

“Neonatal Infant Loss, Radical Dissociation, and Shared Postpartum Vulnerability

in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*”

Seminar: Mothering in Early Modern Culture

Tyler Jean Dukes

ABSTRACT

The first — *and last* — time Shakespeare explicitly mentions the Macbeths’ child is in Act 1. Lady Macbeth notoriously adopts the imagery of infanticide to incite her husband into action: “I have given suck, and know // How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me” (1.7.62-63). These lines set up the Macbeths as grieving parents *in media res*. Lady Macbeth has “given suck” to their infant child, but when the action commences and throws us into the middle of their should be child-rearing, there is no son. This study seeks to address the following questions: What happened to the Macbeths’ child, whose death has transformed these soon-to-be- parents into postpartum mourners? How does the Macbeths’ radically altered postpartum state set up the conditions for the play? Moreover, what does Shakespeare’s gender-swapping characterization of the Macbeths’ behaviors tell us about the emotional complexities of their neonatal infant loss?

This research responds to key scholarship in the field regarding the biologically-specific language of Lady Macbeth (La Belle; Balizet) and the humoral risks of her request to “stop up the access and passage to remorse” (1.5.45) (Kenny). Additionally, I advocate for Macbeth himself to be included in any discussion regarding the postpartum environment of Inverness, arguing that Shakespeare’s parturient characterization of Macbeth’s body illustrates it as a sore, sleepless vessel

concomitant with his wife's suffering postpartum. The result is a shared vulnerability between the two that informs us about the marital limits of early modern infant loss.

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The Winter's Tale and the Arts of Maternity

Ross Knecht

SAA 2022: "Mothering in Early Modern Culture" Seminar

This paper will examine the representation of maternity and child-raising in *The Winter's Tale*. Focusing in particular on act 2, scene 1—in which Hermione and her servants tend to Mamilius—the paper will argue that the play shows mothering to be a collective and creative activity allied to the narrative and dramatic arts. The ease with which Hermione and her ladies in waiting interact and exchange roles in the nursery suggests the degree to which early modern motherhood was a communal enterprise. Even Mamilius himself takes part in the activity, adopting the role of tale-teller that would be traditionally associated with the nursemaid, a move that echoes the connection to nursing suggested by the etymology of his name. Perhaps most significantly, the activities of the nursery are self-consciously associated with the narrative of the play itself: encouraged to share a story, Mamilius promises a "sad tale" appropriate to "winter," a clear allusion to the title of the play. This surprising suggestion of continuity between the nursery and the stage may reflect Shakespeare's move into the hybrid genre of romance or tragicomedy. Classical poetics stressed the importance of observing the boundaries between the comic and the tragic, and the prohibition on genre-mixing was often delivered in gendered terms: Horace disdainfully compares tragicomedy to "a matron commanded to dance on festival days" in the *Ars poetica*. Rejecting traditional poetic proprieties, *The Winter's Tale* actively emphasizes the association of romantic "tales" with femininity and the maternal sphere.

Anna Graham

Mother Knows Best: Tensions Within Maternal Authority

While death during childbirth was a common reality in the early modern period, there were, of course, mothers that lived till old age. Despite this historical reality, there is a paucity of aging mothers in drama. My paper confronts the absence of the aging mother in drama by examining two of the few instances where mothers are represented with reference to their age. In centring Volumnia from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1605) and Eugenia from Fletcher's *Love's Cure* (1647), I examine a figure whose identity is inherently tied to fertility, and juxtaposed with a body that is physically marked as infertile. My paper uses a feminist-historicist lens and builds on the work of Janet Adelman who pioneered discourse on absent mothers in Shakespeare by applying a psychoanalytic approach that frames male characters attempting to replace their true origins with a male motherhood. By narrowing the scope of Adelman's approach to intersections of motherhood and age, this paper interrogates the cultural significance of fertility and mother as an identity. Specifically, it examines how maternal imagery is used by aging mothers to maintain a role of authority within the family and its consequences on the development of their son's masculinity. Ultimately I establish how aging mothers exaggerate their motherhood in order to avoid marginalisation as aging women without a purpose. Suffocating mothers, to borrow Adelman's term, force their adult son's into a bastardized performance of masculinity, which demonstrates the necessity for aging mothers to be absent from narratives where men come of age.

