

Introduction: In Search of the Mother

American culture can define what makes a good father—he is someone present and supportive. He embodies the “package deal:” home ownership, marriage, career, and fatherhood (Townsend). Women, one might argue, have more of a litmus test when it comes to success. As Edie from the ABC television series *Desperate Housewives* asks, “No matter what else she does, if a woman isn't a good mother, she's a failure, right?” (“My Husband”). Ayelet Waldman points out that the women oft-cited as paragons of motherhood are not only unrealistic but, in fact, unreal: June Cleaver, Marmee, and Mary Poppins serve as fictional ideals for today's mothers (9-11). In contrast, when Waldman wrote in *The New York Times* that she loves her husband more than her children, she was vilified as a “Bad Mother” (7).

Our culture is unusually obsessed with creating these “Split Mothers.” We point out and take down deviant mothers, all the while building contrasting, fictionalized images of ideal mothers. This pattern does not result from this particular cultural moment. On the contrary, mother-worship and mother-blaming have a shared developmental history stretching across Western civilizations from classical times. Myths like that of Medea, the jealous mother who murders her two children for revenge, paved the way for centuries of mother-condemnation.

This tendency to create “Split Mother” characters comes across in the European children's literature of the nineteenth century. Fairy tales such as the Grimms' presented a wide array of abandoning mothers, wicked stepmothers, and cannibalistic witches. Maria Tartar writes, “Whether a figure is designated a stepmother or a witch, she takes on a single well-defined function in fairy tales—one that is limited to the sphere of villainy and that magnifies and distorts all the perceived evils associated with mothers” (*The Hard Facts* 142). Thus the Good Mother/Bad Mother dichotomy is somewhat artificial; although these stories attempt to provide a Good Mother figure to contrast this array of female villains, these

attempts consistently fall short. With Good Mothers out of reach and Bad Mothers “inflate[d]” to “mythical dimensions,” these tales provide no workable example of acceptable motherhood (*The Hard Facts* 145).

It is far beyond the scope of this essay to provide a thorough analysis of the global historical trends influencing motherhood. Each region of the world produces stories with local inflections about what it means to be a mother. Instead, this essay will examine just a few children’s stories that feature the Split Mother. Each chapter will describe some broad cultural forces that may have shaped the reader’s vision of what it meant to be a mother in a given time period. The first chapter will provide background about images of the Split Mother from early modern England, when the Protestant Reformation and the witch-hunts brought the practice of demonizing women, especially failed mothers, to the forefront of cultural discourse. The second chapter will turn to Split Mother figures in Victorian England. It will first examine two Grimms’ tales, “Hansel and Gretel” and “The Juniper Tree,” as crucial background texts.¹ Although these tales were originally published in Germany, they were soon translated to English, and their popularity reflected the burgeoning interest in fairy tales—and maternal villainy—in this period. The chapter will also focus on how Victorian maternal ideals manifest themselves in Lucy Lane Clifford’s story “The New Mother” (1882).² The final chapter will look towards Neil Gaiman’s young adult novel *Coraline* (2002) for clues as to how (or if) our views of the Good Mother and Bad Mother have changed in Anglo-American culture, and whether there is, in reality, any middle ground between the “angel in the home” and the devilish witch.

¹ First published in *Nursery and Household Tales* (Germany, 1812; England, 1826), and revised over the course of the nineteenth century (see Chapter II).

² First published in *The Anyhow Stories, Moral and Otherwise* (London, 1882) under the name Mrs. W. K. Clifford.

Chapter I: Split Mothers in Early Modern Discourse

The figure of the Split Mother—the Good Mother defined in contrast to the Bad Mother—came to the forefront during the early modern period. One reason for this pattern may have been misogynistic witch-hunting treatises that framed witches in opposition of God-fearing women. These witch-hunts will be the focus of the latter part of this chapter. Another reason may have been the Protestant Reformation's profound emphasis of the nuclear family. Protestants shared a conviction that men's and women's bodies were created by God to complete different tasks within the sacred marital union; men were designed for intellectual pursuits, while women were designed for childbearing and rearing (Thurer 145). Womanhood and motherhood thus became ever more closely tied within English families.

Meanwhile, Protestant reformers instituted widespread iconoclasm, which included the destruction of images of the adored mother Mary (Thurer 153). Mary's image was replaced with that of Queen Elizabeth, who was figured as an asexual, childless virgin, a "metaphorical mother" only (Thurer 154). Literature and art of the period followed suit, and increasingly failed to feature mothers (Thurer 150-1). Those that did—like early folktales and the plays this chapter will discuss—portray mothers as overwhelmingly sinister.

Who, then, was the elusive Good Mother the early modern citizens upheld? She was chiefly defined in the negative: she who avoided the Bad Mother's sinful example. After all, the Bad Mother was and always will be more easily identifiable. All women, thanks to rampant misogyny, were believed to be susceptible to maternal failure. This chapter will explore practical, witch-like, literary, and religious mother-images. It will demonstrate how Split Mothers never reflected an authentic choice between two options, and how good mothering, as in the case of Queen Elizabeth, was relegated to the realm of mere metaphor.

The Bad Mother

To understand the Bad Mother, we must first understand the Bad Woman. The Protestants framed the family as an essential part of God's hierarchy and emphasized the woman's duty to marry. God made men to obey His word; women, derivative of and subordinate to men, were expected to obey their husbands in turn.³ Robert Cleaver's manual "A Godly Form of Household Government" (1598) demanded that wives "submit themselves and be obedient unto their own husband as to the Lord" (201). Indeed, to rebel against their husbands' rule was to rebel against God (Cleaver 203). "Pious, obedient, chaste, and silent" were the four central virtues governing womankind throughout the discourse of the day (Thurer 147).

Early modern tracts on the proper conduct of women make clear that the wife's obedience was associated with her silence. William Gouge quotes the Apostle Paul on the matter in 1622: "I permit not the woman to vsurpe authoritie ouer the man, but to be in silence" (281). In other words, speech "implieth an vsurpation of authoritie," a rebellion not suitable to womankind (Gouge 281). If she must speak, a good wife's "words must be few, reuerend and meeke," her tone "merry and cheerful," "wise, humble, courteous, gentle, and loving" (Cleaver 199, 204; Gouge 281). She should be dispassionate, not bitter (Gouge 285). Noisy wives were castigated in literature as "shrews and scolds" (Willis 70).

Like Good and Bad Mothers, Good and Bad Women were set in opposition in many of these early household manuals. In a 1620 pamphlet called "The Man-Woman," the speaker idealizes the woman "full of holy thoughts, modest carriage, and severe chastity." In contrast, he vilifies the mannish woman: "man in behavior by rude complement, man in nature by aptness to anger, main in action by pursuing revenge, man in wearing weapons, man in using weapons" ("Hic Mulier" 265, 270). Bad Women, then, were those who transgressed into the

³ In the Biblical creation story, God creates Eve from Adam's rib, and God bids her to serve as Adam's obedient wife (Cleaver 206).

male sphere. These transgressions were tied to a lack of chastity. “The Man-Woman” speaker quotes Spencer’s *The Fairy Queene* as evidence:

“Such is the cruelty of womenkind
 ...All rule and reason they withstand
 To purchase licentious liberty.
 But virtuous women wisely understand
 That they were born to base humility.” (“Hic Mulier” 274-5)

Women are meant to be sexually subservient, not sexually unruly.

“Proper” sexuality included that, within marriage, women had to be fertile and bear children. Early modern writers adhered to Plato’s idea: ““The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into extreme anguish and provokes all manner of diseases”” (Ussher 406). Childlessness was thus framed as a detriment to women’s health. In 1615, Helkiah Crooke’s *Microcosmographia* endorsed the supposedly Hippocratic idea that ““the wombs of women are the causes of all diseases” and that sick wombs lead to “distemper in all the parts of the body...and in all the faculties.” This “disease” became known as “hysteria passio” or “suffocation of the mother” (Willis 66). It led to “pains...in the backe-parts of [the] heade...frenzies or franticke fittes...inabilitie to speake...strange fearefulness...convulsions...dimnesse of [the] sight, [and] the hissing of [the] eares” as well as choking sensations and extreme moods (Crooke; Willis 66). Women’s reproductive organs were consistently blamed for their perceived bodily weaknesses and infirmities. This anxiety over female sexuality, in particular non-reproductive sexuality, resurfaces in the warnings against witches, the children’s stories of later centuries, and even in modern-day social discourse.

At the root of it all, Good Women had to be Good Mothers. Marriage and children were tied together in the same breath. Christian conduct manuals stressed the mother's roles of "nurturer and caretaker" over the economic roles of "household manager or producer of domestic goods" for the first time (Willis 17). The notion of a mother's supposedly natural abilities (e.g., breast-feeding, compassion, pity) comes up time and time again in these publications (Willis 18).⁴ As "The Man-Kind Woman" writer rhymes, "True faith and due obedience to their mate,/And of their children honest care to take" ("Hic Mulier" 276). Virtually all English women were expected to spend their lives tending to husbands and children.

However, the upper classes—those most tuned-in to Protestant rhetoric—"located dangerous potential in women's caretaking roles, requiring stricter forms of surveillance and social control" (Willis 65-6). The reason for these strict codes was clear to their male authors; women were naturally weaker than men, and needed to be kept from temptation. There was renewed attention to the many ways in which, because of women's natural susceptibility, mothers could go wrong. Early modern writers seem to be asking, "How can we allow these inferior beings to take charge of our children?" Below, I discuss five early modern Bad Mother models meant to warn against women's dangerous vulnerability.

The Infanticidal Mother

Margaret Vincent is the perfect example of a Bad Mother. In 1616, she "like a fierce and bloody Medea" hanged two of her children before trying to drown herself ("Pitiless Mother" 364). A modern reader might surmise that Vincent suffered from a major psychological disorder. But the author of the case pamphlet states that Vincent's only illness was her Catholicism. Unable to convince her good husband to convert, (and having no legal

⁴ See also Cleaver, Croke, Rubright, and Thurer for more discussion of what comes "naturally" to early modern women.

control over her own children,) she decided they were better off in heaven than under the Protestant Church. The fictionalization of her case by the presumably male author reveals the society's misogyny and fear. The writer offers the tale as "a clear looking Glass to see a woman's weakness in: how soon and apt she is won unto wickedness" in both body and soul ("Pitiless Mother" 361). Vincent seemed the model wife—"discreet, civil, and of modest conversation"—and yet the "Devil" and "Roman wolves" easily took advantage of her, employing "charming persuasions that hardly the female kind can escape" ("Pitiless Mother" 362). Even though it does not apply to Vincent's case, the author alludes to Adam and Eve, and warns his readers that a wayward woman often makes "persuasive arguments to win her husband to the same opinion" ("Pitiless Mother" 362).

The author obsessively characterizes Vincent's crime as "unnatural" ("Pitiless Mother" 365). Insofar as she acted "weak and frail," her case was really just like a woman, but insofar as she took her children's lives, her case serves as the deepest transgression against the God. Vincent is also characterized as an animal: an "inhuman," "Tigerous Mother" who "so wolfishly" acted, "more cruel than the Viper, the envenomed serpent, the Snake" ("Pitiless Mother" 363-4).⁵ The author asks: "Shall woman, nay a Christian woman, God's own image, be more unnatural than Pagan, Cannibal, Savage, Beast, or Fowl?" He answers: No, she is a "Creature not deserving Mother's name" ("Pitiless Mother" 364, 7). This link between the unnatural and bestial will prove key to the evil mothers of folklore.

Infanticide "was newly criminalized" in the early modern period (Willis 66).⁶ However, most cases were not as extreme as Vincent's. In fact, concealment of pregnancy was often prosecuted as infanticide. Anne Peace, who delivered a stillborn bastard child, was so

⁵ Again, the presence of the serpent calls to mind Eve. Woman's association with original sin here associates her with a natural tendency toward wickedness.

⁶ Interestingly, Hoffer and Hull report that infanticidal mothers and witches seemed to be prosecuted in similar numbers village to village (Willis 66).

convicted in 1659; “under the infanticide statute of 1624, the facts of her spinsterhood and her failure to make public her pregnancy were damning evidence of an intent to murder her child” (Gowing 47). Peace’s case reveals the legal establishment’s deep mistrust of women. The mere rumor from a neighbor that she led a “suspicious and lewd life” resulted in a kind of joint investigation by neighbors and law enforcement alike. They found the damning evidence in her breast milk, which one can only imagine they obtained by invasive force. Peace’s case was not uncommon. The mother’s body was generally a site of more suspicion than respect.

The Stepmother

Modern readers are quite familiar with the villainous stepmother. Tartar writes, “Stepmothers stand as an abiding source of evil in countless fairy tales...the very title ‘stepmother’ pins the badge of iniquity on a figure...The phrase *wicked stepmother*, which has a nearly formulaic ring to it, is pleonastic” (*The Hard Facts* 141). But stepmothers can be found before published fairy tales. Cleaver anticipates the problems inherent to step-parenting in his treatise. He writes, “Stepfather and Stepmother doth signify and a stead-father and a stead-mother...Therefore, they ought to love [their stepchildren], to tender them, and to cherish them as their own father or mother did” (208-9).

Of course, Cleaver targeted his warning about failed stepparents to women in particular: “Stepmothers do more often offend and fail in this duty than men, by reason that their affections be stronger than men’s and many times overrule them...Let the stepmother advisedly consider that God hath ordained and appointed her...to be to them a right true mother...and requireth her to love them and to do them good as to her own” (209). Men, beware! Stepmothers, as women, are liable to hate their stepchildren. Cleaver draws upon a Split Mother image to solidify his point: “How much more effectual ought the sweet name of mother to be, which is full of incredible love? Therefore, every religious and loving wife will

be mollified and moved...when she shall hear herself be named mother...Otherwise, she shall show herself more unnatural and unkind than the wild savage beast” (210). Just as he idealizes the loving “name of mother,” he castigates and dehumanizes the reticent stepmother.

The Overly-Involved Mother

Not only could a mother could neglect her child, she could also “‘spoil’ her [child] with too much love” (Willis 18, 67). The line between nurturing and over-nurturing was a fine one. Juan Vives warned against the impropriety of maternal indulgence. Because “‘what some ever [the mother] answereth, [the children] beleve and regarde and take even for gospel,’” the mother has an extraordinary power of influence that she must not abuse (Willis 67). Vives believed that “‘mothers damn their children when they nurse them voluptuously. Love as you should, in a way that does not prevent steering the young away from vice and instilling them with fear by mild castigations...You make them depraved by treating them as delights!’” (Banditer 33). Vives’ use of the term “voluptuously” suggests that these mothers somehow transgressed their sexual boundaries as well. Over-nursing or leniency implies improper indulgence akin to promiscuity. The Good Mother nurtured her children, but only to a limited extent.

Mothers could likewise have too much influence over their children’s education. Wives were supposed to defer to their husbands in everything, including child rearing. Children legally belonged to their fathers, and the mother’s influence was limited to only the youngest children (Willis 18, 67).⁷ Male children were generally considered better off under the tutelage of another male (Willis 18). Elizabeth Joscelyn, pregnant and anticipating her own death from childbirth, created a manuscript full of child rearing advice in 1622. But Joscelyn knew her husband would disapprove of her “transgressive” writing, and thus defends it as fulfilling her

⁷ Indeed, people still ascribed to the Aristotelian principle that “the child originates in and belongs to the father and that the mother merely provides the environment in which the child grows” (Homans 155).

duty to the ““religious trayninge”” of her child (Metcalf 111-3). This excuse was the only legitimate one; mothers had to instill obedience and piousness in their children, and nothing else.

Even the most restrained, self-censoring mother could not always help the effect she had on her fetus. Simply having the wrong thoughts could result in a monstrous birth. Crooke states that the fetus’ natural growth can “be hindred by another which is more powerfull and diuine then it selfe, such as is the Imagination.” Indeed, early modern people often “attribute[d] to the mother the capacity to undo the living capital she is carrying in her womb; the power of her imagination is such that she can actually kill or deform her creation” (Braidotti 296). Likewise, mothers could damage a fetus by eating wrong or feeling too angry (Willis 66). As late as the nineteenth century, sources attributed Tom Thumb’s dwarfishness to his mother’s overly-tearful pregnancy (Braidotti 296).⁸ Moreover, “pregnant women were to avoid all excitement and cultivate the serenity of their soul. A special warning was issued against reading, which was seen as the activity most likely to influence and inflame their inflammable imagination” (Braidotti 297). Even education in the prenatal stages could ruin a perfectly innocent child. Mothers’ proximity to their offspring endowed them with a terrifying amount of perceived power, more power than they truly had.

The Wet-Nurse

Breast-feeding was, in many ways, the hot debate of the early modern era. Lower classes across Europe tended to breast-feed because they could not afford an alternative. The rich and even the middle classes looked down on breast-feeding as unseemly. They preferred to hire or farm their infants out to a wet-nurse (Thurer 175-6). However, theologians wrote at

⁸ Tom Thumb is the main character in a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folktale.

length about the virtues of the practice. They lauded it as in keeping with the “law of nature” and “the will of God” (Cleaver 206).

Elizabeth Clinton wrote an advice pamphlet called “The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie” (1622) that encouraged upper class women to breast-feed their own infants. Her testimony was rare not only because she was a woman writer, but also because she was an aristocrat critical of wet-nursing. She appealed to a mother’s compassion, not only for her child, but also for the wet-nurse’s family: “Be not so unnatural to thrust away your own children...be not accessory to that disorder of causing a poorer woman to banish her own infant, for the entertaining of a richer woman’s child, as it were, bidding her unlove her own to love yours” (Rubright 108). To be sure, wet-nurses often had to neglect their own children out of economic necessity (Willis 73). Clinton additionally claims, like many religious treatises of the time, that breast-feeding is “[required]” by God because of the natural differences between men and women resulting from “Eve’s transgression” (Rubright 108-9). Cleaver agrees; he accuses the woman who outsources breast-feeding of being only a “half-mother” (Cleaver 207). Cleaver’s tone is less compassionate than Clinton’s; to him, the woman who does not attain maternal perfection through breastfeeding is relegated to a monstrous form of motherhood.

Clinton regrets that her own children had wet-nurses, and suspects those nurses of some of their deaths (Rubright 110). Indeed, wet nurses were often suspected of “[contaminating]” infants with their low-class milk. Some believed breast milk was poisonous in the first few days after birth, and some believed it transmitted the character traits and diseases of the nursing woman (Willis 66). Because of the wet-nurse’s “evil complexion” and “hidden disease,” the child would inherit mental and physical infirmities (Cleaver 207). Others accused wet-nurses of neglecting some infants in favor of others when they had too many

clients (Willis 18). In this way, women who breastfed for compensation could be even more demonized than those who refused to breastfeed at all.

Midwives were a related source of anxiety. The stigma of the womb and women's reproductive systems extended to their profession. Their attempts to help women develop forms of birth control also put them under suspicion. Most of all, they knew about processes that male doctors did not, and this intellectual power meant they transgressed their female roles (Thurer 156). A 1512 law required them to promise not to use magic on their infants and become licensed by religious authorities. However, their proximity to women's reproductive capacity made them, like wet-nurses, easy victims in witchcraft trails (Willis 66).

The Witch: The Ultimate Bad Mother

The witch serves as the best example of the Bad Mother figure. In this period, between 60,000 and 200,000 women were burned for witchcraft (Thurer 140). Any women who did not conform to tenants of proper femininity could be labeled a witch (Thurer 148, Willis 33). The forty percent of women living “on the fringes of society”—the poor, prostitutes, postmenopausal, unmarried, widowed, or barren—were especially vulnerable (Thurer 149). And while historians debate the extent to which witchcraft can be linked to motherhood, Shari Thurer states that:

The characteristics of the witch are...direct perversions of the characteristics of the good mother. The good mother was silent; the witch was verbally aggressive. The good mother was chaste; the witch was promiscuous and perverted. The good mother was always obedient; the witch was wild and insubordinate. And the good mother was pious; the witch flamboyantly sacrilegious. The witch was the anti-mom, the bad mother. She marked off the

borders of proper maternal behavior, thus providing the good mother with a clearer definition of herself. (155)

It is no wonder that trial records commonly referred to accused witches as “Mother” (Willis 34). The witch grew out of the tradition of defining the Good Mother in contrast to the bad.

In each of Thurer’s witch-like transgressions, the woman would have been perceived as usurping male power. Men feared the women who entered “into the masculine domain, challenging her husband’s masculinity and even his adulthood” (Willis 71). Contemporary images of mothers underscored this fear. For example, men created “woodcuts and drawings show[ing] the ‘husband-dominator’ as the punitive mother, spanking her kneeling husband” (Willis 70). Take Shakespeare as another example; Lady Macbeth’s willingness to murder associates her firmly with the masculine realms of politics and war. At the same time, she is portrayed as the bully of her more cautious husband, and the murderous mother, ready to dash out her child’s brains for political gain. Not only do Shakespeare’s witches and mothers assume masculine roles, they infantilize men, underscoring an early modern fear of maternal power (Willis 6-8).

But Shakespeare was not the only playwright with witches on the mind. In 1621, a woman named Elizabeth Sawyer was accused and hanged for witchcraft. Trial records describe her crime as being ““moved and seduced by the devil”” who sucked from ““a thing like a Teate”” above her anus (Dekker 34). Sawyer sought revenge on her neighbors by ““witch[ing] to death their Nurse children and Cattle”” (Dekker xiii). Sawyer’s case thus linked a kind of perverted maternity with witchcraft.

Her trial was immediately fashioned into a play by Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley called *The Witch of Edmonton*.⁹ In the play, the character of “Mother Sawyer” is an unmarried, childless, “poor, deformed, and ignorant” old woman, the epitome of the failed mother (2.1.4). She, too, allows a familiar to “[suck] her arm,” in a sexualized perversion of a nursing ritual that calls into existence ominous “thunder and lightning” (2.1.144-5). She actually represents sexual deviance in general; Old Bank calls her a “hot whore,” and the other characters blame her for their own sexual irresponsibility (4.1.25).¹⁰

Furthermore, unlike the silent and obedient Good Woman, Sawyer sets herself to “study curses.../Blasphemous speeches...detested oaths/Or anything that’s ill” (2.1.112-4). Faced with the angry mob, she boldly cries, “Diseases, plagues; the curse of an old woman/Follow and fall upon you,” and “rots and foul maladies eat up thee and thine” (4.1.21-2, 72). This audacious response intensifies her dangerous potential. Sawyer herself realizes that any woman who speaks boldly risks being so labeled: “Is not that scold a witch?” she asks her accusers (4.1.138).

The themes of *The Witch of Edmonton* echo much of the village-level suspicions of the time. While elite discourse framed the witch “as an enemy of God and a rebel against the state,” village-level discourse focused on this fear of the “malevolent mother” (Willis 13, 15). According to Deborah Willis, “Village-level quarrels that led to witchcraft accusations often grew out of struggles to control household boundaries, feeding, childcare, and other matters

⁹ All act, scene, and line numbers come from this source.

¹⁰ More specifically, First Countryman’s wife blames her infidelity on Sawyer’s curse (4.1.8). Old Banks complains of being bewitched into sexual abnormality; namely, he feels compelled to kiss his cow’s backside (5.1.57-9). Third countryman laments, “our cattle fall, our wives fall, our daughters fall, and maidservants fall; and we ourselves shall not be able to stand, if this beast be suffered to graze amongst us” (4.1.12-14). Not only has “this beast” Sawyer cursed the crucial elements of patriarchal society (chattel, women, and servants), but she has also made them more susceptible to sexual betrayal. Furthermore, if these sexually aberrant trends continue, the men “shall not be able to stand,” a phrase which insinuates both social disintegration and sexual impotence. In this way, the men connect their fear of sexual deviance with their fear of Sawyer’s corrupting influence over the male-dominated society.

typically assigned to women's sphere" (13). Witches were figured as "[jealous]" of others' "fertility" (Thurer 155). They were perpetually accused of child-related crimes: causing impotence and infertility, miscarriages and infant deaths, and stealing children; we saw this pattern in Sawyer's case, and we will see in "Hansel and Gretel" and *Coraline* as well (Thurer 155). In fact, "a full quarter of all indictments against witches in England were for bewitching infants. The witch became the scapegoat for all problems related to childbearing" (Thurer 155). No wonder wet-nurses and midwives were so commonly accused; witches were basically women whose "mothering powers" had "gone bad" (Willis 35).

The witch's teat, as evidenced by both Sawyer's trial records and the play, represented the most direct and extreme perversion of the Good Mother. Villagers believed that the witch's "familiar," or Satan himself, would suck blood from this extra breast (Thurer 155, Willis 52). Breast milk was thought, at this time, to be converted blood, so the feeding of blood symbolized a horrifying reversal of the mother's natural processes (Clever 207, Willis 52).¹¹ The witch's teat inverted maternal power, funneling a life-source away from needy children to the devil. Suckling familiars also associated the witch, like Margaret Vincent, with the animal. The witch thus embodied another version of the Split Mother: "the nurturing mother to her brood of demonic imps but a malevolent anti-mother to her neighbors and their children" (Willis 34).

The witch looked like the mother, but acted the opposite way; she destroyed rather than created life. She, along with the infanticidal mother, stepmother, doting mother, wet-nurse, and midwife, grew out of an increased awareness of maternal roles. While the Church stressed the family, it also worried about the implications of leaving the weaker sex in charge of the next generation. As Willis writes, "New constructions of motherhood as a valued 'special

¹¹ As Crooke writes, "We all knowe that Nurses haue their courses stopped, because the blood returneth from the wombe vnto the brests, where it is turned into milke."

vocation'...went hand in hand with new anxiety about women's capacity for malevolent nurture; maternal power, however generative, could also be used to maim, deform, or destroy children" (18). No matter the era, our idealization of mothers comes along with profound fears.

Chapter II: The Rise of the Victorian Moral Tale

Fairy tales grew out of premodern oral traditions and were published across Europe after the development of the printing press. For some reason, the Grimms' *Nursery and Household Tales* holds particular resonance with readers to this day. Originally meant for adults, tales such as "Hansel and Gretel" and "The Juniper Tree" were warped and manipulated for the bourgeois nineteenth-century readership, in particular the newest reader-market: children. The Grimms' collection, whose preface called it a "manual of manners" for children," reveals their attempts to take horrifying oral tales and adapt them to meet the demands of their audience (*Classic* xi).

Of course, the Grimms' stories are not English in origin. However, they were published in England as early as 1826, and serve as a cornerstone of the fairy tale industry across Western culture. By 1882, when Lucy Lane Clifford published "The New Mother," the art of the children's moral tale and the Grimms' tales in particular would have been thoroughly entrenched in English culture. Clifford's story, like the Grimms', draws upon the Split Mother to show the changing—and stagnating—ideals about Good and Bad Mothers. This chapter will elaborate on Victorian beliefs about motherhood, and how those beliefs reveal themselves in "Hansel and Gretel," "The Juniper Tree," and perhaps most tellingly, "The New Mother."

The Victorian Mother: Domestic Angel

The fear of feminine weakness persisted into the nineteenth century, but it no longer caused men to restrict the maternal function as it had in the early modern era. On the contrary, mothers were framed as the "angels of the home" (Anderson 13, Thurer 183, 222). Thackeray tellingly wrote, "Mother is the name for God" (Thurer 183). The mother-child bond was revered. The 1839 Infant Custody Bill granted mothers legal control of children younger than seven (Holmes 39). The 1873 and 1886 revisions to the bill allowed even adulterous and

widowed mothers child custody rights (Holmes 41-2). Mothers were additionally entrusted with the education of their children. Louis Aimé Martin, whose book on motherhood was published in English in 1842, writes: ““On the maternal bosom the mind of nations reposes; their manners, prejudices, and virtues,—in a word, the civilization of the human race all depend on maternal influence”” (Homans 153). What changed in two hundred years to merit such a shift in perspective? Perhaps most obviously, the Church no longer served as the chief social force. The twin gods of Industry and Science provided new ideologies (Thurer 183-213).

The Industrial Revolution changed every aspect of life over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the mother’s role. In fact, it emphasized gender roles in general. No longer did spouses work together on the family farm. Men sought work outside the home. They formed the economic and political backbone of the society. Women, however, ceased to work in the market or with their husbands. Especially in the middle classes, women remained home during the day. “Separate spheres” were born. Man was a public being; Woman, a private one.

Maternity was, perhaps irrevocably, linked to the home.¹² Set apart from the cold, capitalistic workplace, Victorian women were thought better able to achieve a moral high ground. They were supposed to embody the values of peace, love, piety, and asexuality, and to pass on those values to their children.¹³ This emphasis on maternal morality resulted not only from industrialism but also from changing definitions of childhood. Thanks to the eighteenth-century writings of Rousseau (and the very late seventeenth-century writings of Locke), children were now sentimentalized for their “innocence” (Thurer 191, 195). They were

¹² This made motherhood particularly isolating. Women no longer raised children or did housework in groups, especially groups of non-relatives. Post-partum depression was still being labeled as “hysteria” or nervousness, and treated with lonely, counterproductive rest cures (Thurer 217).

¹³ See, for instance, Anderson, Robb, and Thurer for more discussion of Victorian women’s moral superiority.

“‘economically worthless’ but ‘emotionally priceless’” (Thurer 184). The bourgeoisie viewed the child labor and corporal punishment of the period—immortalized by such writers as Charles Dickens and William Blake—with horror. Those who could afford to kept their children safely at home, away from the cruel world. The best mothers instructed children not through physical punishment but through reason and guilt (Thurer 220). As children were seen as more innocent and needy, maternal practices became more significant to the future health of the society.

Scientific advances reinforced the “separate sphere” doctrine as well. Women’s bodies were still labeled as naturally suited to childcare, although this time, the culprit was Darwin’s Theory of Evolution rather than Protestant directives. “Darwinian thinking” led to the notion of “maternal instinct,” that mothers were “biologically wired” to protect and nurture their young (Thurer 212). Science reinforced motherhood as the only natural, and thus socially acceptable, destiny for women.

Rather than correcting flawed early modern beliefs about the female body, science tended to inaccurately confirm them. Despite the discovery of ovum in 1845, scientists still believed that the mother’s body had no role in the production of a fetus other than incubation (Homans 155).¹⁴ Furthermore, people continued to think that pregnant women were capable of ruining their unborn children with “illicit thoughts” (Thurer 213). M. L. Holbrook’s maternal manual (1871) warned that mothers “gradually, quietly, indelibly [transfer]” their emotions “to

¹⁴ Science continued to misunderstand many things about the female body, adhering to the outdated ideas from the early modern or even classical periods. As Jane Ussher discusses, the Victorian “sexologists took this long historical connection between badness and the womb” that we will remember from chapter one, “and reworked it into a clinical categorization of sexual deviance or perversion.” For example, “‘the reproductive organs...[were still] closely interwoven with erratic and disordered intellectual, as well as moral manifestations’” (Ussher 406). Adrienne Rich adds, “Clitoridectomies and ovariectomies were performed on women as a form of behavior modification for ‘troublesomeness,’ ‘attempted suicides,’ and erotic tendencies’” (170). Ussher notes, “Today, female reproduction and madness are linked irrevocably through the reproductive syndromes—PMS (named late luteal phase disorder in the DSM), PND, and the ‘menopausal syndrome’—the heirs to hysteria and the fear of the wandering womb” (406).

the disposition of the child while yet unborn” via the bloodstream (Homans 155). Therefore, “‘passionate’ women injure fetuses and produce enfeebled children” (Homans 156). Even education was still frowned upon for pregnant women: “As late as the nineteenth century, the idea that reading could inflame the female imagination and cause irreparable damage to the woman’s frail nervous system remained in fashion” (Braidotti 297). These anxieties about the prenatal environment, remnants from an earlier time, undermined women’s capabilities and increased paternal protectiveness.

Science also perpetuated the false conviction that Good Mothers were asexual: “As William Acton declared in 1870: ‘Many of the best mothers, wives and managers of households know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences...a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband's embraces but principally to gratify him; and were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions’” (Ussher 395). The Good Mother had no real passion outside of her children. As in the early modern period when a woman exhibiting non-reproductive sexuality could be accused of witchcraft, women were still expected to limit their sexual expression to motherhood.

This concern over maternal sexuality led to the condemnation of wide swathes of women. “Working class women, prostitutes, or women from ‘immigrant populations’...[who] were positioned as ‘naturally’ promiscuous and sexually unrestrained because of their lower position on the evolutionary ladder” could not possibly be Good Mothers (Ussher 395). Unwed mothers, though more sympathetically portrayed than in the early modern era, still had no safety net available to them. Rates of infanticide and child abandonment grew (Thurer 222). Controversial mothers were likewise condemned. For example, Annie Besant’s daughter was taken away from her in 1878 “because of [Besant’s] advocacy of atheism and birth control”

(Anderson 13). Custody judges hardly ever ruled in favor of adulterous mothers and widows despite laws protecting their rights (Holmes 42). The Victorian Good Mother, like the early modern mother, was chiefly valued according to her ability to conform to the prevailing ideology, an ideology that emerges in the fairy tales of the period.

“Hansel and Gretel”: *Revising the Mother*

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms’ “Olenberg Manuscript of 1810” included a story called “The Little Brother and the Little Sister.” It was a transcription of an oral tale as told by Frenchwoman Dortchen Wild (Zipes 41-2). Here is the opening of that text, as reported by Jack Zipes:

There once was a poor woodcutter, who lived on the edge of a large forest. His life was so miserable that he could hardly nourish his wife and two children. One time he ran out of bread and was very afraid. That evening his wife spoke to him in bed: Take the two children early tomorrow morning and lead them into the large forest. Give them whatever bread is left, and make them a large fire. After that go away and leave them alone. The husband did not want to do this, but the wife did not leave him in peace until he finally agreed. (42-3)

The children are abandoned in the forest and wander until they find an old woman’s house. She entices them with food and ends up trying to eat them. In the end, the children bring the witch’s jewels “to their father who became a rich man. However, their mother had died” (Zipes 43).

The tale, which would become “Hansel and Gretel” in the first printing of *Nursery and Household Tales* (1812), captures many of the early modern beliefs about mothers from which it may have originally derived (Zipes 42). For example, the cruel mother is also a disobedient wife; she transgresses her female role by telling her husband what to do, and then nagging him

until he agrees. She does not respect the father's right to decide what is best for his children. Her unwillingness to nurture her children aligns her with those "unnatural" infanticidal mothers.

Meanwhile, the witch aligns with early modern village-level beliefs. Her desire to steal children makes her seem envious of the biological mother's fertility. Her willingness to feed them only for evil ends alludes to the deceptive nurturance of Mother Sawyer's teat. Her willingness to eat children, moreover, seems bestial. It calls to mind the "monstrous Tiger" and "serpent" of Margaret Vincent's case; it represents a perversion of the natural, God-given order.

The Grimm's revisions to the "Hansel and Gretel" text over the first half of the nineteenth century bring the tale more and more in line with popular Victorian mothering practices. By 1857, when the final edition of *Nursery and Household Tales* was printed, fairy tales were "instructional and moral," used as a "civilizing agent" for middle class families rather than informal adult entertainment (*The Hard Facts* 37; Zipes 4-5, 51). Folk tales, including "Hansel and Gretel," became a way for mothers to foster Christian morality, a tool in the maintenance of the domestic sphere.

For example, the characters of Hansel and Gretel take on more cherubic identities through the revision process. They are given names, and referred to as "poor children" or "heavenly" children, to arouse the reader's sympathy (*Classic* 184, 6, 7). They hold hands (*Classic* 185). When they escape, "they [hug] and kiss, and [jump] up and down for joy!" (*Classic* 189). They are also gendered; Gretel, full of sweet emotions, is perpetually crying, and Hansel, a future gentleman, is perpetually comforting and guiding her. Once captured by the witch, Gretel is the one to do the cooking and serving. Hansel, the male, faces a more

direct attack from this power-usurping old hag (*Classic* 188). Thus the children, in keeping with Victorian beliefs, become more endearing and more distinct from one another.

The presence of cute animals, meanwhile, provides contrast to the supposedly “wild beasts” of the forest and the savage witch (*Classic* 184). The kitten and “good little” duck introduce levity and tenderness (*Classic* 189). The last line reveals the same trend: “My fairy tale is done. See the mouse run. Whoever catches it can make a great big fur hat out of it” (*Classic* 190). This phrase, which would seem like absolute nonsense to an adult, was probably intended to delight children through rhyme. These embellishments ostensibly make the text “quaint” and “provide comfort to the readers” (Zipes 48).

Furthermore, the Grimms “transform the anonymous ‘pagan’ children of the Olenberg manuscript into good, Christian, God-fearing children” (Zipes 48). God is invoked four times in the 1857 version, heaven twice. Hansel, who, as the male child, would be closer to God, informs Gretel, “God will not forsake us,” and “The Lord will protect us” (*Classic* 185-6). Clearly, these children are well-trained in their prayers. The religious additions reconstruct the story so that “it is their goodness and faith in God that enable them to overcome the evil witch” rather than their own skill and wits (Zipes 48).

In fact, Zipes believes that “fathers are continually extolled in the tale, whether they be biological or divine” (Zipes 48). The revisions indeed cast the biological father in a better light. In contrast to the mother, who seems “more explicitly bad-tempered”—which we will come to in a moment—the father seems “more long suffering” (*The Hard Facts* 36). He appeals on behalf of the children: “How could I have the heart to leave the children all alone in the woods when wild beasts would surely come and tear them to pieces?” and “It would be

better if you shared your last crumb of bread with your children”” (*Classic* 184, 186).¹⁵ Rather than “agreeing” to abandon the children like he did in the original version, the father merely “[consents],” all the while maintaining that he is unhappy about the decision (*Classic* 184). In the forest, he says, “Go gather some wood, children. I’ll build you a fire so that you won’t get cold”” (*Classic* 185). This line makes him seem all the more caring and torn; we can imagine his voice cracking as he tries to get out the words. He lives without them in painful misery and regret, and is “overjoyed” at each return (*Classic* 186, 189). Each embellishment makes the father seem more in the right.

The most notable change throughout the Grimms’ revisions is Wilhelm’s change of the mother into the stepmother in 1819 (*Classic* 180, Zipes 49). Zipes suggests they could have been influenced by the stepmother figure in Basile’s “Ninnillo and Nenella” (1634) (43). In addition, the switch to a stepmother could simply reflect the facts of life; stepmothers were just as common in the nineteenth century as they were in other centuries, and because of harsh, impoverished conditions, stepmothers probably did resent their stepchildren (*Off with Their Heads!* 222, Zipes 49-50). Another possibility is that stepmothers have an innate tendency to arouse our suspicion; we saw from Cleaver that stepmothers were mistrusted at least as early as the sixteenth century.

More likely, however, is that public sentiment could not stomach the idea that a natural mother could commit such a heartless act of abandonment. Tartar agrees that “as the audience for the tales changed” to children, “the need to shift the burden of evil from a mother to a stepmother became ever more urgent” (*The Hard Facts* 142). After all, what mother would enjoy telling her young child about the evils of mothers?

¹⁵ While we will come to the figure of the stepmother in a moment, it is important to note that the hyperbolic nature of these two statements casts the stepmother in all the more negative light.

But any public regard that existed for natural mothers did not stop the Grimms from exaggerating the nasty qualities of the thinly-veiled mother-figure. The stepmother remains controlling and loud: “Listen to me” are her first words, and she calls both the husband and Hansel, “You fool” (*Classic* 184-5). She insists, in more detail, more often, and against greater protests, that the children be abandoned in the woods. She does not show any reverence towards her husband; Gouge, had he read the Grimms, would have interpreted her insistence as “usurp[ing] authority over the man,” and Cleaver would have been dismayed at her failure to “be of one heart, will, and mind” with her husband (Gouge 281, Cleaver 204). Additionally, she becomes more closely linked to the witch in the revisions (Zipes 49). The stepmother tells the children, “Get up, you lazybones,” and the witch tells Gretel only pages later, “Get up, lazy bones” (*Classic* 185, 188). Though she may be called a “stepmother,” she and the witch clearly represent a single, malevolent female identity (*The Hard Facts* 142).

The witch herself becomes more three-dimensional in revisions (*Classic* 180). The narrator immediately identifies her as a witch, which seems more akin to a beast than a woman: she “lay in wait for children,” has “red eyes” and “a keen sense of smell, like animals” (*Classic* 188, Zipes 43). She is also linked to beasts through Gretel’s cry that being devoured by “the wild animals in the forest” would be better than this fate (*Classic* 188). The Grimms make sure we cannot read the witch’s actions sympathetically by bestowing her a “fiendish” laugh and a sneer (*Classic* 188). Her greed is base and perverted; she muses, “They’re mine! This time they won’t get away from me...They will make a tasty morsel” (*Classic* 188). However, the elaborate descriptions of the food she provides draw another parallel between her and the stepmother. While the stepmother so greedily withheld food, this witch provides it in plenty, only to turn the children into her own source of nourishment. Likewise, the beds she gives the children seem like “heaven,” but are in fact a mere ruse. This “godless witch” has no

place near heaven; the fire that kills her represents the beginning of eternal hellfire (*Classic* 188, 189).

The Grimms made sure to make the moral of the story clear. Unlike the 1810 manuscript, in which the message of the tale is somewhat left to the reader's imagination, the Grimms say definitively that "there was nothing more to fear" after the witch's death (*Classic* 189). Once the children return home, the narrator informs them that "their worries were over, and they lived together in perfect happiness" (*Classic* 190). One aspect the Grimms did not revise is the mother-figure's eventual demise. She continues to get only the briefest sentence at the end: "His wife had died" (*Classic* 189). This ending clearly indicates that mother-figures are unnecessary to domestic happiness, and a life without women is a life worth living.

Zipes reads these revisions as perpetuating abuse against child readers. The Grimms tried to "harmonize the plot and action of the fairy tales with the norms and expectations of the bourgeois reading public," and in turn, forced children to take unfair patriarchal "social arrangements as authoritative and just" (51). To achieve this end, the Grimms enacted a "shift from the authoritative male voice to the soft voice of the nurturing mother," including proverbs, little songs, and friendly animals to "[awaken] a specific desire for maternal connection and home" (Zipes 51). While the narrative tone may indeed have become softer and more maternal, the action of the story became all the more condemnatory towards mother-figures.

Unlike popular early modern treatises, "Hansel and Gretel" does not quite provide us a Good Mother/Bad Mother model. Instead, it shows us a Bad Mother and a really Bad Mother; it implies that all women, to varying degrees, are incapable of acting in their child's best

interests. The actual mother does not want to feed her own children during a time of famine.¹⁶ The old woman/witch wants to feed on her neighbor's children. All women, it suggests, are dangerously greedy. As Zipes puts it: "The children are moved from the breakdown of order in a domestic situation, caused by a woman, to another threatening domestic situation, in which the woman against represents the forces of chaos and destruction...Fearful of the forest or of living independently, they are ultimately redomesticated and place their riches at the disposal of their father as sole ruler of the house" (52). The domestic sphere becomes the only safe space for children, and yet it can never be safe as long as mothers haunt it.

"The Juniper Tree"

"The Juniper Tree," a lesser-known *Nursery and Household* tale, is also rooted in earlier times. Phillip Otto Runge produced the first written account of the story, which was the published in several journals during the four years preceding the Grimms' version (*Off with Their Heads!* 220, 268). Furthermore, "The Juniper Tree" bears resemblance "to a seventeenth-century written account of a mother who threatened to kill and devour her daughters that she might survive a famine" (*The Hard Facts* 140). The Brothers Grimm summarized this occurrence in their 1810 publication, but it unsurprisingly did not make the revised later editions (*The Hard Facts* 140). However, the evil stepmother of "The Juniper Tree" is cruel and bloody enough.

The Good Mother of this tale is the biological mother. She is the ideal woman: "beautiful" and "pious," wanting nothing more than to bear her husband's children (*Classic* 190). She even sacrifices her own blood to create a child (*Classic* 190). She "is described in terms that link her with nature and biological rhythms;" the months of her pregnancy

¹⁶ She probably would have been expected to sacrifice her own food for her children's sake. There is a historical and cultural tradition of expecting women to go without food in times of need. In the late Middle Ages, as well as some Third World countries today, food is allotted to men and children first, leaving women to starve themselves (Zipes 54).

correspond with the growth and flowering of the juniper tree (*Off with Their Heads!* 220). Her pregnancy brings her overwhelming happiness; in her fifth month, she [falls] to her knees and [is] beside herself with joy” (*Classic* 190). Tartar points out that the Good Mother does have one fault—her greedy consumption of the fruit from the tree. In this way, she is in line with the menacing, consuming Split Mother of “Hansel and Gretel” (*Off with Their Heads!* 222-3). However, this fact is all but lost in a paragraph of full praise for the biological mother.

Sadly, and perhaps necessarily to the integrity of that perfect image, she dies.¹⁷ Tartar goes on to assert that the real, direct cause of her death is the child himself. However, careful reading shows that her death is cause not by the child but by her maternal delight over him: “When she saw the child she was so happy that she died” (*Classic* 190). The best mother, the story implies, should be so joyful that it kills her.

In her place arrives the wicked stepmother. She acts as a foil to the biological mother, representing not nature, but rather artifice and malice (*Off with Their Heads!* 219, 221). She “disturb[s] the harmony among blood relations” in the family (*The Hard Facts* 142). This stepmother is even crueler than the abandoning nag of “Hansel and Gretel.” She deliberately and brutally kills her stepson, and then pettily tricks her own daughter, whom she ostensibly loves, into assuming the guilt. The murder confirms all Cleaver’s worst fears about stepmothers’ inability to love their husband’s children. Moreover, it underscores some core early modern and Victorian beliefs about female inferiority:

Women are deceptively feminine. They appear to nourish but actually have evil motives. As Tartar writes, she represents “the obverse of a nurturing and protective figure, she mobilizes the semblance of maternal actions to trap her victims” (*Off with Their Heads!* 218). Like the witch in “Hansel and Gretel,” this mother uses food and “sweet” speech to lure her

¹⁷ She actually predicts her own death, as did Elizabeth Joscelyn (*Classic* 190, Metcalfe 111-3).

stepson to his death (*Classic* 191). In reality, she is not nurturing at all. She is a mannish “domestic [tyrant]” (*Off with Their Heads!* 224). She acts against her husband’s child according to her own fickle passions.¹⁸

Women have inferior bodies. Before her death, the stepmother’s teeth chatter and she “[tears] at her bodice to loosen it” (*Classic* 195). “Her ears...[roar]...like the wildest of storms, and her eyes [burn] and [flash] like lightning” (*Classic* 195). She falls down and loses her cap, then “jump[s] to her feat and her hair [stands] straight on end like tongues of flame” (*Classic* 196-7). Not only do these “symptoms” align her with the bestial Vincent, they parallel the supposed effects of hysteria.¹⁹ The stepmother’s frenzied bodily performance is symptomatic of her refusal to adopt proper motherhood. The boy says she looks “dreadful,” and indeed, what Bad Mother, with her weak body, would not (*Classic* 191)?

Women are susceptible to devilish temptation. “The Juniper Tree” nearly recreates the story of Adam and Eve. The Grimms write, “The devil got [the stepmother] to speak sweetly” and offer the boy an apple (*Classic* 191). Like Eve, the stepmother is weak to the devil’s temptation (*Off with Their Heads!* 219). The authors go on to implicate Satan in her cruelty: “The devil got hold of her so that she began to hate the little boy” and begins to physically abuse him, no longer an acceptable form of punishment by the nineteenth century (*Classic* 191). The stepmother also indirectly invokes the devil—the “divider par excellence”—when she distinguishes between her natural daughter and her husband’s son: “Whenever the woman looked at her daughter, she felt love for her, but whenever she looked at the little boy, she was sick at heart” (*Classic* 191). Chopping up the boy’s body constitutes a similar but more literal

¹⁸ The story aligns with the early modern belief that the father has sole possession over his children. When he greedily eats up his son in the stew, he proclaims, “No one else will get any. Somehow I feel as if it’s all mine,” underscoring that very tenant (*Classic* 192).

¹⁹ See page 5.

division. Tartar writes, “As a differentiator, the step/mother creates a rupture in the “natural” order of things, dividing, segmenting, mutilating, and destroying” (*Off with Their Heads!* 219).

Women have inferior intelligence. Tartar points out that the stepmother’s method of killing—slamming her stepson’s head off with a chest lid—is “astonishingly” unsophisticated. In addition, her method of concealment—tying his head back on with a kerchief—is “distinctly childlike” (*Off with Their Heads!* 214, *Classic* 191). In most stepmother stories, including “Hansel and Gretel,” the stepdaughter takes a more quiet, martyr-like role than the more directly victimized stepson (*The Hard Facts* 141). This daughter, “little Marlene,” is no exception. She seems too stupid to realize that her mother has tricked her, and she weeps throughout the story, underscoring her own feminine weakness.

The ending of “The Juniper Tree” is no less patriarchal than “Hansel and Gretel.” If anything, it is more patriarchal, because Marlene is more exaggeratedly passive than Gretel, while the son is more directly responsible for the mothers’ death than was Hansel. After passively killing his mother in childbirth, he actively kills the evil stepmother with a millstone. It is no coincidence that she dies as soon as she decides to go “outside,” to transgress the domestic sphere, something she had done in spirit from the beginning (*Classic* 197). The children and father are “overjoyed” at this outcome, and promptly return to eating, unfazed by neither their recent experience with cannibalism nor the loss of another mother (*Classic* 197).

Like “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Juniper Tree” suggests that the Good Mother ideal is impossible to attain. The Good Mother dies from her efforts at perfection, and the Bad Mother is punished for her transgressions against the patriarchy. “Perfect happiness” is not achieved until the women are totally out of the picture (*Classic* 190). Nowhere is there an acceptable, attainable middle ground for mothers. This trend does not bode well for Gretel and Marlene!

“The New Mother” or Just More Revisions?

Lucy Lane Clifford, who published “The New Mother” in *The Anyhow Stories: Moral and Otherwise* (1882), is this paper’s only female author. Because she was a mother writing the story for her two daughters, we might reasonably expect her not to employ the Good Mother/Bad Mother dichotomy so popular with the Grimms. However, Clifford’s story features a Split Mother, one disturbingly carved from the image of the ideal Victorian mother. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write, “The images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women’s writing to such an extent that few women have definitely ‘killed’ either figure” (17). Indeed, we can imagine how easy it might have been for Clifford to cast her own parenting—and that of her character—in angel/monster terms. On the other hand, Clifford’s Split Mother foreshadows Gilbert and Gubar in that it dramatizes the dangers inherent to idealizing mothers. This section will examine the ways in which “The New Mother” both epitomizes and critiques Victorian maternal norms.

“The New Mother” falls in line with other Victorian moral tales. Though the story takes place in a rural cottage with a mother who “work[s] hard” and a family that has few luxuries, it clearly strives to emulate the bourgeois values that the Cliffords, who ran in the same circles as George Eliot, Henry James, and Rudyard Kipling, held (Clifford 120, Moss 53). Sentimental language saturates the descriptions of the family. The father, mother, and children are all “dear.” The children are “good” and “kind” (Clifford 121-2). They, unlike early versions of Hansel and Gretel, have names and histories. In fact, they share the nicknames of Clifford’s daughters (Moss 56). They are also cast as innocent products of domestic moral instruction. Blue-Eyes complains, “I don’t know how to be naughty...no one

ever taught me” (Clifford 125). She, a *tabula rasa*, cannot behave badly because she and her sister have not been trained.

The mother is similarly angelic. She perpetually feeds, warms, and kisses the children. She runs to them when they cry and crafts surprises for them in the night (Moss 56). In a telling sentence, she “took [the baby] on her knee, and danced it up and down, and sang little snatches of songs to it, and laughed, and looked content, and thought of the father far away at sea” (Clifford 122). The mother is figured as utterly content in her domestic pursuits. She wants nothing more than to care for her baby. If she does let her mind wonder, it is only to think fondly of her children’s father. Indeed, a mere letter from her husband seems the highlight of her life.

The bonds between family members are likewise idealized. The sisters, for instance, act and speak symbiotically, from their in-unison responses to the fair girl to their final handhold in the dark forest. The reactions of the baby brighten everyone’s moods. Even letting her “crow at us while we eat” strikes the family as a good time (Clifford 126). Of course, the mother has much empathy for her children. When they misbehave, “the dear mother’s heart ached, and her eyes filled with tears” (Clifford 133).

The children’s love for their mother is no less intense. The children “should hate a new mother,” and “clung to their own mother, and kissed her fondly” (Clifford 127). They ask, “How could they bear to let their own mother go away, and a new one take her place?” (Clifford 128). One of the girls cries, “I should never, never like any other mother. I don’t know what we shall do if that dreadful mother comes” (Clifford 136). Her words evoke Elizabeth Clinton’s appeal to breast-feeding. Mothers are not interchangeable; the bond between a mother and her natural children is unrivaled.

Unsurprisingly, love is foregrounded in the story as the ultimate virtue. The mother, playing the typical Victorian moralist, instructs her children: “‘If one loves one well...one’s love is stronger than all bad feelings in one, and conquers them. And this is the test whether love be real or false, unkindness and wickedness have no power over it’” (Clifford 127). As she says these words, “she seemed to be speaking rather to herself than to them,” which gives her character another dimension. We imagine she speaks from her own marital experience, as if the hardships of her lonely life are worth her husband’s true love. In this way, her statement underscores her loving reverence for her husband.

Furthermore, Clifford’s story encapsulates the doctrine of “separate spheres.” The father works outside the home—to the extreme; he is “far away at sea” (Clifford 120). Clifford makes sure to not mention the harsh capitalistic world. The mother, on the other hand, does not work outside the house. She does not even go to the post office, preferring to send the children. Unlike the Grimms’ tales in which a womanless world is the ultimate goal, “The New Mother” delves deep within the domestic realm with an all-female speaking cast. The cottage room in which they pass the tale is “cozy,” with walls “white as snow”—the color of purity and cleanliness (120). The kitchenware is “polished and shining” (Clifford 121). The quaint and reliable clock is highlighted. The cottage is figured as the center of the family’s bliss.

As much as we idealize the Good Mother, writers seem far more eager to elaborate upon the possible ways in which the Good Mother can turn Bad. Like the fair girl states, “‘The pleasure of good centers on itself. The pleasures of naughtiness are many and varied’” (Clifford 129). Fittingly, Clifford’s Bad Mother has many faces.

The New Mother is the most obvious face of maternal evil. Her glass eye and long, wooden tail recall the bestiality and unnaturalness associated with the early modern witches.

The serpent-like tail, in particular, connects her to the devil (Silver 732). Moreover, the New Mother is frighteningly mannish. Anna Silver writes that her wooden tail is “phallic,” as is her “loud and terrible knocking” and “fearful blow” on the door, which “crack[s] and splinter[s]” it (Clifford 138-9, Silver 732). Not only is she mannish, she violates the children’s inner space. Her assault parallels an act of rape, reminding us of the early modern and Victorian associations of the Bad Mother with sexual voracity. A true Victorian woman would have been incapable of such strong desires; thus this New Mother seems distinctly masculine. Her black bonnet and bag also invert the notion of “angel of the home” (Clifford 138). Her bag, especially, marks her as male; while the Good Mother always carried her innocent baby girl, this mother has an ominous black bag, full of contents from the outside world.

The fair girl serves as another example of inverted maternity. The opposite of the proper lady, she is described as “poor,” “ill,” “hungry,” “wild-looking,” “very unhappy,” and “ragged.” She appears “uncombed and unfastened,” “freckled,” “course,” and “shabby” (Clifford 122). Silver suggests that the girl’s freckles, as well as her chimpanzee song, arouse Victorian fears about “Darwinian degeneration and the dark continent of Africa” (Silver 732). The angel ideal—and the whiteness and cleanliness implied in that ideal—are nowhere to be found on this female body.

The girl is also sexually “dirtied.” She carries not a baby, although the children tellingly mistake it as such, but a peardrum. Silver sees the peardrum as a sexualized perversion of the maternal: “By moving the womb-shaped peardrum from the girl’s shawl, where it resembles a baby, to underneath her buttocks and genitals, Clifford changes its symbolism from maternal and reproductive to suggestively sexual; by sitting on an object that has been symbolically correlated with an infant, moreover, the girl is identified with the

desecration of motherhood” (729-30). Thus the peardrum indicates that the girl, like the New Mother, has refused to take up her “natural” asexuality, and with it, the mantle of motherhood.

In the final scene, the girl thwarts Victorian familial norms by towing along a perverted family of her own:

She did not stop dancing; she was already passing the cottage by. She did not stop singing, and all she said sounded like part of a terrible song. And still the man followed her, always at the same distance, playing shrilly on his flute; and still the two dogs waltzed round and round after him—their tails motionless, their legs straight, their ears clear and white and stiff. On they went, all of them together. (Clifford 135)

Here, like the Good Mother, the girl dances and sings. But unlike the Good Mother’s lullabies, her song is terrible. The man is following the girl, which constitutes an inversion of proper patriarchal conventions. The dogs, walking upright and without the use of their tails, seem like the unlikely couple’s children. “Together” they make up the anti-family, the family that lives by the inverted rules of Carnival year-round.

But the girl’s true power to terrify rests in her inversion of proper moral instruction; she, more than the New Mother, is this story’s anti-mother. She teaches the children to be “naughty.” She encourages them to overturn and destroy household items, to enact a literal, carnivalesque inversion of the domestic sphere. She even gets them to “[laugh] for joy” when their mother was angry, “and when they were in bed they sat up and sang merry songs at the top of their voices,” the opposite of proper comportment (Clifford 130).

The girl’s support of bad behavior is not haphazard; she persuades, like the Good Mother, with reason and civility. She pays attention to what the children “deserve,” and chastises them when they are not “calm” (Clifford 132-3). She emphasizes respectability,

politeness, and punctuality (Clifford 123-33). She insists that “it wants skill to do the thing properly,” and she sees through the guise of mere “make-believe naughtiness” and “spoiled goodness” (Clifford 131, 133). Although she encourages bad behavior, she does so through the guise of propriety. The children are described as “spellbound” when both the mother and the girl leave on their parallel distant journeys, underscoring the link between the two figures (Clifford 133-4, Silver 735-6). The reader, too, can only be amazed at how Clifford plays with that line between Good and Bad mothering, and how similar the two can seem on the surface.

The children eventually become quasi-mothers themselves. They desperately attempt to take on a maternal role in order to win back their own mother. They painstakingly right every wronged item in the house. But their attempts fall short. Displaced by the New Mother, they end up more bestial than maternal; they live in the forest, scavenging for food, their life a series of “cold, dreary days,” and “long dark nights” (Clifford 139).

The Good Mother is clearly the most effective of the mother figures. Despite their bouts of misbehavior, the children have been raised to be obedient and kind. The fair girl reiterates that their naughtiness is only superficial. The children prove their goodness when “their hearts [ache] so much at the sight of the mother’s sad face that they [are not] able to sleep” (Clifford 131). They prove their goodness when they tediously restore the home in hope of their mother’s return. They prove their goodness when they pine after their “own dear mother” with “longing that is greater than words” (Clifford 139). Thus “The New Mother” calls into question what it really means to be a Good Mother. She has successfully raised two girls who would have grown into proper, Victorian ladies. Is that not enough?

Alas, the mother still commits one of the worst crimes: child abandonment. As Anita Moss says, she “is not always wise and strong,” and she “metamorphoses from mother to monster” (57-9). However, Clifford’s ending seems a criticism more of Victorian culture than

of the mother-character herself. The rigidity of the Victorian norms leaves no room for her to cope with their misbehavior. In fact, the perfect mother, all sweetness and virtuousness, would never be permitted the flash of anger or frustration that comes with parenting even near-perfect children like Turkey and Blue-Eyes. In order to maintain the maternal ideal, the Good Mother has to leave them.

Such an unworkable ideal must eventually fade away. Just as the house grows “closed, dark, and silent as a tomb,” this repressive form of motherhood must die (Moss 57). The New Mother can thus be read as a “corpse-like” representation of a past ideal (Moss 57). Clifford hints that, as obsessed as the Victorians were with tidying, dividing, and categorizing life, change is fast approaching. The initial description of the cottage reveals as much: “The forest was so near that the garden at the back seemed a part of it, and the tall fir-trees were so close that their big black arms stretched over the little thatched roof, and when the moon shone upon them their tangled shadows were all over the white-washed walls” (Clifford 120). These images suggest that the cruelty of the wild world will indeed seep into the home. The true mother is driven away by her unworkable ideals, the inhuman New Mother fills the void, and the innocent children, formerly sheltered, are abandoned to the dark wilderness. Such a blended, chaotic setting cannot possibly consist of only Good Mothers and Bad Mothers, but must embrace a spectrum of maternal possibilities woven across the Victorian backdrop.

Chapter III: *Coraline*: Is There Hope for Motherkind?

Like Clifford, Neil Gaiman dedicates *Coraline* to his two daughters (Goodyear 7). And yet this young adult novel hardly seems as moralistic as the Victorian children's tale. Coraline is more "quirky" than "naughty" like Turkey and Blue-Eyes. Although perhaps braver and more appreciative of her parents by the end, she does not learn any clear lesson. She still, in her typical Coraline spirit, refuses to eat her pineapple chunks at dinner (Gaiman 169). What, then, is Gaiman trying to teach his daughters?

Moreover, what does *Coraline* tell us about the 1990's and early twenty-first century?²⁰ Despite the fact that women are not necessarily required to maintain a "domestic sphere" any longer, ideas about motherhood have not entirely caught up with social, economic, and scientific progress made in the hundred years since "The New Mother." Annalee Newitz grapples with these contradictions:

The old ideal of 'a man at work and a woman in the home' is not just morally repugnant to many women but often economically impossible. While 'nontraditional' single parent homes, blended families, and queer families have become more common, equally common are the women who put off childbirth until their forties—or indefinitely—so that they can establish their careers... Yet traditional ideas about parenting, and mothering in particular, remain with us and generate painful contradictions in our daily lives. (335)

Even within more "traditional" family forms, aspects of childrearing, from birthing to moral education, from feeding to entertaining, are increasingly—*but not always*—seen as a joint venture between two parents.

²⁰ *Coraline* was drafted throughout the nineties and published in 2002 in Britain and America (Goodyear 2).

This variety of motherhood ideals would seem to lend itself to a very different kind of story. But Gaiman still relies on the Split Mother figure. Does she perform the same function? Does she still suggest that the more we idealize mothers, the scarier they become? Does she still preclude the possibility of a truly Good Mother? This chapter will argue that Gaiman's novel, while picking up on the same trends we have witnessed so far, makes room for the possibility of a mother situated between the flawless and the horrifying—an unremarkably adequate mother.

Elizabeth Parsons, Naarah Sawyers, and Kate McNally, however, would argue the opposite. They locate *Coraline* in the same realm as “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “The New Mother” in that it, too, “present[s] a journey toward normative and consolidated feminine and heterosexual identities that rely on demonizing women” (371).²¹ They read *Coraline* as a warning against overly traditional mothers, the childless, lesbian mothers, and working mothers. All of these women potentially arouse the reader's “fear of the all-powerful maternal” whose “dominance must be overthrown” (Parsons 371).

The fear of Coraline's distracted, working mother in particular stems from the modern woman's ostensibly liberated persona. Just as early modern mothers were feared for role as child-bearers, and Victorian mothers were feared for their role as moral instructors, twenty-first century mothers are feared, according to Parsons et al, for their potential empowerment:

These mothers share household and career responsibilities with the fathers of their daughters, are not subjugated by an overriding devotion to child rearing at the expense of their own happiness, and thus seem to embody the era of apparent choice and empowerment. But, it is because these mothers make such choices and embrace this empowered status that their relationships with their

²¹ “The New Mother” is an acknowledged source for Gaiman's *Coraline* (Goodyear 1).

daughters are haunted by the specter of a too-powerful (phallic) mother who is the source of fear and anxiety for both the girl protagonists. (372)

In other words, our idealization of the professional, independent mother comes hand-in-hand with our fear that she will totally neglect her childrearing duties, and perhaps overthrow the men around her. As much as mothers have progressed, they are still dealing with the same social anxieties that Elizabeth Sawyer faced in 1621.

There are holes in Parsons, Sawyers, and McNally's argument. Their psychoanalytic framework neglects Gaiman's conscious refutation of earlier cultural trends. Gaiman's story, though bearing many resemblances to the earlier tales, sends a different message. This chapter will examine Gaiman's Split Mother figure to see whether it truly follows in the polarizing, fear-mongering footsteps of its predecessors, and argue that, in the end, the story makes way for an achievable, reasonable mother.

The Other Mother: Demonizing the "Angel"

From her first appearance, we are meant to take the Other Mother's mimicry of motherhood as inappropriate and unsettling:

It sounded like Coraline's mother... It looked a little like Coraline's mother.

Only...

Only her skin was white as paper.

Only she was taller and thinner.

Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp...

And then she turned around. Her eyes were big black buttons... (Gaiman 32-3)

Gaiman's use of paragraphing and repetition of the word "only" solidifies the reader's understanding; despite her similar appearance, this mother is not a Good Mother. In fact, she is downright "sick and evil and weird" (Gaiman 93).

Not only is she a Bad Mother, she is a conscious addition to the long literary tradition of Bad Mothers. Her eyes, like the red eyes of the "Hansel and Gretel" witch and the glass eyes of the New Mother, give her away.²² Gaiman uses three child-ghosts to indicate that the Other Mother has terrorized children for centuries. Indeed, one of her previous victims refers to her as the "beldam," a word which has a tertiary definition of "loathsome old woman, a hag; a witch; a furious raging woman...a virago" ("Beldam," Gaiman 98). It was used as early as 1586²³ on into the nineteenth century ("Beldam"). *Coraline* is not merely a story about an anti-mother; it is a story about the whole literary tradition of anti-mothers.

The Other Mother embodies timeless fears about the Bad Mother figure. First and foremost, she assumes a male role by controlling the Other Father. She deprives the Other Father of voice. He tells Coraline, "Really, I mustn't talk to you when she's not here...But don't you worry. She won't be gone often. I shall demonstrate our tender hospitality to you, such that you will not even think about going back" (Gaiman 84). Here, he simply regurgitates the Other Mother's party line. When he says more than what is permitted, she tells him to "hush!" and banishes him to the basement of the empty flat (Gaiman 76, 135). By the end of the story, the Other Father transforms into a baby-like monster, with a "toothless

²² The red eyes of the "Hansel and Gretel" witch also come across in the numerous rats that live with the Other Mother. In fact, those rats have quite a bit in common with the New Mother. They sing: "We have teeth and we have tails/We have tails we have eyes/We were here before you fell/You will be here when we rise" (Gaiman 37). Teeth, tails, eyes: these are the body parts that frighten us in the New Mother and the witch; these are what mark them as bestial and menacing. They sing again: "We have eyes and we have nerveses/We have tails we have teeth/You'll all get what you deserveses/When we rise from underneath" (Gaiman 141). Both songs put the rats in the position of overcoming and punishing the listener, which is exactly the position of the New Mother. Likewise, Coraline notes that "it wasn't a pretty song," which recalls "The New Mother" fair girl's perverted lullaby, how she sings tauntingly as she leaves the abandoned children behind.

²³ By Sir Philip Sidney

mouth;” his form reflects his voiceless infantilization (Gaiman 135). Although terrifying, the reader never doubts that his power derives entirely from the Other Mother.

The Other Mother also deprives the Other Father of agency. She created him to serve no purpose other than hers. Coraline finds him “not doing anything at all, not even reading gardening catalogs...he seemed pleased to have somebody to talk to” (Gaiman 83). He cannot make choices on his own. As much as he seems to sympathize with Coraline, he “cannot fight” the Other Mother, and must attack the girl (Gaiman 135). Voice and agency, usually the prerogative of men, are here withdrawn from the father figure.

Some of the Other Mother’s characterizations seem to derive specifically from the early modern witch-hunt literature. Her blood is tellingly figured as “deep, tarry black stuff,” reminding us of the perverted blood that ran through witches’ veins (Gaiman 160). The Other Mother’s hair and bestial creation are compared to serpents, recalling the reliance on Eve’s original sin in demonizing early modern women (Gaiman 73-4, 94, 105, 137).

Most obviously, the Other Mother represents the witchlike anti-creator. Gaiman writes, “She could not truly make anything...She could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed” (142). Only eight pages later, he solidifies this point: “The Other Mother could not create. She could only transform, twist, and change” (150). The Other Mother’s inability and yet strong desire to generate comprises a huge part of her characterization. Like the barren witch, jealous of her neighbor’s fertility, the Other Mother is determined to feign creative power. The one thing she truly desires is what cannot be achieved through her magic. The cat, an authority on this other world, explains, ““She wants something to love, I think...She might want something to eat as well. It’s hard to tell with creatures like that”” (Gaiman 78). To gain a child, she traps Coraline in her world, leeching off of others’ fertility like the early modern witch.

The cat's uncertainty about whether she intends to love or eat Coraline also indicates how closely the mother's power to nurture is tied to her power to destroy. Like the witch in "Hansel and Gretel," the Other Mother lures Coraline with food. Gaiman quickly establishes that Coraline detests both her mother's bad cooking and her father's "recipes" (11). Although her mother does not abandon Coraline because of famine, her mother does fail to return from a grocery trip, allowing Coraline time to wander into the Other Mother's realm (Gaiman 29). Upon entry, Coraline notices, "it smelled wonderful" (Gaiman 33). When she sits down to eat with her other parents, she thinks the chicken is "the best chicken [she] had ever eaten" (Gaiman 34). Later on in the story, the Other Mother is portrayed "bustling" around the kitchen to make Coraline's "favorite"—a "perfect" cheese omelet (Gaiman 107-9). But Coraline's delight in the alluring food quickly turns into a fear of being eaten. The Other Mother's cannibalism is less apparent, and thus more menacing, than the "Hansel and Gretel" witch's. Coraline wonders a few times if "the Other Mother and the Other Father were looking at her hungrily," and notices the Other Mother's "full set of teeth" (Gaiman 73, 111). The line between loving and eating grows faint.

Like the mother in "The Juniper Tree," the Other Mother seems somewhat childish. She loves games and puzzles, but seems unable to play by the rules. As the Other Father says, "When she gets out of sorts, she takes it out on everybody else. It's her way" (Gaiman 134). Indeed, Coraline has to remind the Other Mother to "play fair!" when she lets her emotions best her (Gaiman 118). The Other Mother is not only demonized; she is made dumb. Even a pre-adolescent can outsmart her.

Gaiman also uses the Other Mother to toy with the Victorian ideals. The Other Mother chastises Coraline through reason, guilt, and moralizing. She lectures, "Sharper than a serpents tooth...is a daughter's ingratitude. Still, the proudest spirit can be broken, with love"

(Gaiman 92). Here, she falls back upon the Victorian model of discipline: morals tempered with love. She even picks up on some of the religious language used: ““We temper our justice with mercy here; we love the sinner and we hate the sin”” (Gaiman 107). When Coraline speaks rudely, the Other Mother shoves her in the closet behind the mirror: ““You may come out when you’ve learned some manners...and when you’re ready to be a loving daughter”” (Gaiman 95). Coraline is confined to solitude until she learns to comport herself properly.

For the most part, Gaiman seems to criticize these old-fashioned methods of childcare. The Other Mother’s ideal is to ““all be together as one big happy family,”” as if she does not realize that this phrase has passed into cliché (54). She wants to play “happy families” with Coraline, and do “embroidery” and “water colors” (Gaiman 92, 94). These outdated activities make the Other Mother seem all the more a remnant of the past. She just does not grasp what a child truly wants. The toys and costume-like clothes she provides are interesting at first, but eventually off-putting to Coraline in a mere “pink-and-green parody of her own bedroom” (Gaiman 79). The Other Mother’s suggestion that Coraline ““play with the rats”” as a reward for good behavior underscores her inability to understand a child’s needs (Gaiman 94).

Gaiman also scorns the Other Mother’s willingness to devote her entire life to Coraline’s amusement, as Turkey and Blue Eyes’ mother did. The Other Mother speaks in absolute terms about her parenting: ““I will never become bored with you, and I will never abandon you. You will always be safe here with me”” (73). This sounds nice, especially considering Coraline’s own parents barely notice her sometimes. But these other parents notice Coraline *too* much. When she goes to explore, her Other Father says, ““We’ll just wait here for you to come back,”” and as she walks away, ““They were still watching her, and waving, and smiling”” (Gaiman 39). Thirty pages later, their attentiveness becomes downright unpleasant. The Other

Mother insists, ““We’re here... We’re here. We’re ready to love you and play with you and feed you and make your life interesting”” (Gaiman 72). By repeating “we’re here” and “and,” Gaiman highlights the ominous nature of this extra attention. The Other Mother seems more and more akin to the cloying, Overly Involved Mother that early modern writers warned against.

The Other Mr. Bobo opens Coraline’s eyes to the pitfalls of such self-sacrificing motherhood: ““Your Other Mother will build whole worlds for you to explore, and tear them down every night when you are done...Every day will be better and brighter than the one that went before...every meal will be a thing of joy”” (Gaiman 143-4). She will be a mother in total service to her child. But Coraline rejects this ideal: ““What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn’t *mean* anything”” (Gaiman 145). In these words, Coraline summarily rejects the Victorian maternal ideal. Neither children nor mothers are best served by constant attention to children’s wishes.

Gaiman also critiques the Other Mother’s conception of the perfect domestic sphere. The Jones family is not concerned with domestic standards. They only own part of a house, and even that part serves as a joint workplace-living area-storage facility; they have an entire room that they do not use. Meanwhile, the wilderness is fast encroaching upon the once-domestic space of the garden. It is now “overgrown,” the rose section “filled mostly with stunted, flyblown rosebushes” (Gaiman 3, 5). “At the very back was an old tennis court, but no one in the house played tennis and the fence around the court had holes in it and the net had mostly rotted away” (Gaiman 5). The domestic realm, like Coraline, has surrendered to the Jones’ distracted lifestyle.

The Other Mother, conversely, pays great attention to the details of the domestic world, trying to get every aspect of Coraline’s house perfect in her copied version. The drawing room

is, object-by-object, almost an exact replica (Gaiman 30-1). The Other Mother does not even bother with the space outside the home. That cat explains, “All that was real was the house itself” (Gaiman 112). Indeed, as Coraline gets farther from the house, the trees become “cruder and less treelike,” and “very approximate, like the idea of trees” (Gaiman 86). Not only does this approximation highlight the Other Mother’s obsession with home and hearth, it shows how very outdated it is. Coraline is much more concerned with the outside world than the inside, but the Other Mother, playing from a Victorian childrearing book, is not prepared to meet these needs.

Even the Other Mother’s perfect house deteriorates when Coraline gets closer to freeing her parents. The house appears more like a “photograph of a house,” until it becomes a mere “drawing, a crude, charcoal scribble of a house drawn on grey paper” (Gaiman 147, 150). Coraline asserts that this visual “idea of a house” was clearly authored by “not a good person” (Gaiman 125). In saying so, Coraline confirms that the domestic world the Other Mother embodies is, with good reason, crumbling. As the house fades away, so does the reader’s nostalgia for the all-giving, domestic mother. Domesticity/Monstrosity no longer parallels the Good Mother/Bad Mother dichotomy.

Othered Other Mothers: Miss Spinks and Miss Forcible

Parsons et al read *Coraline* as punishing to not only traditional homemakers, but lesbian and childless women as well. Such lifestyles fly in the face of Luther, Cleaver, Vives, the Grimms, and perhaps even Mrs. Clifford. They undermine the male role in child rearing and family law to the utmost degree. Does Gaiman, too, hold these old-fashioned views?

Parsons et al argue that Gaiman casts the unmarried, childless women—Miss Spinks and Miss Forcible—in an unsavory light. For instance, the Misses are the only characters given sexuality, but that sexuality seems false and repulsive. In the other world, the women are

“young...thin, and pale, and quite pretty...The new Miss Spink was wearing green tights and high brown boots that went most of the way up her legs. The new Miss Forcible wore a white dress and had flowers in her long yellow hair...Miss Spink...slapped her thigh, and all the little dogs woofed” (Gaiman 48-9). But these images cause Coraline to “[press] back against her seat” with unease (Gaiman 49). Parsons et al conclude: “As actresses, Miss Spinks and Miss Forcible chose careers rather than families and are shown not as happily independent but rather as paying the price for following their dreams, unable to be satisfied, and thus always regressing by constantly reliving their heady days as theatre performers” (379). They read Spinks and Forcible as Gaiman’s warnings to those who flout their natural maternity.

However, this analysis neglects that not only are Spinks and Forcible cheerful throughout the novel, their stone and fortune-telling play an important role in helping Coraline defeat the Other Mother. These women are not to be brushed off as lonely, sad, and useless to society just because they are unmarried. Moreover, the other world should not be taken as Gaiman’s version of reality. There is no evidence to suggest that just because the other-world sisters are “regressing,” as Parsons et al say, that childless women in real life do the same. Keep in mind the real Spinks’ and Forcible’s reminiscences about their theater days; Spinks’ role of Portia was preferred over Forcible’s Ophelia (Gaiman 15). Clearly, Gaiman shares with these two female characters a preference for women of spunk and agency over those condemned to a restrictive domestic sphere.

Furthermore, if we persist in reading the other world as suggestive of reality, as Parsons et al’s psychoanalysis seems to, than we can just as easily read the Other Misses as *advocating* childlessness. The two women appear as fetuses inside a womb, “slippery, as if...covered in jelly” inside a “sticky” “white” “sac” (Gaiman 122). Parsons et al interpret this image “as a warning about the regressive and mutant forms that emerge from female-female

desire. The imagery of the embryonic state of two women too close together is shown as both unnatural and underdeveloped...dangerous and to be feared” (380). But this scene does not necessarily castigate lesbians; I think the reader can just as easily see the womb image as a warning *against* motherhood. Because the thing is “attached to the wall by its web, encased in its cocoon,” “it could not follow [Coraline]” (Gaiman 123). Gaiman seems to imply that the womb limits a woman’s mobility, that tying a woman to a child is akin to chaining her to a prison wall. While Gaiman includes alternative lifestyles in *Coraline*, there is no convincing evidence to suggest he views them negatively.

Coraline’s “Good Enough” Mother

Parsons et al fault Gaiman for making Coraline’s real mother’s life seem “undesirable” (376). They attempt to prove this undesirability by poking holes in the “egalitarian” nature of the marriage. They think that the father and mother remain gendered: “Coraline’s father embodies the symbolic law of the father via his commitment to following written recipes as ruling instructions and his suggestion that Coraline entertain herself by counting, categorizing, and making lists of real world objects. Her mother, by contrast, suggests that Coraline draw” (Parsons 377). However, Coraline’s mother follows rules too; she demands Coraline eat her meals inside (Gaiman 6). In fact, the father defers to the mother on one point at least, asking Coraline, ““What does your mother say?”” (Gaiman 8). The father does indeed follow recipes, but he is clearly a more freed, creative chef, while the mother is a more package-instructions-based cook. The father even sings lullabies to Coraline about feeding her, doubling up on his feminine and creative roles (Gaiman 188).

Parsons et al also think that while the “balance in labor distribution” between the two parents seems “emblematic of equality,” it is actually “undercut by Coraline’s emotionally invested memories of the significant moments her parents have occupied in her upbringing”

(375). For instance, although Coraline remembers her dad heroically saving her from a swarm of wasps, she remembers her mother removing her bicycle's training wheels and thereby causing her injuries. However, using these two memories to prove the real mother's undesirability constitutes a shallow interpretation. First, Parsons et al could just as easily interpret the bee scene as emasculating the father within their psychoanalytic framework; the phallic swarm of wasps repeatedly penetrates the father (Gaiman 67-70). Furthermore, the mother's bicycle scene is not as negative as they suggest. While Coraline does get hurt, she also gains a "feeling of achievement" (Gaiman 148). This mother clearly cannot shelter her child from every hardship, but she can allow her to make mistakes and learn from them in a supervised environment. This freedom to fall down fosters Coraline's independent personality.

Parsons et al go on to point out that "while Coraline hugs her mother tightly when shaken awake by her in the real world, she actively seeks out her father, and the kiss she bestows on him is made more pointed by her verbalization of love in telling him she misses him" (376). They fail to mention that the only thing that saved Coraline at the moment when her strength was lowest was her mother's affirmation: "Her own mother, her real, wonderful, maddening, infuriating, glorious mother—just said, 'Well done, Coraline,' and that was enough" (Gaiman 161). Despite all of her faults, the real mother endows Coraline with the most encouragement. Her role should not be underestimated.

Parsons et al's attack on the parents' marriage does not correspond with Coraline's own faith in her parents. Of course, Coraline has a "tiny doubt" that they—especially her mother—really want to be liberated from her. She envisions a scene in the Other Mother's mirror: "'How nice it is, not to have Coraline anymore,' said her mother with a happy smile. 'Now we can do all the things we always wanted to do, like go abroad, but were prevented from doing by having a little daughter.' 'And,' said her father, 'I take great comfort in

knowing that her Other Mother will take better care of her than we ever could” (Gaiman 74-5). This vision reflects “Hansel and Gretel” and “The Juniper Tree” all over again: the domineering mother who could care less about her child overrules the good-natured father. But this time, the scenario is dismissed in a flash as a mere “illusion” (Gaiman 75). Coraline knows that both of her parents love her dearly; she rescues them because, as she says, ““If they noticed I was gone I’m sure they’d do the same for me”” (Gaiman 70). Once more, Gaiman engages with but repudiates past Bad Mother traditions. This mirror reflects less upon Coraline’s reality, and more upon what traditionally-minded people might fear about working mothers.

Is the real mother, then, a Good Mother? Coraline believes that both mothers love her. She responds when the Other Mother “cuddle[s] and love[s]” her after her imprisonment (Gaiman 106-7). She thinks, “It was true: the Other Mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold...she was a possession...a tolerated pet whose behavior was no longer amusing” (Gaiman 127). Her love seems distinctly “cold” (Gaiman 126, 127). By the end, she expresses her love “flatly,” like a “wax statue” of a mother rather than the real thing (Gaiman 154, 156).

Moreover, the Other Mother’s love cannot compensate for Coraline’s rebellion. As we saw before, the Other Mother relies heavily on lectures and moralizing: ““Now if you will be a good child who loves her mother, be compliant and fair-spoken, you and I shall understand each other perfectly and we shall love each other perfectly as well”” (Gaiman 107). Good manners are essential to love; indeed, in the graphic novel version of *Coraline*, the Other Mother says, ““Manners maketh man, after all”” (Gaiman and Russell 89). The Other Mother cannot handle a disobedient child. Recall that when Coraline talks back, the Other Mother makes her spend a night behind the mirror (Gaiman 95). Gaiman here seems to be highlighting

the flaw of the mother in Clifford's tale; she cannot compensate for naughtiness, and does not know how to react but to separate herself from her child. Modern maternal love, he implies in contrast, is about loving a child regardless of their behavior. It encapsulates the ability to adapt to hard times. Only Coraline's real mother, with all her faults, fits this definition of a loving mother. She is not very attentive and she cannot cook, but she accepts Coraline, flaws and all.

Can twenty-first century society agree to love this type of mother? According to Gaiman, love is no longer purely about "conquering" all "bad feelings" as it was in "The New Mother" (Clifford 127). Likewise, we are never going to totally defeat our deep-seated fears about mothers. Gaiman does not want us to. He does, however, want us to temper our "bad feelings" with love. