to send specific messages, and that of Ino serves as a warning about the dangers of giving children a stepmother. Like Medea, Ino hates her stepchildren because they threaten the inheritance of her biological children. There is an inherent jealousy that emerges within women in Greek mythology when they become stepmothers. This is even more apparent in the story of Creusa, who abandons her son Ion, and later, once her husband finds him and brings him home, believes he is his child by another woman – and therefore

⁹ Euripides, *Aegeus*. Quoted in Fiona McHardy, 'From Treacherous Wives to Murderous Mothers: Filicide in Tragic Fragments' in *Lost Dramas of Classical Athens: Greek Tragic Fragments*, ed. by James Robson and David Harvey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 129-150, (131).

¹⁰ Ino likely appeared as a stepmother in Euripides' *Phraxis A* and *Phraxis B*, as well as Sophocles' *Athamas*. However, in Euripides' *Ino*, she is in fact the first wife; there is still a wicked stepmother in the character of Themisto. Fiona McHardy, 'From Treacherous Wives to Murderous Mothers', 132.

a stepson to her – and immediately attempts to kill him. Once she realises her mistake, she no longer wishes harm to him, as their true biological connection is revealed. It is only the (mistaken) belief they share no biological relationship, but that he is the son of her husband by another woman, that drives her to plot against him. These Greek myths certainly seem to suggest that a stepmother will naturally and inherently dislike her stepchildren and will often actively scheme against them as a result.

The second equally dangerous stereotype is that of the ‘amorous’ stepmother, a term used by Watson which I also utilise in this chapter.¹¹ The ‘amorous’ stepmother is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the manipulative one; instead of not loving her stepchild at all, she loves him too much, longing to sleep with him and enact her illicit physical desire. Through this desire, these stepmothers provoke similar fears as the manipulative over a woman’s ability to use both her sexuality and rhetoric as tools of manipulation. Phaedra stands as the infamous example of this type: in all variations of the myth, she desires to sleep with her stepson Hippolytus. While the details of the myth differ between versions, he generally rejects her advances, she accuses him of rape and his father, Theseus (who, interestingly, was plotted against by his own stepmother, Medea) kills him. Phaedra, overcome with guilt, admits the truth and kills herself. While her desire is never acted upon, but in fact openly rejected, it is the mere possibility and potential that makes Phaedra such a dangerous figure.

Euripides narrates the story of Phaedra in his drama *Hippolytus*. Interestingly, while he portrays Phaedra as clearly in the wrong in her desire for her stepson, she is given a certain complexity that counteracts the notion that these figures are always one-dimensional and wholly

¹¹ ‘Amorous’ can connote feelings related to both romantic love and sexual desire, but I utilise the term as it is associated with lasciviousness; from the OED, ‘of a person: devoted to or preoccupied by love, sex, or flirtation [...] lascivious, promiscuous’. ‘amorous, *adj*, 1.b’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

immoral. Phaedra is not without remorse and even a degree of sympathy; she recognises that her love for Hippolytus is wrong and tries to cure herself of it. At the beginning of the drama, she aggressively tries to deny it, claiming:

My friends, it is this very purpose that is bringing about my death,
that I may not be convicted of bringing shame to my husband or to
the children I gave birth to (lines 414-416)¹²

Not only does she try and control her passion, but she does so for the honour of both her husband and her biological children; she tries to be a ‘good’ and honourable wife and mother. It is only once her Nurse persuades her that, as a woman, she has no ‘self-control’ and must satisfy her sexual desires that she ultimately succumbs (493). Mairéad McAuley argues that because Phaedra is portrayed in this relatively sympathetic light, she is never actually referred to in the play as a stepmother.¹³ Unlike Medea, her role as a stepmother goes unmentioned so that we may read her as a victim rather than a villain.

Watson compares these representations to what is known about the real-life situation of stepmothers in classical Athenian society. While it is probable that stepmothers may have coveted their husband’s wealth for their own biological children, it seems unlikely these desires led to action, and especially to anything as extreme as homicide (Watson, 54). As Watson demonstrates, there was little incentive for a woman to manipulate her husband or plot against her stepchildren during this time, despite what fictionalised stepmothers might lead us to believe, because in the Greek world, there was still no concept of primogeniture, and so inheritance would have been shared equally between all male offspring, regardless of the identity of their mother (59). It therefore seems highly implausible that the ancient Greeks would have had extensive experience

¹² Euripides, *Hippolytus* in *Children of Heracles. Hippolytus. Andromache. Hecuba*, ed. and trans. by David Kovacs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 438-459.

¹³ Mairéad McAuley, *Reproducing Rome: Motherhood in Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 92.

with either manipulative or ‘amorous’ stepmothers, and certainly not enough to justify their frequent presence in myth and drama.

These examples, nonetheless, still provide a narrative framework for the extreme behaviour utilised by dramatists who portrayed wicked stepmothers. That they were such prominent figures in fiction speaks, not to reality, but to the anxieties and fears they conveyed, largely with regards to female sexuality. That so many of these stepmothers manifested as figures who wanted to disrupt traditional lines of inheritance begins to inform us how women were used as culturally constructed representations of these distinctly patriarchal concerns. This fear was then built upon and further solidified in Ancient Roman literature.

b. The Stepmother Trope in Roman Drama and Society

Like the Greeks that preceded them, Roman culture was particularly concerned with stepmothers, and had its own tradition of constructing them through literature and drama. As Mairéad McAuley comments, the stepmother was an ‘animating source of unease in the Roman cultural imagination’ and this was reflected in its ‘insistent popularity’ in declamation and literature (McAuley, 229). Stepmothers appear frequently (at least twenty-one times) in the Roman declamatory collections, where she becomes a stock character, representative of a ‘type’ rather than of an individual (93). While stepmothers were abundant in Ancient Greece, it is in Ancient Rome that they begin to develop as a recognisable trope; rather than featuring as specific characters, there are more often simple references to stepmothers as figures of suspicion.

The Roman stepmother was referred to as a *nouerca*, which connotes a ‘newcomer’, or ‘interloper’, so even the name itself suggests someone who is interfering, who does not quite

belong, working to separate them from any sense of maternal affection.¹⁴ While some Roman writers took inspiration from the evil stepmothers of Greek myth, they also forged their own tradition, perhaps inspired by real-life stepmothers who were in the public eye.¹⁵ As Michael J. G. Gray-Fow writes, the Romans did not invent the trope of the wicked stepmother, but ‘they played an important part in ensuring its transmission’ (Gray-Fow, 757).

Stepmothers were mentioned in Roman literature fairly frequently, and these references – like those of the Greeks – made certain assumptions about their behaviour and characteristics. Virgil and Horace make unsympathetic references to stepmothers, while Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* features characters taken from Greek myth, including Medea, who again attempts to poison her stepson Theseus, inspiring portrayals of Phaedra as a wicked stepmother.¹⁶ In Book Seven, Ovid describes how Medea ‘prepared a mixture of poisonous aconite’ which she had brought from ‘the coast of Scythia’.¹⁷ Medea, as a stepmother, is othered through both her lack of maternal nurture for her stepchild, as well as her attachment to the ‘foreign’.

The amorous stepmother was similarly present in the Roman popular imagination – the Empress Fausta was accused of making sexual advances on her stepson, and the Phaedra myth carried over from the Ancient Greeks (748). Seneca retells the story in his drama *Phaedra*, and he similarly comments upon the troubling nature of her character, as both woman and stepmother. However, whereas Euripides’ Phaedra is granted a certain amount of sympathy and therefore her

¹⁴ Michael J.G Gray-Fow, ‘The Wicked Stepmother in Roman Literature and History: an Evaluation’, *Latomus* 47.4 (October-December 1988), 741-757, (741).

¹⁵ While I will not discuss them in-depth, there were numerous stepmothers involved in public life in ancient Rome, three of the most recognised being Livia, Agrippina, and Octavia. Livia is portrayed as a scheming stepmother, while Octavia is the rare ‘virtuous’ stepmother. It is unclear if there is any truth to these portrayals, or if they were influenced by authorial and cultural bias. For more, see Watson’s chapter ‘Historical Figures: Livia, Agrippina and Octavia’.

¹⁶ Virgil’s Third Eclogue mentions ‘a father at home, and a harsh stepmother’ (line 32) while Horace’s 5th Epode asks, ‘why are you looking at me like a stepmother?’.

¹⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI.404-424 in *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*, ed. by David Raeburn (London: Penguin Classics, 2004).

role as stepmother is largely ignored, Seneca's Phaedra, by contrast, fits the cultural stereotype and is therefore referred to as a stepmother ('noverca') several times. Unlike Euripides' character, Seneca's Phaedra opens the drama by declaring her love for Hippolytus; although she recognises her mother's 'fateful evil' in her, as a desiring stepmother, she cannot help her passions (line 110).¹⁸ She dramatically declares:

[...] to cap my theme:
Love-care conquers stepmother's cruelty (lines 356-357)

Watson notes that the 'love' which Phaedra describes is not the 'selfless maternal kind' commonly associated with biological maternity, but a shameless 'sexual passion' that makes her not only adulterous, but according to Roman law, incestuous (Watson, 17). When a stepmother describes the 'love' she bears for her stepson, she usually refers to an emotion more akin to lust. Phaedra vocalises the two extreme emotions that a stepmother may experience – the supposed 'love' (that really is not love at all) and the 'cruelty' of the stepmother who plots against their stepchildren, suggesting there can be no in-between. If a woman goes beyond the general, inherent cruelty, the assumption seems to be she will automatically swing to the opposite end of the spectrum.

Phaedra, as the amorous stepmother, is particularly dangerous because she can reveal just how unstable the maternal role is and always has been. When Hippolytus refers to Phaedra as his 'mother', she instructs him to call her by a 'humbler' name, such as sister, indicating the relationship between brother and sister would be less scandalous than that between stepmother and stepson (lines 609-612). Any relationship between surrogate family members would have been considered, even during the classical period, as incestuous. It was believed that when man and woman married, they became one flesh, and so too did any children of the father from his previous

¹⁸ Seneca the Younger, *Phaedra*, in *Tragedies, Volume I (Hercules. Trojan Women. Phoenician Women. Medea. Phaedra)*, ed. and trans. by John G. Fitch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 416-523.

marriage.¹⁹ By reading a potential relationship between stepmother and stepson as incestuous, we can see how stepmothers explicitly challenged the primacy of biological familial relationships in a way only this particular figure would have been able to.²⁰ The theoretical relationship between stepmother and stepson was always covered in incestuous implications because the stepmother was a figure that generated such pervasive anxieties about the stability of patriarchal structures.

These negative perceptions were not reflected in Greek or Roman society, where stepmothers were plentiful but rarely openly malicious.²¹ While a stepmother may have, to some extent, resented her stepchildren, it was unlikely that this resentment would have translated into extreme action, and there are very few proven cases of a stepmother seeking to harm her stepchild. As Watson writes, myth is a ‘polarisation of reality’ rather than a direct reflection of it (Watson, 71). These portrayals, rather than displaying any authenticity, instead embody fears and anxieties about female agency which are foundational in a patriarchally dominated culture. They create the basis for stepmothers as a trope, a reflection of patriarchal concerns surrounding motherhood, and specifically, as I explore, a woman’s ability to disrupt the family and familial lines/inheritance.

Greek and Roman society constructs stepmothers as inherently contradictory; they are unable to love their stepchildren as their own at the same time as they are expected to do exactly that. If a stepmother does not love her stepchild, then she is likely to plot against them and disrupt

¹⁹ Thomas Becon, in *The Book of Matrimony* (London, 1564) writes of stepmothers, ‘remember that they [stepchildren] are thine own husband’s natural flesh and blood, and that it is an unnatural thing to hate them which on thy husband’s behalf pertain partly to thine own body, and are thine own’ (sig. 61v).

²⁰ Stepfathers, by contrast, are rarely ever depicted, and certainly not with the same negative connotations of either manipulation or inappropriate sexual relationships attached. Rather, they were often portrayed as victims of wicked, scheming women; an old English proverb claimed ‘he that marries a widow and three children, marries four thieves’. Stephen Collins, ‘Reason, nature and order’, 321.

²¹ Although we do not have much information about ‘ordinary’ stepmothers, Michael J.G. Gray-Fow believes there are ‘very few clear and certain examples’ of stepmothers who demonstrated the kind of ‘murderous ferocity that is assumed as typical in Roman literature’. We have some records of tense relationships between stepmother and stepchild, usually related to issues of inheritance; stepmothers were accused of forging wills or stealing estates which belonged to their stepchildren, but the villainous nature of their character is not observed. Michael J.G. Gray-Fow, ‘The Wicked Stepmother in Roman Literature and History’, 747, and David Noy, ‘Wicked Stepmothers in Roman Society and Imagination’, 353.

traditional lines of inheritance, and yet, if she does love them, there is the risk that she may try and sleep with them and perpetuate an incestuous relationship, using her sexuality as a tool of manipulation. Both ‘types’, therefore, reveal an unstable foundation and a specific area in which a woman could interrupt patriarchal structures. The contradiction the stepmother reveals is crucial to understanding how they functioned and why they were so often vilified in early modern society. The fact that they are presented as unable to either truly love or dislike their stepchildren implies the role itself is always constructed as inherently disruptive because society needed it to be.

From this brief analysis, we can gather that the overwhelming belief in classical literature was that stepmothers would inherently not love their stepchildren because there was something fundamental in the role that prevented it. As I will explore, this was not something that carried over entirely into early modern English discourse, and yet, the amorous and the manipulative stepmother stereotypes are still pervasive in the drama and literature of the medieval and early modern periods.²² William of Malmesbury, for example, writes in his history *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (c. 12th century) of Queen Aelfthryth, who like so many of the stepmothers of the classical period, is ‘willing to murder her stepson in order to promote her own flesh and blood to the English throne’.²³ He writes that she behaved ‘with a stepmother’s hatred and a viper’s guile,

²² Many of these classical texts were translated into English, although there is the prevailing belief that the influence of Roman drama was more pronounced. However, although it is still relatively unacknowledged, translations of Greek playwrights were prevalent in early modern England. Tanya Pollard has argued that although the ‘English engagement with Greek texts’ was not as common as it was in Continental Europe, there was still a market for them. However, translations were less common, and so those who read the works in their original Greek were likely to be well-educated. There was certainly renewed interest in Seneca’s work beginning in 1559, and during the 1560s authors translated nine of his works into English. *Phaedra* was translated by John Studley in 1567 and renamed *Hippolytus*. In focusing on the stepson instead, this translation is perhaps intended to remind the reader that it is Hippolytus who is the true tragic figure of the drama, and not Phaedra. For more on the translation and dissemination of Greek texts, see Tanya Pollard, ‘Greek playbooks and dramatic forms in early modern England’ in *Formal Matters: Reading the Materials of English Renaissance Literature*, ed. by Alison K. Deutermann and András Kiséry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 99-123. For Seneca specifically, see Jessica Winston, ‘Seneca in Early Elizabethan England’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 59.1 (Spring 2006), 29-59.

²³ Kirsten A. Fenton, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the Works of William of Malmesbury* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 127.

in her anxiety that her son should also enjoy the title, laid plots against her stepson's life', once again portraying a stepmother as a woman who schemes against her stepson and in doing so interferes in the succession.²⁴ In her machinations, she distracts her stepson with a 'kiss of welcome', utilising her sexuality in order to get what she wants (Malmesbury, 266). Guerric of Igny in his *Liturgical Sermons* suggests that Eve herself could not have been a mother but rather a 'stepmother' as she gave her children nothing but an 'inheritance of certain death'.²⁵ This is despite what Miriam Müller calls the 'widespread acceptance of stepmothers' and suggests that similar motivations to those we see in the classical world are in operation in the medieval period; medieval texts which reference stepmothers continue to emphasise the disconnect between fiction and reality.²⁶

It is this disconnection I will interrogate further by turning my attention to early modern English dramatic works which feature stepmothers that to some extent affirm these tropes, but who also subvert and question these traditional narratives. The classical tradition was repurposed during the Renaissance to suit the political and cultural context of the time; writers used the figure of the stepmother to invoke a literary inheritance which enabled them to comment upon growing pervasive fears about the corruption of family and state. I turn now to these portrayals of the stepmother in early modern England, to consider how they use these traditions and respond to them in ways that reflect the unique conditions of the time to create a more nuanced, complex figure.

²⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, Vol. 1, ed. by R.A.B Mynors, R.M Thomson, and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 266.

²⁵ Guerric of Igny, *Liturgical Sermons* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 2:168. For more on motherhood in the medieval period, see Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1991).

²⁶ Miriam Müller, *Childhood, Orphans and Underage Heirs in Medieval Rural England: Growing Up in the Village* (Basel: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 140.

III. Neither a Mother nor A Stepmother: The (Rhetorical) Maternity of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* and Elizabeth I

a. Dido, Queen of Carthage and the 'Almost' Stepmother

I begin my discussion of the stepmother in the early modern period by considering a dramatic character who does not fully embody the role at all: the titular character of Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (1588). While this may seem an odd choice, it is productive to discuss Dido as what I term an 'almost stepmother', as her desire to take on the role is, I suggest, an integral part of her character, and one which enables us to begin to observe the nuanced portrayal of stepmothers in early modern drama. Dido does not simply wish to be Aeneas's wife and the biological mother of his children; she also expresses a clear desire to act as a stepmother to his son Ascanius. I argue Dido, through her attempts to be both a ruler and a (step)mother, becomes representative of the fear of the woman who sits in the middle, between mother and non-mother, and between the domestic and political realms. This liminality connects to Elizabeth's I own position as an unmarried, childless Queen who utilises maternal rhetoric to establish political power.

Dido, at the beginning of the play, appears to be a successful, single female ruler with no desire for a husband; she openly rejects the advances of her suitor, Inarbus. It is only once she tries to take on the role of stepmother that her ultimate tragic fate seemingly becomes unavoidable. When Dido meets Aeneas and his son Ascanius for the first time, Ascanius immediately informs her '[m]adam, you shall be my mother' (2.1.96).²⁷ This is a particularly interesting remark, as not only is it an odd thing to say to a woman you have just met, but Ascanius expresses this wish for Dido to embody the role of mother towards him before she ever demonstrates any real interest in

²⁷ *Dido, Queen of Carthage* in in *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. by J.B Steane (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969).

his father, and in turn, she expresses a desire to be a maternal figure before she desires to be a wife, a direct reversal of the expected path of a stepmother.

It is only once Cupid has disguised himself as Ascanius that he compels Dido to fall in love with Aeneas. It can be said, then, that Dido's tragedy comes as a direct result of her love and affection for his son. Cupid (as Ascanius) weeps to Dido, 'I shall not be her son, she loves me not' to which Dido, overcome with maternal warmth, replies, '[w]eep not, sweet boy; thou shalt be Dido's son' (3.1.22-24) as she takes him onto her lap. Again, she clearly demonstrates motherly affection for the boy she believes to be Ascanius before she comes to care for his father. When she takes the boy into her arms, he asks, '[you] shall not hurt my father when he comes,' to which she responds, '[n]o, for thy sake I'll love thy father well' (80-81). Her language again subverts the typical expectations of a step-parental relationship; instead of loving the child for the sake of the father, here Dido says she will instead love the father for the sake of the son, allowing the child to manipulate her into making the decision that ultimately destroys her. It is here the surrogate child who hurts the mother rather than the other way around.²⁸

It is in this moment, when she takes Cupid/Ascanius onto her lap in an explicit display of maternal nurture, that he pierces her breast to make her fall in love with Aeneas. This image equates a traditionally maternal picture, that of a child on their mother's knee, with a sexual desire, in a moment where Marlowe purposefully diverges from Virgil's account, which does not include such a scene or anything comparable.²⁹ In adding this sensualised interaction between would-be

²⁸ In a recent article, Heather Bailey discusses Dido as a surrogate mother, although she does not specify her as a stepmother, which I believe to be a crucial omission. She focuses on the dangers of Cupid as a surrogate son rather than the danger of a surrogate mother, arguing that 'Cupid's power over Dido [...] calls attention to the threat of surrogate children as it is precisely Cupid's disguise as innocent surrogate son that is used as a cover for his manipulation of Dido'. Heather Bailey, "'Thou Shalt be Dido's Son': Surrogate Motherhood in Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 20.1 (Winter 2020), 83-109, (85).

²⁹ Donald Stump, 'Marlowe's Travesty of Virgil: "Dido" and Elizabethan Dreams of Empire', *Comparative Drama* 34.1 (Spring 2000), 79-107. Stump suggests Marlowe's intention in adding this scene was to make a 'laughing stock' of Virgil's *Aeneid* (86).

stepmother and supposed stepson, we are reminded of the inherent connection between (surrogate) maternal and sexual desire. Dido's love for her (prospective) stepson is implicitly, and perhaps intentionally, intertwined with her sexuality and enables a reminder of the incestuous potential underlying all stepmother/stepson relationships, a potential which I discuss in greater detail shortly.

Dido does not get much of a chance to act as a stepmother, and her behaviour does not match up to the manipulative or the amorous stepmother models of classical myth.³⁰ Marlowe interprets Dido's grief at the loss of Aeneas as less to do with Aeneas himself, and more to do with the loss of his son, as much as for the hope of any children of her own. When she declares '[h]ad I a son by thee, the grief were less / [t]hat I might see Aeneas in his face' (5.1.149-150), she is acknowledging the loss of both a potential husband and a potential son. However, it is not only the possibility of a biological son, but the chance to legitimately become Ascanius's stepmother that slips away along with his father. Here, we can see that Dido is both a manipulative and lustful stepmother, and yet, at the same time, she is neither. The affection she feels for her would-be stepson, and her grief at his departure, feels genuine, and yet she uses him as a weapon to try and prevent Aeneas from leaving. Having stolen him away, when Aeneas tells Dido he will not depart without his son, she tries to tempt him to stay:

DIDO: Aeneas, pardon me; for I forgot
That young Ascanius lay with me this night.
Love made me jealous: but, to make amends,
Wear the imperial crown of Libya (4.4.29-34)

³⁰ Ovid's depiction of Dido suggests she is, in fact, pregnant with Aeneas's child, and therefore (somewhat) a biological mother. Virgil, by contrast, explicitly makes it clear that Dido has no 'little Aeneas' and she even threatens to '[butcher] Ascanius for his father's supper'. In putting his character in-between these two extremes, Marlowe portrays Dido as a complex character, and, I suggest, a complex stepmother. John Watkins, 'Remembrances of Dido: Medieval and Renaissance Transformations of the Aeneid' in *The Specter of Dido: Spenser and Virgilian Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 30-61, (33).

Her apology appears sincere; she is not maliciously manipulating Ascanius, and yet she does clearly use him as a tool to try and stop his father from leaving. Love, or lust, has made her the ‘jealous’ and emotional woman so many believed to be one of the defining characteristics of all females, and to try and ‘make amends’ she offers him the throne, essentially willing to give up her power for a husband and, by extension, a stepson.³¹ In using Ascanius as bait of sorts to keep Aeneas for herself, she is exposed as someone who is both manipulative and lustful, although she desires the father rather than the son. When we read Dido as a stepmother, she cannot be neatly placed into these two narratives, for she both subverts and conforms to their definitions. So, the question then becomes, why is Dido portrayed in such a complex and nuanced way? What is the motivation for her depiction as what I have termed an ‘almost stepmother’, someone who embodies both the qualities of the manipulative and amorous stepmother and yet at the same time, cannot fully be defined as either?

The answer, I propose, is directly related to the sovereign on the throne when the play was written. While we have to be cautious about reading historical realities into dramatic texts, there is an undeniable connection that can be (and has been) made between Dido and Elizabeth I as unmarried, childless queens.³² This association brings to the fore the intersection of the political and private worlds as a framework for understanding early modern motherhood and the identity of the stepmother, as well as highlighting the anxieties which are evoked by women who try to integrate themselves into both. That both women are surrounded by the language of stepmotherhood is crucial; Elizabeth’s embodiment of a role she did not really occupy was indicative

³¹ Women were believed to be naturally more emotional than men, and particularly less able to control their emotions and, by extension, their sexuality. Juan Luis Vives remarks that a woman is ‘jealous and naturally suspicious’ and ‘a feeble creature’ who is ‘sooner pricked to the heart or moved to passions than man [...]’. *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (c. 1529), ed. and trans. by Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 97.

³² See, for example, Deanne William’s, ‘Dido, Queen of England’, *ELH* 73.1 (2006), 31-59.

of the instability of maternity and its performative nature. Like Dido, Elizabeth both is and is-not a mother, and her position as a 'step-mother' to the citizens of England threatens to limit her power, as it ultimately and decisively does for Dido.

Whether or not it was Marlowe's intention, *Dido* can certainly be interpreted as a suggestion that Elizabeth made the right choice in not pursuing marriage.³³ Dido is, for all we can see, a successful female ruler at the beginning of the play, who is not altogether troubled by her lack of a husband or biological heir. It is only once Aeneas and Ascanius enter her world, when she dares to think she can be both ruler and (step)mother, that her tragic fate becomes unavoidable. Elizabeth, certainly, was aware of the inherent danger that marriage posed to her power; should she take a husband, she would not only limit her own authority, but it would have been virtually impossible to find a suitor who would have pleased all her subjects. Thus, unlike Dido, she made the wise decision to limit her maternity to a theoretical, rhetorical one, to keep her power within the political world at the expense of trying to co-exist as both queen and wife/mother. She instead attempts to create her own maternal authority that she alone can control.

Elizabeth, as an unmarried woman, uses maternal imagery to paint herself as the mother of her subjects; she did not need a husband because she was married to her country, and she did not need offspring because its citizens were her children. Many scholars have written on Elizabeth's use of the rhetoric of motherhood in her construction of power, but few have considered her familial rhetoric with respect to surrogate parental relationships.³⁴ Elizabeth's own maternal metaphors were successful to varying degrees; although they allowed her to manipulate public

³³ Deanne Williams notes that Marlowe 'transforms Virgil's apologia for masculine prerogative into praise for a Queen who, by avoiding marriage, preserved the liberty and prosperity of her people'. 'Dido, Queen of England', 43.

³⁴ For some scholarly consideration of Elizabeth's use of maternal and gendered rhetoric, see the work of Louis Montrose; "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture', *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983), 61-94. More recently, *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender, and Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

perception, they also left room for others to appropriate these maternal images to question her authority. Elizabeth, aware of these attempts, memorably proclaimed, ‘though after my death you may have many stepdames, yet shall you never have any a more mother than I mean to be unto you all’.³⁵ She tried to distance herself from the label of a ‘stepdame’ by declaring herself a natural, biological mother, but in her confluence of household and political language, in trying to transfer maternity to the political realm, she left herself vulnerable to those that sought to delegitimise her rule.

Male writers, as I will discuss shortly, tried to rhetorically undermine Elizabeth’s own language of maternity by referencing the stepmother, calling upon the classical stereotypes which surrounded the figure.³⁶ Although they may be hesitant to directly name Elizabeth as a stepmother, they make the connection obvious: John Stubbes’ *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf* (1579) suggests, for example, that the ‘naturall mother’, Elizabeth, may be replaced by some ‘cruel and proud governour’.³⁷ In doing so, they raised fears over not only Elizabeth’s lack of a biological heir, but the fear she might become a tyrant. The relationship between being a ‘stepdame’ and a tyrant was ostensible and highlights the association of the domestic and political realms: if Elizabeth is not a good ruler, then she is not a good ‘mother’ to her metaphorical children – or, she is not a mother at all. The conflation of the two suggests a pushback against her attempts to occupy both spaces, and to derive agency in the political sphere from the language of the domestic one. Jacqueline Vanhoutte writes about this trouble in her article ‘Elizabeth I as Stepmother’, in which she notes the tendency of the time to ‘invoke surrogacy’ as an indirect commentary on Elizabeth’s

³⁵ From a 1563 speech to Parliament in response to criticism for her failure to marry. Quoted in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. by Leah S. Marcus, Janet Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 72.

³⁶ Stepmothers appear frequently in what Louis Montrose has dubbed the ‘Elizabethan cultural imagination’; playwrights who refer to stepmothers include John Lyly and, of course, Shakespeare.

³⁷ John Stubbes, *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf Whereinto England is Likely to be Swallowed* (London, 1579), sig. C7v.

rule, to suggest that her claims to motherhood, and by extension her claims to the throne, were tenuous at best.³⁸ Elizabeth made stepmothers both a popular and dangerous literary trope during her reign, both to her success and detriment, but of course, Elizabeth was not a stepmother, and nor was Dido – she could not be, because to be a stepmother implied marriage.

b. The Relationship Between Stepmother and Stepchild

Through this consideration of Dido in relation to Elizabeth, we can consequently begin to see how early modern stepmothers were portrayed far more complexly than has been previously discussed by scholars, and I have begun to describe the motivations behind those representations. However, what also becomes clear through a consideration of both female rulers are that the negative stereotypes that surrounded stepmothers persisted into the early modern period. These negative perceptions were not entirely without reason, as there are some examples of contentious relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren during this time. While both Dido and Elizabeth were extraordinary queens and figures, stepmothers of lower social status also had the power to interfere in public matters as they had the potential to exert influence within both the political and domestic spheres. I am now going to suggest that the negative response to stepmothers had far more to do with this ability to intervene in issues of inheritance and succession rather than any historical reality about their behaviour.

Stephen Collins notes that when it came to matters of inheritance, stepmothers could, in theory if not in practice, prove more influential than stepfathers. A twice-married woman would have been unlikely to control the disposal of her own wealth, or direct her wealth away from the children of her first marriage, and so a stepfather would have been unable to manipulate his new

³⁸ Jacqueline Vanhoutte, 'Elizabeth I as Stepmother', *English Literary Renaissance* 39.2 (2009), 315-335, (325).

wife in order to direct the estate towards his biological children (Collins, 322). The husband/father, however, did have power over the distribution of his inheritance, and so the anxiety arose that a stepmother would use her 'sexual appeal' to convince her husband to disinherit the children of his first marriage in favour of the children of the second (323). To do so was to upset the entire social order upon which paternal hierarchies were constructed, and so it created the stepmother as a potentially disruptive figure, turning what was fundamentally a domestic and 'private dilemma' into something of 'public importance' (315).

When there are such recorded instances of poor behaviour from stepmothers, it is almost always connected back to these anxieties, and specifically the concern that the stepmother is keeping children from receiving what is rightfully theirs. There were regular legal proceedings brought against stepmothers, usually after the husband/father's death, and typically involving a stepson suing his (ex)-stepmother over the distribution of property or inheritance. For example, in the early 1500s, Roger Lassels of Brokenborough in Yorkshire sued his stepmother Margaret, accusing her of refusing to accept an agreed estate to satisfy her dowry after the death of her husband and his father. John Tylney similarly challenged his stepmother's claim to her dowry, arguing that her marriage to his father had never been valid in the first place (Stretton, 92). Indeed, it seems there was a common trend of accusing stepmothers of abusing their legal powers following the death of their husbands, and of keeping their stepchildren (and particularly their stepsons) from receiving their inheritance.

Some early modern writers described their personal experiences with stepmothers, which also typically related back to matters of inheritance. John Newnham, for example, was an Elizabethan pamphleteer who wrote about his resentment toward his stepmother who controlled his deceased father's estate. In his *Newnhams nightcrowe* (1590), he reports that:

It is nowe more than twenty years space, since it hath been my fortune to beare the assaultes, damage, injury, discomfortes, and vnkindnesse of a stepdame, by her ouermuch preuailing [...]³⁹

Newnhams' anger derives from his belief that his stepmother has deprived him of his inheritance, of what he believes is rightfully his:

Her driftes thus extending to the spoiling mee of my birthright, which to everie man is the best Monument of his parent. I could not but be moued with that prickle or instinct of Nature (sig. A2v)

He has been robbed of his 'birthright', that 'best Monument' of his (biological) parents. While we cannot say for sure whether Newnham's claims of his stepmother's 'vnkindnesse' are true, it is clear that the anxiety of the stepmother, and claims of her lack of affection, are inextricably tied up with concerns over how they may interfere with traditional, patriarchal lines of inheritance.

Anne Bacon is another example of a stepmother who had to negotiate legal issues with her stepsons after their father's death; she tried to remain cordial with them, but expressed no real interest in displaying any maternal affection towards them after the death of her husband.⁴⁰ In a letter to one of her stepsons, she writes:

[...] I pray yow, goode Syr Nicholas Bacon, lett it do not hurt betwyxt us where there hath ben so long a continuance of more than common amytee. Yow being the sonne, and I the wyff, and now the weedoe of the same good father and husbände. So I byd yow hartely fare well and shallbe very glad when wee may mete together frendely⁴¹

She implores they remember the 'more than common amytee' that had previously existed between them, but her rhetoric lacks maternal warmth. Their only connection seems to be the mutual respect they had for the 'same good father and husbände'; it is him that binds them, even in death, but

³⁹ John Newnham, *Newnhams nightcrowe* (London, 1590), sig. A2.

⁴⁰ Anne's husband Nicholas Bacon died on 20 February 1579, and while he left provisions for his wife and the children of both his marriages, his debts meant both branches of his family disputed their inheritance. The issue was resolved by 1580, but 'Anne's relationship with her stepsons [...] thereafter seems to have been strained'. Gemma Allen, ed, *The Letters of Lady Anne Bacon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 11.

⁴¹ Anne Bacon to Nicholas Bacon II, May - July 1579 in *The Letters of Lady Anne Bacon*, 79-80.

there is no indication that any maternal attachment remains. Her language in her letters to her biological children is, by contrast, full of affection:

[...] God bless my sonne. What he wolde have me do and when for his own goode as I now write, let him return plain answer by Fynch. He was his father's first chis, and God wyll supply yf he trust in him and call upon in truth of hart, which God grant to mother and son⁴²

To her natural son Anthony, she writes of the 'trust' and 'truth of hart' which exists between mother and son. There is a discernible difference between how she speaks to her biological sons and her stepsons; she tried to secure the 'family line' for those with whom she shared a 'biological relation', and seemed to abide by the notion that the interests of the biological children superseded that of the stepchildren.⁴³

When relationships between a stepmother and her stepchildren were contentious, they appeared to centre around issues of inheritance, rather than a concern over a lack of maternal nurture and affection. Even those such as John Newnham, who do mention the so-called 'vnkindnesse of a stepdame', show that their anger is in some ways related to the feeling they are being kept from what is rightfully theirs, that traditional lines of inheritance have been interrupted by this disruptive figure. Therefore, I suggest that the true fear of the stepmother is, really, the fear of any woman who tries to exist within both the private, domestic world and the public, political one. Like Dido, and like Elizabeth, these historical stepmothers use both political and maternal language to influence issues that they were meant to be excluded from. A woman can be a mother, or even (in some exceptional circumstances) a political power, and to cross the two boundaries is to inherently politicise issues that were intended to remain private.

⁴² Anne Bacon to Anthony Bacon, 18 April 1593 in *The Letters of Lady Anne Bacon*, 125-126.

⁴³ Katy Mair, "'Good Agreement Betwixt the Wombe and Fruit': The Politics of Maternal Power in the Letters of Lady Anne Bacon" in *Family Politics in Early Modern Literature*, ed. by Hannah Crawforth and Sarah Lewis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 99-117, (100).

IV. Elizabeth, James I, and the Incest Narrative

a. *The Incestuous Stepmother*

It was not only a stepmother's ability to manipulate that made her threatening, but her transgressive sexuality, and the two were implicitly connected. The stepmother was almost always surrounded by the fear (whether articulated or not) that her relationship with her stepson would turn sexual: that a woman's uncontrollable passion would emerge in a manner that threatened the stability of the paternal family. Stepmothers were clouded with spectres of incest, and I argue that incest and stepmothers were so often intertwined in early modern discourse because they raised similar anxieties about the power of transgressive sexuality to disrupt both the family and the state and to make domestic issues public. Like the manipulative stepmother, 'amorous' stepmothers present similar threats to patriarchal stability and are therefore essentially inseparable from the manipulative stereotype; as we will see, to talk about one is to talk about the other. To fully understand the danger the stepmother represented, we must now turn to a discussion of her connection to unsettling expressions of desire. By labelling stepmothers as always potentially incestuous, their ability to destabilise and undermine traditional narratives becomes even more evident.

The OED defines 'incest' as a 'crime of sexual intercourse or cohabitation between persons related within the degrees within which marriage is prohibited, sexual commerce of near kindred'.⁴⁴ This definition makes it clear that these may be relationships between 'near kindred', meaning incestuous relationships are not limited to those related by blood. This broader definition

⁴⁴ 'incest, n.1a', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

of incest was particularly relevant in the early modern period, extending to those connected by ties of kinship; in other words, while we might today define the relationship between a stepmother and stepson as inappropriate, we would not necessarily label it as incestuous, whereas they would have done so (and did) in early modern England. Lois E. Bueler expands on the wider definition of the term, particular to the early modern period:

Incest, which is sexual attraction or activity within a forbidden degree of consanguinity or affinity, appears in English Renaissance plays in an unexpectedly wide number of variations: an incestuous relationship may be biological or only legal; it may take place within or outside the nuclear family and within or between generations; the passion may be one-way or reciprocal; it may be consummated or frustrated; characters may actually be related or only think they are, and they may or may not recognize their passions as incestuous⁴⁵

Incest was not simply defined as something that occurred between those who were related by blood. Moreover, like the maternal role itself, incest was constructed, and dependent, upon both legal and moral restrictions of time and place. What was defined as incest was not a constant, but a classification that was often politically motivated, and the prevention of incest was presented as a ‘natural law’ necessary to contain a fundamentally repellent crime.

The relationship between a stepmother and her stepson had always been expressly forbidden and was always incestuous under the wider definition of the term. The Bible itself makes this clear; Leviticus 18, which lays out unlawful sexual relationships, expressly forbids sexual relations with a ‘father’s wife’ as it is ‘thy father’s nakedness’ (18:8).⁴⁶ Deuteronomy similarly directs that a man ‘shall not take his father’s wife’ or ‘discover his father’s skirt’ (22:30).⁴⁷ Both verses speak directly to the son and invoke respect of the father as incentive not to indulge; it is

⁴⁵ Lois E. Bueler, ‘The Structural Uses of Incest in English Renaissance Drama’, *Renaissance Drama* 15. Modes, Motifs, and Genres (1984), 115-145, (116-118).

⁴⁶ King James’s Version, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus%2018&version=KJV> [Accessed 4 March 2019].

⁴⁷ King James’s Version, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus%2018&version=KJV> [Accessed 4 March 2019].

the son who must express restraint because, as is implied, the stepmother will not. In the early modern period, in fact, it seems the potential sexual relationship between stepmother and stepson was sometimes more concerning than even that between a biological mother and son. Bishop Arthur Lake, in a sermon preached in the Cathedral Church of Wels, declared it was ‘incest of the worst sort, that a man should have his father’s wife’.⁴⁸ Similarly, John Calvin, in his *Commentaries on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* notes that such a relationship would have ‘involved an incestuous connection, abhorrent to all propriety and natural decency’.⁴⁹ Lake in particular echoes the language of the Bible, that to sleep with a stepmother is to dishonour the father; however, it was not simply the threat to the father’s honour that made this relationship so dangerous.

Incest, in its various forms, was threatening not just because it fostered an unnatural relationship, but because it was in fact seen as a site for the expression of transgressive female sexuality, and potential female agency. Claude Lévi-Strauss’ well-known theories on kinship and the ‘incest taboo’ proposes that relationships between kin are forbidden not because they are simply abnormal, but to ensure exchange outward, between groups, and that this exchange is predicated on the trading of women through marriage. Gayle Rubin’s feminist response to Lévi-Strauss’s theories introduced the concept of the traffic in women, suggesting that one of the only ways a woman may escape the circulation and commodification of her body is through relationships among kin.⁵⁰ Because a woman’s supposed purpose was always to form bonds

⁴⁸ Bishop Arthur Lake, *Sermons vvith some religious and diuine meditations* (London, 1626), 18.

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. by Rev. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 2017), 145.

⁵⁰ Rubin’s article ‘The Traffic in Women’ focuses in large part on repurposing Lévi-Strauss’s theories of kinship and considering how they have resulted in female oppression. She argues that female oppression is dependent upon the exchange of women – they become gendered ‘female’ only when they participate in this exchange. Gayle Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women’ in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. by Linda Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 27-62.

between men, to establish male affinities between families, if a woman refused to participate in such circulation than she was preventing the formation of homosocial bonds and thus subverting patriarchal culture. In theory, one of the only ways for her to do so (along with chastity and homosexuality) is by limiting relationships to within her own home. If a woman forms ties only within her immediate household, then extended bonds of kinship cannot develop, and so incest was more than just unnatural, it was potentially disruptive and empowering for women. It implies a deliberate removal from the very bonds that sought to oppress women and keep them within the domestic household.

Although Rubin's theories were written regarding unmarried women, I believe the connection is valid as a stepmother who sleeps with her stepson (often instead of her husband) is nonetheless such a woman who resists her proper 'role' of cementing bonds between male families.⁵¹ Further, she has been circulated more than once and thus in some ways becomes an agent in her own circulation: after all, a stepmother has, by definition, married into a family, and often has been married before. She has been integrated into this system, removed, integrated again, and then in a sense removes herself through her (potentially) incestuous relationship. Even once within the marriage, a woman who 'actively [desires]' is dangerous to the proper establishment of male bonds (Rubin, 182). A stepmother is someone who has managed to work both within and outside of the system; she participates in the 'traffic in women' while she also has the potential to reject it. Like all women who both are and are not mothers, she both is and is not a part of this circulation, but she may become more immersed in these structures than, I believe, any other sort of mother or mother-figure. A stepmother's role, as a result, may always be related to incest, or at

⁵¹ Rubin writes that any woman who 'actively [desires]' rather than one who 'responded to the desires of others' is dangerous to these systems of exchange; if a woman does not fulfill her role in her own exchange, then she may still disrupt the system even once she is married. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women', 182.

least the potential for incest to occur, as it coincides with the ability to be removed from systems of exchange.

The stepmother and the incestuous relationship were positioned as disruptive forces that had the power to make domestic issues public and political. As Richard McCabe writes in his extensive study of incest in the early modern period, '[p]erversions in the sexual politics of the family provide ready analogies for corruptions in the power politics of the state'.⁵² Incest narratives acquire public significance because they can so often function as a symbol that something is 'wrong' on a political level – the corrupted family stands in for the corrupted political world, and a woman's sexuality becomes the site of public anxiety. It is not only through their sexuality that a stepmother may interfere in matters of public importance, but through manipulation as well, however, their methods of manipulation often invariably become tied up in fears over their 'dangerous' sexuality. The discourse of stepmothers, then, is constantly surrounded by the incest taboo and the fear that by participating in a relationship with their stepson, they are destabilising the very structures upon which the state, as well as the family, are built.

Furthermore, a stepmother, whether manipulative or amorous, problematises these systems of kinship through their blatant and abundant use (and particularly misuse) of both sexuality and rhetoric. As Maureen Quilligan writes, a woman's use of language is tied to her expression of desire; when language is suppressed, so is desire.⁵³ Kinship systems were therefore dependent upon women being chaste, silent, and obedient; a stepmother, at least as she was portrayed in fiction, was none of these things, and in fact she openly utilised both her rhetoric and sexuality as tools of manipulation. Thus, I contend stepmothers were constructed as sexually dangerous to try

⁵² Richard McCabe, *Incest, Drama, and Nature's Law, 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 25.

⁵³ Maureen Quilligan, *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 12.

and contain their implicit rejection of the systems early modern England was dependent upon, and that the incestuous under/overtones that surround them are inextricably tied up in these dangers.

b. Reading the Incest Narrative in The Misfortunes of Arthur and the Reigns of Elizabeth and James

Like the manipulative stepmother, the portrayal of these lustful figures is, in fact, far more nuanced than critics have previously considered, and not all these depictions feature the shameless, brazen woman of the classical tradition. Amorous stepmothers were not a common trope in drama under Elizabeth, with one notable exception in Thomas Hughes' *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1588), which dramatizes the legend of King Arthur, and specifically, the story of Arthur's son Mordred (in this story, himself the result of an incestuous relationship between Arthur and his sister) and his plots against his father in his absence.⁵⁴ Mordred, after Arthur has left to fight Rome, takes up with Arthur's wife and his stepmother Guinevere (Guenevora), who – unlike the typical remorseless stepmother of classical literature – demonstrates guilt over her betrayal of her absent husband, while still initially wishing for his failure in battle. Upon hearing that Arthur is returning after years away, she pledges her allegiance to her stepson/lover even in the face of her husband's reappearance:

GUENEVORA:

My love, redoubled love, and constant faith
Engaged onto Mordred workes so deepe,
That both my hart and marrow quite be burnt [...]
Desire to joy him still torments my mind [...] (16)⁵⁵

⁵⁴ There was also a lost play entitled *The Stepmother's Tragedy* (1599), written by Henry Chettle and Thomas Dekker. Although the plot is unknown, it may have been based on a ballad 'The Lady Isabella's Tragedy; or, The Step-Mother's Cruelty' where a jealous stepmother kills her stepdaughter and bakes her. 'Stepmother's Tragedy, The', Lost Plays Database, https://lostplays.folger.edu/Stepmother%27s_Tragedy_The (accessed 21 February, 2022).

⁵⁵ Thomas Hughes, *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (London: Septimus Prowett, 1828).

Initially, she demonstrates the expected wicked behaviour of a stepmother, going so far as to plot the death of her husband. She justifies her actions, saying that ‘unlawfull love doth like when lawfull lothes’ (17). However, she is talked out of it by one of her ladies, Fromia, who implores her to think of ‘[her] sexe and future fame of life’, and ultimately, her loyalty to Arthur wins out; ‘[m]y fear is past, and wedlock love hath woone’ as she believes by repenting, she frees herself from all guilt of her crimes (21).

Interestingly, it is an appeal to both her womanhood and her ‘future fame’ that causes her to re-evaluate her actions; in other words, speaking to her as both a wife and queen does the trick. At the end of the first act, she retreats to a nunnery to atone for what she has done. She does not die or suffer extreme punishment for her relationship with Mordred, but she does disappear from the rest of the play. It is Mordred, as the stepson, and not the stepmother, who lacks any shame for their incestuous actions; he tells Guenevora, after she voices her regret, that ‘the crime was joint’, they are both as guilty as the other (22). What remains constant, however, is the prominent connection between sexual and political desire, and the notion that when one is corrupted, the other inevitably is as well. Mordred’s desire for Guenevora is intricately tied up in his desire for power, to steal the throne from his father; likewise, the corrupted nature of the union between Guenevora and Mordred reflects the corrupted political state. Hughes makes this clear in his deliberate diversions from his source (Geoffrey of Monmouth) in making Mordred Arthur’s son with his sister, rather than simply his nephew, and emphasising the incestuous union of Guenevora and Mordred, forgoing the far more popular story of her affair with Lancelot.⁵⁶

The Misfortunes of Arthur, like *Dido*, was written under Elizabeth, and its depiction of Guenevora can, I believe, likewise be seen as influenced by Elizabeth. In critical ways, Elizabeth,

⁵⁶ Christopher J. Crosbie, ‘Sexuality, Corruption, and the Body Politic: The Paradoxical Tribute of “The Misfortunes of Arthur” to Elizabeth I’, *Arthuriana* 9.3 (Fall 1999), 68-80, (70).

as a pseudo-mother/stepmother, participated in narratives surrounding the incest taboo and the potential power it may grant women as she also faced the real dangers it presented. As Maureen Quilligan remarks, a woman's refusal to be traded inevitably 'results in something that resembles incest', and Elizabeth resolutely refused to be traded (Quilligan, 16). Elizabeth, born into a family that was no stranger to incestuous relationships, grew up well-aware of the dangers that faced a woman who participated in such an exchange. Her father divorced Katherine of Aragon on grounds of incest to marry her mother, a marriage which was also eventually deemed incestuous, as Henry had relations with Anne Boleyn's sister, and Anne herself was accused of incest with her brother, contributing to her eventual execution (33). As a young woman, Elizabeth was courted by Thomas Seymour, who had been married to her stepmother Katherine Parr; had she consented, their relationship would have been incestuous as well under the early modern definition (35). Confronted with these harsh realities, Elizabeth deliberately removed herself from these systems, and in doing so, demonstrated the potential for female agency granted by her refusal to participate in systems of exchange (35-36). While I do not think it is entirely accurate to say that Elizabeth's decision not to marry was incestuous, nor was it deemed so, I do agree she was always immersed in such narratives, and that her refusal to be exchanged was a means of asserting control that could, at the very least, be tied to illusions of incest.⁵⁷ There have been many reasons given for why Elizabeth chose not to become a biological mother, but there is little doubt that in remaining the 'Virgin Queen', she refused to participate in traditional systems of exchange and thus held on to power. Certainly, she was able to keep the power within her own family, and within the context of theories of kinship, this was an act that evoked, if not actual, certainly spectres of incest.

⁵⁷ Maureen Quilligan believes that Elizabeth enjoys a 'metaphorically incestuous' relationship as she comes to be 'nursed by the nation, married to the nation, and mother to the nation'; however, I think there is a distinction between England itself and its citizens – Elizabeth proclaims herself married to England, and therefore mother to its people. *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England*, 37.

Elizabeth, naturally, gives up her insular power once she dies and passes the throne onto James, who is not only a male, but from a different family and a different country. James's rule was met with suspicion and mistrust, as a Scottish king on the English throne he was often treated as a foreigner. James, as a result, had to work almost as hard as Elizabeth, despite his gender, to maintain that he was the true and rightful heir to the throne, and he similarly used familial imagery to do so. James, notably, purposefully highlights the connection between the family and the state. In his *True Law of Free Monarchies*, he compares the King as the head of the government to the father as the head of the family. He remarks, '[t]he King towards his people is rightly compared to a father of children, and to a head of a body composed of diuers members [...]'.⁵⁸ James deliberately emphasises the comparison between the King and the father, and more importantly, the 'naturall father', joining the domestic and political worlds together while keeping them separate and, of course, patriarchal. In the aftermath of Elizabeth's reign, James works to (re-)establish the patriarchal/paternal hierarchies of both the state and the family, with the father as the metaphorical 'head' of the body, in order to eliminate the images of surrogacy generated by Elizabeth's rhetoric.

At the same time, James, like Elizabeth, contradictorily depends upon constructed familial relationships to obtain and sustain his throne. James, despite being the biological son of Elizabeth's cousin Mary Stuart, referred to Elizabeth as both his mother and sister, creating, once again, illusions of incest. He signs a letter to Elizabeth dated 19 July 1585 as '[y]our most loving and affectionate brother and sonne'.⁵⁹ He creates a relationship that is both 'endogamous and adoptive' in order to establish a connection with Elizabeth that can be his and his alone.⁶⁰ James is aware

⁵⁸ James Stuart, *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (London, 1642), 10.

⁵⁹ James Stuart to Elizabeth Tudor, 19 July 1585. National Archives State Papers, 52/37 fol. 95.

⁶⁰ Bruce Thomas Boehrer, 'James I and the Fabrication of Kinship' in *Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 86-112, (87).

that it is in his interest to create a mother/son relationship with Elizabeth; in framing himself as her natural son, he also poses himself as her natural heir and successor. Elizabeth, by contrast, never refers to James as her son, and defines herself only as a sister to him.⁶¹ This distinction is likely due to her hesitance to name James as her successor for fear of admitting her own mortality; as Elizabeth aged out of her childbearing years, her references to a metaphorical maternity lessened, as she instead leaned on the image of the eternal, immortal virgin.

Elizabeth and James depend on images of both the family and queen/kingship, weaving the two together to suggest that in some sense their authority as rulers is derived from their position as parents, whether literal or metaphorical. There is a certain power granted to those who sit on the boundary between the political and domestic ‘worlds’ and are able to inhabit both. Elizabeth does not participate in the ‘traffic in women’, and yet she embodies the position of mother to justify her ‘failure’ to participate in traditional systems of exchange. She cannot be a good ruler if she is not a good mother to her children, and in making her maternity purely metaphorical she asserts the ability to control her children/subjects while leaving herself vulnerable to criticism. When a woman tries to occupy both spaces, she inherently becomes threatening – hence why Elizabeth was often labelled a stepmother, as stepmothers were themselves dangerous for being both public and private. James, as a man, can ‘safely’ embody both the political and domestic, as his rhetoric of the king as the father of the state was hardly met with the same criticism as Elizabeth’s maternal metaphors.⁶² Nonetheless, he relied on the same fabricated relationships as his predecessor. Through their attempts at constructing familial relationships, both Elizabeth and James depend on

⁶¹ See, for example, Elizabeth I to James VI of Scotland, 22 December 1593. National Archives, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/elizabeth-monarchy/elizabeth-i-to-james-vi-of-scotland-1593/> [Accessed 23 November 2021].

⁶² Boehrer notes that unlike Elizabeth, James never suffered from the ‘stigma of incest’ despite his similar use of ‘expanded tropes of kinship’. ‘James I and the Fabrication of Kinship’, 87, 88.

the idea that these relationships can be adapted and changed, while in the process trying to write them as stable. Both monarchs depend upon their ability to portray their relations as ‘natural’, or as biological, with the obvious knowledge that they are not. What certainly becomes apparent is England under both Elizabeth and James was a culture preoccupied with the nature and structure of the family. From looking outward to bonds of kinship to a turn inward and a move toward the beginnings of the ‘nuclear family’, these relationships were purposefully constructed and thus open to change and re-appropriation. I believe the stepmother functioned as a symbol of these anxieties, reflecting the tensions that followed Elizabeth and James’ reigns; not just a fear of the female who can manipulate public control and influence (through the incest ‘taboo’), but a concern over the constructed and adaptable nature of the family exposed by their sovereigns. Regardless of whether the monarch was male or female, familial relationships were constantly open to reinterpretation depending on time, context, and situation.

This fear is reflected in early modern discourse, as we can observe in Robert Greene’s *Planetomachia* (1585), as he retells the story of a stepmother who lusts after her stepson. Of her desire, he comments:

Well, Rhodope being a woman, and therefore both amorous and inconstant, shamed not to disdain the father and desire the son, yielding herself captive to lust at the first alarum⁶³

Greene highlights the ease with which Rhodope, as a woman, desires her stepson; it is simply part of her nature, as she is both ‘amorous and inconstant’, the exact qualities with which all women threatened established structures. Her stepson, by contrast, is described as follows:

First he persuaded himself that incestuous adultery was a sin so repugnant to nature as the very brute beasts did abhor the committing of such an act, and that it was so odious to both the gods and men as it were better to commit either sacrilege or

⁶³ Robert Greene, *Planetomachia: or the first parte of the generall opposition of the seuen planets* (London, 1585), 48.

murder [...] yet nature and virtue so much prevailed that he chose rather to die than to consent unto such unnatural disloyalty (48-49)

Although the stepson desires his stepmother, he fights his feelings because he knows such a relationship would be classified as ‘incestuous adultery’; the act is so frowned upon that here it is defined as worse than murder. Unlike his stepmother, he does not want his honour destroyed by his unnatural feelings. It is only once Rhodope tempts him that he ultimately gives in to his desire, and this – unsurprisingly – leads to both their deaths at the hands of the husband/father, who stabs them to bring about ‘a death not sharp enough for such incestuous traitors’ (50). The sinfulness of the relationship between stepmother and stepson is clearly emphasised, and although their desire is reciprocal, it is still the woman who must persuade the man, and it is she who easily succumbs to the temptation, abiding by her inconstant nature. It is the stepmother who provides the true threat, and not the stepson, even though they ultimately must both be punished for their behaviour.

Collins makes the argument that almost every reference to an amorous stepmother in early modern England is a thinly veiled allusion to the Phaedra myth, which many early moderns would have been thoroughly familiar with from reading translations of Ovid and Seneca (Collins, 321). Phaedra haunts these depictions, as the epitome of the dangerous, sexually unnatural woman. Nonetheless, we can see this was not always the case, as in Guenevora’s portrayal in *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. As with most archetypes, the reality of the lived experience of these figures was far less important than how they were interpreted, how they functioned, and what they symbolised. Both the manipulative and amorous stepmother trouble both the political and domestic spheres, continuously tied together as they perpetuate the incest narrative – particularly when the stepmother in drama is so often put in a position of political power. Thus far, I have considered the portrayals of stepmothers under Elizabeth, arguing they reflected anxieties over the childless female monarch, the negotiation of public and private space, and fears of incest. I turn now to

dramatic portrayals during the reign of James I, analysing how they were adapted under a male monarch and suggest their representations adjust to the new reality of James trying to re-establish patriarchal rule.

c. *The Amorous Stepmother in Jacobean Drama*

The reign of James I saw more plays which featured amorous stepmothers written and performed than were seen under Elizabeth. It might seem counterintuitive that these sexually-charged figures would be more prevalent under a male monarch, particularly when we consider that Elizabeth had generated such anxieties about the dangers of female power. However, it may simply have been too risky to write about stepmothers under Elizabeth, given the fragile nature of Elizabeth's own metaphorical maternity, and the not unrealistic idea that she might take any reference to stepmothers as a personal offense. All the plays I am going to explore from this point on were written under James, and I think, place greater focus on the actual role and responsibility of a stepmother than either *Dido, Queen of Carthage* or *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. Under the reign of a male monarch, playwrights could comment upon the nature of stepmothers, both manipulative and sexual, without worrying how those comments would be interpreted. What we see in these plays, then, is a disruption of order (represented by the stepmother) and an ultimate restoration of balance, a sign of the supposed return to stability under James. These fears, here represented through a stepmother's transgressive sexuality, are, I believe, always purposefully connected to and entangled with matters of succession and inheritance. This connection is emphasised in the shift in genre and tone under James, a move from more sympathetic portrayals of stepmothers to the villainous ones reflected in revenge tragedy.

It is also possible these concerns over inheritance were connected to contemporary anxieties over James as the ‘true’ successor of the English throne. Judith M. Richards notes that James was particularly anxious to ‘demonstrate the difference a male ruler made’ in the wake of the Virgin Queen and was, in fact, surprised to discover that people felt nostalgia for Elizabeth’s rule and the female rhetoric that surrounded it.⁶⁴ As a result, James found himself, as I have already mentioned, having to navigate his dependence upon constructed relationships for his claim to the throne, while trying to assure his subjects that his succession was, in fact, natural and legitimate. His association between the family and the state, therefore, was an attempt to create this lawful claim, as we can see in a speech given to Parliament in 1609:

Now a Father maye dispose of his Inheritance to his children, at his pleasure; yea, even disinherit the eldest vpon iust occasions, and preferre the youngest, according to his liking [...] So may the King deale with his Subjects⁶⁵

The father, as the head of the family, was free to do with his inheritance as he pleased; James makes it clear this was an area available only to men, just as the monarchy was now an area that was, once more, firmly patriarchal. While I am not suggesting all portrayals of stepmothers are commenting on the transition from Elizabeth to James, I do propose that the portrayals we see in drama under James can be read as representative of the disruption caused to traditional inheritance under the female Elizabeth, and the restoration of that order under the new sovereign.

That being said, stepmothers continued to be portrayed with a previously overlooked degree of complexity. Like Guenevora, a Jacobean stepmother who feels some sense of guilt over her adulterous actions is Levidulcia in Cyril Torneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy* (1610). Levidulcia is a lustful woman who begins an affair with her stepson-in-law, Sebastian, which is a connection

⁶⁴ Judith M. Richards, ‘The English Accession of James VI: “National” Identity, Gender, and the Personal Monarchy of England’, *The English Historical Review* 117.472 (June 2002), 513-535, (513).

⁶⁵ Stuart, James. ‘A speech [...] to the Parliament [...] on Wednesday the XXI of March. Anno 1609’. Quoted in Judith Richards, ‘The English Accession of James VI’, 532.

separated a degree further than stepmother/stepson, but nonetheless carries incestuous connotations. However, as an actual stepmother to her stepdaughter, the morally honourable Castabella, she does not display the expected manipulative tendencies. She, claims, in fact, to have her best interests at heart, and is not shown to intentionally disprove her assertion:

LEVIDULCIA: I'm but her mother i'law [stepmother];
Yet if shee were my very flesh and bloud
I could advise no better for her good (33)⁶⁶

Although her advice and actions might be misguided and not truly in the best interests of her stepdaughter, she does not knowingly try to bring harm to Castabella. Her guidance, nonetheless, is coloured by her innate lustful nature, heightened by her role and position as stepmother. She advises Castabella to indulge in pleasure, which is the 'wealth of life' and take the man who is in front of her rather than wait for the return of the one she truly loves (32). The distinction between Levidulcia, who commits several adulterous actions throughout the play, and Castabella, who remains chaste awaiting the return of Charlemont, is stark.

The Atheist's Tragedy is a play obsessed with matters of succession and inheritance, once again suggesting that sexuality and politics are always inherently intertwined. The villain of the play, D'Amville, is entirely motivated by his need to preserve his posterity through the succession of his children:

D'AMVILLE: Here are my Sonnes. –
There's my eternitie. My life in them
And their succession shall for ever live
And in my reason dwells the providence,
To adde to life as much of happinesse.
Let all men lose, so I increase my gaine
I have no feeling of another's paine (11)

⁶⁶ Cyril Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy in Plays and poems*, ed. by John Churton Collins (London: Chatto and Windus, 1878).

He explicitly states that his ‘eternitie’ lies in the ‘succession’ of his sons; he does not care what he must do, so long as their inheritance is secured. He kills his own brother for access to his fortune and lies to his nephew that he will not be ‘disinherited’ but that D’Amville will act as a ‘Gardian’ to ‘make [him] ripe for [his] inheritance’ (95-96). Really, his goal is to ‘leave a state / [t]o the succession of my proper blood’; by ‘proper blood’ he no doubt means his biological sons, rather than someone further separated from his lineage, including his nephew (104).

Again, the corrupted nature of the family is reflected in the corrupted sexual politics of the play, not simply through Levidulcia and the amorous stepmother trope, although she is certainly a reflection of it. There is also potential incest in the possible relationship between father and daughter-in-law, as D’Amville attempts to force himself upon Castabella, Levidulcia’s stepdaughter. She manages to escape his advances, accusing him of attempting to perpetuate ‘incest’, but D’Amville radically suggests such a relationship would in fact not be considered incestuous:

D’AMVILLE: Incest? Tush!
 These distances affinite observes
 Are articles of bondage cast upon
 Our freedoms by our owne objections (113)

In particular, suggests that it does not count as incest if there is a suitable ‘distance’ between the participants, such as the non-biological relationship between father and daughter-in-law. D’Amville is not suggesting that all incest is constructed, but rather that incest, by definition, is not incest when between people who are connected merely through ‘affinite’, or kinship, as opposed to biology. D’Amville, as the ‘atheist’ of the title, obviously speaks contrary to the ‘moral’ word of God, but even the implication may have been troubling, or – more dangerous still – potentially may have reflected a social acceptance of certain kinds of incest, regardless of what was preached in conduct literature.

There is an apparent connection between D'Amville and Levidulcia and how they both rationalise their actions, and specifically their sexual behaviour. Both refer to 'nature' as a justification; Levidulcia remarks on the 'naturall sympathie' that drives people, and especially women, to lust (127). While D'Amville is driven by his need to secure his lineage, by a certain twisted rationality, Levidulcia is instead motivated purely by sexual desire, but through her actions she nonetheless still threatens to equally interfere in matters of succession. The two plots are intertwined as Sebastian, Levidulcia's lover, is also D'Amville's biological son, and so through her relationship with him, Levidulcia innately threatens the succession that motivates D'Amville.

However, like Guenevora, Levidulcia comes to express guilt and remorse at her behaviour, subverting the typical expectations of the amorous stepmother. She feels profound grief over the death of both her husband and her lover, who die in a duel with one another. She feels responsible for both their deaths, incited by her adulterous/incestuous relationship with her stepson-in-law:

LEVIDULCIA: Shall I out-live my Honour? Must my life
Be made the world's example? Since it must
Then thus in detestation of my deede
To make th'example moue more forceably
To virtue thus I seale it with a death
As full of honour as my life of sinne (130)

She becomes self-aware of the sinful nature of her actions and realises her honour has been compromised; to regain her virtue she must 'seale it with a death / [a]s full of honour as my life of sinne'. She does not want to be 'made the world's example', not simply of an adulterous, sexually promiscuous woman, but of a stepmother who perpetuated incest with her stepson (in-law).

Ultimately, the virtuous Castabella, Levidulcia's stepdaughter, inherits the wealth and titles of D'Amville, along with her lover Charlemont. Charlemont, D'Amville's nephew, had been disinherited through the machinations of D'Amville, who wanted to possess his fortune for himself, and ensure the continuation of his 'posterite' via his own children. However, with both

D'Amville and his children dead at the play's conclusion, Charlemont is restored to his rightful succession. This ending suggests *The Atheist's Tragedy* is a play that disrupts 'true' succession and inheritance before restoring the rightful order in a fashion that echoes the 'restoration' of paternal order under James. This goes hand in hand with the elimination of the sexually transgressive stepmother.

Similarly, Beaumont and Fletcher's drama *Cupid's Revenge* (1607) portrays a stepmother, Bacha, who is both amorous and manipulative; however, she sleeps with her stepson Leucippus before she marries his father. It is only once she becomes a stepmother that her actions turn malicious: once she realises her lover will become her stepson, she tells him she will do no more to him than a 'natural mother ought', but quickly reveals her ulterior motives (3.2.179).⁶⁷ Once she is alone, she divulges her true plan to destroy Leucippus and place her daughter as the king's heir:

BACHA: I do see already
 This prince, that did but now condemn me, dead:
 Yet will I never speak an evil word
 Unto his father of him, till I have
 Won a belief I love him: but I'll make
 His virtues his undoing, and my praises
 Shall be so many swords against his breast:
 Which, once performed, I'll make Urania,
 My daughter, the King's heir, and plant my issue
 In this large throne; nor shall it be withstood:
 They that began in lust must end in blood (3.2.389-399)

Her rhetoric weaves that of political ambition with the sexual lust she experienced for her soon-to-be stepson. Her final line, 'they that began in lust must end in blood' suggests an implicit relationship between the amorous and the manipulative; her relationship with Leucippus has almost, in a way, precipitated her plots against him. Although Bacha is clearly a lustful woman,

⁶⁷ Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Cupid's Revenge* in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon: Volume 2*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

here she becomes the epitome of the manipulative stepmother as well; she will play the part of a loving wife/mother, as she plots to ‘plant [her] issue in this large throne’. Not only are the manipulative and amorous narratives combined, but they are directly tied to a stepmother’s attempt to manipulate the succession. Bacha then, falls within both categories, and ultimately, she kills both her former lover/current stepson and herself. As she has already stated, their lustful relationship cannot end in anything but bloodshed. Like Levidulcia, she seems to feel some guilt, as she calls herself ‘the worst of evils’ and yet, she proclaims ‘as I [have] stood a queen, the same I will fall’ (5.4.308, 316). With her last words, she asserts herself as a queen, a ruler, rather than a mother, and separates herself from both her stepson and her daughter, her political power outweighing any maternal emotion.

It is becoming clear that the portrayal of the amorous stepmother is in many ways inseparable from that of the manipulative stepmother, and these representations vary from text to text. To conclude this section, I turn my attention to the most conventional, and therefore dangerous, amorous stepmother of the time: the Duchess in Thomas Middleton’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606). The Duchess’s first appearance, in keeping with the tradition, sees her easily expressing her desire for her stepson Spurio, who is her husband’s bastard son:

DUCHESS: Wast ever known step-Duchess was so mild,
 And calm as I? [...]
 Some second wife would do this, and dispatch
 Her double-loathed Lord at meat and sleep,
 Indeed ‘tis true an old man’s twice a child,
 Mine cannot speak, one of his single words,
 Would quite have freed my youngest dearest son
 From death ordinance, and have made him walk
 With a bold foot upon the thorny law,
 Whose prickles should bow under him but ‘tis not,
 And therefore wedlock forth shall be forgot.
 I’ll kill him in his forehead, hate there feed,
 That wound is deepest though it never bleed.
 And here comes he whom my heart points unto,

His bastard son, but my love's true begot (1.2.94-111)⁶⁸

There is no doubt here that she understands the forbidden nature of her feelings, even though she attempts a sort of twisted rationalisation. She begins her monologue by asserting herself as a 'mild' step-Duchess (an interesting choice of words, for she is defining herself as a surrogate Duchess, rather than surrogate mother; by class rather than gender), who could easily plot to kill her husband but does not intend to do so. She hates him because he has imprisoned her 'youngest dearest son', and so she is still a stepmother who acts on behalf of her biological child. However, she decides to enact her revenge in a different way; although she hates her husband, and although 'some second wife would do this', she reveals that she instead will 'kill him in his forehead' by making him a cuckold and sleeping with his son. In this way, she believes she is doing greater damage than if she attempted physical harm against him, revealing just how dangerous early modern society considered a woman's sexuality to be.

Spurio likewise easily consents to the Duchess's advances, not because they are particularly requited, but because he himself wants to enact revenge against his father for 'making' him a bastard. This reciprocation, whatever the motivation, is unusual – in Greek and Roman literature, there are no instances of a stepson requiting, let alone consenting, to the desire of his stepmother. In every version of the Phaedra myth, Hippolytus is defined by his firm rejection of his stepmother's advances. Not only that, but even in examples (such as in Greene's *Planetomachia*), where the stepson does feel an attraction towards his stepmother, he usually fights against these unnatural feelings. Spurio, by contrast, experiences no such moral dilemma, declaring, '[s]tepmother, I consent to thy desires, / I love thy mischief well, but I hate thee (1.2.191-192). His own hatred for his stepmother is overridden by his desire for revenge, and the knowledge

⁶⁸ Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy in Five Plays*, ed. by Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor (London: Penguin Classics, 1988).

that to sleep with his father's wife would hurt him in a way nothing else could. Both stepmother and stepson have ulterior motives beyond pure incestuous lust, but both realise to indulge in this lust is the best way to achieve their revenge.

It is not only the unnatural couple themselves that use their relationship for retribution; as part of his own plan for retribution, Vindice forces the Duke to watch his wife and son in a compromising position, the sight of which kills him. As opposed to the husband of Greene's *Planetomachia*, who punishes his wife and child himself, the Duke merely becomes a pawn in someone else's quest for vengeance. Somewhat ironically, it is during this moment Spurio expresses doubt, when he acknowledges it is 'bitter sweetness' that the 'best side to us is the worst side to heaven' (3.5.204-205). The Duchess tells him it is the Duke, 'thy doubtful father' that causes his guilt, but if he does not 'forget him', she will kill him (206, 209). In referring to Spurio's 'doubtful' father, she reminds him of his bastardy, and of his illegitimate position which motivates him to seek revenge. By reminding Spurio of his questionable paternity, the Duchess reminds him of his hatred, 'so deadly do I loathe him for my birth' (211). Spurio's resentment of his father is connected to his uncertain role within the family as a bastard, a position that is both biological and yet disruptive, both within the family and outside of it, and the Duchess recognises this hatred, as it is similar to her own position as a stepmother. Unlike Spurio, the Duchess has, in some ways, chosen her place within the family dynamic, yet she also chooses to stand outside it in engaging in a relationship with Spurio, removing herself even further from the traditional familial structure.

Bastards served their own particular threat to early modern English society, but the anxieties they raised were quite similar to those raised by the stepmother. As Michael Neill writes, these anxieties were presupposed by the bastard's ability to disrupt the 'proper line of paternity'

and his threat to replace the ‘true’ heir with a ‘false’ substitute.⁶⁹ Spurio touches upon these anxieties when he says, of his brother, ‘I’ll disinherit you’, giving voice to the very thing that makes him so dangerous (2.2.122). Both the bastard and the stepmother may destabilise the foundations upon which patriarchal culture is built; in doing so they threaten public order within a largely domestic context. They blur the line between public and private and turn issues of the family outward, and the sexual relationship between stepmother and bastard manifests this anxiety through its transgressive sexuality.

Both Spurio and the Duchess, then, work within the domestic sphere to exert influence on the political world in which they stand, for the most part, merely on the periphery. In their relationship and their respective positions both within and outside the home, they disturb an order that has worked to exclude them; they threaten not just the natural order of the family home, but the broader issues of inheritance and succession. The Duchess embodies both the amorous and manipulative stepmother, harnessing her sexuality in order to disrupt the traditional structures that, within the world of the play, are so precarious and open to destabilisation. Somewhat surprisingly, although she is ultimately banished from the court, she is seemingly allowed to live – but it is made clear she will no longer be able to manipulate or interfere in either the domestic or political world.⁷⁰

These depictions make it clear the fear of incest that surrounded the stepmother was inextricably tied up in the fear of their ability to interfere in matters of inheritance and succession. As stepmothers were constantly surrounded by the incest narrative, they managed to keep themselves out of circulation while simultaneously working within these systems to disrupt them.

⁶⁹ Michael Neill, ‘Bastardy, Counterfeiting, and Misogyny in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,’ *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36.2 (Spring 1996), 397-416, (389, 399).

⁷⁰ The Duchess’s last line comes in Act Five, Scene One, when she comes onstage with Spurio and discovers her husband is dead. Two scenes later, Lussurioso announces that ‘the foul, incontinent Duchess we have banish’d’ (5.3.7).

The connection between disruptive sexuality and disruption of inheritance becomes apparent; there is a corruption in both the family and the state, as the stepmother uses the power her position grants her to intervene in both. These anxieties always make the stepmother inherently troubling to both paternal and patriarchal power, and I would argue they cannot escape these fears that lead to their negative appearance in drama, as I will consider now by looking to the notion of the ‘good’ stepmother in early modern England.

V. The ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Stepmother in *Fortune by Land and Sea* and *Cymbeline*

Now that I have focused extensively on what constitutes a ‘bad’ stepmother and exactly what makes them dangerous, for this final section I turn my attention to how one may be able to be a ‘good’ stepmother. I think it is crucial to conclude by examining how through the good stepmother’s opposition we can better understand how extensive the anxieties raised by the bad stepmother were. To do this, I look to early modern advice books which discuss what a stepmother’s role was meant to entail, then turn to a play in which this ‘ideal’ stepmother is reflected, Heywood and Rowley’s *Fortune by Land and Sea*. Finally, I look to the other end of the spectrum, the irredeemable evil stepmother, in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, to show that both extremes relate back to the same, seemingly inescapable anxieties that are inherently tied up in the step-maternal role.

William Gouge, in his *Domesticall Duties*, writes that step-parents are to be ‘ranked in the first degree of those who are in the place of natural parents’ and that because marriage makes ‘man and wife one flesh’ they are bound to care for their spouses’ children from their previous marriage.⁷¹ Gouge stresses the bond between husband and wife and claims it is legitimate enough

⁷¹ William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties* (London, 1622), 489.

to allow the wife to act in the place of the ‘natural’ mother – in fact, if she does not treat them with maternal care, then she is going against her duties.

Juan Luis Vives likewise makes the point of a stepmother’s duty, and reinforces that they are not intrinsically wicked:

Again and again, women are exhorted to make every effort to keep their emotions and passions under control [...] stepmothers therefore, are not unjust and harsh except those who are tyrannized by their emotions, who do not exercise control over their feelings but rather are slaves to them⁷²

It is a woman’s ‘emotions and passions’ he argues, that have the potential to make them neglect their responsibilities as a stepmother, but stepmothers are not by their very nature unable to love their stepchildren. Vives also notes that ‘even if [a stepmother] has a heart of gold’ they will still be portrayed as the ‘cruel stepmother’ inspired by ‘rhetorical commonplace’ (Vives, 324). Women, according to most male writers of the time, were more susceptible to extreme emotions and to act irrationally as a result, and therefore may have in their mind presented a greater danger than a stepfather. Robert Cleaver echoes Vives; ‘[s]tep-mothers do more often offend, and faile in this dutie then men, by reason that their affections be stronger then men, and many times overrule them’.⁷³ However, a woman was nonetheless not assumed to act irrationally, and in theory, could prove to be a virtuous stepmother. Cleaver also notes that ‘God hath ordained [stepmothers] [...] to be to them a right and true mother’ otherwise she proves herself to be an unnatural woman (Cleaver, 119). But, I believe she is always surrounded by these ‘rhetorical [commonplaces]’ that Vives alludes to, and that the threat she generates can never truly disappear because it is always connected to the anxieties she raises.

⁷² Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman* (c. 1529), ed. and trans. by Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 284.

⁷³ Robert Cleaver, *A godly forme of houshold gouernment* (London, 1603), 118.

Thomas Heywood and William Rowley's Jacobean play *Fortune by Land and Sea* (1623) features a stepmother who subverts traditional stereotypes, and yet is nonetheless immersed in them throughout the text. It is another play overwhelmingly concerned with primogeniture and inheritance, so it is not surprising that it includes the figure who is most troublesome to these issues. Old Harding marries Anne, an act that worries his sons, no doubt fearful that she will 'rob' them of their inheritance. He tells his children that 'no child to her, can be to me no son', invoking respect of the father as reason to love a stepmother, and playing on fears that if they dishonour her, they will lose out on their inheritance (1.3.314).⁷⁴

Anne contradicts the trope of both the manipulative and lustful stepmother, and yet she finds that she nonetheless cannot escape from these perceptions. She defends her oldest stepson Philip to his father, after he removes him from his will upon discovering he has married a woman with no dowry. She implores him, '[c]hide him you may, but yet not cast him off', urging him not to disinherit his son (2.1.558). She explicitly interferes in matters of succession and primogeniture, but not to manipulate the father against the son – rather the exact opposite. She recognises she is acting against what would traditionally be expected of her, for she says:

ANNE: These think because I am their stepmother,
 their chiefest torture is most my content,
 when I protest, to see them this afflicted
 it grates my very heart-strings every hour:
 For though before their Fathers rathless eye,
 and their remorseless brothers, I seem stern,
 yet privately they taste of my best bounty (2.3.824-830)

The stepmother, it turns out, is kinder than the father, but she remarks upon the assumption that because she is their stepmother, they believe 'their chiefest torture is most [her] content'; if she acts harshly, it is only as a reflection of the father's expectation. The stereotype pervades her

⁷⁴ Thomas Heywood and William Rowley, *A Critical Edition of Fortune by Land and Sea by Thomas Heywood and William Rowley*, ed. by Herman Doh (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1980).

language, and the line that ‘yet privately they taste of my best bounty’ could be read as sexual, raising (not so) subtle underlying fears of an incestuous relationship, but is never realised.

In the end, Old Harding dies intestate, meaning that Philip, as the oldest son, automatically inherits his fortune under the laws of primogeniture despite having been disowned. He recognises the kindness of his stepmother, and so tells her, ‘[w]e have found you kind, / and shall now be willing to requite you’ (4.6.2037-2038). Doubtlessly because she defended him and his right to inherit his father’s fortune, he returns the favour and allows her to safely benefit from her late husband’s wealth. Anne is clearly the exception to the rule, made all the more obvious by the negative preconceptions that surround her character and her motivations; her stepsons do not initially trust her, for no reason other than the simple fact that she is their stepmother. It is only once she has made it clear she has no interest in stealing her stepson’s wealth, once she has actively defended them, that they may accept her as part of the ‘family’. Still, Old Harding dies at the end of the play, and so she does not actually remain a stepmother at all; she is removed from the bonds that connected her to her stepsons. The clear suspicion and mistrust that characterises this portrayal makes it clear she is the exception that proves the rule. Anne is still very much immersed in the troubles of the stepmother.

I will end this chapter by considering arguably the most archetypal stepmother in early modern drama to demonstrate the true ‘bad’ stepmother, and how even she can be read in a more complex manner than has been previously suggested; this is the nameless Queen from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* (1610). She shares many similarities with *Pericles*’ Dionyza, as she plots against her stepdaughter Imogen in an attempt to ensure that her biological son Cloten will inherit the crown from her second husband.⁷⁵ On appearance the Queen follows the traditional model of

⁷⁵ The similarities between Dionyza and *Cymbeline*’s Queen have been noted by previous critics: William Barry Throne makes the interesting observation that ‘[l]ike Dionyza in *Pericles*, the Queen is an agent of "anti-fertility",

the non-maternal stepmother, but I suggest, she is actually the only stepmother who is not surrounded by any spectres of incest or transgressive sexuality, troubling the attempt to fit these figures into any definitive narrative.

Like the other works I have examined, succession and inheritance play a major part in the anxieties raised by the Queen, as she similarly attempts to disrupt patrilineal lines of succession. More so in Shakespeare's play than any of the others, the anxieties are shown to be constructed specifically by the Queen's position as a stepmother, and her role as one is crucial to understanding her character and her position in *Cymbeline* as a whole. This is clear from her introduction, when she is almost immediately presented as a stepmother; in her conversation with her stepdaughter, she refers to herself as one and alerts the audience to the nature of the relationship between herself and Imogen:

QUEEN:

No, be assured you shall not find me, daughter,
After the slander of most stepmothers,
Evil-eyed unto you. You're my prisoner, but
Your jailer shall deliver you the keys
That lock up your restraint (1.1.71-75)⁷⁶

She calls Imogen her 'daughter' but makes it apparent they are not biologically related in the same sentence. While she insists she will not follow 'the slander of most stepmothers', she acknowledges the stereotype that surrounds these figures, and assumes the audience would be aware of a stepmother's negative reputation. Moreover, it soon becomes abundantly clear that, despite her affirmations to the contrary, the Queen fits the 'slander' of the manipulative stepmother perfectly, and neither Imogen nor the audience is fooled by her insistence that she is a loving

dedicated to undermining the position of the rightful heir and substituting her own graceless son on the throne'. 'Cymbeline: "Lopp'd Branches" and the Concept of Regeneration', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20.2 (Spring 1969), 143-159, (150).

⁷⁶ William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. by Roger Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

stepmother. As soon as she has left the stage, Imogen rages, '[h]ow fine this tyrant/[c]an tickle where she wounds!' (1.1.98-99). She binds the language of maternity and tyranny, and casts the Queen as a tyrant who has unlawfully asserted complete control over both the state and the family. This is the first, but not the last, instance in which such a connection is made – and the interweaving of political and familial rhetoric that runs throughout *Cymbeline* reminds us of accusations of Elizabeth's own tyranny, and the Queen's position within both the domestic and political/public sphere.

Imogen further refers to the Queen as a 'stepdame false' who has influenced her father and stolen away his affection for her. A Lord refers to Cymbeline as 'by thy stepdame governed', the use of political rhetoric again implying she has infiltrated both 'worlds' – she 'governs' Cymbeline as the head of state, and as the head of the family (2.1.55). Her attempts to wed Cloten and Imogen fail, as Imogen has already married Posthumus, and so her methods quickly and effortlessly turn nefarious. Like Dionyza in *Pericles*, the Queen plots against her stepdaughter to increase the fortune of her biological child, the key difference between the two characters being that Dionyza does so out of jealousy and spite because Marina is prettier and smarter than her daughter. The Queen, by contrast, is motivated by a more damaging desire for her son to inherit the throne from Cymbeline. Their motivations, while they lead to similar action, set the Queen apart and remind us this is a specific threat raised by the stepmother. She comments that with Imogen out of the way, she has 'the placing of the British crown' (3.5.65); in securing it for her biological son, she secures it for herself and assures it is her lineage and bloodline that will be passed down, not Cymbeline's. This is inherently threatening because it allows a woman to intervene in a patriarchally-dominated sphere, and – while Cloten is male – he is not biologically related to the

King, and thus a woman is disturbing patrilineal inheritance as she destabilises a public issue through her domestic position.

The Queen easily controls Cymbeline, who as a result treats Cloten as a biological son, and even endeavours to secure the union between his daughter and stepson. The Queen tells Cloten that he is ‘most bound to th’ King/[w]ho lets go by no vantages that may/[p]refer you to his daughter’ (2.3.43-45). While ‘prefer’ here is glossed as ‘recommend’, indicating that Cymbeline is giving every effort to match Imogen and Cloten, the language at the very least implies that, simultaneously, Cymbeline does not favour his biological child over his stepson, and sees no issue with making them equal in inheritance. He informs Cloten that Imogen must first forget about Posthumus, and then ‘she’s yours’ (42). The Queen’s control of Cymbeline is so complete that not only is he willing to force Imogen into marriage with her stepbrother (a union that would be regarded as incestuous), but he is willing to make his stepson equal to his biological child in the line of succession. In supporting this marriage, the spectres of incest surround the potential match, although it is never explicitly stated, but the Queen herself is not entwined in these incestuous connotations.

It is important here to note it is not only the Queen who presents such a threat to natural, patriarchal succession in the play; Belarius, meanwhile, has stolen Cymbeline’s two sons in an attempt to ‘bar [him] of succession’. He, like the Queen, describes his motivation specifically in terms of the succession of the crown, and expresses a similar desire to interfere with these traditional lines of inheritance:

BELARIUS:

How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature!
 These boys know little they are sons to th’King,
 Nor Cymbeline dreams that they are alive.
 They think they are mine, and though trained up thus
 Meanly

I'th' cave wherein they bow, their thoughts do hit
 The roofs of palaces, and nature prompts them
 In simple and low things to prince it much [...]
 At three and two years old I stole these babes,
 Thinking to bar thee of succession as
 Thou reft'st me of my lands. Euriphile,
 Thou wast their nurse: they took thee for their mother,
 And every day do honour to her grave.
 Myself, Belarius, that am Morgan called,
 They take for a natural father (3.3.79-85, 101-107)

He is, nonetheless, aware that however much he might attempt to hide 'his' children's true paternity, it is always difficult to conceal 'the sparks of nature' that mark Guiderius and Arviragus as Cymbeline's true sons. He mentions Euriphile who has died before the events of the play, as their 'nurse' who they believed to be their mother. While he maintains the distinction between the natural and surrogate, they 'take' Belarius for their 'natural father' and blur the lines between the two. It is not, then, only the Queen who proves a threat to the passage of the throne between father and rightful heir/son, and yet it is the Queen who is punished for it, who is painted as the wicked manipulator incapable of love for either her stepdaughter or her husband. In fact, it could even be argued that Belarius does more to disrupt and trouble the succession, as in taking Cymbeline's biological sons off to raise as his own, he leaves a woman, Imogen (or a non-biological son), in line to inherit the throne of Britain.

The fact that the Queen is the one who is punished, while Belarius is forgiven, speaks volumes and demonstrates it is a surrogate mother, and not a surrogate father, who is perceived as an unnegotiable threat. Belarius, as a male father-figure, can be assimilated into Cymbeline's family – although he bears no biological relationship, Imogen may still tell him 'you are my father too' (5.4.401). Surrogate fathers may exist in the world of *Cymbeline*, but there is no room for surrogate, or even biological, mothers at all. The Queen has her death reported by Cornelius, along with a narration of her true evil nature and intentions. Like Dionyza, she disappears, and her fate

is narrated by another character, revealing how she planned to ‘work/[h]er son into th’adoption of the crown’— again, the language of surrogacy and politics are mixed to highlight the threat she demonstrated to both of these structures (5.4.56). Cloten, through his mother’s machinations, would ‘adopt’ the crown, just as one might adopt a child who is not their own, and over whom (in the minds of early modern England) they would have no legal claim.

Cymbeline differs from *Pericles* in that the biological mother is not re-negotiated into the family, and in fact, women are eliminated from both the domestic and political order. Although inheritance is stabilised and ensured through male lineage, the maternal role remains unfulfilled, as Cymbeline takes it upon himself to embody both the maternal and paternal role. In a play that has run rampant with what Janet Adelman refers to as ‘the deep anxiety of the mother-infant bond’ it is not surprising that Shakespeare makes the choice to limit both female and, specifically, maternal power at the end of the play.⁷⁷ Cymbeline, free from the control of the wicked stepmother, can now ‘produce a family in which women are not half-workers’ and create a familial unit that does not risk disruption by women at all (Adelman, 202). Even Imogen, who is the only female present on stage at the play’s conclusion, is still dressed as a boy, and ‘never regains the visual trappings of her femininity’.⁷⁸ With the Queen’s offstage death, Imogen disguised as Fidele and safely married off to Posthumus, and his biological sons restored to succession, *Cymbeline* appears to neatly wrap up any lingering anxieties raised by a woman’s potential to interrupt patrilineal succession. In fact, *Cymbeline* has established a family in which men are the generators, both as head of the family/state and as actual birth-givers; in declaring he is a ‘mother to the birth of three’

⁷⁷ Janet Adelman, ‘Masculine Authority and the Maternal Body: The Return to Origins in *Cymbeline*’ in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare’s Plays, ‘Hamlet’ to ‘The Tempest’* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 200-219, (202).

⁷⁸ Jodi Mikalachki, ‘The Masculine Romance of Roman Britain: Cymbeline and Early Modern English Nationalism’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46.3 (Autumn 1995), 301-322, (321).

Cymbeline is taking away the role of the mother entirely, both biological and surrogate (5.4.370). His insistence on paternalism, of man as both father and mother, can be traced back to James's own attempts to re-establish the primacy of the patriarch in both the family and the state. In fact, I would say that *Cymbeline*, of all the plays I have considered in this chapter, is most relevant to James's attempt to portray himself as the restorer of order in the face of the upset caused by Elizabeth. Although James emphasised his own marriage and biological heirs in contrast to Elizabeth, in many ways he – like Cymbeline – attempted to construct himself as the sole generator of a newly joined England and Scotland. The King alone is the 'naturall father' and 'kindly master' of his people and, as he declares upon his accession, 'I am the husband, and all the whole isle is my lawfull wife'.⁷⁹ James makes himself both the devoted husband and father, and yet at the same time he needs to separate himself so that he may stand alone, without female intervention, as the head of state and husband of a newly united kingdom.

VI. Conclusions

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, by examining an assortment of portrayals of stepmothers in early modern English drama, we can observe that these women were not simply a trope utilised to symbolise any 'bad', dangerous woman; they were a particular figure that parodied and threatened patriarchal structures in very unique ways. Stepmothers served a specific purpose, as they reflected particular anxieties relevant to the early modern period, they were not merely a stereotype carried over from the classical tradition and the portrayals developed and transformed even within the period itself. I have not discussed these plays in any real chronological order (other than between Elizabeth and James), nor have I really divided them into the expected 'manipulative'

⁷⁹ James Stuart, *Basilikon Doron* (Edinburgh, 1599), 18.

James Stuart, 'The speech of King James I. to both Houses of Parliament upon his accession to, and the happy union of both the crowns of England and Scotland', 22nd March 1603.

and ‘amorous’ narratives, because I believe these traditions have limited our understanding of how stepmothers actually existed in early modern England.

Under Elizabeth, stepmothers were a prevalent fixture in the cultural imagination, as Elizabeth’s own use of maternal rhetoric saw her face criticism as she was surrounded by the language of stepmother-hood in attempts to delegitimise her rule. In *Dido, Queen of Carthage* and *The Misfortunes of Arthur* we are subsequently confronted with two subtle depictions of stepmothers who are both, to a degree, portrayed in a sympathetic fashion while still possessing qualities of the stereotypes that surround them. Both Dido and Guenevora, in their own ways, are shown as women who generate some degree of pity, whose (somewhat tragic) downfall is a direct result of their position as a stepmother, or an almost-stepmother. I have suggested this is directly related to Elizabeth’s own portrayal and a hesitance to create an equation between her and stepmothers, along with an understanding of the implied association between the queen and the role of a stepmother.

By contrast, their appearance under James was not only far more abundant, but their portrayals became greatly exaggerated and grotesque. We cannot say with any certainty if there was a connection between James as monarch and the increased depiction of stepmothers on the stage, but there, at the very least, appears to be some relationship between how they came to be depicted and James’s own attempts to restore patriarchal and paternal order in both the domestic and political realms. Without the concern for the potentially unflattering connection to Elizabeth, stepmothers could appear in the theatre as embellished, their role as stepmothers highlighted and focused upon, while remaining complex figures who did not simply fit in the two narratives that have been assigned to them.

Stepmothers, as they were portrayed specifically in early modern drama, expose a patriarchal fear of women who can occupy space in both the political and domestic spheres, and use that position to interfere in the public and political issues of inheritance and succession. Although the texts I have studied in this chapter differ in a myriad of ways, what they all have in common is a focus, in one way or another, on matters of inheritance and lineage, and a stepmother's ability to disrupt these traditional structures. Inheritance was typically seen as a masculine dominated area, and so a woman's intervention in these spaces was always inherently dangerous. As these issues became more complex in early modern England, and as James adopted the language of paternal inheritance to justify his own rule, they found representation through the figure of the stepmother. They suggest a connection between the stepmother's transgressive sexuality, often expressed through an incestuous relationship with her stepson, and her continuous potential to create instability.

Like the foster and adoptive mothers I discussed in the previous chapters, stepmothers and their portrayals reveal not just a particular space where women could find a certain degree of agency, but they also demonstrate just how dynamic and performative the maternal role truly was and continues to be. These performances, then, become more easily readable and readily apparent through the dramatic works that feature these roles. Although I have not really commented upon it in this chapter, underlying the fears surrounding the stepmother, as with all those that seek to embody surrogate maternal roles, is the fear they will expose just how unstable motherhood is and how easily it can alter. Blended households, a common occurrence in early modern England, suggest that the idea of family was always open to change, and stepmothers faced such a seemingly insurmountable task; they were expected to love their stepchildren as they would a biological child, while understanding that to do so would present its own problems. They became a figure that

reflected the anxieties over inheritance and succession, perceived as such a masculine-dominated space, and the transgressive sexuality of a woman who could manipulate public affairs from within the domestic order – a position that could be embodied by no one other than the stepmother.

Chapter Three: ‘For being not mad, but sensible of grief’: The Maternal Identity in Response to Child Death and Infertility in Early Modern England

I. Introduction



Figure B: The tomb of Alexander and Anne Denton in Hereford Cathedral

Anne Denton died in childbirth in 1566 at the age of eighteen, and her new-born baby died with her. Her husband, Alexander Denton, went on to remarry and died ten years later in 1576. Figure B displays the tomb in which Anne is buried, located in Hereford Cathedral, which depicts Anne and Alexander alongside their child.¹ The child (a girl, also named Anne), was less than a day old when she died, but is nonetheless granted space right next to her mother, implying that she was a vital member of the family unit despite barely being part of it, as well as an indication of Anne's maternal identity. Yet her placement in her mother's robes suggests that the child has a strong

¹ Oddly, Alexander is not buried alongside Anne; he later remarried and was subsequently buried in All Saint's Church in Hillesden. Historical England, <https://historicalengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/item/BB056997> [Accessed 1 November 2021].

impact on the memorialised identity of Anne as a mother.² In receiving tribute as a mother, and by memorialising a child who died at birth, the tomb demonstrates that children were not just remembered, but they were mourned and grieved by their parents.³ Most crucially for the purposes of this thesis, this monument reveals the cultural assumption that motherhood, as it was defined within early modern hierarchies, was a crucial aspect of womanhood, perpetually a part of a woman's identity even if they lost their child. The child's memorialisation helps us push back against the notion that childhood was not an important stage of life, as well as the idea that a woman can only be considered a mother when she is actively performing a maternal role. It is crucial to consider both child death and infertility to understand the cultural construction of motherhood; it is at this point we must turn from a discussion of non-biological motherhood to consider how biological mothers were likewise able to parody the role.

As I demonstrated in my first two chapters, the female body was always a contested space on which anxieties surrounding not only the inherent threat of the transgressive woman, but the numerous different contexts for that transgression could be explored. Women who embodied the maternal role through non-biological methods were dangerous not simply because they threatened traditional ideas about motherhood, but because they could disrupt other hierarchies that were essential to patriarchal society, particularly related to issues of inheritance and political affairs. Having discussed the representation of such alternative mother-figures in early modern England and the ways in which they signified those anxieties, I now turn my attention to a different kind of alternative mother: women who did experience biological motherhood, but whose experience was

² Katie Barclay, 'The early modern family' in *Early Modern Childhood: An Introduction*, ed. by Anna French (London: Routledge, 2019), 67-127, (80).

³ Judith W. Hurtig writes about the increased number of memorial tombs dedicated, specifically, to women who died in childbirth, indicating an increased social concern with such fatalities. 'Death in Childbirth: Seventeenth-Century English Tombs and Their Place in Contemporary Thought', *The Art Bulletin* 65.4 (Dec 1983), 603-615.

disrupted or impeded by infant death or infertility. In examining a range of literary and historical figures I demonstrate that it was not only foster, adoptive, or stepmothers who could prove threatening to an established patriarchal hierarchy; women who actively pursued biological motherhood could trouble the same structures, albeit in different ways. These women did not reject motherhood, or even the cultural idea of motherhood; rather, they are women who actively sought to become mothers, or women who were mothers, but faced complications in fully assuming the role. Through this examination, I aim to help us better understand what exactly it meant to embody the maternal identity: who is a mother, when do they become a mother, and do they ever stop being one? And, perhaps more importantly, who decides their right to this maternal identification – the women themselves or the patriarchal society in which they live?

In this chapter I am going to focus on these two major disruptions to biological maternity: child death and infertility. Both women who lost children and those who could not reproduce for medical reasons were in some ways perceived as being unable to live up to their responsibility as women. I have already explored how various genres of writing worked to cast marriage and motherhood as an obligation, and this obligation increased with the birth of Protestantism as the veneration of motherhood/childbirth subsequently decreased.⁴ As the fear of the ‘bad’, monstrous mother (whom I discuss in the following chapter) gained traction, the need to control and regulate a woman’s role gained greater importance. As Patricia Crawford succinctly argues, ‘[t]he Protestant Reformation enhanced men’s need to control women and [their] power to do so’ (*Women and Religion in England*, 43). Protestant religious figures touted the notion that women

⁴ Prior to the Reformation, women were still expected to become mothers, but motherhood was more respected and honoured and childbearing was seen as a sacred event involving the use of relics and saints; this is demonstrated in the decline of the cult of Mary which I discussed in the introduction of this thesis. There has been disagreement between Catholics and Protestants as to which religion was more ‘liberating’ for women, but there is no doubt that the need to control a woman’s body and behaviour increased as the role of the patriarch was heightened and ‘all women’s social conduct came under scrutiny’. Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 43.

were made for motherhood: the Puritan preacher Thomas Adams references the creation of Adam and Eve, noting Eve was created to be a companion to Adam and '[f]or the propagation of the world' as she is a 'fruitful vine'.⁵ William Whately likewise notes in a wedding sermon simply that the 'woman is made to be fruitfull'.⁶

Both Adams and Whately imply that the woman's duty is to be fruitful, to bear children, but what of the raising of those children? As discussed in Chapter One, a mother's duty was to give birth to children, but also, crucially, to nurture and educate them. I explore the failure to properly raise one's children in the following chapter, but here I focus on the woman who is unable to fulfil the first function, that of childbearing, either through infertility or the death of their child. As the tomb of Anne Denton tells us, not only was there a growing importance placed on a woman's role as mother, but there was some context for considering a woman to be a mother as soon as she bore a child. While truly virtuous motherhood could only result from nurturing and educating a child, the maternal identity could form well before then; women were always considered potential mothers, certainly once they began menstruation, and so the failure to fulfil the biological maternal role was necessarily a cause for concern. It is thus, I believe, important to examine such women as threatening not just for their prevention of the perpetuation of patriarchal bloodlines, but their ability to similarly parody the maternal role and in the process expose cultural fears about a woman's ability to disrupt other societal expectations surrounding religious, political, and economic issues. Turning from non-biological motherhood, I now make the argument that our

⁵ Thomas Adams, *Meditations Upon the Creed in The Works of Thomas Adams, Vol. III, Containing Sermons from texts in the New Testament, and meditations on the creed* (Edinburgh: James Nicholl, 1862), 138.

⁶ William Whately, *A bride-bush* (London, 1617), 44.

Patricia Crawford notes Protestant preachers particularly stressed that 'woman was created for maternity, and in caring for her children she was serving the Lord'. Patricia Crawford, *Blood, Bodies and Families* (New York, Routledge, 2004), 84.

understanding of alternative maternity must also include those who sought or embodied biological motherhood but were unable to live up to the ideals that society placed upon them.

The topics of both child death and infertility have received renewed focus from scholars in recent years. Much of the earlier scholarship on child death concentrated on the emotional response of the parents, and was primarily concerned with questioning whether or not they felt grief at their loss. There has been the persistent narrative, championed by Phillipe Ariès in his 1960 work *Centuries of Childhood*, which argues that ‘childhood’ as a concept did not really exist in the medieval or early modern period, and that there was far less attachment between parent and child because children died so frequently.⁷ This perspective has been echoed by those such as Lawrence Stone, who argued that parents were detached from their children and therefore relatively unaffected by their deaths.⁸ However, in more recent times many have criticised this view: Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, in *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (1994), is one of the most noteworthy. She sets out to disprove Stone’s argument by outlining how childhood was a distinct period in one’s life, and how parents’ perceived stoicism towards their children was not necessarily a reflection of a lack of care or affection.⁹

Much of the discussion around child death in early modern England has subsequently focused on how parents responded to the loss, and there has been far less written on what happens to parents, and specifically to the mother, after the child’s death. Recent works have largely

⁷ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (Bournemouth: Pimlico, 1996). Ariès’ work focused on childhood in France over the centuries, but it was translated into English two years after its original publication and become the defining, if outdated, work on the subject. In a 1998 review of Ariès’ work, Hugh Cunningham defends Ariès, claiming the view that childhood did not exist is the result of a translation error from the French; nonetheless, it remains the thesis Ariès is most known for, and what subsequent critics have focused upon. Hugh Cunningham, ‘Histories of Childhood’, *The American Historical Review* 103.4 (October 1998), 1195-1208.

⁸ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Penguin, 1990). See, in particular, 70

⁹ She notes that other scholars who dispute Stone’s claims include Alan Macfarlane, Keith Wrightson, Linda Pollock, and Ralph Houlbrooke, among others. Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 6.

accepted the belief that parents did, in fact, grieve over their children, and this perspective has influenced all subsequent work on the subject.¹⁰ Pamela Hammon's 1999 article is one of the few works which takes as its focus the maternal response to child death, and the potential rhetorical agency it may grant these women.¹¹ More recently, Katie Barclay's and Kimberly Reynolds' *Death, Emotion and Childhood in Premodern England* (2017) acknowledges that the conversation around whether parents mourned their children has largely been resolved, and we now acknowledge that 'displays of emotion are formed by culture' (Barclay and Reynolds, 3). Examinations of such displays of emotion is naturally where the conversation should turn next, and in this chapter, I am going to focus specifically on the identity of the mother after a child's death. While scholars have discussed a mother's response to the death of her child, they have not extensively examined what becomes of these women, and how they can prove to be troubling figures beyond the world of motherhood.

The study of early modern emotion is a rich one, and there is far too much work to cover satisfactorily in this introduction. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the most important aspect of the field to recognise is the understanding that emotions were themselves considered to be a spectacle and a performance.¹² As Katie Barclay writes, 'even parts of the human performance that appear "innate" or "biological", and emotion here is an important example, are performed practices'.¹³ Rather than seeing emotions or the expression of these emotions as a natural state, they were rather viewed as a disruptive force that was intended to visually draw attention to its

¹⁰ Noteworthy examples include Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynold's *Representations of Childhood Death*, Robert Woods' *Children Remembered: Responses to Untimely Death in the Past*, and Hannah Newton's *The Sick Child in Early Modern England, 1550-1770*, all published this century.

¹¹ Pamela Hammons, 'Despised Creatures: The Illusion of Maternal Self-Effacement in Seventeenth Century Child Loss Poetry', *ELH* 66.1 (Spring 1999), 25-49.

¹² Patricia Simons, 'Emotion' in *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*, ed. by Susan Broomhall (London: Routledge, 2016), 78-81, (80). Broomhall's edited work provides a good basic but comprehensive introduction to the field of emotion studies.

¹³ Katie Barclay, 'Performance and performativity' in *Early Modern Emotions*, 53-56, (53).

expressor. The ways in which grief was (publicly) expressed by these women can thus reveal a lot about how these women and motherhood in general were constructed and how they may be dangerous, beyond merely its implications on maternity. Furthermore, if emotion is formed through its ‘articulation’, then our understanding of it must be shaped through historical sources as well as drama, both of which encompass the ‘social practice’ of emotion, the form through which they are not only performed, but created (Barclay, 54).

The significance of the performance of emotion is not only crucial when speaking about child death; women who experienced infertility might express similar sentiments of grief or dissatisfaction. Discussions around infertility have become more common in recent years, but many have focused on infertility as a medical rather than a social concern, although these contexts are always connected. In this decade, there has been an increase in studies of infertility, particularly from Jennifer Evans and Daphna Oren-Magidor. Both women have written numerous works on the subject, most notably Evans’ 2014 book *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England* and Oren-Magidor’s 2017 *Infertility in Early Modern England*.¹⁴ Oren-Magidor sums up the discourse well at the beginning of her book when she writes that infertility was ‘not solely a personal misfortune’ but rather a source of ‘social and cultural anxiety’ (*Infertility*, 2). Both Oren-Magidor and Evans comment upon the social implications of this failed mother; Oren-Magidor writes that infertility ‘distanced couples, and especially women, from the early modern ideals of body, faith and family’ and in the process exposed ‘extant anxieties about society and gender, masculinity and femininity’ (3). Similarly, Evans comments on the ‘anxieties’ infertility created around ‘cultural and social ideals about the social roles of men and women’ and the ‘institutions

¹⁴ Other works include, by Evans, “‘They are called Imperfect men’: Male Infertility and Sexual Health in Early Modern England’ (2016) and by Oren Magidor, ‘From Anne to Hannah: Religious Views of Infertility in Post-Reformation England’ (2015) and ‘Literate Laywomen, Male Medical Practitioners and the Treatment of Fertility Problems in Early Modern England’ (2016).

of marriage and the family' (*Aphrodisiacs*, 7). Both authors focus their discussion on how infertility generated anxiety over these cultural norms, but they do not consider the implications of childlessness outside the confines of maternity.

Women who experienced such impediments to traditional maternity were able to embody motherhood to a degree, but not entirely, thus complicating and disrupting the process without intending to. They live in a space that does not truly exist; between motherhood and its non-existent opposite, for motherhood does not operate on a binary. To perceive it as such is to limit our understanding of a woman's position within early modern society, and one that we must make sure to recognise. There can be no opposite, no true 'non-mother', just as there can be no real woman/not woman dichotomy. This liminal status as an unsuccessful mother, paradoxically, empowers them and grants them access to a rhetoric to speak out in a manner other women could not. As a result, they raise anxieties about a woman's ability to disrupt the structures upon which society was built; not just domestic institutions of marriage and children, but religious, political, and economic structures as well.

Terminology is important to the work I do in this chapter. For the purposes of my discussion, there are several terms that are important to adequately define: infertile, sterile, barren, and impotent. It is quite easy to interchange the first three terms, as their modern-day definitions tend to overlap.¹⁵ This was true of early modern definitions as well, largely due to the prominence of the 'one sex body' theory; sterile and barren were terms that could be used to refer to both men and women.¹⁶ Jakob Rüff, in *The Expert Midwife* (1554), claims that 'sterility' or 'barrennesse' is

¹⁵ According to the OED, 'infertile' can be defined as 'unproductive', 'barren', and sterile; sterile as 'barren, not producing fruit or offspring' which is 'chiefly said of females' while 'barren' is the only term with a distinct gendered definition: 'of a woman: Bearing no children, without issue, childless'. 'infertile, *adj.*', 'sterile, *adj.* 1' and 'barren, *adj.* and *n.*, *A.adj.* 1', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ The one-sex model refers to the Classical idea perpetuated during the Renaissance that women were merely imperfect men. This has been most famously discussed by Thomas Lacquer in his *Making sex*, where he discusses

not only a 'disability' found in women, but 'in men also', and Philip Barrough (1590) notes that barrenness can be caused by either the 'womans part' or the 'mans part'.¹⁷ While there were several expressions that one could use to describe a man or woman who could not produce children, infertility is a term that did not get much usage in early modern England, often replaced with 'unfruitful'.¹⁸ Nonetheless, as it is used as a general term by contemporary scholars to describe all those who failed to conceive, it is one that I, for the sake of clarity, utilise when referring to the general lack of conception within a married couple.

However, it is important to note there was a gendered distinction coming to be made over the course of the early modern period between being infertile/barren and being impotent, although it was not a completely discrete separation. As William Gouge wrote, there is a 'great difference betwixt impotencie and barrennesse', namely that impotency may be discerned by 'outward sensible signes' while barrenness only by 'want of child bearing', and impotency is 'incurable' while barrenness is not.¹⁹ Further, he claims those who are impotent were '*borne Eunuchs from their mothers wombe*', implying it is only men who may be afflicted (Gouge, 182). Jennifer Evans comments on this transition, noting the connection between barrenness and the womb became 'more pronounced as the period progressed'.²⁰ While these were not wholly distinct terms, this slow but sure transformation is important to bear in mind as it is crucial to understanding how and

the notion there was, in actuality, no 'female' and 'no sharp boundary between the sexes'. *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35.

¹⁷ Jakob Rüff, *The Expert Midwife* (London, 1637), 11 and Philip Barrough, *The methode of phisicke* (London, 1583), 157.

¹⁸ John Florio's *A Worlde of Wordes*, for example, equates 'infertile' with 'vnfruitfull'. *A Worlde of Wordes*, ed. by Hermann W. Haller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

¹⁹ William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties* (London, 1622), 182.

²⁰ Jennifer Evans, 'It is caused of the womans part or of the mans Part': The Role of Gender in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Sexual Dysfunction in Early Modern England', *Women's Historical Review* 20.3 (2011), 439-457, (443).

why infertility particularly, and all its connotations, came to be seen as a site of anxiety over the specifically female body.

Secondly, ‘infertility’ could refer to more than just the lack of conception: as Daphna Oren-Magidor remarks, fertility issues could also refer to ‘recurring miscarriages and stillbirths, as well as recurring premature labors’ which resulted in the death of the infant shortly after birth (*Infertility*, 5-6). Infertility can, broadly speaking, refer to any condition that ‘hindered a couple from having viable children who could survive outside the womb’ (6). My discussions of infertility can be applied to this more general definition, as they all lead to a similar result; namely, a noticeable lack of children. However, I focus my attention on the failure to conceive, as I believe this leads to the most productive discussions with regards to how these women were treated and constructed, and serves as a helpful counterpoint to the discussions of child death which form the first part of this chapter. It is this struggle to conceive entirely which provokes the most discourse, and which serves as the most anxiety-inducing disruption to the traditional patriarchal family.

It is also important to consider the term ‘childhood’ and what exactly that encompassed. It is not a simple question, and it does not have a straightforward answer. As Anna French tells us in *Early Modern Childhood*, it was a debate that puzzled early modern society as it might puzzle us today. French reminds us that childhood was so often defined, not by children themselves, but by adults, and so in many ways the discussions around childhood tell us more about their parents than the actual children. We should thus understand childhood as a nuanced concept, and I consider mothers who experienced the loss of their children at various ages. I agree with French’s view that childhood largely constituted a ‘dependency upon adults’ and this could sometimes last through the late teens or early twenties.²¹ The children I examine in this chapter all fit this definition in that

²¹ Anna French, ed. *Early Modern Childhood: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2019), 35.

they rely on their parents, and specifically their mothers, regardless of their age in the text, and I therefore justify examining these children at different levels of maturity. Further, regardless of the child's age, I focus on the mother's response to child death more than the death of the child itself; it is more important to consider the maternal response to loss, as I am focused on the identity of the mother, rather than the child.

As with the non-biological mothers who comprised the first half of this thesis, I focus my analysis on dramatic texts which portray these types of alternative mothers, suggesting that drama is again the genre where the tensions between cultural norms and lived reality are best exposed. In this chapter, I consider primarily two tragedies that deal with the loss of a child, and one city comedy which tackles infertility. That tragedy and death go together seems obvious, and the (traditionally masculine) genre of revenge tragedy will prove especially important, as I consider how women respond to the deaths of their children and the way they do or do not avenge these deaths, and how such action/inaction grants them agency. Conversely, city comedies serve as a fitting genre for issues of infertility, as they often function as a 'satirical' portrayal of 'middle-class life and manners'.²² However, as I will interrogate, although *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is definitively a city comedy, and on the surface evokes laughter for its treatment of infertility, the issue and its ultimate resolution in the play would have, in reality, been perceived as no laughing matter. These genres, and drama in general, allow for female characters to respond to loss in a transgressive manner, to make spectacles of grief, loss, and the lack or absence of children. The public and visual nature of performance is of particular importance in this chapter; the extravagance of drama leads to indulgent displays of mourning, and contrasts sharply with how

²² 'city comedy' in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-206>
 [Accessed 6 July 2021].

grief is portrayed in other mediums, such as the maternal mourning poetry I consider in the following section.

Bearing all this in mind, I first consider the ‘appropriate’ Protestant response to the death of a child by discussing women who wrote poetry following the death of their children, demonstrating the acceptable Protestant emphasis on resignation and self-blame in the wake of the Reformation, and what this tells us about how maternal identity was constructed. Following this, I examine a dramatic character who, by contrast, actively works against these traditional responses: Constance in Shakespeare’s *King John* (1596). I argue that Constance becomes transgressive through her passionate mourning and rejection of Protestant values, as well as her vocal rhetoric against male characters following the death of her son and insistence on continuing to identify as mother.

After thinking about the religious anxieties raised by maternal mourning, I turn to the mothers in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (1593) who similarly deal with the loss of their children, but whose mourning takes the form of action. They too refuse to passively accept the fate of their offspring, using their position at court to adopt the role of avenger and enact payback on those they blame for their loss – and their actions impact their roles as political figures. I again suggest it is only through ‘losing’ their identities as both mothers and royals that they can disrupt the political climate of the play and thus renegotiate their communal grief and mourning into agency.

Following a consideration of the effects of child loss, I shift my attention to infertility, first examining it as a medical condition that was discussed in both religious and medical discourse. Like child death, infertility was meant to be treated with acceptance and the understanding that everything was God’s will, and, like *King John* and *Richard III*, Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (c. 1613) presents a woman who fails to abide by those parameters. Lady Kix

and her husband Oliver Kix deal with their lack of children from a purely economic position, spending large sums of money on cures and failing to produce a child that would help them sustain their household. Ultimately, I argue that although we learn it is in fact the husband who is infertile, it is nevertheless the woman who finds herself shouldering the blame. However, through her deception she retains agency even as she comes to fulfil her maternal responsibility within marriage.

All of the women in the three plays I examine in this chapter, to some extent, are unable to live up to patriarchal expectations, but this in turn allows them to transgress boundaries of religious, political, and economic structures, becoming the site upon which the expression of such anxieties is written. I consider the various factors and these women's negotiation of their maternal identity, with particular attention to how their portrayals are implicitly connected to the threat they present for their inability, for whatever reason, to completely assume the maternal role. Such an examination, I suggest, will significantly enhance how we understand the function these mothers serve in dramatic texts. These women reveal the instabilities and uncertainties of not just maternity, but religion, politics, and economics, while giving them the ability to negotiate a space for agency, rhetoric, and their own self-identification.

II. The 'Bad' Protestant and the Mourning Mother

a. Mourning in Maternal Loss Poetry

The twenty-second act of the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563, enacted to summarise the beliefs of the newly formed Church of England, proclaims:

The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoration as well as images as of relics, and also invocation of saints, is a fond thing, vainly

invented and grounded upon no warranty of scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God²³

Under the new Church, excessive displays of worship were forbidden, and these new codes (particularly the remission of the belief in purgatory) meant that mourning was significantly reduced and interactions with the dead no longer permitted.²⁴ Protestantism maintains that everyone's fate is predestined, meaning intercession on behalf of the dead becomes unnecessary. This belief in predestination eliminated the need for large-scale and extravagant interventions on their behalf, and in fact, to continue to do so was to fail under the tenets of the new religion (Döring, 9). The removal of this public mourning demonstrates how, in some ways, grief is itself performative. Even if the emotion is genuine, the enactment of that grief becomes a spectacle put on in public; as David Cressy succinctly writes, grief is something 'people felt, but also something they performed'.²⁵

Prior to the Reformation it was common – even expected – that people would publicly mourn the dead; this was typically done with extravagant funerals and memorials. It was believed that such unrestrained performances of mourning were essential to ensuring that the dead were properly memorialised: as Rist examines, old-fashioned memorials in the Christian tradition were characterised by what he refers to as 'social performance' in which expressions of grief were considered more powerful the more performative they were.²⁶ It seems, then, mourning made a fitting subject for dramatic performance, but this changes with the Reformation, and grief becomes less about its performativity and more

²³ Quoted in *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: A Sourcebook*, ed. by David Cressy and Lori Anne Ferrell (London: Routledge, 1996), 65.

²⁴ Tobias Döring, *Performances of Mourning in Shakespearean Theatre and Early Modern Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 9.

²⁵ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 393.

²⁶ Thomas Rist, *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 4.

about ‘restricting sadness to repentance’ (Rist, 25). The proper remembrance was, as Scottish minister William Guild writes, a ‘declaration’ of ‘love of the dead’ alongside an understanding the deceased were ‘in bliss already’ and so they did not need to be, and should not be, excessively grieved.²⁷ Anyone who performed unnecessary grief in the wake of the Reformation, then, could be seen as failing to abide by one of the central beliefs of Protestantism. Rather, the appropriate form of mourning was an acknowledgement of loss, but an acceptance that it was God’s will and there was nothing to be done; this is what we see reflected in the maternal mourning poetry of the time, although with it comes a certain amount of dissatisfaction.

Mourning itself was a gendered act, and the distinction between an emotional female mourning and a more stoic, rational male mourning was promoted following the Reformation. Feminine mourning took on the characteristics of emotional volatility and a failure to control oneself to contain mourning to an appropriate degree. In a funeral lament to Frances, the Duchess Dowager of Richmond and Lenox, Abraham Darcie writes that while ‘no sorrow is a signe of a brutish state’, too much emotion ‘proves one effeminate’.²⁸ Increasingly, this overly expressive mourning becomes associated with not just Catholicism, but with a dangerous femininity where feminine sorrow is portrayed as ‘violent, and immoderate’.²⁹ However, as Patricia Phillippy argues in her book on mourning in post-Reformation England, maternal mourning held a unique place within Protestant culture, wherein it was perceived as a site of ‘affective and emotional license’

²⁷ William Guild, *Ignus fatuus. Or, the elf-fire of purgatorie* (London, 1625), 47.

²⁸ Abraham Darcie, *Funerall Tears* (London, 1624), lines 38-39.

²⁹ Patricia Phillippy, *Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1. Phillippy notes that male reformers cast Catholic lamentation as ‘excessive and feminine’ while a measured mourning is the proper ‘masculine expression of grief’ (9).

that allowed for a ‘suspension of orthodox responses to loss’ that is particularly useful for male authors (Phillippy, 110). Indeed, Phillippy focuses much of her work on how male writers use the latent power of maternal mourning for their own purposes, but in this chapter, I want to connect the notion of an ‘unorthodox’ expression of maternal mourning with the limits and constraints imposed by Protestant expectations around grief, and how this may help or hinder female agency.

The death of a child is evidently a tragic event for any mother to experience, but the ways in which women in early modern England responded to the deaths of their children offers important commentary on the appropriate ways they were allowed to grieve such a loss. Literate women used the form of poetry to channel their maternal grief in a contained, socially acceptable format, and yet as I assert, their use of poetry as an ‘orthodox’ expression of grief still allowed them to negotiate that grief within the literary conventions of the genre.³⁰ I focus on two women writing such poetry following the Reformation, Elizabeth Hoby and Anne Cecil de Vere, using some later female poets to further comment on the custom and subversion of these conventions.³¹ Maternal mourning poetry had a range of genre-defining conventions: notably, the mother connects her identity to her child, permanently intertwining the two, while also acknowledging everything as God’s will. Consequently, these poems typically adopt a tone of resignation. Alongside these qualities, there is often an element of self-blame, reiterating the idea that a child’s death was punishment for the sins of the parents. Pamela Hammons notes these poems

³⁰ It is important to remember that both diaries and poetry served specific functions during the time; they were written as public documents, with the intention they would be read, rather than serving as a private expression of personal emotion.

³¹ While a few of the poets I consider in this section were writing after the death of James I, and thus after the period I focus on, I believe the conventions of the genre which they utilise – while in some ways reflective of the changing times – are still representative of the cultural approaches to mourning which followed the general wake of the Reformation.

reflect the cultural context that believed the ‘moral shortcomings of mothers’ were responsible for their children’s ‘early deaths’ (Hammons, 27). These conventions follow the Reformation’s teachings on how to properly respond to the death of a loved one, particularly the focus on atonement and the understanding that the dead are now at peace. These restrictions were also, I believe, an attempt to keep women from speaking out of place, ensuring they would not use such a tragedy to express dissatisfaction with their domestic situation. Maternal loss poetry gave women a form through which to showcase their sorrow, a ‘culturally sanctioned’ opportunity to write for both private and public consumption (25).³²

Elizabeth Hoby is one such women; in her poem ‘An Epicedium [...] on the Death of Her Two Daughters, Elizabeth and Anne’ she mourns the loss of both her daughters. She remarks upon the heartache that followed the death of Anne so shortly after the death of her older daughter, but acknowledges they now live ‘dear to God’.³³ She ‘[unites] them in a single tomb / [w]eeping, whom [she] once carried in the same happy womb’ (lines 11-12). The link between the mother’s womb and the child’s tomb highlights the mother’s (biological) connection to her offspring, and Hoby presents herself as reabsorbing her children back into her womb after they have passed away. Still, although she understands her children are now ‘dear to God’, she cannot deny that their ‘death was cruel’ (4-5). She makes no secret of her ‘mother’s grief’, particularly at the loss of both children, feeling the

³² Although many women did not officially publish their work, they did reach a more targeted audience through the circulation of manuscript copies. Peter Davidson, Jane Stevenson, eds. *Early Modern Women Poets (1520 – 1700): An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xli.

³³ Elizabeth Hoby, ‘An Epicedium by Lady Elizabeth Hoby, their mother, on the death of her two daughters Elizabeth and Anne’ in *Children Remembered: Responses to Untimely Death in the Past* by Robert Woods (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 131. Her two daughters both died in February 1571 within nine days of each other.

loss of Anne more acutely for being robbed of her remaining joy after Elizabeth's death (9).

Similarly, Elizabeth Brackley begins her poem 'On my Boy Henry' with an acknowledgement of her grief over the loss of her son:

Here lyes a Boy the finest child from me
Which makes my heart and soule sigh for to see
Nor can I think of any thought, but greeve,
For joy or pleasure could not me releeve (lines 1-4)³⁴

She claims there is nothing she can do but 'greeve' and nothing could 'releeve' her of her sorrow, yet a few lines later, she concedes that her son is 'happy' and therefore she must 'mourne not' for 'thy Birth' and death (9-10). Although Brackley's poem is brief, there is a tension between these few lines, where Brackley moves quickly from claiming she can do nothing but experience grief at her son's death, to reminding both herself and the potential reader that he is with God, and therefore she truly has no grief to express. This is a tension which might indicate these women were struggling to negotiate between personal and religiously acceptable expressions of emotion.

By contrast, Anne Cecil de Vere's four sonnets dedicated to the death of her son demonstrate extreme grief, but none of the guilt or 'pious commonplace' that characterised other works of the genre.³⁵ Lisa J. Schnell comments on de Vere's use of rhetoric which frames her son as her personal property, rather than as one who always belonged to God (Schnell, 494). In her first sonnet, she laments that the Gods have 'herited' the soul of her son; a shortened form of 'inheritance', de Vere suggests she has, in this case unwillingly, given her son away (line 2).³⁶ Similarly, the second sonnet in the sequence claims that 'Destins' and the 'Gods' have '[taken]',

³⁴ Elizabeth Brackley, 'On my Boy Henry' in *Early Modern Women Poets (1520-1700)*, 316.

³⁵ Lisa J. Schnell, "'Lett me not Pyne for Poverty': Maternal Elegy in Early Modern England", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 493.

³⁶ Anne Cecil de Vere, 'Six Elegiac Poems' in Ellen Moody, 'Six Elegiac Poems, Possibly by Anne Cecil de Vere', *English Literary Renaissance* 19.2 (Spring 1989), 152-170.

or stolen, her son, rather than having returned him to his rightful place (9). Her grief is unmistakable, but the act is unjust, and she is a victim, rather than one who worries their sin has caused the tragedy:

The heavens, death, and life, have conjured my yll,
For death hath take away the breathe of my sonne:
[...]
And my life dooth keepe mee heere against my will (1-4)

From her third sonnet, de Vere portrays her son's death as a tragedy through which she has suffered, and which she did not deserve. In this case, 'death' has '[taken] away' her son from her, and she is especially punished because 'life dooth keepe' her alive 'against [her] will'. Nowhere in de Vere's sonnets does she express contrition, or regret, only the overwhelming grief of a mother who has lost her child and cannot find the good, or the justification, in the loss.

By contrast, Gertrude Aston Thimelby writes a poem for her deceased infant, and in the very first line declares, 'twas thy mother's fault / [s]o soone inclos'd thee in a vault' (lines 1-2).³⁷ Although she offers no explanation as to how her child's death is her responsibility, the cultural assumption that the parent is to blame is prevalent from the beginning of her verse. This belief is propagated by Protestantism: the chaplain John Owen explained that '[t]he sickness of [the] Child' was sent as 'punishment for his [the parent's] own personal sin'.³⁸ This supposition is a particularly prevalent one in child loss poetry, and it is often the mother who takes the blame. In Mary Carey's 'Upon ye Sight of my abortive Birth', she believes her child's untimely death is specifically a punishment for being a bad Protestant, a connection I am going to explore within the dramatic texts shortly. She writes that she hears 'Gods voyce' telling her 'this is thy sinne' for presenting him with 'dead frute' and '[d]ead dutys', 'prayers' and 'praises', suggesting she has not fulfilled

³⁷ Gertrude Aston Thimelby, 'Mrs. Thimelby, on the Death of Her Only Child' in *Early Modern Women Poets*, 255.

³⁸ John Owen, *Immoderate mourning for the dead* (London, 1680), sig. C2.

her religious duties, and because she has failed as a Protestant, she deserves to suffer the loss of her child (lines 37, 39, 41).³⁹

Both Thimelby and Carey, as well as Hoby, stand in contrast to de Vere, but what they share is an acknowledgement and entertainment of their grief, while being largely constrained and contained by the form. Thimelby, for instance, acknowledges it is her own ‘frailty’ that allows her ‘ioy’ to be exceeded by her grief, as she knows that she should not let her emotions dictate her response (Thimelby, lines 7-8). Similarly, Hoby tries to channel her own grief into the understanding that her children are forever an extension of her, and they have been returned to their rightful place with God. They must remain within what they consider to be the acceptable limitations of their grief, and de Vere is thus a notable but unique anomaly; while the others may ‘struggle against’ the Protestant theology that their child has been ‘taken back’ by God, and that they must accept their own blame and responsibility, de Vere rather expresses the strength of her loss but without the characteristic tone of resignation and self-blame (Schnell, 492).

Fathers, by contrast, also mourned the deaths of their children, but theirs was often perceived as a less emotional mourning, and their expression of grief was often more subdued as a result of patriarchal expectations. Hannah Newton has argued that this difference has been exaggerated, and men felt grief just as acutely as their wives; Robert Sidney told his wife that her ‘grief must be as much as mine’ after the death of their daughter Philipa.⁴⁰ John Evelyn, after the death of his five year old son Richard in 1658, similarly lamented that ‘the joy of [his] life’ has

³⁹ Mary Carey, ‘Upon ye Sight of my abortive Birth ye 31th: of December 1657’, quoted in Pamela Hammons, ‘Despised Creatures’, 41.

⁴⁰ Robert Sidney, *Domestic Politics and Family Absence: The Correspondence (1588-1621) of Robert Sidney, First Earl of Leicester, and Barbara Gamage Sidney*, ed. by Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon, and Michael G. Brennan (London: Routledge, 2005), 227.

Hannah Newton, “‘Wrackt Between Hope and Fears’: Parents’ Emotions’ in *The Sick Child in early modern England, 1580-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 122-158.

ended and that he will go ‘mourning’ to his grave.⁴¹ The difference, however, was not in their intrinsic grief, but in how fathers believed they were meant to respond to their loss. Child death may have been particularly devastating to men because it indicated the loss of an heir, rather than suggesting any great emotional loss, and they were thus meant to stand in contrast to the more emotionally volatile female. John Owen advises his female subject that ‘examples of masculine patience’ and mourning may not speak to the ‘softness’ of her temper, for men are considered more ‘hardy and invulnerable’ (Owen, sig. A6r). When men wrote of the death of children, they were often ‘constructing their own masculine identities’ and ‘reminding themselves of the necessity of manly self-control’ (Newton, 127). Indeed, men were often expected to respond to death with either stoicism or violence, which leads to many depictions of such avenging men in contemporary revenge tragedies. Macduff is a particularly pertinent dramatic example – upon the death of his children, he is visibly distraught, but also declares that he must ‘feel it as a man’ and blames his own ‘demerits’, or sins, for their deaths (4.3.261, 266).⁴² These expected and acceptable methods of coping with loss inform us how grief and emotion, like many things, are dependent upon gender construction, implying that to diverge from these norms is to become inherently disruptive. These conventions and the gendering of mourning are crucial to understanding how one was a ‘good’ mother, certainly within a religious context, and how transgressing the boundaries of acceptable mourning was to inherently threaten the limitations imposed upon women which worked to keep them within the acceptable confines of the domestic home.

b. Constance and (anti-Protestant) Maternal Mourning in King John

⁴¹ John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. by William Bray (London: Bickers, 1879), 257.

⁴² William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Like Macduff, male avengers in revenge tragedy drama have a duty to forgo excessive mourning for decisive retribution against those that have wronged them. Hamlet is a similar example: it is his indecision and failure to act that lead to accusations of his effeminacy; the fact that he allows himself to live in his grief rather than take decisive action to avenge his dead father. In his lengthy monologues, he wishes he could merely find the resolve to enact revenge, asking ‘am I a coward?’ for his inability to do so (2.2.559); although he is so ‘prompted to [his] revenge’ he continues to instead ‘(like a whore) unpack [his] heart with words’ (574).⁴³ As I have already discussed, following the Protestant Reformation, excessive rhetoric over the dead was increasingly considered to be ‘ungodly’, believed to hold no genuine impact on the fate of the deceased other than to displace the focus onto those still living.⁴⁴ The genre of revenge tragedy, as Thomas Rist comprehensively argues, developed in part as a response to these shifts following the Reformation and the changing taboos surrounding mourning. A character such as Hamlet is troubling because he is outspoken in his grief rather than allowing his revenge to take the place of excessive mourning. Rist considers what occurs in such a play, when the male ‘protagonist’ mourns excessively and blatantly contradicts Reformation ideals; but what happens, then, when it is a woman (who was, as we have already noted, perceived as the more irrational sex) who instead is grieving – and specifically, when it is a woman mourning her dead child? I will interrogate what this can tell us about the social identity and construction of the mother and how Constance tries to cling onto her maternal identity even as others tell her she can no longer lay claim to it.

⁴³ In his examination of the play, Thomas Rist discusses how *Hamlet*, as both play and character, rejects the ideas of Reformers about restrained mourning. Almost all the characters in the play mourn excessively, and although Hamlet frequently chastises himself for doing so, the performance of remembrance is unarguably a crucial aspect of the plot. See *Revenge Tragedy*, 60-75.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by G.R Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ This was largely a result of the belief that Purgatory was ‘unbiblical’, along with the Calvinist belief in predestination; in other words, one’s fate was determined before one was born and could not be altered, and so actions for the deceased were essentially pointless. Thomas Rist, *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration*, 5.

In Shakespeare's *King John* (1596), Constance is an example of a woman who does not restrain her grief, and who refuses to be silenced following the death of her son Arthur. She thus can be read not just as a mourning mother, but as a 'failure' of a good Protestant woman, for her grief is decidedly theatrical at a time when religious teachings instructed Protestants that they were not meant to exhibit excessive emotion. Although *King John* is set long before the Reformation, I am reading the text within the context it was written, which is the late sixteenth century. While Constance was not a Protestant within the events of the play itself, the implications of her actions would have certainly been noted by an audience that was officially Protestant, and their response to her character would have therefore likely been one of shock. The connection between how one mourns and the strength of one's faith was indisputable: as Rist notes, 'godliness' was a quality that one may achieve through restrained mourning and anything else was considered 'un-Christian' (Rist, 25). Mourning therefore played a crucial role in how one was meant to serve as a good Protestant, and to see a character, and specifically a woman, fail to live up to those standards emphasises how through the mourning of their children, these women become subversive in both their identities as good mothers and Protestants. However, although Constance is initially an unlikeable character, through the naturalisation of her mourning she may gain sympathy from the audience, speaking to the grief reflected in the poetry of mourning mothers – but taken to a much more threatening conclusion, utilising the less constrained rhetoric of performance to transgress not just maternal, but religious boundaries.

Constance's actions are driven by her desire to see her son inherit the throne of England. Queen Eleanor, John's own mother (and Arthur's grandmother) remarks that 'Constance would not cease / [t]ill she had kindled France and all the world / [u]pon the right party of her son' (1.1.33-

35).⁴⁵ When Constance discovers that a proposed marriage between the crown prince Louis of France and John's niece Blanche threatens France's support of Arthur's claim to the throne, she panics, asking 'what becomes of me?' (3.1.37). Her drive seems selfish, as even her son wishes he were 'laid low in [his] grave', to prevent placing further stress on his mother, but she cannot look past her ambition for him to assume the throne (47). Even if her aspiration is self-motivated, she acts completely in the interest of Arthur, developing no personality of her own; her identity is only established as a mother, and predominantly as mother to the potential king. Queen Eleanor, for example, defines Constance as ruthless primarily through her desire to see her son inherit the throne, telling her, 'thy bastard shall be king' so that she 'may be a queen and check the world' (2.1.123-124). However (as was often the case), her potential identity outside of motherhood depends upon her successful maternity. As a result of this ambition at her son's expense, critics have not been particularly kind to Constance; Joseph Campana notes that several critics, including Juliet Dusinberre and Eugene Waith, argue that 'modern viewers tend to turn away' from Constance with 'a certain embarrassment and impatience'.⁴⁶ We might expect audiences, and particularly modern-day audiences, to at least sympathise with a mother's pain, but there is something about Constance that comes across as insensitive even to a twenty-first century audience, and I suggest that this dislike is connected to not just this ruthless political ambition, but her rejection of the Protestant perception of womanhood. Rather than the silent and passive ideal mother, Constance uses her son as a vehicle for her own power. The play forces us to question her – and by extension our own – religious and gender politics.

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *King John*, ed. by A.R. Braunmuller (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ Joseph Campana, 'Killing Shakespeare's Children: The Cases of *Richard III* and *King John*', *Shakespeare* 3.1 (2007), 18-39, (30). He notes that modern audiences likely treat Constance's outbursts with suspicion, not reading her emotions as genuine, but I believe her response to losing her son cannot help but make an audience more understanding of her character.

Constance makes her desire to see her son become King clear, going so far as to tell him that her love for him is predicated on certain factors:

CONSTANCE:

If thou that bidd'st me to be content wert grim,
 Ugly, and sland'rous to thy mother's womb,
 [...]
 I would not care; I then would be content,
 For then I should not love thee; no, nor thou
 Become thy great birth, nor deserve a crown.
 But thou art fair, and at thy birth, dear boy
 Nature and Fortune joined to make thee great (3.1.45-54)

She is here explaining to her son that her love for him is conditional – on his beauty, and his claim to the throne, and that her affection is not the unchangeable maternal love that a contemporary audience might expect. Were he ugly, he would be ‘sland’rous to thy mother’s womb’, and she would not only not mourn him, but she would not love him at all. More than that, he would not live up to his ‘great birth’ or ‘deserve a crown’, and she would lose out on her political ambitions, even if those ambitions are purely for her son. This comment, while seemingly a startling rejection of unconditional maternal love, makes more sense when we remember that the child was considered a reflection of the mother, as she was believed to influence the child while in the womb.⁴⁷ Any deficiencies in the child, then, were the responsibility of the mother. While her son is alive, Constance, I believe, comes across as a largely unsympathetic character (certainly within an early modern context) – her maternal identity is not given the proper emphasis, her love for her child instead entirely dependent upon her political aspirations. However, the true radical implications of her character only manifest once she ostensibly loses access to that identity,

⁴⁷ Valeria Finucci, ‘Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth: Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*’ in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Kevin Brownlee and Valeria Finucci (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2001), 41-79, (54).

in the process making her at once a more transgressive and yet a more sympathetic character.

Constance is shown to be a vocal character from her first appearance, even while her son is alive: King Philip, upon consenting to the marriage of Blanche and Louis, inquires where Constance is, for 'her presence would have interrupted much' (2.1.543). She persistently tries to speak out on behalf of her son, and even asks, 'how can the law forbid my tongue to curse?' but although she tries, she faces resistance from the male characters against her efforts to speak out of turn (3.1.190). After her son's disappearance, however, there is a shift as she refuses to be silenced, and her most potent rhetorical moments come only once she knows she will never see him again. When Philip tells her to have 'patience' and 'comfort' she retorts, '[n]o, I defy all counsel, all redress' (3.4.22-23). Although the loss of her son robs her of any real or potential power, and her vocal expressions of mourning make her a failure as a Protestant, it simultaneously gives her agency to speak out against those who previously silenced her. She gains access to a rhetoric that is usually denied to women, precisely because of her loss; she resists all attempts to portray her as mad, and it becomes difficult not to sympathise with her. Her words, particularly because of this loss, hold power and demonstrate her refusal to be defined by the men around her:

CONSTANCE:

I am not mad. This hair I tear is mine;
 My name is Constance; I was Geoffrey's wife;
 Young Arthur is my son, and he is lost.
 I am not mad; I would to heaven I were,
 For then 'tis like I should forget myself.
 O, if I could, what grief should I forget!
 [...]
 For being not mad, but sensible of grief,
 My reasonable part produces reason

How I may be delivered of these woes,
 And teaches me to kill or hang myself.
 If I were mad, I should forget my son,
 Or madly think a little babe of clouts were he (3.4.46-59)

She insists she is ‘not mad’, because she remembers who she is; crucially, she declares that her name is Constance, and (equally important) she was ‘Geoffrey’s wife’ and ‘[y]oung Arthur is [her] son’. When referencing Arthur, she speaks in the present tense, he ‘is’ rather than ‘was’ her son, and she continues to define herself as a wife and mother, even though she is technically no longer either – the implication being that she has no identity without them. She uses them to assert her sanity, while reminding us that her identity is entirely dependent upon patriarchal relationships, and she has now lost both. Nonetheless, she defends her outpouring of emotion, asserting that she is ‘sensible’ in her grief because there is no other reasonable response to the death of her child. It is this ‘reason’ that ‘teaches [her] to kill or hang’ herself; in this statement, she echoes Anne Cecil de Vere who wishes to join her child in death and sees only injustice in what she has lost.

Her vocal and passionate exclamation of grief marks her religious failure just as it also gives her greater authority to speak; she is actively rejecting Protestant ideas about how one is expected to mourn. As I have discussed, following the Reformation, it was considered ‘ungodly’ to make a spectacle out of one’s grief and Constance, in stark contrast, does not accept any blame for Arthur’s death (although it would not be entirely implausible to say that her insistence upon his right to the throne contributed to his demise). She similarly never apologises for her behaviour; rather, when King Philip accuses her of being ‘as fond of grief as of [her] child’, she denies it vehemently (3.4.94). Philip claims that her exaggerated response is merely a cry for attention, rather than any honest emotion (implicitly implying a Catholic reaction which places focus on the mourner rather than the deceased), but Constance tells him:

CONSTANCE:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
 Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
 Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
 Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
 Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
 Then, have I reason to be fond of grief?
 [...]

[She unbinds her hair]

I will not keep this form upon my head
 When there is such disorder in my wit.
 O Lord! My boy, my Arthur, my fair son,
 My life, my joy, my food, my all the world,
 My widow-comfort and my sorrow's cure! (3.4.95-107)

She questions, 'have I reason to be fond of grief?' but she has already answered her own query; she thinks, or she knows, that she does. Through her grief she attempts to keep Arthur alive – he exists only through her remembrance of him, and so she rhetorically keeps him in a state between life and death, a metaphorical purgatory.

Whatever Constance's true motivations, she insists upon her right to mourn her son in whatever manner she chooses; her passion now makes her more sympathetic, regardless of what religious doctrine instructs regarding the death of a child. If Constance was disruptive before as an advocate for Arthur's right to the throne, she becomes far more threatening after she is unsuccessful. It is telling that Constance only finds power through her identification as a mother, but she can only access the language to express herself through 'losing' her position as one. Her rhetoric in some ways depends upon her grief to be believable; her grief and her clear devastation at the loss of her son asserts that both the characters and the audience must listen to her rather than villainise her. Her resolve that Arthur remains her 'life', 'joy,' and 'food' tells us that she depends on him to survive, and cannot find her identity outside of him, and now that he is gone there can be nothing left for her. Constance clearly still sees herself as a mother, but the other characters do not share her assessment: Cardinal Pandulph tells her she holds 'too heinous a respect of grief' to

which Constance responds, ‘he talks to me that never had a son’ (3.4.90, 91). While she believes her maternity gives her permission to speak, her sorrow is, in the eyes of others, the thing that keeps her connected to her maternal identity and therefore makes her dangerous, and so they insist that she must let go of her grief to leave her motherhood behind – and, in the process, her anti-Protestant rhetoric. It is not surprising, then, that she does as she claimed she would, and dies shortly after, implicitly of grief. Her death, like so many others, occurs offstage and is merely reported: a messenger declares ‘the Lady Constance in a frenzy died’ and so she is removed from the narrative and permanently silenced (4.2.121).

Katherine Goodland comments on the anxiety that Constance’s grief causes the male characters around her. She notes that they fear her ‘emotional volatility’ and specifically the ‘public performance of her grief’; there is something inherently dangerous in the public nature of her mourning.⁴⁸ She is thus risky because, in this instance, the transgressive woman becomes religiously errant; she strays from the Protestant teachings that were, by the late 1500s, widespread while still managing to evoke compassion from the audience. Matthew Parker, in a 1551 sermon at the funeral of Martin Bucer, proclaimed:

Make small weeping for the dead, for it is both unseemly and wicked to use any howling or blubbering for him, unless we desire to be accounted endued rather with beastly nature then furnished with the use of reason; to be deemed Heathen people rather than true christians⁴⁹

In making a spectacle of her grief, Constance goes against the words of Parker and other Protestants, undertaking a very Catholic way of mourning. As I have noted, the play occurs within a medieval setting, in which Constance’s emotional response to her son’s death would not have

⁴⁸ Katherine Goodland, ‘Constance and the Claims of Passion’ in *Female Mourning in Medieval and Renaissance Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to King Lear* (London: Ashgate, 2006), 119-135, (125).

⁴⁹ Matthew Parker, ‘A funeral sermon, [...] at the buriall of the reurrend doctor, and faithfull pastor of the Church of Christe, Martin Bucer’ (London, 1587).

been questioned and indeed even expected – and yet, in the play, it is. Even the characters within the story appear at odds with one another, as the (male characters’) reactions to her mourning are a Protestant response within a text set during a time when her reaction would not have been criticised from a religious perspective. She is set up, I believe, in contrast to John himself, whose image at the time the play was written was uniquely positive. John was perceived as a ‘kind of anticipant Protestant’ which, I argue, implies that Constance stands in contrast, as she represents the ‘old’ way of Catholicism that must be eliminated.⁵⁰ Her importance in the play comes from her rejection of the values that John represents, and her insistence that she does not need to abide by the rising tide of Protestantism.

At the same time, it becomes clear that women like Constance, who take the loss of their children and turn that loss into rhetorical agency, rather than Protestant resignation, are also threatening to patriarchal order because they transgress the limits of the maternal role. Although she does not achieve anything tangible, her influence is nonetheless felt by the male characters who worry about what she will do once she has nothing to lose. The death of a child can give mothers an authority which they may choose to access, a language to speak and a loss that cannot be understood by men. These men correspondingly try to write her off, and specifically they attempt to undermine her mourning; Pandulph insists, ‘you utter madness and not sorrow’ as it is safer for Constance to be mad than publicly grieving (3.4.44). Campana notes that this female agency can only come after the ‘disappearance of the actual child’, but I believe it is more than that – it can only come once she has lost her ‘access’ to motherhood and rejected Protestant mourning (Campana, 30). In other words, Constance must lose her maternal role, while insisting on her right to maintain her identity as a mother, to truly speak outside of her position. Constance

⁵⁰ Carole Levin, ‘A Good Prince: King John and Early Tudor Propaganda’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 11.4 (Winter 1980), 23-32, (23).

ultimately lets herself be defeated, but in the next section I am going to consider what happens when a woman who loses her child responds not just through the performance of mourning, but through actively pursuing revenge and its connection to political agency.

III. Maternal and Political Agency in *Richard III*

While Constance mainly channels her maternal grief into religious transgression, this was not the only area in which mourning mothers could contravene the boundaries of rhetoric and authority. The three mothers of *Richard III* (1623), rather, use their mourning to work from a political position, similarly channelling their grief and maternal loss into political subversion. These three women vary greatly in personality, but they are united by the play's conclusion through their shared experience of child loss. Queen Margaret, wife of Henry VI, whose only son Edward dies in Shakespeare's previous history play, *Henry VI, Part 3*, is perhaps the most prominent example due to the loss of her only child, but Queen Elizabeth (wife of King Edward IV, and mother of Edward and Richard, colloquially known as the Princes in the Tower allegedly murdered by the titular Richard) and the Duchess of York (mother to Richard and the deceased King Edward) share similar experiences.

In the final act of *Henry VI Part 3*, Margaret watches as her son Edward is killed right in front of her eyes. Her reaction is appropriately vocal and dramatic; while I will not analyse her entire speech, she cries 'kill me too!'. Richard, only too happy to oblige, asks '[w]hy should she live to fill the world with words?' (5.5.41, 44).⁵¹ His words imply now that her son is dead and her maternal role void, Margaret has nothing to offer, and her grief will cause her to speak out, which is fundamentally dangerous – and this is exactly what happens in *Richard III*. All three women

⁵¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 3*, ed. by Randall Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

bond over their shared loss, which distinguishes them from the otherwise masculine domain in which they are immersed at court. While one might expect them to be distanced from the court because of their loss, it paradoxically grants them more agency; it is through their maternal grief that they are able to interfere in the political world.

Although these women respond to their children's deaths with a similar lack of acceptance, unlike Constance, they take decisive action to avenge those deaths, and thus align themselves with the more 'masculine' (within an early modern context) style of mourning. All three women are noteworthy in that they refuse to passively accept the fate of their deceased children. Margaret, after the gruesome death of her son right before her eyes, boldly proclaims, 'I am hungry for revenge / [a]nd now I cloy me with beholding it' (4.4.63-64).⁵² Indeed, Margaret's mere presence in *Richard III* is noteworthy, as she historically died in France before the events of the play. Shakespeare, then, makes the deliberate choice to include her in the text, and her presence increases the focus on maternal power through mourning. In rewriting history, Shakespeare inscribes her into the narrative and allows her to enact the revenge that was denied to her. Margaret desires revenge against those she believes responsible for her son's death, and more importantly, she is vocal about craving that revenge, rather than merely resigning herself to her loss. In her first appearance in Act One, she arrives at court and proceeds to rail against those whom she blames for Edward's death. She casts the blame onto those around her, including and especially Richard, but she also wishes harm upon the current queen, Elizabeth, and even on Elizabeth's own children:

QUEEN MARGARET:

Edward, thy son, that now is
 Prince of Wales,
 For Edward our son, that was Prince of Wales,
 Die in his youth by like untimely violence.
 Thysself a queen, for me that was a queen,
 Outlive thy glory, like my wretched self.

⁵² William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. by John Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Long mayst thou live to wail thy children's death
 [...]
 And, after many lengthened hours of grief,
 Die neither mother, wife, nor England's queen (1.3.208-219)

Although Elizabeth is not directly responsible for the death of Margaret's son, Margaret still insists on her guilt, and feels justified in wishing for her to mourn her children just as she mourned her own son. Connected to this wish is Margaret's desire for Elizabeth to lose her 'identity' as Margaret did: she will die 'neither mother, wife, nor England's queen', but it is clear from Margaret's previous statements that it is Elizabeth's identity as mother she feels would be most painful to lose. Maternity, then, regardless of what else a woman may be, is perceived as their most essential role. Further, Elizabeth's maternal and political positions are clearly connected, as to lose one is to fundamentally lose the other; politics and motherhood, and Elizabeth's success in either, are undeniably associated. Margaret's wish for not just destruction, but political chaos, are unique for a female character, particularly from a woman in the public setting of the court. While she is labelled as a 'hateful, withered hag' her words carry weight, particularly when we realise she is, at this point, the only one who recognises Richard's true wickedness (225).

Margaret is evidently a dangerous female character in the way she speaks and acts against established patriarchy (now that her son can no longer be the head of it) – it is this grief that serves as the catalyst for her desire for revenge. Where Constance was ultimately inactive, living (and dying) in her grief, the mourning mothers of *Richard III* instead assume the revenging role, and they do so in what I argue is the most effective way of achieving revenge: through rhetorical manipulation. This brings me to a crucial point which I believe has been understated by scholars such as Phillippy in their discussions of mourning – that maternal mourning is more rhetorically (and actively) powerful than any other. Phillippy discusses the power of maternal mourning in *Richard III*, arguing it becomes a contrast to the 'male government', emphasising the dichotomy

between ‘pre-Reformation ritual’ and the ‘Machiavellian statecraft’ represented by Richard. She highlights the disruptive force of their mourning, and in this section, I build upon this idea and argue that mourning becomes political agency through the loss of maternal identity (Phillippy, 126, 137-138). There is something exceptional about maternal grief, an implicit understanding that, for women, maternal identity continues after a child’s death, and that this grief can be enacted in a multitude of ways. It is important to remember that many of these women have also lost their husbands, and they do often reference their position as widows, but I argue the loss of their spouse does not grant them the same drive for revenge nor the authority to seek it. For example, as mentioned in the previous section, Constance has also lost her husband Geoffrey, but she refers to Arthur as her ‘widow-comfort’; when women still had their children, they did not mourn their husbands to the same extent. The other major female character in the play, Richard’s wife Anne, similarly begins by cursing him over the death of her husband Edward. She initially blames him for his death, but her curses, notably, do not work, nor do they hold the same power as those of her mother-in-law.

Richard is able to manipulate Anne’s language and transform her hate into love, or at the very least, into an acceptance she will not be able to win against him. She begins the scene believing she has the right to ‘curse [Richard’s] cursed self’, but less than a hundred lines later he is instead telling her to ‘curse not thyself’, as if she has been cursing herself the whole time (1.2.78, 130). Ultimately, her words are no match for Richard’s tricks. However, later in the play, Richard will attempt similar rhetorical manipulations with Elizabeth in his attempts to marry her daughter, who will not be deceived, largely, I believe, because she is arguing on behalf of her child rather than herself. In comparing both scenes, it is clear Elizabeth’s resistance comes from her anger over the death of her sons; she rejects a return to political agency as potential queen mother because of

her maternal duty. She asks Richard, '[s]hall I forget myself to be myself?', questioning if she should forget her role as the mourning mother to increase her political power (4.4.340). Where Anne chooses political power in agreeing to marry him, Elizabeth resists this potential match, and in doing so actually ensures her lineage as well as her posterity.

More so than Constance, I suggest, the mourning mothers of *Richard III* manage to both lose their maternal and political positions and yet find ways to preserve them. Unlike Hamlet, or most male avengers, rather than enacting retribution directly, they instead manipulate and influence the political climate. Hence, when Richard attempts to convince Elizabeth to permit him to marry her one remaining child, her daughter Elizabeth, she can fool him into believing she has accepted his proposal. Ironically, Elizabeth must here deny her daughter's paternity and her own constancy; she is willing to 'slander [herself] as false to Edward's bed' to save her child's life (4.4.197). It is only once she completely forsakes her maternal identity that she is ultimately able to triumph at all, but at the same time, it is this very loss that I believe allows her to fool Richard in the first place. As she sacrifices her maternal self, and becomes neither 'mother, wife, nor England's queen', she paradoxically also establishes herself as a mother who would do anything to protect her child.⁵³ She also assures her future political success in ensuring her daughter will eventually become queen and take up the position she lost, through her marriage to Richard's successor, Henry VII. In denying political power in this moment, she unknowingly actually guarantees it.

However, before Elizabeth can successfully outwit Richard, she must, in fact, lose everything as Margaret predicted, and when she does, she turns this loss into agency through the

⁵³ Madonne M. Miner, "'Neither mother, wife, nor England's queen': The Roles of Women in *Richard III*" in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. by Carolyn Ruth Swift, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 35-56, (43).

performance of mourning. In *Richard III*, mourning becomes particularly threatening because it allows for a rare moment of female bonding on the stage. The respective losses of Margaret, Elizabeth, and the Duchess unite them as they come to recognise their grief in each other in what Katherine Goodland terms the ‘scene of mothers’, Act Four, Scene Four.⁵⁴ In this scene, all three women are at their lowest, having lost their children as well as their political identity: Margaret and Elizabeth are no longer queen and (ostensibly) have no claim to it, and the Duchess disavows her only living son, the current king, going so far as to tell Elizabeth that together ‘in the breadth of bitter words’ they will ‘smother / my damnéd son’ (4.4.127-128). Thus, even while their mourning holds an undeniable emotional resonance, their grief here takes on decidedly political (rather than religious) connotations – in their grief and anger, they turn their attention to ‘smothering’ and cursing the king.

The three women come together to create a community of sorts that is inherently politicised. Their very public mourning becomes a political act, and it functions, as Döring notes, as an ‘ersatz for familiar ceremonies’ as, I believe, it also stands in for the public rituals that have been removed under Protestantism (Döring, 56). Margaret, Elizabeth, and the Duchess come onstage with the intention of destroying Richard, disrupting court life, and in doing so they simultaneously recall the older traditions of mourning as they attempt to pursue their own revenge. If, as I explored in the introduction to this thesis, the maternal body is always anxiety-inducing for its potential resistance to male control, then the loss of that maternal identity can prove even more dangerous, because it is used to represent anxieties over not just religious dissent, but political opposition as well. It is when these women feel they have nothing to lose that they truly become

⁵⁴ Katherine Goodland, ‘Mourning and Communal Memory in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*’ in *Female Mourning in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama*, 135-155, (143).

the most threatening to political and patriarchal power. In this scene, Margaret reminds Elizabeth of just how much she has lost:

MARGARET:

A queen in jest, only to fill the scene.

Where is thy husband now? Where be thy brothers?

Where are thy children? Wherein dost thou joy? (4.4.86-88)

Margaret's words recall her warning to Elizabeth during their first encounter, all her curses having become reality, imbuing them with an inherent, almost mystical power. Her words also suggest that Elizabeth has lost everything that made her important, and thus her entire identity, and failed to protect her legacy: her husband, her title, and most critically, her children and '[her] joy'. This motivates Elizabeth to fight for her one remaining daughter and protect her from Richard immediately following this scene, and is why she can successfully do so through a shrewd and calculating negotiation of her own identity.

The loss of the maternal function, therefore, can evoke more than the potentially subversive threat of the mourning woman; it becomes an indication of not just religious transgression, but political agency as well. Elizabeth, Margaret, and the Duchess all turn the loss of their children into power through political manipulation rather than passive acceptance. It is their communal and shared loss that gives them access to the language which allows them to do so, and to work as political figures and draw power from this loss where others (Anne) failed to do so. While the emotional intensity of maternal mourning is not a new discussion, I have suggested in these first two sections that this mourning was not just an exceptional emotional power, but it had the potential to allow these women to transgress further boundaries which would otherwise have been closed off to them. These women, then, whose child has died, continue to self-identify as mothers, and their insistence upon doing so alongside their immoderate grief makes them dangerous – hence why their responses had to be so controlled. In the concluding section, I shift focus to another kind

of loss, the loss of the expected fulfilment of motherhood due to infertility. Like women who lost a child, these women who cannot conceive are failing to meet patriarchal expectation, but they likewise find ways to utilise their identity as ‘non-mothers’ to find agency in other areas. The potential curing of infertility in particular makes their subversions at once more threatening and yet ultimately fulfilling of the maternal role, as I will explore in Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

IV. Economic Agency and the Barren Woman in Early Modern Discourse

a. *Infertility as a Medical Concern*

In Act One, Scene Four of *King Lear* (1605), Lear curses his daughter Goneril for betraying him, despite her original pledge of love and devotion:

KING LEAR:
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility,
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her (1.4.268-273)⁵⁵

Lear, believing Goneril has failed him as a daughter, and by extension as a woman, correspondingly asks God to take away the thing that definitively defines her as such: her fertility. Not only does he seek retribution for the pain he believes she caused him, but he rhetorically takes away her womanhood, and ‘into her womb convey[s] sterility’. Lear’s language is reflective of the pervasive discourse that surrounded women who experienced infertility, or barrenness, and their perception as disappointments. Infertility is depicted as a disease, and as a physical reflection of the moral corruption that makes Goneril deserve such a curse. Infertility is a clear signal of female

⁵⁵ William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Folger Shakespeare), ed. by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (London: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

failure, as wives were expected to be mothers: Philip Gawdy, when informed of his wife's safe delivery, asked whether the child be a 'boy or a mother'.⁵⁶

Oren-Magidor writes that most couples dealt with infertility by seeking various forms of physical treatment, alongside an equally important focus on spiritual rejuvenation through prayer (*Infertility*, 123). Many sought cures for their infertility, and there were often advertisements for such treatments and remedies; Jennifer Evans provides an example of a physician on the Strand who claimed to have 'the most Prevaillent Remedies, that ever were yet found out, to take away the cause of [barrenness], by the use of which several Hundreds have Conceived, or brought forth Children' ('Imperfect men', 323).⁵⁷ Although there is no mention of gender in this advertisement, it was listed next to treatments for miscarriage, indicating the advertisement was deliberately targeting a female audience. Similarly, the casebooks of the physician Richard Napier feature numerous examples in which treatments for 'unfruitfulness' were sought. In one record, he writes that 'Goodman [Barrow] cam [sic] to me for his wife' to 'take some things' to 'become fruitfull'.⁵⁸ While there are fairly frequent instances of women visiting Napier to inquire if they would ever have a child, or to seek solutions for their infertility, this specific example of Barrow is particularly interesting because, although it is the man making the visit, he is, in Napier's words, looking for something 'for his wife' to 'become fruitfull'.⁵⁹ There is no scientific way Barrow could have

⁵⁶ Linda Pollock, 'Childbearing and Female Bonding in Early Modern England', *Social History* 22.3 (October 1997), 286-306 (288).

⁵⁷ Evans argues that this description, and others like it, makes it clear that men were not excluded as potential patients; however, I believe there is little doubt such wording, and the fact it was followed by remedies for miscarriage, makes it clear the implication was the woman was to blame.

⁵⁸ Lauren Kassell, Michael Hawkins, Robert Ralley, John Young, Joanne Edge, Janet Yvonne Martin-Portugues, and Natalie Kaoukji (eds.), 'CASE21729' in *The casebooks of Simon Forman and Richard Napier, 1596-1634: a digital edition*, <https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk/cases/CASE21729>, [accessed 19 December 2019].

⁵⁹ For instances of women visiting Napier with concerns regarding their infertility, see, for example, Case 3449 and Case 42570.

known who or what was responsible for their lack of children, and yet, he believed it was his wife who needed to be cured regardless.

Although people did seek medical treatment, infertility was, like most things, meant to be understood within a ‘religious framework’ and so couples used their faith both to ‘give meaning to their condition and to hope for a cure’ (*Infertility*, 121). If a marriage was infertile, they had to remember such a thing was God’s will, and it was therefore up to God to provide the cure for that infertility, which may come in the form of a miracle or a medical treatment. Just as the death of a child was seen as punishment for the sins of the parents, so too was infertility perceived as a chastisement of sorts. In Samuel Hieron’s *A helpe vnto [devotion]*, he includes a prayer instructing women that if God does not see it fit to ‘grant this [...] request [for children]’ they must not ‘murmure against’ God.⁶⁰ Couples tried to find meaning through their faith, as they also tried to understand what had happened, why it had happened, and how to respond. Although infertility is, in some ways, the opposite of child loss – the fear arising in the absence of life rather than in death – women were meant to respond to such obstacles in strikingly similar ways. This reveals how women who faced difficulties in embodying motherhood, for any reason, were strictly controlled in how they could respond to these obstacles, for fear their emotional reaction to their lack of children might lead them to act immorally to resolve the issue.

During the Medieval period, people usually turned to saints for healing and individual saints were associated with specific ailments; in the aftermath of the Reformation, people could no longer pray to them. The Virgin Mary was often called upon for general reproductive concerns, while St. Anne was the patron saint of barren women.⁶¹ Medieval Christians also utilised props

⁶⁰ Samuel Hieron, *A helpe vnto [devotion]* (London, 1611), 160.

⁶¹ St. Anne was the patron saint of barrenness because she was believed to have conceived through divine intervention. Daphna Oren-Magidor, ‘From Anne to Hannah’, 88.

and relics, making reproduction something of a performative act; this was especially true during childbirth, as many used the relics of saints to try and ensure a safe delivery. The English historian Eadmer writes of St. Anselm's belt, noting its use 'especially for women in the dangers of childbirth', and later medieval writers expanded on the exact function of the belt, which needed to be worn by the woman giving birth.⁶² Prayer rolls and birth girdles were other material objects that were frequently called upon, again being used upon the body to enact a sort of ritualistic performance.⁶³ However, such performances of faith were forbidden under Protestantism, as the faithful could now turn only to God for divine intervention ('From Anne to Hannah', 88). Correspondingly, just as for those who dealt with child loss, religious doctrine emphasised resignation and acceptance, an understanding that everything was God's will and infertile couples should focus not on their disappointment, but on prayer and repentance (89).

Women were instructed to find comfort in biblical stories of women who dealt with barrenness, and whose barrenness was cured through direct prayer to God. The story of Hannah was often used as an example: Thomas Bentley's *Monument of Matrons* (1582) includes Hannah's prayer 'Against Barrenness' in which she prays, '[o]h Lord of Hosts, if thou wilt looke on the trouble of thine handmaid [...] but give unto thine handmaid a manchild'.⁶⁴ Hannah, as a barren woman, asked God directly to bless her with a child, and he listened; she thus could serve as a model for real women dealing with infertility who longed for a remedy. Samuel Hieron alludes to 'some barren Hannah, or childless Elizabeth, desiring to bee blessed with fruite of bodie' who should 'prayeth thus' (Hieron, 156). Comparably, in a sermon preached at St. Paul's Cross in 1615,

⁶² Hilary Powell, 'The "Miracle of Childbirth": The Portrayal of Parturient Women in Medieval Miracle Narratives', *Social History of Medicine* 25.4 (October 2012), 795-811, (800).

⁶³ Peter Murray Jones and Lea T. Olsan, 'Performative Rituals for Conception and Childbirth in England, 900 – 1500', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89.3 (Fall 2015), 406-433, (426). Murray Jones and Olsan discuss the function of these rituals as performative, noting that although they were far more common for childbirth than conception, there was still an element of spectacle and performance in all aspects of reproduction.

⁶⁴ 'The praier or vow of Hanna, for a sonne' in Thomas Bentley, *Monument of Matrones* (London, 1582), 8.

Thomas Adams assured that ‘many holy women ordained to be mothers of famous and worthy men, were yet long barren’. As examples, he references ‘Sara, the wife of Abraham’, ‘Rebeccah the wife of Isaac’, ‘Rachel the wife of [Jacob]’, ‘Anne the mother of Samuel’, and ‘Elizabeth the mother of [John] of Baptist’.⁶⁵ Although women could no longer pray to saints for help directly, they could take comfort and inspiration in the stories and prayers of the biblical women who came before them.

However, it would be incorrect to claim women were the only ones thought to be at fault for a couple’s lack of children. Although we observe writers such as Daniel Sennert claiming ‘[b]arrenness is oftner from a fault in the women then the men’, that is not to say men could not be considered responsible.⁶⁶ In his 1554 medical manual Jakob Rüff writes that ‘sterility or barrennesse [...] is not only a disability and unaptnesse of bringing forth children in women: but in men also [...] of ingendering and sending forth fruitful seede’ (Rüff, 11-12). Rüff defines sterility and barrenness as a disability, but he makes it clear this disability may be the fault of either the woman or the man. That being said, men were primarily critiqued for their infertility exactly because it kept them from asserting masculinity through their ‘sexual dominance and ability’ over their wives (‘From Anne to Hannah’, 23). Married men who did not have children were dangerous because they could be emasculated, as they could not successfully contain women within the household to raise their children. It also generated the fear that the wife would commit adultery to try and ‘cure’ her infertility, and thus make her husband a cuckold.⁶⁷ Therefore, even if the man

⁶⁵ Thomas Adams, *The Sacrifice of Thankfulness* (London, 1616), 45.

⁶⁶ Daniel Sennert, *Practical Physick: The Fourth Book* (London, 1660), 134.

⁶⁷ Oren-Magidor notes one of the characteristics of how infertile women were treated in early modern society: they ‘tended to be outspoken and domineering, and therefore transgressing of the expected behavior for “proper” women’ which is tied together in the ‘trope of the adulterous barren woman’. *Infertility in Early Modern England*, 87, 88.

may be at fault biologically, the danger he poses comes largely from his failure to control his wife; she is still the root of the anxiety which unquestionably surrounded childless couples.

This is further confirmed in much of the discourse surrounding impotence, which was considered a principally male problem. Impotence, rather than infertility, was often represented in relation to a man who is in some way deceived by a duplicitous or villainous woman, thus alleviating him of true guilt. There was a particular humour which centred around old men being cuckolded by younger women, as many jokes were made about elderly men being unable to satisfy their wives; the earl of Essex, after being accused of impotence by his wife Frances Howard, was publicly mocked as people jested ‘that it was a Truth, that the Earl had no ink in his pen’.⁶⁸ Sarah Toulalan notes that the impotence of old men had the potential to cause disruption in ‘bloodlines and inheritance’, and particularly, lead the wife to ‘seek sexual satisfaction’ in another relationship which could lead to an illegitimate child.⁶⁹ Impotent bodies were disruptive to the perpetuation of patriarchal lines, and yet the worry still traced largely back to women who will inevitably seek pleasure elsewhere, which would manifest in an uncertain paternity that could never be truly known. This tension between the visible display of infertility and the secrecy of a woman’s potential adultery and deception around paternity are at the forefront of the final play I am now going to examine, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

b. *Infertility and Economic Agency in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*

⁶⁸ Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 72. McLaren traces the history of impotence and its cultural connotations; in his discussion of impotence in early modern Europe, he comments that impotence represented the ‘social disorder’ which could result from the woman ‘becoming the sexually active partner and making her man a cuckold’, 58.

⁶⁹ Sarah Toulalan, “Elderly years cause a Total dispaire of Conception”: Old Age, Sex and Infertility in Early Modern England’, *Social History of Medicine* 29.2 (May 2016), 333-359, (353).

While infertility may have been a common concern, and a frequent topic in medical and religious discourse, it is featured comparatively less in dramatic texts; this is an interesting omission, but not altogether surprising when we imagine the fears surrounding the childless couple and the potential it allows for female domination. Almost all works which do feature infertility of some fashion centre around deceit and trickery and adopt a humorous tone, often dealing with an impotent man and building upon the jokes they so often found themselves the subject of. It indeed makes sense that city comedies so often depict infertility, as it maps onto the idea that men who could not reproduce were not real men, that they would not control their wives, and thus become laughing stocks worthy of a comedy. When infertility or impotency is portrayed as a joke, it reinforces the cultural stereotype that only incapable men can be made into cuckolds and these women are thus themselves non-threatening; and yet, as I explore, this is not the case in Middleton's play, as it exposes very real concerns surrounding economic agency and inheritance.

In John Marston's *The Fawn* (1605), for example, the witless Sir Amoroso is impotent; when his brother Herod sleeps with his wife, Sir Amoroso is disinherited; his wife declares that 'he got his elder brother's wife with child, / and so deprived himself of th' inheritance' (4.1.80-81).⁷⁰ Another lost play, *Henry the Unable* (c. 1612-1620), according to the description from the *British Drama* catalogue, featured a plot in which King Henry's first marriage 'ended in divorce, ostensibly because his wife was barren, but in reality because of his impotence'. This leads him to make a cuckold of himself, hiring his favourite, Bernard, to sleep with his second wife Joan to produce an heir.⁷¹ Bernard and Joan continue their affair, and the legitimacy of Henry's daughter is questioned, leading to his deposition. In both examples, inheritance and legitimacy is cast into

⁷⁰ John Marston, *Parasiter or the Fawn*, ed. by David Blostein (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986).

⁷¹ *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue, Vol.7: 1617-1623*, ed. by Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 189.

doubt, and while the overarching tone is humorous, there is some punishment for not just the wife who commits adultery, but the other parties involved as well.

Perhaps the other most notable example, George Chapman's *An Humorous Day's Mirth* (1597), features the old, impotent Labervele, who although he has a son from a previous marriage, has been unable to provide his second wife Florila with children. This greatly upsets Florila, who desires to 'use [their] marriage to the ends it was made / which was for procreation' (1.4.164-165).⁷² Predictably, he begins to suspect she will seek satisfaction elsewhere, and goes so far as to test her loyalty and chastity, sending Lemot to tempt her to commit adultery. When she fails and succumbs to temptation, Lemot rejects and scolds her, telling her to 'repent, amend your / life!' but he promises not to tell Labervele (1.9.71-72). Thus, while she does not suffer extreme punishment, she fails in making a cuckold of her husband, and she is never shown to be able to procreate. While these are not the only other works which feature infertility of some kind, they demonstrate that most texts which include infertile couples do so as a warning to the women who may be tempted to stray, typically under the guise of humour. By contrast, in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), although there is still a central humorous tone, there is a lack of any sense of culpability, guilt, or punishment, which radically changes how we understand this play's presentation of infertility.

Oliver Kix and his wife, Lady Kix, deal with the concerns that surrounded infertile couples as both marital and economic failures. As I explore, the Kixs encapsulate the fears that formed around childless couples, but ultimately, they (and particularly Lady Kix) paradoxically manage to subvert the stereotypes through conforming to them. While both ultimately fulfil the respective stereotypes that permeated cultural ideas of infertile couples (the clueless impotent man and the

⁷² George Chapman, *An Humorous Day's Mirth*, ed. by Charles Edelman (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010).

sexually transgressive woman), Lady Kix is able to successfully assume the maternal role at the play's conclusion, producing mixed messages over how we are supposed to understand her role within the narrative. At the start of the play, the Kixs bemoan their lack of children, and Sir Oliver remarks they have tried numerous remedies on which he has been willing to spare no expense – 'I spare for nothing, wife; no, if the price / [w]ere forty marks a spoonful / I'd give a thousand pounds to purchase fruitfulness' (2.1.144-146).⁷³ Oliver Kix's words paint fertility as a purely economic transaction, as something that can be bought if the price is right and the funds sufficient. He makes no mention of prayer, and there is no real indication the Kixs have turned to God for a cure for their infertility; rather, they have spent considerable sums trying to find a medical cure. Not only, then, have they rejected the appropriate response of acceptance and repentance, but they are draining their economic resources to find a solution. They are spending the money that would be their child's inheritance, and without children they are unable to successfully complete their household.

Children were more than just a necessary product of marriage; they were an essential part of running the family home and ensuring its economic stability. This was particularly true in poorer households, but even in wealthier families such as the Kixs, children held important economic value as both workers and heirs to ensure the continuation of a family's lineage. Margaret Pelling tracks the economic value of children in Norwich in the sixteenth century: in one example, she refers to John Pound's 1570 census in which he references a household that was entirely dependent on their child to provide for them.⁷⁴ While that was most certainly not the general trend, especially in wealthier households, a child always held 'potential value' for their labour within the household.

⁷³ Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* in *Thomas Middleton: Five Plays*, ed. by Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 161-239.

⁷⁴ Margaret Pelling, 'Child Health as a Social Value in Early Modern England', *Social History of Medicine* 1.2 (August 1998), 135-164, (141).

Children who were chronically ill were seen as detrimental to a family unit because they could not work or be sent out to work in other households to help provide for their family (Pelling, 41). Married couples that did not have children, then, also could not necessarily fulfil their economic needs; the Kixs, instead, spend their money on pointless infertility treatments that do not work. They are therefore not just medical failures, but economic ones as well.

As a result of this economic tension, their infertility is not kept a secret or confined to their own household; the entire community is aware of their struggles to conceive and takes a particular interest in their childlessness. Sir Walter, who bears some relation to the Kixs, is especially invested in their lack of children, as if they remain childless, he will inherit their fortune, upon which he is depending. As Lady Kix remarks, ‘[t]is our dry barrenness puffs up Sir Walter’ (2.1.160); ironically, their infertility is what would make him productive, or fruitful as it were, but it keeps the Kixs from being so and actively denotes their economic failure. As with the alternative forms of motherhood I discussed in my first two chapters, anxieties around infertility can similarly be connected to questions of inheritance and succession; the Kix’s conception issues become a public matter because it determines who will inherit their estate, and prevents them (and particularly Oliver Kix) from ensuring their biological lineage. This is, without question, a crucial part of their concern, and yet there is more at stake here than just ensuring lineage; after all, there were real-life examples of women marrying men who previously had children, and therefore heirs, who still longed for children of their own.⁷⁵

Lady Kix is portrayed, like Florila in Chapman’s play, and like so many women without children, as desperate to fulfil her supposedly essential maternal function. She bemoans her

⁷⁵ For example, Mary Whitelocke married her husband Samuel, who already had ten children from two previous marriages, but Mary still longed for a child of her own. Oren-Magidor remarks that Mary could have fulfilled her maternal desire through acting as a stepmother, but although her husband did not need any heirs, she continued to ‘pray for a child of her own’. Daphna Oren-Magidor, *Infertility in Early Modern England*, 13.

childless status, '[t]o be seven years a wife and not a child, O, not a child!' (2.1.137). Despite her own prosperity, Lady Kix still feels incomplete because she has no children of her own. Her attempts to find meaning in other ways, to fill that void with 'good deeds' are unable to satisfy her (15). Like the mourning mothers of the first two sections, she does not conform to the 'good' Protestant woman who tries to find meaning and value in her infertility, but instead complains and questions her misfortune and inability to successfully satisfy her maternal desire.

The play, then, manages to both conform to and subvert the stereotypes around infertility and barren women. Although Lady Kix expresses the hopelessness one would expect of a childless woman, her response is transgressively vocal, and the ending of the play is unexpectedly subversive. The Kixs turn to what they believe to be a water remedy provided by Touchwood Senior, which a maid insists will 'within fifteen years / [f]or all your wealth, [...] make you a poor man' (2.1.194-195). She suggests they will become so fertile that children will become economically unproductive, but even that possibility does not bother them. Sir Oliver pays '[i]n some five hundred pounds a pint' to get a child, which Lady Kix tells him is 'worth all' (2.1.202, 205). No amount of money could be too much, as the value of a child in their house is worth whatever the cost. However, the cure turns out to be, not in the water, but in the hyper-fertility of Touchwood Senior. They thus spend 'five hundred pounds a pint' for something that is quite literally useless; instead they pay, ironically, to have Lady Kix commit adultery and become the transgressive woman that every woman in an infertile couple was feared to be. In sleeping with the extremely fertile Touchwood Senior, she conceives a child, but the child is not her husband's – both Lady Kix and the audience are aware of this reality, but Sir Oliver is not. He instead declares he is now 'a man for ever!' because he has successfully ensured his lineage, and while the genre

of city comedy implies that we should laugh at his cluelessness, neither the situation nor the context would have been particularly humorous (5.3.1).

Still, the couple's infertility problem is 'solved', and there is no sense there will be any repercussions for Lady Kix's infidelity. This resolution seems particularly odd, given the overwhelming concern in early modern England with the ability (or inability) to truly know the paternity of a child. While infertility was a visible and public spectacle, the issue of paternity could never be accurately observed, and in this case such a fear is, we know, justified. Lady Kix disappoints as a faithful wife, but it is her husband who fails biologically and subsequently as a man. The apparent lack of consequences, however, gives us the impression Lady Kix has gotten away with something; more so than Constance or the mothers in *Richard III*, I believe Lady Kix poses the greatest threat to traditional structures of maternity because she in fact most conforms to them at the play's conclusion. Although the audience knows the truth, we are given every indication she will triumph despite, and indeed because of, her sexual transgression. She will fulfil her duty as wife and mother and deliver a child to economically complete her household. At the end of the play, she therefore has achieved everything she is meant to as a woman, and although that allows her to be relegated to the domestic world, she retains a degree of agency, exactly, I think, because she works within the structures that exist to contain her. If we recall the female poets mourning their dead children, they are always constrained by the form that oppresses them, having to find acceptable restraints to feel justified to write at all, but here Lady Kix is able to subvert from both within and outside the domestic sphere, as she has successfully fooled her husband and (as far as we know) will never be punished for her deceit. Ironically, then, she is at her most powerful the moment she also becomes, on the surface at least, the submissive and controlled wife/mother that every married woman was meant to. In a society that increasingly

rejected public and visual spectacle, that feared the vocal and unrestrained mother who speaks out against her oppression, it is indeed the woman who embodies motherhood, stays largely silent and (literally and metaphorically) commits her indiscretions in the dark who proves the most radical.

V. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the ways in which women who dealt with child death and infertility were representative of fears surrounding not just potential maternal power but religious, political, and economic agency as well. Because women who faced obstacles to traditional motherhood were inherently transgressive, they could simultaneously function as sites onto which these other anxieties were written. However, as their inability to fully embody maternity marks them as failing to completely live up to the duty expected of married women, it also grants them a particular authority and access to a rhetoric only they can utilise, and a space which men are inherently excluded from. If they are unsuccessful in motherhood, as they move further away from their maternal identity while continuing to self-identify as mothers, they simultaneously become more powerful and free from patriarchal control. And yet, it is Lady Kix, the character who ultimately falls most in line with the maternal role, who I argue retains the most control because she can exist within the domestic space while still escaping punishment for her sexual transgression and deception of her husband. She works inside patriarchal norms, whereas the other women are only justified to speak once they are beyond those norms, and only once they have largely lost access to them through their transformation of identity.

When a woman experiences the death of a child, or fails to conceive one when she desperately wishes to, she becomes stuck in a literal and linguistic state of limbo; there is no word to accurately describe a woman who has lost a child, or who is otherwise kept from being a mother

for reasons beyond her control. That the opposite of ‘mother’ can best be defined only as ‘non-mother’ (as we have observed, ‘childless’ does not do justice to the true position of such women) tells us there is little rhetorical space for a woman who does not fully embody the ideals of motherhood, and therefore any form of maternity that goes beyond those restraints has the potential to become inherently destabilising. Through my first two chapters, I demonstrated the ability of non-biological mothers to disrupt traditional definitions of maternity, to parody the role and negotiate what motherhood meant, and in this chapter, I have similarly sought to show that women viewed themselves as mothers and considered maternity an integral part of their identity even when they did not fulfil the role in the fashion that was expected. Through this self-identification, these women too become sites of anxiety upon which fears of transgression are mapped, and onto which the dangers of women who act or speak out of turn can align with fears of religious, political, and economic dissension.

It is consequently limiting, I believe, to consider these maternal figures only through the perspective of their identities (or lack thereof) as mothers. While maternity was no doubt always an essential part of their person, I think it is vital to read and understand these women and their representations outside the domestic sphere, using their liminal status to transcend their limitations as mothers. They manage to use their failure to claim a space for themselves, beyond the maternal identity, even as they simultaneously write themselves into it. As these women, without ever intending to, find themselves removed from that which was supposed to define them, they also find they can speak in ways in which they would otherwise be denied, should they choose to access it.

This chapter has been full of claims that may seem to be contradictory, or paradoxical, but this, if anything, is indicative of the conflicting position in which these women found themselves.

As contradictory figures, as both mothers and its (non-existent) opposite, it is not surprising their representations are similarly inconsistent. These inconsistencies, as I have tried to demonstrate, centre on the claim it is only through losing or rejecting their identities that these women can assert any power, when they are stripped of their identity or while they stand outside it. It is their position in the middle which gives them the ability to act beyond motherhood; because they are not-quite mothers, they find ways around the limitations of its position. In the next and final chapter, I am going to shift my attention to the other facet that constituted maternity, nurture and education. While this chapter considered women who failed to produce children, through infertility or child death, I now explore women who did not live up to the ideals of the virtuous mother, through the figure of what I have termed the negligent mother.

Chapter Four: ‘Neglect in nurturing children’: The Negligent Mother and Surrogate Nurture in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

I. Introduction



Figure C: Marcus Gheeraets the Younger, *Anne, Lady Pope with her Children* (1596)

Figure C, which depicts Lady Anne Pope with several of her children, follows many of the typical portraiture conventions of the time, with its neutral setting, elaborate jewels and clothing, and Anne’s placing of a hand upon one of her children.¹ Anne is shown with the children of her first

¹ Rosemary Isabel Keep, ‘Facing the Family: Group portraits and the construction of identity within early modern families’, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, (2018), 60.

marriage, while pregnant with her first child from her second marriage to Sir William Pope.² Portraits of (upper-class) women with their children such as Anne's served to highlight their position as good wives and good mothers, embodying and performing their essential duty without complaint. As with many genres, these portraits were more political than personal; they sought to make a statement about the unity and cohesion of a family, the existence of heirs, along with the obedience and deference of the mother and her connection to her children. The purposes of these portraits among those of high-status was not to portray genuine emotion or affection between parent and child, although there may be elements of such a bond, but rather to demonstrate how early modern society envisioned true parenthood – and, in this case, motherhood – in its idealised form: women as silent, chaste, obedient, and always deferential to her identity as mother.

In the previous chapter I considered women who, by contrast, failed in their obligation to produce children, through either child death or infertility. Now, I turn to what I consider the second part of such an investigation, and examine biological mothers who did not live up to this idealised version of motherhood as presented in such portraits, and (more notably) in contemporary conduct literature. Of course, a mother's responsibility was not complete after childbirth, she then had to ensure her children were raised and nurtured properly, through both breastfeeding and education. Mothers were expected to exemplify a range of ideals in the raising of their children, and any who did not were at risk of being portrayed as failing in their duty, and consequently being perceived as neglectful, or even monstrous, mothers.

These strict values – which I will highlight again shortly – have permeated this thesis thus far, but have largely remained on the periphery as I examined women who circumvented these

² 'Anne, Lady Pope with her Children', National Portrait Gallery, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw69849/Anne-Lady-Pope-with-her-children> [Accessed 3 November 2021].

strictures, or who could not abide by them. Here in the final chapter, I conclude by suggesting that even within the confines of biological motherhood, there were ways of parodying and subverting the maternal role simply by falling short of the strict ideals which were placed upon it. This might not seem like a radical notion, but scholarship up to this point has largely ascribed to the two stereotypes of motherhood which permeated early modern culture: the ideal versus the monstrous mother. Monstrous motherhood is a concept I have purposefully avoided thus far, but in this final chapter I must integrate it largely to argue against it; or, at least to suggest it is time we move beyond such a firm dichotomy of motherhood as either perfect or evil.

In this chapter, then, I seek to incorporate the women who do not fit either definition, who exist in-between these two extremes, to argue not just that such women existed, but that their very existence is evidence of how biological motherhood could itself prove parodical. This thesis has sought to examine alternative forms of motherhood, and it ends by contemplating a form which subverts tradition in only minor ways, and yet which still proves destabilising and destructive to the patriarchal hierarchies that seek to control women. Rather than focus on the tension between the good and monstrous mother, I instead take as my starting point the idea that we need to reconceptualise our understanding of motherhood, and consider women who may not live up to these ideals – women who I have termed ‘negligent’ mothers.

There are several important terms to bear in mind in this chapter, some of which have very subtle nuances that can be difficult to parse out. The first distinction that must be made is between nurture and neglect as they were understood throughout the early modern period. While I will dive deeper into what these terms connoted in the next section, I want to briefly summarise what I mean when I use both terms here. During the early modern period, nurture, while now associated more with a general care, was most closely associated with two distinct but connected principles –

breastfeeding and education. The OED defines the now rare usage of the word as a ‘person’s breeding, upbringing, education, or training [...] especially in matters of behaviour or etiquette’ as well as the ‘bringing up, rearing or training of a person [...] esp. a child’.³ However, nurture can also be defined as ‘to feed or nourish’, and this was intended both literally and figuratively during the early modern period.⁴ Similarly, Claude Hollyband, in his *A Dictionary French and English* (1593) defines ‘Endoctriner’ as ‘[t]o instruct, to bring one vp in good nurture’ and ‘Norriture’ as ‘meate, food, [nurture]’.⁵ These two meanings were implicitly connected, and I further examine how a mother’s role in nurturing her child was connected both to her literal delivering of nourishment, and her spiritual nourishment of the soul through education and by inspiring her children to be virtuous citizens – to do both makes her the ideal, virtuous mother all women should aspire to be.

Neglect, then, can best be defined as the absence of nurture, or a disregard for the duty that one has to provide nurture. This is crucial, as neglect did not necessarily have to signify the ‘failure to take proper care of a child’ which can prove ‘tantamount to maltreatment or cruelty’ as it might today.⁶ Neglect, as the opposite of nurture, in the early modern period, is best here understood as a failure to live up to the duties expected of parents at the time; it is best defined as the failure ‘to perform’ or ‘the failure to discharge (a duty)’ as opposed to necessarily indicating what we might identify as outright abuse today. John Florio, in his *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) translates the Latin phrase ‘metter in non cale’ to ‘to neglect, to despise’ and to ‘care little for’, indicating that neglect is associated not just with a lack of care, but with a complete disinterest and disdain for providing

³ ‘Nurture, n.1a’ and ‘n.2a’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

⁴ ‘Nurture, v.1a’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

⁵ Claude Hollyband, *A Dictionary French and English* (London, 1571).

⁶ ‘Neglect, n.3’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

that care.⁷ Women who neglected their children, then, were not necessarily truly monstrous, but they are nonetheless still perceived as dangerous because they threaten the ideal standard of motherhood, and thus are cast opposite such virtuous mothers and constructed as transgressive and unwomanly, as this chapter will explore in detail.

The third term I am introducing into this discussion is ‘negligent’. Negligent is a difficult term to properly define because it is almost inextricably connected to neglect, and yet I want to utilise it in this chapter to represent a subtle but crucial space in-between nurture and neglect. In doing so, I am imposing modern-day terminology onto early modern concepts that did not possess the same nuances of language, but for the sake of clarity it is a linguistical distinction I intend to make. The OED defines a negligent person as one who is ‘inattentive to duty’ as well as ‘careless’ and ‘indifferent’, behaviour which can be defined as synonymous with neglectful.⁸ Indeed, in early modern England the terms were basically indistinct and may have been used interchangeably. William Gouge writes of a mother ignoring her duty to nurse her own children, claiming she is ‘negligent therein’ of her responsibility.⁹ In Thomas Thomas’s *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (1587), the Latin phrase ‘Incūriōsus, a, um. Gell.’ is translated to ‘careles [sp], negligent, nothing minding or regarding’ while in John Florio’s dictionary ‘negligent’ indicates something that is ‘careles, retchlesse’ or ‘not regarding’.¹⁰ Both definitions imply a general failure to live up to one’s expected duty, and while this is not a distinction that would have been made at the time, to clarify the differences in behaviour I define negligence as inattention to a duty and neglect as a complete rejection of that duty which usually casts a woman as inhuman. I believe

⁷ John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes* (London, 1598).

⁸ ‘Negligent, A.adj.1a’ and ‘1b’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

⁹ William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties* (London, 1622), 510.

¹⁰ Thomas Thomas, *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (Cantebrigiae, 1587) and John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes*.

saying these women are ‘negligent’ better represents the middling position they occupy in their roles as mother – not nurturing, but not quite neglectful.

Scholarship on the subject has likewise been organised largely through a binary construction of mothers as either nurturing or neglectful, and works which focus on the actual construction of these women are surprisingly sparse. Monstrous mothers are a frequent topic for scholars, but they are not the same as neglectful mothers, although neglectful mothers often become or are portrayed as monstrous. Monstrous mothers are most closely connected to both witches and women who commit infanticide, and those women are not the focus of this chapter. However, I briefly consider such women in my first section, as they are important to remember if we are to understand the various ways in which a range of women who did not fulfil the image of the ideal mother were villainised. One of the few works which discusses nurture and neglect without entering the territory of monstrous motherhood is Loretta A. Dolan’s 2016 *Nurture and Neglect*, which focuses specifically on how the two terms were defined and performed, taking care to note that we cannot ‘make judgements on what constituted nurture or neglect’ based on our own modern-day assumptions.¹¹ While Dolan’s work focuses on the responsibilities of both mothers and fathers, her examination of the mother’s duty will prove integral to my own discussion, however, her work is far more analytical and historical, rather than considering the implications of the construction of nurture and neglect, and how these responsibilities are depicted in drama and how negligence fits in-between.

Other works which discuss the subject of maternal nurture or neglect tend to highlight the extreme dichotomy not simply between nurture and neglect, but between the good and bad woman, particularly focusing on the villainization of women who do not properly care for their children.

¹¹ Loretta A. Dolan, *Nurture and Neglect: Childhood in Sixteenth-Century Northern England* (London: Routledge, 2016), 6.

Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh's 2000's edited collection *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period* (which I have already referenced in earlier chapters) traces the role of mothers and caregivers and their maternal duty as nurturing figures from conception to maturity. Their tracking of a woman's influence on a child centres on the mother's potential for either 'nurture' or 'rejection', 'sustenance' or 'destruction' and the spectacle this may create.¹² Others take a more specific focus on nursing: Rachel Trubowitz uses issues surrounding maternal nurture to argue that good maternity was connected to the health of the nation in her book *Nation and Nurture in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (2012). She argues, specifically, that the maternal breast and the mother nurturing her own child came to symbolise the English state with the accession of James I and his own co-option of images of nursing. The majority of texts which discuss nurture do so to contrast it with what Miller and Yavneh term the 'demonic' mother, but which may also be described as the monstrous mother (Miller and Yavneh, 2). Such scholars write about how these demonic/monstrous mothers are placed in opposition to the nurturing mother, through unthinkable acts such as infanticide. Such works include Francis E. Dolan's 1994 *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700*, Keith Botelho's 2008 article 'Maternal Memory and Murder in Early-Seventeenth-Century England', and most recently, Josephine Billingham's 2019 *Infanticide in Tudor and Stuart England*. All of these works emphasise the construction of both the ideal and the monstrous mother, and the potential for all women who veer into the monstrous category to act outside the domestic home, and to 'resist or subvert subordination or confinement'.¹³ While it is imperative to consider the strong distinction made between good and bad motherhood in early modern England, as that

¹² Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh, *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 7.

¹³ Keith Botelho, 'Maternal Memory and Murder in Early-Seventeenth-Century England', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 48.1 (Winter 2008), 111-130, (114).

distinction was an essential component of patriarchal attempts to construct the ideal woman/mother, in this final chapter I suggest that it is time to look beyond these extreme categorisations, introducing negligence as a middle ground.

While motherhood was often portrayed as operating along the nurture/neglect binary, the experience of maternity, as I hope I have demonstrated throughout the first three chapters, was far more nuanced. This was true even within the confines of unimpeded biological motherhood, where strict conventions were implemented to try and control women and conceal the overwhelming fear provoked by the potential for a woman to transcend the limitations placed upon her. However, my argument is that these conventions could be subverted in subtle ways, that the duties of maternity could be ignored without mothers necessarily becoming monstrous, and that these negligent mothers themselves reflected an anxiety over the changing nature of motherhood and the increasing need to control it. These negligent mothers may be portrayed as different, and their treatment of motherhood can overlap with enactments of neglect, but they were not, I believe, written off as inhuman or cast to the margins of society in the same manner one may with a mother who becomes monstrous – by either early modern writers or by contemporary audiences. Negligent mothers, rather, are immersed within their narratives and can both occupy the role of motherhood and transcend it in their inattention to their duty.

To demonstrate the specific subversions of motherhood such negligent women evoke, I focus on two specific mothers who I propose may be defined as negligent mothers – Lady Capulet and Cleopatra. Before beginning an examination of these characters, however, I first consider in greater detail what exactly nurture and neglect meant during the early modern period, particularly with respect to motherhood. I further explore the two main components of maternal nurture – nursing and education – in connection with how women who failed in either of these duties were

often portrayed as monstrous in an attempt to frame any woman who did not live up to these ideals as inherently neglectful. I particularly consider the duties of women of higher status, as their relative wealth and privilege placed them in a distinct position with regards to how their relationships with their children were defined. This will shape how I frame my discussions, as I suggest the construction of both Lady Capulet and Cleopatra as mothers – who fail to live up to these standards in some way – is in fact a portrayal not of complete neglect of their children, but of negligence and an inattention to duty that challenges notions of a specifically upper-class motherhood.

I turn first to Lady Capulet, considering her character in not just Shakespeare's play, but first by examining the character and her relationship with Juliet through Shakespeare's main source material, Arthur Brooke's poem 'Romeus and Juliet'. I do so not only to demonstrate how drastically Shakespeare alters the material to change how we read the maternal role, making both Lady Capulet and the Nurse more threatening in their respective roles as negligent biological and nurturing surrogate mother, but to suggest that the changes in Lady Capulet, Juliet, and the Nurse present a very different version of maternity and ideas of maternal nurture. Specifically, I focus on how Brooke portrays Lady Capulet's reaction to her daughter's sorrow and subsequent proposal of marriage as an act of maternal care, while framing the nurse's character as a deceitful contrast to the loving if misinformed biological mother. Lady Capulet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, by contrast, is a more distant, less emotional mother, whose actions may be construed as cruelty, but which are in actuality more closely aligned with the accepted standards of upper-class motherhood. However, I argue that by reconstructing the Nurse as a more nurturing maternal figure towards Juliet, Shakespeare implicitly makes Lady Capulet a negligent mother and comments on the potential harm that may be brought about by a mother's emotional distance or absence.

I conclude by examining three different depictions of Cleopatra: first, again considering Shakespeare's predecessors, I look at her depiction in two contemporary closet dramas by Mary Sidney and Samuel Daniel. Both authors make Cleopatra's maternity an essential part of her character, at once humanising her while also constructing her as less radically subversive. I argue that in highlighting her maternity, both Sidney and Daniel in fact limit her power, by framing her as caring for her children and placing them above other aspects of her identity – namely, her queenship. Shakespeare, again, redefines the character by utilising her maternity only to further or preserve her own authority. While Shakespeare's Cleopatra has been discussed by scholars countless times, they have largely overlooked her maternal role as it seems to have little impact on her character or narrative as a whole. However, I suggest that to read Cleopatra as a mother is in fact to grant her even greater agency, as in making her a negligent mother, she is permitted to combine multiple maternal identities without allowing herself to be limited or contained by any of them. By the play's conclusion, Cleopatra has inscribed her own identity as queen, biological mother, and surrogate mother, escaping entrapment by Rome and preserving her self-identification; in doing so, I believe, she becomes the most radical alternative mother of all in her ability to embody and thus parody all these identities at once.

II. Nurture, Neglect, and the Monstrous Mother in Conduct and Popular Literature

William Gouge, in his *Domesticall Duties*, defines nurture as the 'correction' as well as 'instruction' of children; parents should be neither 'too austere' nor 'too remisse', but instead must find a happy middle-ground between the two extremes of over-correction and under-correction (Gouge, 157). He later lays out the 'peculiar care' women have in 'nurturing' their children, claiming it is a mother's duty to teach her child while they are young. She is in such a 'peculiar'

position because she ‘feedeth them, apparelleth them’ and ‘tendeth them’ and so she can uniquely influence her child’s development, something which has the potential to prove disastrous should the mother not abide by the strict tenets laid out to her and constantly prove herself to be silent, chaste, and obedient (546).

Gouge’s words highlight not only one of the primary definitions of nurture in early modern England, but the particular importance of the mother, and subsequently, the importance of ensuring the mother is properly controlled by her husband, who is the ‘[governor] over child, mother, and all’ (547). If a mother chose to influence her child in a negative way – at least, in a way that was perceived as negative by patriarchal society – she could easily make the transition from virtuous, ideal to monstrous mother. This ostensibly seamless transformation is evidence not of the actual lived experience of mothers in early modern England, but of the ways in which their behaviour was formally controlled, always regulated, and always subject to the potential of being othered if their nurture was not deemed acceptable.

Many writers of conduct literature, like Gouge, discuss what nurture and neglect signified during this time. While they outline the responsibilities of both mother and father, it is the mother’s duties with which this chapter is concerned, and thus that which will be the focus of this section. As I have already alluded to, and as has permeated this entire thesis, a mother’s virtue was predicated on two main responsibilities which constituted ‘nurture’ – breastfeeding and education. Juan Luis Vives lays out the specific duties of the mother from pregnancy to adulthood, emphasising that she must ‘nurse [her child] with her own milk if she can’ as she needs to ‘[nourish] it with the same food with which it was created’.¹⁴ Chapter One of this thesis focused extensively on the intense discussions around a mother nursing her own children and the perceived

¹⁴ Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, ed. and trans. by Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 269.

dangers of the wet-nurse, and so I will not re-tread them here; however, it is critical to bear in mind that, despite the constant pressure, most women of high-status continued to utilise the wet-nurse into the seventeenth century, as their duty was first and foremost to produce heirs. As Dorothy McLaren notes, upper-class mothers were in a distinct position as they were expected to construct a pattern of ‘ever-recurrent births’ which was aided by the use of a wet-nurse, as breastfeeding reduced their fertility.¹⁵ Therefore, while writers of conduct lit were addressing women of high-status when calling upon them to nurse their own children, they were also faced with pressure to continuously produce heirs to ensure the continuation of their husband’s lineage. However, if these women did not nurse their own children, they were obligated to choose an appropriate nurse who would not have a negative impact on the child. As will be particularly relevant to my discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*, nurses were meant to embody the virtuous qualities expected of mothers.

Bartholomew Batt writes in detail:

But such as be sober, honest, wise, discréeete, well condicioned, of [gentle] behaiour, of a good complexion, cleanly, and such a one as can well frame her tongue to an exquisite order of spéech, [...] lest the young and tender infant in the budding & floueing yeares be stamed with corrupt maners, & vnséemely words. And so with sucking the milk and nutriment of such lewde Nurses, issuing & procéeding from an vnnaturall bodie & disordred minde, be infected with the most [pernicious] contagion, of soule filthinesse, odious errors, & detestable diseases, [...]¹⁶

The appropriate nurse must be ‘sober’, ‘honest’, ‘wise’ and ‘discreet’, among other similar qualities which reflect a deference to authority and allow for the child to grow up as a virtuous and obedient citizen. Likewise, if the nurse is ‘corrupt’ or ‘[unnatural]’ then she will ‘infect’ the child with her negative characteristics; thus, while it might not be stated directly, I argue it is not a stretch

¹⁵ Dorothy McLaren, ‘Martial Fertility and Lactation, 1570-1720’ in *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, ed. by Dorothy McLaren and Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 22-46, (27). McLaren notes there was as much pressure on these women to not breastfeed as there was to bear children.

¹⁶ Bartholomew Batt, *The Christian mans closet* (London, 1581), 54.

to say that to choose an unacceptable nurse for one's children could have been considered its own form of neglect.

The other aspect of nurture was the raising and education of one's children, and – as Gouge notes – of finding that balance between too much and not enough. Again, mothers were seen as having a particularly important role to play, as young children looked to their mothers for advice and guidance. Vives cautions the mother about this immense responsibility:

Children run to their mother, ask her advice about everything, ask her all sorts of questions, and whatever she answers they believe, admire, and consider as the gospel truth. Mothers, how many opportunities have you to make your children good or bad! (Vives, 272)

Vives instructs the mother to take care with her influence over her children, but his words also serve as a warning. She must teach her children to value 'piety, fortitude, temperance, learning' etc. primarily through her constant and consistent enactment of those same virtues. She must reflect these qualities back at her children, for her influence is substantial and potentially dangerous if she eschews any of them, she may potentially not simply transgress her own station, but negatively impact her children.

The most important point to note here is that nurture did not necessarily equal affection, and in fact, excessive fondness towards one child may have been perceived as a form of neglect. As Vives writes, children are 'weakened by delicate living' and while mothers ought to love their children, they must 'hide their love' so their children will not take advantage (274). Physical punishment was not frowned upon, and in fact even encouraged to a point: Thomas Becon writes that when children are 'negligent', 'moderate correction' is as necessary for their wellbeing as 'meat and drink'.¹⁷ None of the characters I examine in this chapter physically harm their children directly, but it does serve as a potent reminder that nurture did not have the same connotations

¹⁷ Thomas Becon, *The Catechism of Thomas Becon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), 353.

during the early modern period as it does today, and we must bear in mind that during this time, outwardly expressing affection and indulging one's child was not necessarily equated with nurture. It was far more important to teach them to be virtuous and pious citizens, and to exhibit restraint so as not to make the child weak.

Now that we have identified the most essential components of nurture, the connotations of neglect appear obvious – it is, simply put, the opposite of nurture, or the failure to properly provide nurture. Neglect, particularly in the case of upper-class mothers, did not have to mean absence or inattention, but rather a rejection of the duty that was expected – to raise one's children or to delegate the role to an appropriate surrogate. As Dianne Berg notes, women shaped the household and the family not just through breastfeeding and education, but through the 'selection of midwives and wet-nurses', meaning an equally important component of both nurture and a woman's power within the home was their ability to choose suitable parental substitutes, and to fail to do so was its own form of neglect.¹⁸ This does not mean parents were not supposed to be involved in their children's lives: William Gouge writes on parent's 'neglect in nurturing children', highlighting that 'contrary to good nurture is too much liberty' and that, particularly with wealthier parents, many may pretend that 'their children need no [education]' (Gouge, 530). Parents were neglectful if they allowed their children to run free, but they (and particularly mothers) also ran the risk of neglect if they coddled them or expressed too much affection.

It was understood that any woman who neglected her child in some way risked damaging them, and threatened to break free of the constrictions imposed upon her; she was thus someone who needed to be constructed as unwomanly. As a result, the frequency of monstrous mothers in

¹⁸ Dianne Berg, 'Monstrous Un-Making: Maternal Infanticide and Female Agency in Early Modern England' in *Medieval and Early Modern Murder: Legal, Literary and Historical Contexts* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), 417-433, (422).

popular literature such as broadside ballads and pamphlets was high, as sensationalised tales of women who commit monstrous acts on their own children served as a warning to any mother who did not lead a virtuous life. These monstrous mothers, who are typically depicted as those who commit the unthinkable act of infanticide, are not the focus of this chapter, and yet it is important to pause for a moment here to consider them. In doing so, I ultimately argue that the women I consider are not monstrous (which becomes a natural extension of neglect), but they are negligent, and this is a distinction that must be made.

A monstrous mother is a woman who has been completely ‘othered’, her rejection of the essentialised maternal role having made her into something that is neither woman nor human at all. ‘Monstrous’ is specifically defined as something that deviates from the ‘natural’ or ‘conventional’, it is a woman who has forgotten her own humanity; these women are ‘inhumanly wicked’ and cannot be considered among the category of women.¹⁹ Josephine Billingham discusses infanticide in early modern England, writing that a woman who murders her own child is ‘beyond the norms and boundaries of society’ and constructed as even ‘beyond the human race’.²⁰ These women provide a challenge to the domestic patriarchal home, and twist ideas of maternal nurture to suit their own purposes; one such prominent example is Margaret Vincent in the anonymously published pamphlet *A Pittlesse Mother* (1616). Vincent is a unique yet appropriate example because she is a married woman who was of ‘good education’ and known for being ‘discreete’, ‘[civil]’ and of a ‘modest conversation’.²¹ In other words, she is not the typical subject for stories of infanticide, yet she is also the most troublesome because she is immersed

¹⁹ ‘Monstrous’, ‘A.adj.1a’ and ‘5a’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

²⁰ Josephine Billingham, *Infanticide in Tudor and Stuart England* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 183.

²¹ Anonymous, *A Pittlesse Mother* (London, 1616), sig. A2v.

within the domestic home and is the image of the nurturing mother turned monstrous.²² Vincent loves her children, but when her husband refuses to allow her to convert them to Roman Catholicism, she takes drastic action to do what she believes is best for them, imagining that they have been ‘hoodwinckt [...] from the true light’ and that to kill them is to actually ‘save’ their soul (sig. A3). Vincent reflects the fear of a woman who is easily led astray, the former good mother whose love is perverted into this monstrous maternity (Berg, 419). Vincent is portrayed as being beyond human and coded in language that stresses her unnaturalness; she becomes a ‘creature not deserving mother’s name’ and ‘more cruell then the Viper’ or the ‘[invenomed] Serpent’ or ‘any Beast whatsoever’ (*A Pittillesse Mother*, sig. A4). By rhetorically separating her from the maternal identity, and indeed from humanity altogether, the author ensures that Vincent is an outlier, a warning against the potential influence a mother may have over her children, but an ultimate assurance that such a creature has transformed into something else entirely, something not belonging in the domestic home, or within acceptable society.

There is also a connection between monstrous mothers and witchcraft, particularly regarding the perversion of traditional images of maternal nurture. Witches transcend the boundary of the private home and became indicative of the ‘antimother’ who co-opts maternal nurture by utilising the visible signs which represent it. The witch is a figure who pollutes and creates disorder rather than sustaining the family home, they encourage disunity and infection instead of the purity and chastity of the ideal mother; they are uncontained and leaky, making porous the boundaries of

²² Josephine Billingham discusses the differences in how single women and married women who committed infanticide were portrayed; while they were both constructed as ‘outsiders’, those who write about married women were touching upon something ‘much deeper’ as they ‘threatened the concept of the unity and sanctity of the family and marriage by corrupting the familial bond’. Josephine Billingham, *Infanticide in Tudor and Stuart England*, 222-223. Dianne Berg also notes, however, that married women who committed infanticide could be treated with greater sympathy, or seen as acting in a fit of madness, and so given a chance to repent or make amends before death. There are some stories of married women committing infanticide where the author grants her a degree of pity – see, for example, the stories of Mary Champion and Mary Philmore. Dianne Berg, ‘Monstrous Un-Making’, 432.

the home. As Dianne Purkiss writes, the witch is the ‘dark other’ of the early modern woman, enacting the desires they must repress in order to fulfil the role of the good mother and the good housewife.²³ One such example which emphasises the witches’ ability to disrupt traditional motherhood, Joan Jurdie, was accused of witchcraft in the parish of Rossington for failing to attend the birth of Janet Murfin’s child and later refusing to share food with her; Janet’s death was subsequently blamed on Joan’s failure to follow the practices of childbirth. As Purkiss comments, Jurdie ‘crossed the boundaries of the household’ and, in failing to help provide nurture, Janet’s milk was turned to blood, transforming herself from mother to antimother (Purkiss, 103). Joan is accused of witchcraft merely because she corrupted the ideal of motherhood, and in the process allegedly made not just herself, but Janet, into the neglectful mother who fails to properly nurture her child.

Witches were popular figures onstage and in the cultural imagination as well, although one who demonstrates this point most succinctly is one who never appears onstage at all. Sycorax in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is described as a witch who enacted ‘sorceries terrible’ and who birthed the literally monstrous Caliban before purportedly dying before the play’s proceedings (1.2.264).²⁴ Although Sycorax never appears and while her role is marginal, her power is felt as both witch and mother, and her pervasive maternal power has given birth to the physical manifestation of female/maternal transgression in the monster Caliban.²⁵ Generally speaking, witches were often portrayed as malevolent women who committed perverse acts of nurture,

²³ Dianne Purkiss, *The witch in history: early modern and twentieth-century representations* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 100.

²⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁵ One of the most well-known works on the absent mother in *The Tempest* remains Stephen Orgel’s article ‘Prospero’s Wife’, where he discusses the ‘absent presence’ of the mother, and the maternal stand-ins which permeate the play, including Sycorax. Stephen Orgel, ‘Prospero’s Wife’, *Representations* 8 (Autumn 1984), 1-13. I also recommend Dianne Purkiss’s chapter ‘The witches on the margins of “race”: Sycorax and others’ which discusses Sycorax as a racialised other who is always ‘unknowable’, although I do not necessarily agree with the idea that her role in the play is less important than critics believe.

including the use of the maternal breast on their ‘familiar’ – demonic imps they treated as their children. Deborah Willis examines the connection between witchcraft and maternal nurture; someone is marked as a witch by the teat through which she nurses these familiars, while usually being portrayed as past the age of childbearing, and so in essence rejecting good motherhood even as she co-opts the images that characterise it.²⁶

Both murderous mothers and witches are monstrous, liminal beings who cannot lay claim to the title of woman, and yet they were once good mothers, or they may use the signifiers of good motherhood to pervert the identity. However, because these figures become inhuman, they can also be marginalised – they are not true women, and so they are obviously not true mothers, and their actions not indicative of societal norms. It is easy to understand why so many scholars have focused their attention on these sensationalised mothers who are made monstrous as much by their own actions as by the ways in which they were constructed in popular literature. These women are radical in their subversions, but they are in some ways contained by the severe nature of their actions, which both restrict access to their children and allow them to be cast out of civilised society, as monsters or witches or something otherwise inhuman. Monstrous maternity is virtuous motherhood taken to its other extreme, but it is not reflective of the majority of women who lived the role. I have mentioned them briefly only to highlight that the women I discuss now are not monstrous mothers, nor are they neglectful, but they are not nurturing either, and they are allowed to remain immersed within the domestic home while parodying its rigid patriarchal construction.

²⁶ Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1985), 33.

It is unsurprising that some authors associated the practice of wet-nursing with infanticide and monstrous motherhood. Jacques Guillemeau writes that there is ‘no difference between a woman that refuses to nurse her owne child; and one that kills her child’. This connection is undoubtedly deliberate, an attempt to cast the mother who fails in her responsibility to her children as not just neglectful, but monstrous. Jacques Guillemeau, *Child-birth, or, the happy deliuerie of vvomen* (London, 1612), sig. li2.

They fall somewhere in the middle, in a space I have best termed ‘negligent’, and that this position exerts its own kind of influence, one that is much more nuanced but, I suggest, no less radical in its implications and commentary on contemporary constructions of maternity.

III. The Negligent Mother in *Romeo and Juliet*

a. *The Good(?) Mother in Arthur Brooke’s ‘Romeus and Juliet’*

There is no better known non-biological maternal figure than the Nurse in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), a character who I purposefully did not consider in my first chapter due to her unique position within the play. The Nurse, as both Juliet’s servant and wet-nurse, is an exceptional example; she lives with the family, and Juliet was never sent away as a baby, as was frequently the case. The Nurse’s position in the Capulet household is a reminder of their significant wealth, as only extremely well-off families were able to afford to have their child’s nurse reside with them.²⁷ This is crucial, as it allows the Nurse to occupy the same physical space as the biological mother, Lady Capulet, and, to a certain extent, merges the two identities that were typically kept independent. As I examine in this section, by having the biological and surrogate mother exist in the same space, and by portraying Lady Capulet as a negligent mother who overlooks her maternal duty, Shakespeare grants the Nurse access to the world of maternal care to which lower-status servants like her were usually denied. Further, I consider how *Romeo and Juliet* complicates these identities in very particular ways, and what impact Shakespeare’s adaption has on the text, by examining the play in contrast to its source material. In comparing Shakespeare to his source, we can better comment on the adapting relationships within and outside the home, the potential for

²⁷ Valerie Fildes notes that nurses were rarely ever employed in the family’s home except in the cases of royalty and the ‘higher aristocracy’. Valerie Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), 158.

greater influence from those outside the biological bond among upper-class families, and even a subtle criticism of the distance and coldness with which mothers of high-status engaged with their children.

Shakespeare's primary source material, Arthur Brooke's poem 'Romeus and Juliet' (1562), was reprinted in 1587, about eight years before the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.²⁸ Brooke's work features many of the same elements Shakespeare adapts in his own story, but it is the differences and distinctions upon which I am going to focus. The nurse, Juliet's mother, and father all feature as principal characters in Brooke's poem, and yet their roles, while broadly the same as in *Romeo and Juliet*, are represented differently and their actions infused with altered meanings. These implications, I argue, completely change the way we understand the roles of both mother and nurse, and their respective maternal functions as either nurturing or negligent parental figures. I first examine how Brooke represents the (far more straight-forward) relationships between both mother and child and nurse and child, before considering how Shakespeare complicates these relationships in his own depiction.

Of particular interest is how Brooke deals with the central issue of Juliet's marriage; in his poem, Juliet's unwelcome betrothal to Paris is a direct result of her mother's concern over her daughter's sorrow. Following the death of Tybalt at Romeus's hands, her mother tries desperately to understand what is wrong with her daughter:

Dear daughter, if you should long languish in this sort,
I stand in doubt that oversoon your sorrows will make short
Your loving father's life and mine, that love you more

²⁸ There can be little doubt Shakespeare adapted his play from Brooke's poem, but Brooke himself was influenced by Luigi da Porto's c. 1530 Italian work *Historia novallamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti*. Jill L. Levenson notes that Shakespeare traced his sources from five different places: da Porto's work, Brooke's poem, Matteo Bandello's version in his *Novelle* (1554), Pierre Boaistuau's French translation of Bandello (1559), and William Painter's prose version in *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567). However, Brooke's poem is generally accepted as Shakespeare's 'immediate source' and is thus the version I focus on here. Jill L. Levenson, 'Romeo and Juliet before Shakespeare', *Studies in Philology* 81.3 (Summer 1984), 325-347, (327).

Than your own proper breath and life [...] (1790-1793)²⁹

Lady Capulet feels Juliet's sadness as acutely as if it were her own, although she does not understand the true reason for her distress. All she knows is that if her daughter continues in such pain, she will 'make short' both her own and her husband's lives, as they love her more than their own existence. In contrast to Shakespeare's Lady Capulet, she unabashedly expresses her affection and concern for her daughter while she is alive and actively seeks to help her. This concern, however, leads her to an incorrect conclusion with ultimately devastating consequences:

But now at length I have bethought me; and I do believe
The only crop and root of all my daughter's pain
Is grudging envy's faint disease; perhaps she doth disdain
To see in wedlocke yoke the most part of her feres,
Whilst only she unmarried doth lose so many years (1842-1846)

In this case, her affection leads to disaster; she proceeds to inform Juliet's father of her concern and her theory that her daughter's sadness is a result of her desire to marry. Lady Capulet's solution is misinformed, but it demonstrates both her love for Juliet and her practicality as an early modern mother; by suggesting marriage, she is ostensibly fulfilling her maternal duty, and in the process validating her love for Juliet. Her father easily agrees to the idea of finding a suitable husband, but explicitly claims he will not force her into marriage with someone she does not care for:

The whilst seek you to learn, if she in any part
Already hath, unaware to us, fixéd her friendly heart;
Lest we have more respect to honour and to wealth,
Than to our daughters quiet life, and to her happy health;
Whom I do hold as dear as th'apple of mine eye,
And rather wish in poor estate and daughterless to die,
Than leave my goods and her y-thralled to such a one,
Whose churlish dealing, I once dead, should be her cause to moan (1867-1874)

²⁹ Arthur Brooke, 'The Tragicall History of Romeus and Juliet' (1562) in *Being the Original of Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' Newly Edited by J. J. Munro*, ed. by J. J. Munro (New York: Duffield and Company, 1908).

Unlike the Capulet of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's father seeks to ensure he chooses someone who will make her happy, and to make sure she has not already 'fixed her friendly heart' on another. In doing so, he follows the duties of the good parent as set forth by authors of conduct literature. William Gouge touches upon the issue of parents' responsibility with regards to their children's marriage; although they were meant to have a hand in deciding who their child should wed, they were typically not supposed to force the union. He writes:

2. Though the match may seeme meet in the parents eie, yet he may not force his childe thereto [...] I denie not but parents vse all manner of faire meanes to move their children to yeeld to that which they see good for them: but if they cannot move them to yeeld, to referre the matter to God, and not against their childrens minds to force them (Gouge, 564)

Marriage was a complex social process, and one that often involved the participation of many people beyond the potential husband and wife. It was as much of, and sometimes more of, an economic and social transaction as it was a love union, however, that did not mean the feelings of those involved were not considered. Factors such as a potential suitor's wealth and reputation could allow a parent to intervene to either approve or deny a match.³⁰ This was particularly the case for marriages between those of high social status, and so it would be too simplistic to presume that Juliet should have either deferred to her parents completely or been able to make the choice entirely of her own free will.³¹ What is clear is that parents, however much of a role they have in the decision, should ideally not force anyone upon their child. Robert Cleaver echoes Gouge's words: although he devotes much time to a parent's role in choosing a suitable partner for their child, he writes they should

³⁰ Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 31.

³¹ O'Hara writes that arguing 'whether marriages were arranged by parents, or were the romantic concern of individuals, imposes an artificial polarity on what was, in reality, a much more complex matter' and it is within these 'bounds' of social status, wealth, etc. that it needs to be understood. *Courtship and Constraint*, 32.

not ‘sell’ them to anyone and ‘bring them into bondage’. If parents force their offspring to ‘marrie contrarie to their minde and liking’ then they have not done their duty, and so ‘there must [...] be a knitting of hearts before a striking of hands’.³²

At this point in Brooke’s poem, both parents are abiding by these doctrines; not only is their pursuit of the union a direct result of Lady Capulet’s concern for her child’s wellbeing, but her father’s words enforce the idea that while they are using ‘faire meanes’ to ‘move’ Juliet to what they believe is ‘good’ for her, he has no intention of forcing her into marriage. This assertion makes her father’s words about a thousand lines later extremely puzzling:

“Listen,” quoth he, “unthankful and thou disobedient child,
[...]
How much the Roman youth of parents stood in awe,
And eke what power upon their seed the fathers had by law?
Whom they not only might pledge, alienate and sell,
When so they stood in need, but more, if children aid rebel,
The parents had the power of life and sudden death (1948-1955)

His words here stand in direct contrast to his previous claims that he would not force his daughter into marriage. In recalling the children of the classical period, he recalls an antiquated notion of relationships between parent and child, one which he idolises but which would bring him further away from early modern ideals. Perhaps, then, Brooke is indicating to the reader that both parents are lacking in their treatment of their daughter – Capulet’s harshness is not the ideal, but neither is his wife’s over-affection.

Whatever the reason for this sudden shift, Lady Capulet separates herself from her husband’s harsh words, and her concern remains with her daughter’s well-being. Juliet tells her, like her Shakespearean counterpart, that she cannot believe her mother is offering her

³² Robert Cleaver, *A godly forme of houshold gouernment* (London, 1603), 318.

to a man before knowing ‘if I do like or dislike my lover’ (1908). Further, she insists if she is forced into the marriage, she will ‘pierce [her] breast with sharp and bloody knife’ and that her mother ‘shall become the murd’ress of [her] life’ (1915-1916). These words fill Lady Capulet with immense grief, ‘so deep this answer made the sorrows down to sink / [i]nto the mother’s breast, that she not knoweth what to think / [o]f these her daughter’s words’ (1926-1928). Although Juliet’s father attempts to force her into marriage, her mother by contrast appears ignorant but well-meaning; the thought of hurting her child, of becoming her ‘murd’ress’, even indirectly, fills her with a heartache that will not be mirrored in Shakespeare’s play.

It does not come as a surprise, then, when her reaction to Juliet’s apparent death is one of overwhelming sorrow:

“Ah, Cruel Death,” quoth she, “that this against all Right,
Hast ended my felicity, and robbed my heart’s delight.
[...]
Whereto stay I, alas since Juliet is gone?
Whereto live I, since she is dead, except to wail and moan?
Alack, dear child, my tears for thee shall never cease;
Even as my days of life increase, so shall my plaint increase (2431-2438)

Lamenting the loss of her daughter, she reflects the strong emotions of maternal loss I discussed in the previous chapter. She wonders what is left for her now that her child is gone, and she has been stripped of that maternal identity. But her emotions have not been confined to her grief; Lady Capulet, throughout the poem, has veered into the territory of neglect through overindulgence. While she obviously cares for her daughter, as I discussed, being too open with one’s affection was potentially detrimental to a child’s development, and thus a possible indication of neglect rather than nurture. This certainly seems to be confirmed by Juliet’s fate, (in)directly brought about by her mother’s concern – had Lady Capulet not tried to negotiate her marriage to Paris, the events

of the poem may never have unfolded. While Brooke doubtlessly intends for the reader to sympathise with Lady Capulet and her pain, there is nonetheless the underlying suggestion that Lady Capulet has neglected her duty to her daughter in coddling her rather than providing stricter instruction – her daughter’s excessive emotion a reflection of her own.

However, I suggest that although in some ways both Juliet’s mother and father can be seen as negligent, Brooke does not allow the nurse character to adopt the same maternal role she does in *Romeo and Juliet*, and thus minimises how critical we may be of Juliet’s biological parents. He instead emphasises the distinction between biological mother and servant; the nurse in Brooke’s version is similarly Juliet’s confidante, and the only one privy to the truth of her relationship with Romeus, but Brooke portrays their connection as less overtly maternal. To begin with, the nurse is a conspirator in Juliet’s secret relationship, and as in the play she is the one in whom Juliet confides:

To whom shall she unfold
Her hidden burning love, and ere thought and cares so cold?
The nurse of whom I spake, within her chamber lay
Upon the maid she waiteth still; to her she doth berray
Her new receivéd wound (621-625)

Although the nurse is initially hesitant to keep Juliet’s feelings to herself, she agrees ‘to do what she commands’ and keep her secret (630). The nurse’s role is less motherly, serving instead as Juliet’s friend and largely irresponsible partner in crime. After Juliet’s confession, the two ‘do sit and chat awhile / [a]nd to themselves they laugh how they the mother shall beguile’ (713-714). This image of Juliet and her nurse laughing over how they may fool Juliet’s mother conveys to the reader that the two are acting childishly, and Juliet’s mother is the true parental authority whom they must ‘beguile’ through their immature deceit. When Brooke refers to Juliet as a ‘nurse-child’, it is in direct reference to that ‘secret counsel of her heart’, which leads her to keep her plans hidden

from her mother: he seems to suggest that Juliet's disobedience is a direct result of the nurse's negative influence (2290). It is when she is going against her parents' wishes that Juliet truly 'belongs' to the nurse, and so Brooke confirms the stereotype I explored in earlier chapters which suggests surrogate maternal influence (if indeed you could even call his iteration of the nurse 'maternal') is something that must be rejected.

As her confidante, Juliet seeks out the nurse's advice, who tells her to marry Paris, for she does not believe Romeus will ever return, and even if he does, she counsels, Juliet will simply acquire a lover. 'The one shall use her as his lawful wedded wife / [i]n wanton love with equal joy the other lead his life'; this advice does not comfort Juliet, but rather 'greatly did these wicked words the lady's mind dis-ease' (2305-2306, 2310). Shortly afterwards, Juliet decides to ask the Friar for help and puts into action the plan which will ultimately lead to her death. Brooke, then, places the blame for Juliet's tragic death not on Lady Capulet for her emotional response to her daughter's sorrow and subsequent proposal of marriage, but on the nurse for her poor advice. As a result, at the conclusion of the poem, the 'nurse of Juliet is banished in her age / [b]ecause that from the parents she did hide the marriage' (2987-2988). In Brooke's version, the nurse is a destructive figure, a servant who steps outside the acceptable limits of her role in aiding Juliet, in clear contrast to Lady Capulet who – while her actions may have been defined as neglectful under the early modern definition – is only shown to want the best for her child. Although Lady Capulet and the nurse exist within the same space, in the poem they are still confined to separate worlds, kept apart as much by their different social status as by the secretive nature of Juliet's connection with her nurse. The nurse is never truly presented as an alternative mother-figure for Juliet, and Lady Capulet is instead granted all the sympathy, and so conceptions of nurture and neglect, for the most part, remain intact.

b. *Surrogate Nurture and Biological Negligence in Romeo and Juliet*

There is no question Shakespeare was influenced by Brooke's poem in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), and the basic aspects of the familial relationships – both biological and surrogate – remain, but he reworks the maternal connection between Juliet, her nurse, and Lady Capulet. As I will demonstrate, the Nurse as she is presented in the play infiltrates the world of the biological mother as she takes on a more conspicuously maternal role that blurs the distinction between biological and surrogate maternal nurture. Lady Capulet, in turn, loses some of the elements that clearly distinguished her as the nurturing mother in Brooke's poem and transforms into a negligent mother who fails to live up to her duty. I suggest that she is not neglectful, as she largely abides by the precepts of upper-class motherhood I set forth in the first section, and she is never made inhuman, but she becomes negligent exactly because she allows the Nurse to challenge the role of the biological mother and exert greater influence over Juliet. In the process, the audience may be forced to question the social expectations placed on mothers, and specifically the more distant nature of upper-class motherhood as exhibited by Lady Capulet.³³

The overall trajectory of Shakespeare's story is much the same as Brooke's with some notable changes in how the drama unfolds: namely, Juliet's betrothal to Paris does not result from her mother's concern for her happiness. Instead, Lady Capulet informs Juliet at the beginning of the play that she is of marriageable age, and she has selected a prospective match. Notably, the

³³ It is interesting to note that the first quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* is much closer to Brooke's poem in its depiction of Lady Capulet as a sympathetic, maternal figure, and indeed of the three women as a 'generally cooperative trio'. Q2, then, reflects an updated and increasingly complex portrayal of the relationship between these women. For an in-depth consideration of the differences between the two quartos with respect to the relationship between Juliet, her mother, and nurse, see Steven Urkowitz, 'Shakespeare revises Juliet, the Nurse, and Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*' in *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England*, ed. by Christina Luckyj and Niamh J. O'Leary (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 185-207, (quoted 201).

Nurse is present for this conversation: after Lady Capulet initially says she will talk to her daughter ‘in secret’ she advises the Nurse to stay and ‘hear our counsel’ (1.3.9,10).³⁴ In doing so, she invites the Nurse into the maternal world, allowing her access to what she originally indicated should be a private moment between mother and daughter and thus beginning to remove the barriers between biological and surrogate mother. She informs them of her desire for Juliet to marry Paris, and – although she does not suggest that she will force her to wed – she leaves little room for disagreement. She asks her daughter, ‘[c]an you love the gentleman?’; phrasing it as question implies a degree of choice, but she carries on that she should ‘[r]ead o’er the volume of young Paris’ face, / [a]nd find delight writ there with beauty’s pen’ (81, 83-84). Her daughter’s response is characteristically non-committal, though hardly disobedient:

JULIET:

I’ll look to like, if looking liking move.
But no more deep will I indart mine eye
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly (99-101)

She will do as her mother asks and consider Paris, and her mother’s ‘consent’ leads her to desire the match, and that alone is reason enough for her to make the effort. At this point, Lady Capulet is following the guidelines of the nurturing mother with regards to marriage; she is suggesting but not yet forcing the issue, but she lacks the foundation of maternal care that was abundant in Brooke’s poem. Instead, it is the Nurse who is given the language of warmth towards her (not)-child.

Once Juliet has fallen for Romeo, she quickly becomes defiant to her parent’s wishes, but tries to appeal to her mother; she begs for pity to not be forced into marriage. In one of the few instances in which she refers to Lady Capulet as her mother, she evokes maternal love by pleading,

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Jill L. Levenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

‘O sweet my mother, cast me not away’ (3.5.198).³⁵ Like her counterpart in Brooke’s poem, she tells her mother if she is forced into marriage she may ‘make the bridal bed / [i]n that dim monument where Tybalt lies’, to which her mother coldly responds, ‘[t]alk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word / [d]o as thou wilt, for I have done with thee’ (200-201, 202-203). As I have discussed, early modern discourse suggests that even if parents have a strong choice for their child’s partner, they should not force them into marriage. Both father and mother’s harsh insistence, then, that Juliet marry Paris is a direct contradiction of the nurturing parent, and Lady Capulet’s remarks that she does not care what Juliet does if she refuses to obey her orders, go beyond merely a restraint of affection (which was acceptable for high-status parents), and cast her as a negligent mother.

Lady Capulet is (sometimes literally) shadowed by the Nurse, who in many ways functions as her antithesis, and often performs a more maternal role to Juliet. There is no question that she truly cares about Juliet and views her as a surrogate child, taking the place of her own daughter who died as an infant. In the scene in which Lady Capulet informs Juliet of her plans for her marriage to Paris, it is the Nurse who is given the space to speak of her affection for Juliet, while Lady Capulet remains impassive. The Nurse laments the loss of her biological daughter but demonstrates a love for Juliet as real and honest as that of any mother towards her child. She speaks at length on how she nursed Juliet as a baby, and how this allows her to express her love and care for the ‘prettiest babe that e’er [she] nursed’ which compels her to ‘live to see her married’ (1.3.62, 63). Her rhetoric in this scene is full of affection, as she tells Lady Capulet that she ‘can tell [Juliet’s] age unto an hour’ and retelling a story of Juliet as a child she cannot help but carry on

³⁵ Juliet only uses the word ‘mother’ three other times: to ask ‘where is my mother?’ (1.5.62), ‘where is my father and my mother, nurse?’ (3.2.138), and to comment ‘it is my lady mother’ (3.5.66). This is the only instance in which she uses it with any sort of affection.

even after both Lady Capulet and Juliet have told her to ‘hold thy peace’ (12, 51). By contrast, Lady Capulet views the marriage as a social transaction, one that is necessary as ‘[y]ounger than you / [h]ere in Verona, ladies of esteem / [a]re already made mothers’ (71-73). While Lady Capulet’s practicality can be seen as an attribute of the good mother as she is not allowing her emotions to interfere with what she believes is best for her daughter, by comparing her reaction to the Nurse, we at the very least observe two different ideas of care co-existing in the same space, which opens the play up to the potential criticism of Lady Capulet’s emotionally indifferent form of motherhood.

Later, when Lady Capulet coldly tells her daughter that she does not care about her feelings regarding her marriage to Paris, it is once again the Nurse to whom Juliet turns, asking her to ‘comfort me; counsel me’ (3.5.208). She looks to the Nurse as one might a mother, for both advice and reassurance, two things she does not receive from Lady Capulet. In these moments, the Nurse feels less like a co-conspirator, plotting with Juliet to deceive her parents, and more of an alternative mother who stands in place of the biological mother. Furthermore, the Nurse defends Juliet to her biological parents when they accuse her of disobedience. Capulet, reacting to Juliet’s pleas not to marry Paris, harshly reprimands his daughter:

CAPULET:

[...] Wife, we scarce thought us blessed
That God had lent us but this only child,
But now I see this one is one too much,
And that we have a curse in having her (3.5.163-166)

The Nurse quickly comes to Juliet’s defence at her father’s unforgiving words: ‘God in heaven bless her! / [y]ou are to blame, my lord, to rate her so’ (168-169). Both father and mother threaten to disavow their daughter for disrespecting their wishes, but it is the Nurse who supports her and insists it is the parents who are at fault for even thinking to speak that way about their child. Once

more, the Nurse occupies the same space as Juliet's biological parents, and she is also given access to a very similar language. In fact, most of the time her rhetoric is far more nurturing than that of Juliet's actual mother. In defending Juliet and participating in these exchanges, her role supersedes that of the servant and is elevated to something that is distinctly maternal. Capulet tells the Nurse to '[h]old your tongue', to 'smatter with your gossips go' and again to '[u]tter your gravity over gossip's bowl' (169, 170, 173). Although his words may merely imply she is speaking out of turn, in referring to her twice as a 'gossip' he reminds her, and the audience, of her station, asserting that she is not in a position to be speaking in such a familiar way.

It makes sense here to think more thoroughly about how the nurse's role had to be appropriately regulated, and how Shakespeare's character subsequently betrays these conventions. The Nurse's position within the Capulet household is somewhat undefined, as she is not just a wet-nurse; she remains a servant even once Juliet has finished nursing, and so it is not entirely accurate to judge her by the standards of one or the other. However, given that she was Juliet's wet-nurse first, and considering that those would have been considered some of Juliet's most formative years, I am engaging specifically with the character as a wet-nurse. I have already extensively considered in the first chapter of this thesis the distinction between a biological mother nursing her own child or hiring a nurse to do so in her place; Lady Capulet, then, fails at the most important responsibility of all, as she does not nurse Juliet herself. Although this was not uncommon for a woman of her status, she further ignores her duty by hiring a woman who would not have been considered appropriate for the position.

When hiring a nurse, there were strict rules regarding what attributes they should possess, and it was the parent's responsibility to hire someone who fit all qualifications. Jacques Guillemeau writes that there are six qualities that should be considered in the hiring of a nurse:

‘her birth and [p]arentage’, ‘her person’, ‘her [behaviour]’, ‘her mind’, ‘her milke’ and ‘her child’.³⁶ Particularly of concern with regards to the Nurse (as much as know of her character) is her ‘behaviour/mind’ and her ‘child’; she should be ‘of good behaviour, [sober], and not given eiether to drinking, or gluttonie’ as well as being ‘sage, wise’ and ‘discreet’ (4). She should also have a child who is not ‘above seven or eight months’ but older than ‘fiftee daies or a monthe’ (5). Juliet’s Nurse, by contrast, could hardly be called ‘sage’, ‘wise’ or ‘discreet’, certainly not in the context of her attitude regarding Juliet’s secret relationship with Romeo. Also crucial, although she did at one point have a biological child (a daughter, rather than a son), she died at a young age, and is now childless, which would have meant that she had no childcaring responsibilities of her own and could focus all her attention on Juliet as surrogate daughter. Nowhere does it mention that a nurse should be overly loving and affectionate towards her charge; the nurse may feel a fondness towards the child she nurses, but she is meant to perform the duty for which she was hired and should not possibly share the same affection as the biological mother.³⁷ While I am not suggesting that we impose twenty-first century values of nurture onto the text, I do contend that in refuting many of these characteristics and by involving herself directly in family life, Juliet’s Nurse threatens the distinction between biological and non-biological maternal nurture. Further, Lady Capulet is negligent in allowing an unsuitable wet-nurse to exert influence over her daughter. Shakespeare thus challenges and threatens the primacy of biological maternity, and exposes the dangers posed by a woman who does not outwardly express affection or love for her child.

³⁶ Jacques Guillemeau, *The Nursing of Children* (London, 1612), 2-4.

³⁷ Elizabeth Clinton, in her defense of maternal wet-nursing, advises mothers that they should ‘trust not other woman’ to nurse their children, as those whom ‘wages hire’ could not provide the same level of affection as those whom ‘God and nature ties to do it’. Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery*. Quoted in Kate Aughterson, *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 117.

Indeed, while the Nurse does not hide her fondness for Juliet, it is only once she believes Juliet has died that Lady Capulet outwardly displays any maternal care. Her response upon discovering her daughter is startling in its emotional force, in stark contrast to her previous negligent behaviour:

LADY CAPULET:

Accursed, unhappy, wretched, hateful day!
 Most miserable hour that e'er time saw
 In lasting labour of his pilgrimage!
 But one, poor one, one poor and loving child,
 But one thing to rejoice and solace in,
 And cruel death hath snatched it from my sight! (4.4.70-75)

Her sudden outpouring of emotion is an unexpected shift, and it somewhat vindicates her previous actions in not taking Juliet's feelings into consideration with regards to marriage. After all, her insistence on an arranged, emotionless marriage for Juliet would have avoided the heightened feelings and rash decisions that led to her daughter's rebellion and supposed death. She calls her daughter the 'one thing to rejoice and take solace in', demonstrating a completely different form of care than anything she has expressed previously. She refers to Juliet as her 'only life' and cries that if she does not awaken, she will 'die with [her]'. As I discussed in Chapter Three, mothers were taught that raising children was their sole purpose, and when that child was lost, it was extremely hard for women to figure out what became of their identity. There thus seem to be two different 'versions' of Lady Capulet: the negligent but practical woman who ignores her daughter's pleas and transfers all her duties onto the Nurse, and the one we observe here, who mourns for her child and raises sympathy with the audience. This contradiction, I believe, may help explain why – despite the common discussions around Shakespearean portrayals of maternity – Lady Capulet has been discussed shockingly infrequently by critics as a mother. Her combination of negligent

motherhood while her daughter is alive, and her extreme emotions after her death means that it is difficult to place her into one category, or reconcile her own position alongside that of the Nurse.³⁸

The overlapping roles of biological and surrogate motherhood are emphasised in the Nurse's own reaction to discovering Juliet lifeless, and the way in which it mirrors Lady Capulet's response. She cries out, '[s]he's dead, deceased. She's dead, alack the day!' to which Lady Capulet almost parrots back, '[a]lack the day, she's dead, she's dead, she's dead' (4.4.50-51). The two maternal figures are completely unified in their grief, and even if we are meant to feel Lady Capulet's greater pain at losing her biological child, it is difficult to separate the two and more difficult still to completely sympathise with a woman who was so indifferent to her child in life.

The Nurse continues:

NURSE:

O woe, O woeful, woeful, woeful day!
Most lamentable day, most woeful day
That ever, ever I did yet behold!
O day, O day, O day, O hateful day!
Never was seen so black a day as this!
O woeful day, O woeful day! (4.4.76-81)

The surrogate body cannot directly use the language of the mother, but her emotional response may seem more genuine than that of Lady Capulet, and even just being allowed onstage in this scene to react at all is exceptional in and of itself. While Lady Capulet laments the loss of her 'loving child' as the 'one thing to rejoice [...] in' despite her actions never reflecting her words, the Nurse cries out an authentically passionate response as evidenced by her repetition and failure to find words. In Shakespeare's story, both the Nurse and Lady Capulet mourn Juliet in strikingly

³⁸ There are comparatively few works dedicated specifically to discussing Lady Capulet's role within the play; much of the discussion around Lady Capulet has focused on her lack of agency. Sasha Roberts notes in her analysis of the play that feminist critics have often stressed the 'crucial role of patriarchal power', but Lady Capulet herself is an 'ambivalent figure open to conflicting interpretations'. Sasha Roberts, *Romeo and Juliet* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 21, 26. While there is no doubt *Romeo and Juliet* is, in many ways, a patriarchal play, it is interesting that Lady Capulet has so often been discussed as a victim of her controlling husband rather than an active agent making her own choices with regards to motherhood.

similar ways, entwining the two in a manner Brooke's poem does not, where their roles are kept separate and biological maternity clearly takes precedent. Ultimately, although as in Brooke's poem, we can argue that the Nurse is partially to blame for the tragedy that unfolds, her punishment is to lose the child she considers a daughter, and to suffer the loss as strongly as Lady Capulet (if not more so). In other words, while in Brooke's poem the nurse is punished as an outsider, a destructive force who must be exiled, the Nurse of *Romeo and Juliet* is on the inside, and consequently faces the same punishment as Lady Capulet.

What becomes clear, then, is that Shakespeare radically alters the relationships between the three female characters and, in doing so, rewrites how we understand their roles. Lady Capulet, so concerned and caring – if dangerously misinformed – in Brooke's poem, becomes a negligent mother who ignores her daughter's wishes and leaves her in the hands of an 'unsuitable' nurse. The Nurse, then, fills the gap left by this negligent, emotionally absent biological mother and contradicts common notions about the unloving and harmful surrogate. The play challenges traditional ideas about surrogate nurture, and while we cannot claim that Shakespeare made these changes purposefully to muddle this distinction, in doing so he nonetheless allows the Nurse access to both a language and a role in Juliet's life that would normally be off-limits to a non-biological mother. It is Lady Capulet's negligence that grants the Nurse this power, and in allowing them to co-exist within the world of the play, Shakespeare destabilises the distinction between biological and surrogate and suggests that there is room for negotiation within both patriarchal and class structures.

Through performance, *Romeo and Juliet*, unlike Brooke's poem, presents us with Lady Capulet and the Nurse physically in the same space. Because children were usually sent out to nurse, it is unusual for the two figures to engage with each other. While the effects of this may be

minimised in a poem such as Brooke's, onstage their proximity is unavoidable and undeniable. While the boundaries of the home were porous, and 'privacy' did not have the same connotations it does today, and servants frequently found themselves on 'fairly intimate terms' with their employers and privy to the intimate details of family life.³⁹ However, servants were meant to be discreet and remember their place within the household, so the Nurse's outspokenness to and often against the Capulets is striking nonetheless.⁴⁰ Lady Capulet's negligence and emotional absence in her daughter's life is a space the Nurse rhetorically occupies, and physically inhabits on the stage. Juliet engages with both maternal figures together and separately, but the meaning of these interactions may be significantly altered based on performance choice. For example, in a review of a 2018 RSC production of *Romeo and Juliet*, Michael Billington writes that the actor playing the Nurse portrays a 'giggling intimacy' with Juliet, suggesting a relationship similar to the one depicted in Brooke's poem, whereas the same character is described in a review of the 2009 Globe production as 'real flesh and blood, not the bawdy caricature of tradition' implying the Nurse's performance reflects a real, honest connection with Juliet.⁴¹ Lady Capulet's character can likewise be reinterpreted: the 2021 film version from the National Theatre has a Lady Capulet who is 'cold, imperious, and a little too menacing', whereas Sasha Roberts describes a 1996 New End Theatre production in which Lady Capulet lovingly 'takes Juliet in her arms' when discussing her

³⁹ Amanda J. Flather, 'Space, Place, and Gender: The Sexual and Spatial Division of Labor in the Early Modern Household', *History and Theory* 52.3 (October 2013), 344-360, (344).

⁴⁰ Servants could often use the secrets they learned as weapons against their employers; for this reason servants were expected to be 'obedient, honest, and diligent'. Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 170-171, 129.

⁴¹ Michael Billington, 'Romeo and Juliet review – RSC's gender-fluid tragedy of youth', *The Guardian* (2 May 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/may/02/romeo-and-juliet-review-rsc-gender-fluid-tragedy-of-youth> [Accessed 3 May 2021] and Lyn Gardner, 'Romeo and Juliet', *The Guardian* (4 May 2009), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/may/04/romeo-and-juliet-globe-london> [Accessed 3 May 2021].

marriage.⁴² The fact that performance choices can radically alter how we perceive these women and their relationships to one another confirms the ambiguous nature of their characters. Shakespeare constructs them as neither one extreme or the other, and yet those who direct and perform the play often feel the need to make them so.

Regardless of how a particular production may portray these relationships, there is little doubt that by virtue of the maternal figures operating in the same physical and rhetorical space, Shakespeare muddles the distinction between the two identities. While Brooke's poem emphasises the differences in how they relate and interact with Juliet, ultimately suggesting the primacy of biological relationships, Shakespeare places them in direct dialogue with each other, implicitly criticising the negligence of upper-class motherhood and the space it allows for intrusion from other maternal figures. However, he does ensure that they remain separate characters and ultimately, he confirms the stereotypes as it is still Lady Capulet who stands alone while the Nurse is essentially erased from the narrative, excommunicated implicitly if not blatantly. In the play's final scene, it is only Juliet's biological parents who must reconcile their daughter's death – the Nurse is not granted a place within the family tomb, and the guilty Friar merely confesses that 'to the marriage / [h]er Nurse is privy (5.3.265-266). In the next section, I explore a character who, by contrast, stands alone at the end of the play and drives this distinction even further, ultimately embodying the identities of both the biological mother and the nurse simultaneously – Shakespeare's Cleopatra.

IV. Cleopatra as (Non)-Mother

⁴² Arifa Akbar, 'Romeo and Juliet review – National Theatre's first film is an ingenious triumph', *The Guardian* (4 April 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/apr/04/romeo-and-juliet-review-national-theatre-sky-arts-josh-oconnor-jessie-buckley> [Accessed 23 October 2021] and Sasha Roberts, *Romeo and Juliet*, 27.

a. *Cleopatra in Mary Sidney's and Samuel Daniel's Closet Dramas*

Much has been written about Cleopatra as both a historical and literary figure, and her portrayal in Shakespeare's play stands as one of the most enduring depictions of the Egyptian queen. Cleopatra has been discussed by scholars as a queen, a wife, a lover, and a woman who crosses and negotiates gender boundaries in ways which female characters are unable to in many of Shakespeare's works, and in early modern literature as a whole.⁴³ However, Cleopatra has rarely been discussed as a maternal figure, and as a mother to her children.⁴⁴ This absence in critical and cultural discourse is not surprising, especially when studying Shakespeare's Cleopatra – her children never appear in the play, are rarely mentioned, and seem to hold little importance to either the characters or plot. It is, however, an unexpected omission given the importance of maternity to early modern ideals of female virtue, and the critical and cultural focus on Cleopatra in relation to those ideals. A notable exception to this omission is Yasmin Arshad's 2019 *Imagining Cleopatra*, which begins to incorporate Cleopatra's maternity into her character and how it is portrayed in various versions of Cleopatra's character, with a primary focus on how these depictions relate to Elizabeth I's own problematic portrayal of maternity.⁴⁵

⁴³ Some of the most well-known works discussing Cleopatra include Cristina León Alfar's *Fantasies of Female Evil: The Dynamics of Gender and Power in Shakespearean Tragedy*, which includes the chapter "I kiss his conqu'ring hand": Cleopatra and the Erotics of Imperial Domination' (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 136-160. Cleopatra has also been discussed in the context of race and empire; for example, the chapter 'The Imperial Romance of *Antony and Cleopatra*' in Ania Loomba's *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2002) and Joyce Green MacDonald's *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), which links Cleopatra's sexual and racial identity in the text. León Alfar comments that Cleopatra 'repeatedly resists the containment of her desire and power by masculine interests' but her 'self-determination can never survive patrilineal conflicts over land and power'. Despite this ultimate failing, she is often seen by critics as a 'woman in control of her body and her own representation', unusual for female characters of the time. Cristina León Alfar, *Fantasies of Female Evil*, 137.

⁴⁴ A few exceptions to this gap in discourse are Constance Brown Kurimaya's article 'The Mother of the World: A Psychoanalytical Interpretation of *Antony and Cleopatra*', *ELR* 7 (1977), 325-351 and Susan C. Straub's 'Bred Now of Your Mud: Land, Generation, and Maternity in *Antony and Cleopatra*' in *Renaissance Papers 2012*, ed. by Andrew Shifflett and Edward Gieskes (London: Camden House, 2012), 67-82. Both Kurimaya and Straub speak to Cleopatra's acceptance or rejection of motherhood, but both see it as an either/or; either Cleopatra entirely rejects motherhood, or she ultimately embraces it in the final scene.

⁴⁵ Arshad covers a range of topics in her discussion of the various early modern depictions of Cleopatra, and although she rightfully highlights the importance of Cleopatra's maternity to Daniel's drama, I believe there is still

In this section, I am therefore going to develop this idea and argue that in focusing in on Cleopatra as a mother, and specifically as a negligent mother, we can better understand exactly what makes her such a threatening figure in Shakespeare's play, as well as develop our understanding of the boundaries of biological and surrogate maternity and maternal duty which she negotiates and troubles.

As with my discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*, in order to fully understand the subversive nature of Cleopatra's lack of maternal nurture in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), I am first going to consider two contemporary depictions of the character which present very different images of Cleopatra as mother: Mary Sidney's *The Tragedie of Antonie* (1590) and Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* (1593). By examining these source materials, I can engage more fully and coherently with the different ways in which mothers could be negligent towards their children, and how Shakespeare specifically – through dramatic performance – allows his Cleopatra to negotiate maternity without fully embodying and ultimately fulfilling its ideal. This, I argue, is crucial to understanding that motherhood did not necessarily have one strict definition; *Antony and Cleopatra* ultimately demonstrates that maternity can exist in ways that we might not have imagined in early modern England. Both Sidney's and Daniel's work have, predictably, received less critical attention than Shakespeare's, but they both present a Cleopatra who, while hardly the image of the ideal mother, is comparatively concerned with her maternal duty and the fates of her children.⁴⁶ By choosing to incorporate Cleopatra's children and reminding the reader of her

much more to be developed with regards to the importance of Cleopatra as a mother, and specifically as a mother who largely ignores her maternal duty. Yasmin Arshad, *Imagining Cleopatra: Performing Gender and Power in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁴⁶ Contrary to Brooke's and Painter's earlier versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, which Shakespeare used as source texts for his play, critics do not have evidence Shakespeare was influenced by these earlier versions of Cleopatra's story. However, Arthur M.Z Norman comments that Shakespeare was certainly influenced by Daniel's poetry, which increases the possibility he was likewise familiar with his closet drama. Arthur M.Z Norman, 'Daniel's *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* and *Antony and Cleopatra*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 9.1 (Winter 1958), 11-18, (11).

obligation to them, they critique and engage with early modern notions of a mother's responsibility – with concepts of nurture and neglect – in ways Shakespeare chooses not to.

It is crucial to bear in mind that Sidney's and Daniel's works were written as closet dramas; in other words, they were never intended for performance onstage.⁴⁷ This genre, like Brooke's poem, granted both authors certain liberties while also largely constraining them to language as the sole producer of meaning, rather than allowing their work to be interpreted by performance choice. Closet drama, however, did allow authors to make more blatant political commentary, which typically centred around issues of the monarchy, and was particularly focused on the question of when a monarchy descends into tyranny.⁴⁸ Cleopatra makes a fitting subject for the genre, then, as through the historical figure one could comment both on the fragile divide between monarchy and tyranny as well as the 'confusing paradox of female political power and sexuality' (Clarke, 155).

I argue that what Shakespeare decides not to include in his text becomes as important as what he does, and the absence of Cleopatra's maternity onstage becomes its own statement. In contrast to Lady Capulet, Cleopatra is never given the opportunity to be a nurturing mother, but rather, she prioritises her role as wife and queen and creates a rhetorical and visual spectacle of both identities. Her lack of attention to or consideration for her children is something that is worth exploring despite, and indeed because of, its distinct absence. Rather than seek to reincorporate traditional maternity into Cleopatra's character, I intend to demonstrate that Shakespeare's Cleopatra uses images and notions of maternity, both biological and surrogate, to attempt to establish and maintain her power, and in doing so entwines maternal identities that were always

⁴⁷ Closet dramas could sometimes be read aloud within a group, which might constitute a type of performance, but as its name suggests, it was intended to be kept from a larger public audience.

⁴⁸ Danielle Clarke, 'The Politics of Translation and Gender in the Countess of Pembroke's "Antonie"', *Translation and Literature* 6.2 (1997), 149-166, (153).

intended to remain independent. Again, he does so by making her a negligent maternal figure who, under the precepts of queenship, does not neglect her children, but cannot be said to nurture them either, although she co-opts the images that defined maternal nurture.

When discussing Cleopatra's character, it is also important to remember that the duty a parent owed their children did not end once that child reached so-called 'adulthood' – rather, their responsibilities carried on for the remainder of the parent's life.⁴⁹ Particularly relevant to my discussion of Cleopatra as a maternal figure is Gouge's assertion of the duty parents owe their children 'when they cease to be parents: that is, when they are going out of this world' (Gouge, 567). Gouge's words confirm the obvious, that a parent never stops being one so long as they are alive, but he also details what parents owe their children even in death. He remarks that the parent should take care to leave their children with three things: 'good direction', 'faithfull prayer' and 'a wise choice of some friends to be as parents to them' (568). These dictates, and particularly the choice of surrogate parents in their absence, mark Cleopatra as either nurturing or negligent in the three depictions I am now going to examine. Through this exploration, I interrogate how negligent mothers in Shakespeare's plays are shaped by genre and source material, and how Shakespeare uses these conventions to comment upon Cleopatra's own identity as queen, lover, and mother, to allow her to use images of maternal nurture without being confined to the identity of the nurturing mother.

Mary Sidney's version of Cleopatra's story is a translation of Robert Garnier's French work *Marc Antonie*. Although Sidney is working with someone else's words, as in any translation she chooses what to focus upon and what to emphasise through her rhetorical decisions. Clarke notes

⁴⁹ As I discussed in my previous chapter, notions of what constituted 'childhood' and when a child officially became an adult has been oft-debated. I continue with the idea of 'childhood' as more reflective of the parent's experience than the offspring.

that in choosing to concentrate on the ‘consequences of a disputed succession’, Sidney’s translation was likely to have been influenced by the succession crisis and Elizabeth I’s lack of an heir (Clarke, 157). I would add that this context may also help us understand why Sidney highlights Cleopatra’s maternity and her connection to her children, reminding the reader of Elizabeth’s own lack of not only an heir, but of any biological children at all. By writing a closet drama, Sidney would have been able to provide commentary on the succession issue without worrying about presenting these issues directly before the queen herself through performance. The danger Cleopatra poses in Sidney’s work comes largely from her inability to properly establish her succession, and from her limitations as a mother. By focusing her work on these concerns, Sidney brings Cleopatra’s maternal negligence to the fore.

Sidney opens her drama with a lengthy speech from Antony in which he relays how Cleopatra has, in his own words, deceived him and steered him from a virtuous life. Driven by his all-consuming love for her, he has lost his honour, and she – as a changeable, volatile woman – spares no thought for him or ‘thy wife Octavia and her tender babes’ (1.122).⁵⁰ Antony sets up Cleopatra’s shortcomings as he admits his own and reveals his illogical love for her, which he claims shall ‘burne [him] last’ (140). Cleopatra, by contrast, in her first appearance, declares that she never betrayed him, and that she has in fact sacrificed everything for him, including her ‘[s]ceptre, children, freedome, light’ (410). She places her love for Antony over all else, over both her crown and children, forgetting both duties which should have assumed greater importance.

Cleopatra’s maternal limitations are emphasised, and she may be defined in Sidney’s drama as negligent, as I shall illustrate. Sidney takes the time to make it clear that her behaviour is destructive, and she is purposefully scolded for her failure by other characters. Upon Cleopatra’s

⁵⁰ Mary Sidney, *The Tragedie of Antonie* (London, 1595).

realisation that Antony is lost to her and her subsequent contemplation of suicide, Charmian scolds her to 'live for [her] sonnes' to which Cleopatra replies, '[n]ay for their father die'. This prompts Charmian to label Cleopatra a 'hardhearted mother' and calls attention to her rejection of her children and her failure as a caring maternal figure (2.555-556). Cleopatra's desire to value her role as Antony's lover over her role as mother is clearly perceived negatively, and Charmian further tries to convince Cleopatra that the duty she owes her children is reason enough to remain alive:

CHARMIAN: [...] Honour his [Antony's] memory: with doubled care
Build and bring up the children of you both
In [Caesar's] grace: who as a noble Prince
Will leave them Lords of this most glorious realme (615-618)

She emphasises that Cleopatra should raise her children with 'doubled care' (perhaps as both father and mother) and that it is a maternal obligation that should compel her to live. If she truly hopes to honour Antony, she should do so by raising their children and fulfilling her role as a mother instead. If she does so, in 'Caesar's grace' they will then be left as the '[l]ords of this most glorious realme'. Her political ambitions for her children are therefore explicitly tied to her ability to care for them in the manner that was expected; one cannot succeed without the other.

This connection between maternal care and the realisation of political power is stressed later, once Antony is dead and Cleopatra plans to follow him. Euphron, who serves as tutor to Cleopatra's children, echoes a similar sentiment:

EUPHRON: Live for your children's sake:
Let not your death of kingdome them deprive.
Alas what shall they do: who will have care? (1813-1815)

Like Charmian, Euphron urges Cleopatra to live for her children, and reminds her that the 'death' of her kingdom is explicitly connected to the fate of her children. Cleopatra cannot be a queen without them, and the only way to ensure her posterity is to remain alive and care for them, but

that does not seem to concern her. When this approach does not work, he then attempts to appeal to her maternal compassion with details of what will be done to her children when they are captured by Caesar, how their ‘tender armes with cursed cord’ will be ‘fast bound’ and their ‘seely necks to ground with weakness’ bent (1820, 1822). His words do have a powerful effect on their mother, for she cries that she would rather face ‘a thousand deaths’ than be forced to see her children suffer in such a manner – not simply because their capture implies the loss of her ‘royall race’, but because as their mother, she cannot bear to imagine their pain (1826, 1816).

What separates Sidney’s Cleopatra from Shakespeare’s is her development as a mother who cares for her children, evidenced by her concern for her children’s fate. Overwhelmed at the prospect of their servitude at the hands of her enemies, Cleopatra does not veer from her course, but she does attempt to guarantee they will be looked after. She begs Euphron to take care of them and ‘be their good [f]ather’ to ensure that they will remain safe (1831). She explicitly asks that he serve as a surrogate paternal figure, in the absence of both biological parents; although she is not replacing herself, she is at least ensuring that her children will be protected. Not only that, but to guarantee their safety, she requests he take them away from Egypt, and in doing so, begs that they forget their lineage entirely:

Remember not, my children, you were borne
Of such a princely race; remember not
So many braue kings which have Egypt rul’d
In right descent your ancestors have beene:
That this great Antony your father was (1845-1849)

She understands that the only way to definitively guard her children is to separate them from their ancestry, and by extension, from her power, which is the very thing she risks losing; we have already been made to understand that the two identities of queen and mother are inextricably linked to one another. Sidney’s Cleopatra, then, transforms and becomes willing to sacrifice her

queenship and any potential of her legacy for the sake of her children. While she may not see them as a reason to stay alive, she does care for them enough to forgo her royal identity, and to guarantee that they will have someone to raise them. As her children are taken away, she mourns their loss, rather than the loss of her queenship; she bids them goodbye, to forget their ‘birth and high estate’ and to ‘bend to the force of fate’ (1858-1859). Although we cannot suggest that she ever fully becomes the nurturing mother, it is clear that she – unlike Shakespeare’s Cleopatra – ultimately cares enough to follow Gouge’s advice to assure the care of her children after her death. In doing so, and particularly in telling them to forget their noble birth, she puts her children above her royal identity, although not above her love for Antony.

Samuel Daniel’s *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* goes further than Sidney’s drama, and has one of Cleopatra’s children, Caesarion (who is the son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, rather than of her and Antony) speak in the text. Yasmin Arshad comments that in doing so, Daniel places Cleopatra’s motherhood at the centre of the drama, which imbues her with ‘pathos and grace’ and in turn makes her a more sympathetic character (Arshad, 73, 75). It is Caesar who Cleopatra sees echoed in her son, ‘the model of his sire’, which she believes grants Caesarion the power and opportunity to ‘turn back to rule the sceptre of this land’ (1.1.33, 31).⁵¹ This may explain why it is Caesarion, and not one of Antony’s children, who appears in this scene; like Sidney, Daniel is emphasising at once the connection between maternity and political power, and ultimately, intimating that maternal love should be one’s primary concern. In this scene, she oscillates between ordering her son to leave with Rodon (his tutor) to keep him safe, and allowing him to remain with her to face their fate together. She first tells him to ‘fly hence’ so that she may ‘endure the fury of this tempest, here alone’ but then changes her mind – ‘let us stay, and let us fall together’ (42, 45-

⁵¹ Samuel Daniel, *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* in *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Samuel Daniel*, ed. by Rev. Alexander B. Grosart (Printed for the Spenser Society, 1885), 1-95.

46, 50). She is torn between conflicting desires to keep him safe or keep him close, and her desire for him to one day return and rule Egypt is presented as secondary to her maternal instinct.

After questioning '[her] divided soul' for about a hundred lines, she comes to a decision and bids farewell to Caesarion, having entrusted his care to Rodon, a surrogate parental figure similar to Euphron in Sidney's drama (101). Daniel's Cleopatra conveys the strong sense of maternal loss that would be expected of a mother parting from her child, undoubtedly forever:

CLEOPATRA:

Yet let me speak, perhaps it is the last
That ever I shall speak to thee, my son,
[...]
Ah no (dear heart) 'tis no such slender twine
Wherewith the knot is tied twixt me and thee.
That blood within thy veins came out of mine,
Parting from thee, I part from me.
And therefore I must speak. Yet what? O son,
Though I have made an end, I have done (1.1.113-122)

She comments on the strength of the bond between mother and child, emphasising their biological connection; her son is a part of her, and in 'parting from' him, she parts from herself. The strength of their relationship is made apparent from this first scene, as before she can do anything else, she must find a way to leave her child. She asks Rodon to 'tender well his youth' and to make sure he is cared for, as she only does at the end of Sidney's version (53). It is in a mother's nature, she explains, to 'fear' the worst, as her maternal care and worry is on display (56). Caesarion attempts to assuage her concern, and it is he who tells her she must focus on other matters:

CAESARION: Dear Sovereign mother, suffer not your care
To tumult this with the honour of your state.
[...]
And this good, let your many sorrows past
Work on your heart to harden it at last (123-128)

It is her son who gives her permission to forget about her duty to her children, to work to 'harden' her heart and leave them behind. Daniel's Cleopatra can only gather the resolve to disregard her

children when one of them gives her direct instruction to do so. She is far from the Cleopatra we will see in Shakespeare, who needs no permission to focus solely on her own interests, and she goes beyond Sidney's queen, who cares for her children's fate but does not allow that concern to alter her course. From that point forward, as Caesarion bids her goodbye, Cleopatra is resolved in her decision, but in beginning his work with this emotional scene between mother and son, Daniel drastically alters how the reader perceives her character and amplifies her maternity in the process.

As in *The Tragedie of Antonie*, by ensuring that her child will be looked after and, crucially, that he will be taught and educated, Cleopatra is fulfilling her duty as a mother, even in her absence. However, a key difference in Daniel's drama is that Rodon does not follow through on this promise. Sidney gives no indication that Euphron does not carry out Cleopatra's wishes, but Rodon betrays Caesarion and enables his capture after being bribed 'with rewards and promises so large' from Octavius (4.1.66). Cleopatra did 'commit to [him] / [t]he best and dearest treasure of her blood' in an attempt to save him, and instead led him into the hands of her enemies (54-55). As with Lady Capulet's 'poor' choice of nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Rodon's betrayal forces the reader to question if Cleopatra's decision to send Caesarion off was in fact the correct one, and seems to suggest the best place for a child, no matter the circumstance, is with its biological mother. Caesarion himself questions whether it would have been better to have been born to 'humble birth', a similar sentiment to that which Cleopatra expresses in Sidney's story (23). He too understands that Cleopatra's dedication to Antony and her position as queen complicates her responsibility to her children, and prevents her from fully devoting herself to the maternal role. While the nature of upper-class motherhood was different, and particularly unique for a queen, the ways in which Cleopatra's respective responsibilities are portrayed in these accounts suggest that, for Sidney and Daniel, maternal duty should precede any and all others.

Sidney's and Daniel's versions of the narrative present many of the same complexities of Cleopatra's character that Shakespeare focuses on; ultimately, in all three versions, she does choose death over the care she owes her children. She elevates her identity as queen and lover while sacrificing her relationship with her children – a choice which both authors firmly critique. She remains a sexualised and troublesome figure, but in making the decision to amplify her position as a mother, both authors humanise her, and negate the power that her negligent motherhood might grant her; they believe that her primary duty was meant to be her maternity, no different than any ordinary woman. They make a direct comment on her dereliction of care by having other characters remark on it explicitly, but they also make her a more sympathetic figure by showing that Cleopatra does have maternal emotion, even if her ways of expressing it may be non-normative (i.e., choosing absence over presence).

b. Queen, Lover, and Mother? Negligence in Antony and Cleopatra

In stark contrast to Sidney's and Daniel's versions of the narrative, Shakespeare's Cleopatra demonstrates none of the maternal nurture or concern that unites her with other women, and in doing so she elevates her unique and subversive qualities to a previously unseen level. *Antony and Cleopatra* develops the love/sex narrative, and goes into greater depth regarding both their characters while almost completely ignoring their status as parents. While the other two adaptations either feature the children physically as characters, or through references made by others which serve to remind Cleopatra of her maternity, in *Antony and Cleopatra* they are mentioned only in relation to the power that they (and by extension Cleopatra) possess or lack. They are referenced by name only when Caesar relates how Antony crowned his sons in the marketplace before a public audience:

CAESAR:

I'th' common showplace where they exercise.
 His sons he there proclaimed the king of kings;
 [...] She
 In th' habiliments of the goddess Isis
 That day appeared, and oft before gave audience,
 As 'tis reported, so (3.6.12-19)⁵²

It is not simply the power that Antony grants to his and Cleopatra's (illegitimate) children that is cause for concern, but the public style in which he grants it. Caesar remarks on the 'common showplace' that they parade through, with Cleopatra dressed as the goddess Isis giving audience to the public. Antony symbolically passes his power onto his children, and he does so by making a spectacle of both parent and offspring. It is only when these children become manifestations and tools of (particularly Cleopatra's) power that they hold any importance in the narrative. There is no interaction between Cleopatra and any of her children that occurs onstage, not even a reminder of her responsibility towards them. If anything, Cleopatra only emphasises this lack of maternal care through her language. When Antony asks, worried, if she is now '[c]oldhearted' towards him, she answers that if she were:

CLEOPATRA:

[...] The next Caesarion [smite],
 Till by degrees the memory of my womb,
 Together with my brave Egyptians all,
 By the discarding of this pelleted storm
 Lie graveless till the flies and gnats of Nile
 Have buried them for prey! (3.13.163-168)

By connecting her 'brave Egyptians' to the 'memory of [her] womb', she rhetorically adopts the people of Egypt, her subjects, as her children, acknowledging (without having to recognise) the negligence which she shows her actual offspring. The association may not be intentional, but her

⁵² William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

devotion to her power and the people she rules here lead her to assume a position of metaphorical maternity that highlights her negligence as an actual mother.

Speaking of metaphorical maternity will inevitably bring Elizabeth I to mind, and indeed there has been some speculation that Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra may have been influenced by stories of Elizabeth, or at the very least that her shadow looms over the character.⁵³ Scholars have noted similarities in behaviour between the fictional and historical queens and suggest that the scene in which Cleopatra begs for descriptions of Antony's new wife Octavius potentially parallels the story of Elizabeth demanding a description of Mary Stuart.⁵⁴ However, the differences between the two are just as notable as the similarities; particularly the fact that Cleopatra had biological children, while Elizabeth had none.

Both queens place their throne above family, and both replace biological children with their subjects, but their rhetoric inherently carries different connotations due to their respective statuses as mothers/non-mothers. Elizabeth has little choice but to establish a metaphorical maternity to assuage fears over her lack of an heir, but Cleopatra does not face the same problem – her efforts to adopt the people of Egypt, instead, reflect a lack of care for the very people she should be prioritising: her biological heirs. Cleopatra has heirs to inherit her throne, and she makes some effort to ensure that they will do so, but she demonstrates that she values her own life and rule over guaranteeing the succession. In doing so, she paints herself as a surrogate mother to the people of Egypt, while ignoring her role as biological mother and this I believe, makes her particularly

⁵³ Helen Morris noted this potential connection in a 1969 article 'Queen Elizabeth I "Shadowed" in Cleopatra', suggesting that Shakespeare took some of Elizabeth's own qualities and reflected them in Cleopatra. They are both 'brilliant and captivating' but also 'capable of undignified spurts of rage, hysterical nerve storms, and public flirtation'. *Huntington Library Quarterly* 32.3 (May 1969), 271-278, (75). Keith Reinhart also writes in 1972 that it is hard to tell exactly how much Shakespeare takes from Elizabeth, as a lot of her character was influenced by Plutarch. He notes the connection between the scene where Cleopatra asks for a description of Octavia. 'Shakespeare's Cleopatra and England's Elizabeth', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23.1 (Winter 1972), 81-86.

⁵⁴ Morris specifically mentions the potential connection between these scenes of observation and discovery on 274. Helen Morris, 'Queen Elizabeth I "Shadowed" in Cleopatra'.

dangerous. Of course, their respective statuses as queens meant that their duties with regards to motherhood may have potentially surpassed the distance of even upper-class motherhood, and yet they both knowingly call attention to these roles to further their own power – and both falter when it comes to assuring their succession, a crucial component of one's reign.

In using their femininity and, particularly, maternity (both rhetorical and literal) to attempt to establish and maintain authority, both Elizabeth and Cleopatra contradict the notion that maternity is inherently associated with female virtue. Although Elizabeth is virtuous in the sense that she remains unmarried and virginal, in constantly calling attention to but ultimately rejecting her supposed duty to produce heirs, she can never be truly virtuous in the eyes of a patriarchal society.⁵⁵ Cleopatra, by contrast, is the opposite of chaste, infamously using her sexuality to further her own power. For Cleopatra, maternity (both biological and surrogate) is a tool that challenges the belief that motherhood must be intrinsically virtuous and domestic. Her sexuality increases her maternal potential, but it simultaneously brings her further from the image of the ideal, nurturing mother and closer to that of a queen who cannot be restrained by personal duty. This subversion reaches its climax in the final scene of the play, which I turn to now.

Because of the absence of children in the narrative, it is appropriate to jump to the play's conclusion, as Cleopatra's perversion of maternal nurture is no more apparent than in Shakespeare's depiction of her suicide. Although we cannot make assumptions about the author's motivations, the fact that he constructs the scene the way he does cements Cleopatra's character as the negligent mother. Unlike the Cleopatra of Sidney's or Daniel's versions, Shakespeare's

⁵⁵ This may seem like a bit of an odd claim, as chastity was perceived as such an important virtue for women, but eschewing the responsibility of marriage or childbirth could also, I believe, be perceived as unvirtuous. In Shakespeare's *All's Well*, for example, Parolles tells Helena that to remain a virgin is 'against the / rule of nature' and to accuse one's mother of 'disobedience'. Amy M. Froide writes about this tension once Elizabeth ascends the throne in her book *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Cleopatra notably does not express concern about leaving her children without a mother, or anyone to care for them. The only time she references them is after she is locked in her monument and awaiting her fate, as she realises that her hold on power is all but gone. With Antony dead and Caesar's victory inevitable, she understands that the only tool she has left at her disposal is her children. She therefore requests:

CLEOPATRA:

If he [Caesar] please
To give me conquered Egypt for my son,
He gives me so much of mine own as I
Will kneel to him with thanks (5.2.18-21)

This moment is the only instance where she herself directly mentions her children, and she does so to ask that her son be allowed to rule Egypt. Her choice of wording is particularly telling; she begs Caesar to 'give me conquered Egypt for my son'. Asking for Egypt to be given, specifically, to her via her son implies that she is making the request for her own sake. This becomes even more apparent in the next line, when she says that if Caesar permits her son to rule Egypt, he 'gives me so much of mine own'; the indication is clear that she is asking for herself, to ensure her power is secured through her offspring. Cleopatra is abiding by the tenets of queenship in trying to ensure the continuation of her lineage, but her selfish motivation clearly labels her as different from other iterations of her character. Just as Elizabeth refused to choose a successor to the English throne until it was unavoidable, believing that to do so would be a reminder to her subjects of her own mortality, Cleopatra does not try and secure her children's position – too preoccupied with her own – until it is too late. She similarly does not advocate for her children's lives to be spared, she only asks that her son be allowed to maintain a position of power for her own sake, and Octavius's words thus have no effect:

CAESAR: Cleopatra, know
We will extenuate rather than enforce.

If you apply yourself to our intents,
 Which towards you are most gentle, you shall find
 A benefit in this change; but if you seek
 To lay on me a cruelty by taking
 Antony's course, you shall bereave yourself
 Of my good purposes, and put your children
 To that destruction which I'll guard them from
 If thereon you rely (5.2.124-133)

Cleopatra does not believe his promises, and she deliberately chooses not to listen either way. Regardless of whether she believed he would truly 'guard' her children from 'destruction', she tells her ladies '[h]e words me, girls, he words, that I should not / [b]e noble to myself' (191-192). She knows the course of action she is going to take, and does not waver, even at the assurance of the safety of her children. The characters around her understand that her motivations come from her position as queen, rather than mother, and as a result they do not use her maternal duty to try and convince her to submit to Roman rule. Instead, they abide by her orders: when she whispers in Charmian's ear (likely asking to send for the poison that will kill her) Charmian merely agrees, '[m]adam, I will' (196). Shortly after, Dolabella informs her of Caesar's plan for her and her offspring, but again there is no effort to persuade her to stay alive:

DOLABELLA:
 [...] Caesar through Syria
 Intends his journey, and within three days
 You with your children will he send before (5.2.200-202)

Although his words inform both Cleopatra and the audience that Caesar did not intend to keep to his agreement, the fact that she did not once stop to consider the fates of her children tells us she was going to proceed with her suicide regardless of whether he was telling the truth. Her refusal to allow herself to be paraded through the streets of Rome as a conquest doubtlessly makes her a good queen, and a strong woman, but her ignorance and implicit rejection of her children decidedly makes her a negligent mother.

I suggest, then, the issue is not that Cleopatra places her queenship above her maternity (although her selfish rhetoric still feels somewhat out of place), but how she ignores and rejects the maternal duty entirely, utilising it only to suit her own purposes. Her exceptional status as a female ruler meant that, like Elizabeth herself, she had to constantly negotiate her tenuous claim on power. As I have discussed, the expectations for wealthier women, including female royalty, with regards to motherhood were considerably different, and so it would not be particularly unusual for a queen to leave the raising of her children to others. But in simultaneously ignoring motherhood and yet integrating these identities into herself, Cleopatra rejects the belief that biological and surrogate motherhood were fundamentally separate roles. As I have alluded to, and as will be affirmed in this final scene, Cleopatra implicitly and knowingly uses both type of maternity as weapons rather than trying to redeem herself.

Not only does Shakespeare's Cleopatra fail to show any genuine concern for the fate of her children (beyond what their fate means for her own situation), but her death consciously perverts the most pervasive image of 'good' motherhood, that of nursing. In her final moments, Cleopatra puts the asp, not to her arm as in both contemporary and earlier versions, but to her breast. Here, Shakespeare deviates from source material and in doing so, I argue that he calls attention to Cleopatra's negligence as, not simply a woman, but specifically as a mother.⁵⁶ If the visual image of her drawing the asp to her breast was not enough, she rhetorically comments on the action to bring further attention to it: '[d]ost thou not see my baby at my breast / [t]hat sucks the nurse asleep?' (5.2.306-308). She refers not just to the asp as the baby at her breast, but to herself as the nurse; the use of the term is telling, as it connotes more than an image of nursing, but also of the

⁵⁶ There is no consensus on the method Cleopatra historically used to commit suicide, but many of the most prominent sources, including Virgil and Horace, maintain it was a snake bite. Adrian Tronson contends the story of the asp at her breast originated in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Adrian Tronson, 'Virgil, The Augustans, and the Invention of Cleopatra's Suicide – One Asp or Two?', *Vergilius* 44 (1998), 31-50.

wet-nurse who stood in for the mother.⁵⁷ As she did earlier when referencing the people of Egypt as her children, she again takes up the identification of the surrogate mother, in this case the wet-nurse, as she corrupts the supposedly nurturing act. Rather than the traditional image of the ‘nursing Madonna’, in which the virtuous mother provides nourishment to her child, here it is instead the ‘baby’ that passes the poison into the nurse-mother, providing destruction rather than nourishment.⁵⁸

Indeed, although Shakespeare’s retelling diverges from his source material, it is the image that has carried through future artistic portrayals of Cleopatra’s suicide. The scene, which has inspired numerous artists, is most often depicted in line with Shakespeare’s adaptation; the figure of Cleopatra is overtly sexualised, with the asp lying atop her (typically exposed) breast. Shakespeare was not the first to depict her suicide this way, but his invocation of this image undoubtedly remains the most culturally resonant.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Several previous critics, including Janet Adelman, have noted that Cleopatra ‘nurses’ the asp, but have largely overlooked the weighted connotations of this image. Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: Routledge, 1992), 176.

⁵⁸ As I discussed in Chapter One, the image of the nursing Madonna was a popular one in artwork of the time, depicting the Virgin Mary nursing and nurturing the baby Christ. A prominent example is *Madonna Litta*, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, which I have included on the following page.

This image of the asp piercing the breast may also conjure the imagery of the young pelican sucking blood from the breast of its mother, nourishing itself but potentially damaging the parent. This, as we see in *King Lear*, is connected to twisted ideas of maternal nurture.

⁵⁹ Examples of other earlier/contemporary references to Cleopatra placing the asp at her bosom includes Thomas Nashes’ 1593 work, *Christ’s Tears over Jerusalem* in which he writes, ‘at thy breasts asps shall be put to nurse’ making obvious reference to Cleopatra.



Figure D and Figure E: Leonardo da Vinci (attr.), *Madonna Litta* (late 15th century) and Guido Cagnacci, *The Death of Cleopatra* (c. 1645-1655)

The image, in Shakespeare's play and the artwork in inspires, not only serves to sexualise Cleopatra's death, but it forces the audience/viewer to conjure images of breastfeeding, and specifically the perversion that her nursing of the asp signifies. Traditionally, breastfeeding, seen as the mark of the nurturing mother fulfilling her maternal duty, is not just about love and care, but ensuring the qualities of the mother are the only ones transferred to the child. As I have discussed, one of the primary fears over the use of the wet-nurse was that the qualities of that nurse would be transmitted through breast milk, and the child would become more of a 'nurse-child'. In such a case, it is the milk of the mother/surrogate mother that is nourishing the baby, as well as nurturing it. This is not what happens with Cleopatra, and yet, in this moment, she is somehow as

much of a mother as she has ever been, and also the furthest from that identity, as she rhetorically distances herself by labelling herself a nurse.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, although Shakespeare troubles the distinction between the biological and surrogate mother through Lady Capulet and the Nurse, they remain two separate identities. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, both converge in Cleopatra conclusively in this final image prior to her death. She becomes both mother and nurse, biological and surrogate, a culmination that has been subtly building throughout the play. Unlike in contemporary adaptations, there is no surrogate to whom she entrusts the care of her children, there is only Cleopatra, who embodies both roles and concurrently rejects them both. It is not that she is monstrous, or that she mistreats her children, but it is the inattention to her maternity – becoming, ultimately the nurse who, as we have seen in *Romeo and Juliet* and Chapter One, was always potentially negligent – that makes her most subversive, and which separates Shakespeare's character from alternate representations.

Cleopatra's role in *Antony and Cleopatra* is primarily that of a queen and lover, while her position as a mother barely surfaces until it is wholly corrupted in the final tableaux. At the same time, I do not believe she can be called a neglectful or monstrous mother as she is not othered in the way that most are, and her maternal identity is always there, constantly present if rarely mentioned explicitly. Her use of the images of maternity when she has essentially lost all other identities allows her story to end somewhat triumphantly. She does this by avoiding capture by Caesar, but also by transforming herself into the one thing these men can never be. Her maternal function, so long ignored and ultimately corrupted, becomes a final act of resistance. She dies still technically a queen, but she also dies a mother and nurse, two roles that cannot be embodied by men and thus cannot be taken from her. While most of the female characters I have discussed throughout this thesis have not knowingly attempted to transcend the limits of their own maternity,

Cleopatra here proves an extremely notable exception. As an agent of her own representation, in this final scene I believe she self-reflexively constructs herself to be queen, wife, mother and nurse all at once, and in doing so she avoids the capture of both her physical body and – more crucially – the identity that the male characters so fiercely tried to repress. Cleopatra resists being written into the rigid patriarchal institution of motherhood that was so strictly controlled, and yet at the same time her embodiment of these maternal identities immerses her into the very structures that she rejects through her negligence. Like many of the women I have examined in this research, Cleopatra helps demonstrate that maternity, both biological and surrogate, was a role like any other that could be negotiated and reworked, and to do so allowed these women to destabilise and alter not just the maternal identity, but other identities of class, social standing, etc. that were always meant to remain static.

V. Conclusions

In the concluding chapter of a thesis dominated by women who expose the performative and negotiable role of motherhood in ways that have largely gone unexplored, I have argued that Cleopatra resists classification entirely. She is all these maternal identities, while simultaneously refusing to be any of them. She, like Lady Capulet, is a negligent mother who fails to live up to the strict standards of the time, but she does not reject motherhood or its imagery entirely. Instead, she co-opts the rhetoric and visuals that defined maternity and, in the process, inscribes herself into the narrative of maternity, rather than allowing it to be inscribed onto her.

It is easy enough to analyse characters such as the Nurse or Lady Capulet as extreme examples of what women were not supposed to be: characters who are appropriately punished for their failure to live up to expectations and their prescribed roles – or, indeed, to not analyse them

at all.⁶⁰ However, as I have explored, to reduce them to this model is to limit our discussion and to ignore the nuanced ways in which motherhood could be constructed and identified. While certain women, like the murderous mothers of the pamphlets and ballads, can be easily ‘unsexed’ and pushed to the margins, women such as Lady Capulet, the Nurse, and especially Cleopatra, show that there were female characters who did not fit into these extreme narratives and could thus prove more subtly, but no less forcefully, resistant.

These are subversions that we can only notice when we consider the concept of the negligent mother and add it to our categories into which women could fall, or when we suggest that these categories should be eliminated entirely. Lady Capulet is neither a monstrous nor an ideal mother, and that has meant that scholars have not necessarily known how to treat her, but our engagement becomes more fruitful when we realise that she does not have to fit into a proposed category at all. At the same time, her negligence allows space for the lower-status Nurse to provide surrogate maternal nurture and exist in the same sphere, a world she would normally not be granted access to. Similarly, Cleopatra’s own negligence towards her biological children is what allows her to adopt both maternal identities while being defined by neither. By introducing the idea of the negligent mother, a woman who ignores her maternal duty but never outright abuses it, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which maternity could be performed, and the spaces granted for both biological and surrogate motherhood to be enacted.

I have concluded this thesis with a discussion of these negligent mothers in order to demonstrate that ‘alternative’ maternity does not have to indicate something that would have been

⁶⁰ Previous scholars have tended towards these extremes, labeling the Nurse’s character as either ‘irrelevant’ to the narrative or a ‘grotesque’ example of maternal nurture, while Lady Capulet has mostly been perceived as either a heartless, ‘uncaring’ mother or a ‘victim’ of patriarchal control. These critics have attempted to place both women within a defined category, but I suggest here that to do so is to undermine the importance of their characters and their relationships to one another. William B. Toole, ‘The Nurse’s “Vast Irrelevance”: Thematic Foreshadowing in “Romeo and Juliet”’, *South Atlantic Bulletin* 45.1 (January 1980), 21-30; Felicity Dunworth, *Mothers and Meaning on the Early Modern Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 133-135.

considered exceptional or particularly inimitable; the distinct and diverse ways that women could embody the role are, and always have been, the result of choices made by the individual, and the playwright, for or against societal expectations. Lady Capulet and Cleopatra were never defined by those who wrote or read them as the norm of woman or motherhood, but this new understanding of them as negligent mothers who enact the role but not its ideal, allows them to be read as (in Cleopatra's case, even more) radical and parodical, resistant to the patriarchal norms that attempted to impose one version of maternity. Although, as with so many of the plays and women I have considered in this thesis, the male playwrights likely intended to show these women as untraditional and unrepresentative of the expected norm, their presentation nonetheless challenges the view that one – whether in life or onstage – either had to remain this ideal mother, to allow motherhood to become one's whole identity, or risk being cast out of patriarchal society entirely. In presenting them on page and stage, they open the audience and early modern society as a well up to the multitudes of motherhood, and expose the reality that – even if such women are appropriately dealt with in their texts – the dangers and power they present still remain.

Conclusions: How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth (and Why Does It Matter)?

Ever since L.C. Knight asked the now infamous question, ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?’ in 1933, the problem of Lady Macbeth’s maternity has, in many ways, plagued and distracted scholars from focusing on other, potentially more significant, aspects of her character.¹ Numerous productions of *Macbeth* have attempted to incorporate or integrate either physical children, or the absence of children, into their depictions of this devious woman.² Whether this inclusion is intended to further demonise her as a murderous mother ‘suffocating’ her child, or to humanise her as a woman whose sinister actions may be connected to the loss of her own flesh and blood, I believe this particular discussion is largely futile. A. C. Bradley, to whom the question has been notoriously attributed, followed the inquiry by answering, ‘[w]hether Macbeth had children or (as seems to be usually supposed) had none, is quite immaterial’.³ As Bradley suggests, the question is the wrong one to ask – rather, what we should be asking is: what does taking the children off the stage (as well as the overwhelming desire to integrate them into later performance) tell us about how Shakespeare portrays the maternal role, and how we respond to that portrayal?

I mention Lady Macbeth here in the conclusion to a thesis on alternative motherhood, not because I believe she is strikingly similar to any of the characters I have examined as either a woman or a ‘mother’, but because she helps us come full circle in our understanding of how early modern society thought of maternity, and how we still think of it now, as well as suggesting why the women I have focused on in this thesis are so unique within the world of early modern drama. Even women who were not mothers, such as Lady Macbeth, even characters who pushed what it

¹ LC Knight, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? An Essay in Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).

² An example of such a production is the 2016 Globe performance, which places a child onstage at certain key moments of the plot – it is unclear if the child is alive or a spectre, but there is an obvious implication this is the child of the Macbeths.

³ Quoted in John Britton, ‘A.C Bradley and those Children of Lady Macbeth’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12.3 (Summer 1961), 349-351, (350).

meant to be a ‘woman’ as far as it could possibly go, have been defined by criticism for their unmitigated acceptance or rejection of children. Lady Macbeth is one of the most popular Shakespearean female characters amongst critics, who often home in on her relationship to maternity; earlier critics, unsurprisingly, were particularly concerned with Lady Macbeth as mother. In a 1974 article, Marvin Rosenberg opens by declaring ‘[o]f course Lady Macbeth has at least one child’ and furthermore, that ‘a sense of this Macbeth-child’s felt presence in crucial scenes can enrich the tragedy’.⁴ However, these questions still plague scholars even today: in a 2018 book chapter, Arthur Bradley plainly states that Macbeth ‘is also a play about children’.⁵ These interrogations have proven to be a roadblock for recognising the true questions that should be asked about these female characters who perform and parody maternity in unique and distinct ways – questions which I have sought to answer.

So, why exactly does it matter if Lady Macbeth had children? Does it indeed matter at all? Or, as I propose, does it instead tell us more about how we as readers and audience members still feel the desire to justify or villainise everything through a very specific view of what we believe motherhood should be for all women, even if the reality is and was dependent upon every woman’s individual experience? In this thesis, I have considered a wide variety of non-traditional, alternative forms of motherhood which deconstruct and parody the notion of this essential ideal of maternity. By utilising and re-working the traditional images of good motherhood, adoptive mothers, foster mothers, stepmothers, women who experienced impediments to biological motherhood, and negligent mothers could all subvert and destabilise these models, becoming the

⁴ Marvin Rosenberg, ‘Lady Macbeth’s Indispensable Child’, *Educational Theatre Journal* 26.1 (March 1974), 14-19, (14).

⁵ Arthur Bradley, ‘Untimely Ripped: Macbeth’s Children’ in *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure*, 71-94, (78).

image of ‘parodic maternity’ which is by no means confined only to the forms I have discussed in this thesis, and which I hope will be interrogated further.

I introduced this thesis by calling upon Judith Butler’s theories of parody, suggesting that we could apply these ideas as they relate to gender performativity to maternity. Much in the same way that cross-dressing, which plays upon a conventional understanding of gender construction, can be a powerful way of subverting traditional gender norms, I have sought to demonstrate how alternative types of motherhood can similarly destabilise the foundations upon which they are built and upon which patriarchy depends. Adoptive, foster mothers, and stepmothers could all enact a maternal role towards children with whom they did not share a biological bond and, in the process, confuse the readable signs of motherhood and disrupt public questions of patriarchal lines of succession, transference, and inheritance. Similarly, women who experienced impediments to biological motherhood could trouble conventional understandings of the maternal identity, how one could be a mother, and who determined who was ‘allowed’ access to its identity. Finally, negligent mothers challenged the notion that one had to embody the model qualities of motherhood in order to identify as a mother, and were able to twist the images associated with virtuous motherhood to trouble its construction.

All of these roles were thus destabilising to the hierarchies of gender, class, and status upon which early modern society depended, and they were all figures who were understood to be dangerous because of their ability to transcend patriarchal constructions of motherhood and in the process reveal its very instability. In writing this thesis, I have aimed to demonstrate that embodiments of motherhood were varied, nuanced, and complex, functioning in their own unique ways to expose the performative and parodical nature of maternity. Going forward, I hope that discussions of motherhood expand to include these types of alternative maternity, which can help

develop the framework for how we talk about a woman's maternal experience, so we are not limited to the same cyclical conversations which have been ongoing for years. Women's individual experience has always been nuanced, and, of course, not all experience centres around motherhood, but this thesis has suggested that even within the boundaries of motherhood, women were able to circumvent the restrictions imposed upon them and interfere in public and political matters as well as inherently disrupt the traditional structures upon which patriarchal society was built.

I wrote this thesis for partially selfish reasons, as these are stereotypes and labels that I have frustratingly seen continue to persist into the twenty-first century. The past informs the present, and we must understand its history to ensure that we do not repeat it. Undeniably, only once we recognise that a woman's identity has always been more than just the socially dominant ideals of motherhood, can we move past the stereotype that to be an 'alternative' mother, or to not be a mother at all, makes one less of a woman, as well as an understanding that becoming a mother does not necessarily make someone a woman at all. This does not seem to me a particularly radical conception, and yet we still find ourselves hindered by the ideas of the past which tell us that motherhood is what a woman was quite literally born to do, and that biological motherhood is still its most valid, 'real' form. These arguments, in my mind, becomes less effective when we realise that there is no ideal to which we can return or aspire, as that ideal never truly existed at all; if it did exist, it was only to be subverted and, indeed, parodied.

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