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“...Cram ’s with praise, and make ’s / As fat as tame things”: human and more-than-human mothering in *The Winter’s Tale* (1.2.91-92)

This paper looks at the pregnant body as the nexus of the notorious nature/culture binary in Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*. Frequent parallels to non-human reproductive bodies inferiorize Hermione as well as downplay the value of maternal ‘tactile’ subjectivity. However, I wish to go beyond the conventional, patriarchal ‘animalization’ of women and ‘naturalization’ of motherhood and investigate what these constructed inferiorizations say about the (early) modern appropriation of non-human reproductive bodies. Contemporaneous medical consensus on pregnancy is plagued with tensions between humans and nature. Female fertility is expected to be a measure of female value, since the only expected social role carved out for early modern women is maternity (Crawford 2013, 6). On the other hand, pregnancy collapses a well-guarded but tenuous boundary between humans and animals, humanity and monstrosity. Although early modern ideology works hard to enclose pregnancy within a single, constrictive narrative, it emerges as a fluid condition. Such fluidity opens a possibility to interrogate the intersections of human/nonhuman in the context of “gender equity and environmental justice;” (Munroe and Laroche 2017, xv). In my ecofeminist analysis I interrogate Hermione’s pregnancy and mothering against early modern and modern conceptualizations of the animal world. I argue that *The Winter’s Tale* is deeply invested in the aforementioned clash of the ideology of maternity and female bestiality but its reliance on the more-than-human world allows for a deconstruction of human exceptionalism and allows to generate compassion for both human and non-human reproductive bodies.

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Prendergast

Abstract for "Mothering in Early Modern Culture" (SAA 2022)

Contingent Motherings and the Art of Letter-Writing: The Case of Catherine of Aragon

Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* contains two historical, royal mothers--neither of whom is represented, in the play, as actively mothering her daughter. Queen Katherine makes a brief reference to her daughter Mary in the play, but this daughter is essentially erased from the play, while Anne Boleyn appears to stop existing once she gives birth to Elizabeth. These absences are not just a product of self-censorship on the part of Shakespeare and Fletcher as they manage the topic of Henry VIII's wives, a topic that remained controversial in Jacobean England; the absences also gesture to the ways in which royal mothers were often prevented from active mothering--whether it be for reasons of safety, politics, or convention. This paper seeks to give presence to one of these absent mothers and daughters--Catherine of Aragon--by considering the contingencies of active yet absent royal motherings as they are recorded in Tudor letters surrounding two aspects of her life. The first is the series of substitute mothers who speak for Catherine after her separation from her mother, Isabella of Castille, in 1501; the second is Catherine's own attempt to mother her daughter, Mary, after 1529--a daughter from who she had been forcibly separated after she refused to annul her marriage to Henry. The variety of voices that seek to make up for the distance between mother and daughter speak both to the contingent forms of mothering often experienced by royal children and to the ways in which mothering remained largely associated with affective emotions, even as mothers often worked towards the social and financial betterment of their progeny.

Maria Teresa M. Prendergast

Anne Llewellyn Morgan
SAA 2022
Mothering in Early Modern Culture
“The Work of Maternal Pathos”

This paper will consider Lady Macduff’s sentimental scene with her son prior to their murder. In particular, I’ll look at that scene as a dramatic descendent of medieval cycle play pageants of the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents. This paper is prompted by Gloria Olchowy’s observation: “These pageants also featured [...] mothers using the tools of their trades to resist the soldiers who had come to kill their children in stark contrast to Lady Macduff [...], who, lacking work implements, flees rather than fights and dies with her boy-child.”¹ It is this absence that I want to consider further. Lacking a distaff to fight off Herod’s goons, can Lady Macduff be said to bludgeon the audience with the tools of her role as the “natural mother,” i.e., pathos and sentimentality?

I’d like to think about the role mothering plays in modulating tone in dramatic works and pointing the audience towards the appropriate emotional response. This may be especially true when the narrative serves some political goal, as Shakespeare’s staging of *Macbeth* in honor of England’s Scottish king does. In the early modern period, the sentimentality of mothers was used as a criticism of them, and a rationale for limiting their influence over children, but nevertheless was crucial to national and religious narratives. Lady Macduff’s pathos, which has been both praised and faulted by later critics, then itself replaces the implements of labor held by her grieving precursors and suggests the affective labor mothers are still expected to perform today.

¹ “Murder as Birth in *Macbeth*.” *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*, edited by Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson, 197-209. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007.

Sarah Le

“The Jew’s Daughter”: Jessica and Religious and Racial Inheritance in *The Merchant of Venice*

This paper analyzes the role of motherhood and race within Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), focusing on the absence of Jessica’s mother as a source of anxious racial inheritance. While most scholars who have studied Jessica’s racialization center her relationship with Shylock, others like M. Lindsey Kaplan argues that Jessica’s mother, via Jewish inheritance laws, is the source of her racial identity and belonging. If the play constructs Shylock and Jessica as opposing racialized figures, with Shylock as the condemned and Jessica as the redeemed, it does so to provide an opportunity for racial transformation and religious conversion. Yet, in failing to acknowledge the true source of Jessica’s racial identity, the play also erases her own capacity for motherhood and thus easing anxieties about miscegenation. Jessica’s marriage to Lorenzo is dependent upon her total disavowal of religious and racial identity through a continual process of self-disciplining that opens up little to no space to think about her future as a Christian woman and mother. Using the works of Black Feminist and Afropessimist scholars like Hortense Spillers and Alexander Weheliye, I bridge modern critical race theory with early modern critical race studies to consider the relationship between race and reproduction within this play, arguing that Jessica’s reproductive and miscegenative capabilities are nestled within the religious conversion narrative.

Dr. Elizabeth Ann Mackay
SAA 2022

Like (a) mother, like (a) daughter: Similes, Surrogates, and Shakespeare's Queer (M)others

This essay builds upon Mary Beth Rose's foundational study of early modern maternity, "Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare?" (1991). Mothers in Shakespeare's works have always been considered absent, though Rose shows mothers appear everywhere in the plays. Her short list of Shakespeare's mothers primarily includes mothers of sons: Tamora, Lady Macduff, Volumnia, Gertrude, the Countess of Rossillion. Noticeably, Rose indicates, mothers are "conspicuously absent" in plays featuring daughters like Miranda, Desdemona, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, Portia, Katarina, and Bianca.

Shakespeare has long been our touchstone for the early modern period, and so, in this paper, I use examples from six plays to illuminate early modern relationships that are *like* biological mother-daughter relationships. Attending to characters who perform *as* mothers and *as* daughters—who desire to act *like* mothers and daughters, thus co-creating same-sex relationships that are not necessarily erotic, but certainly are non-normative—I argue that Shakespeare dramatizes his culture's investments in maternity, investments (re)produced in discourses surrounding "queer mothers." I suggest these discursive (re)productions depend on the logic of a queer rhetorical figure: the simile. For early moderns, the simile is a figure of resemblance, substitution, and desire (the desire of like for like); it is also a figure theorized and described as simultaneously mother and daughter. In all of these examples of early modern queer mothers—similes, surrogates, and Shakespeare's (m)others—I explore new alternatives to "options for gender representation" (Rose) and consider why it matters, in our study of early modern maternity, to seek out these alternatives.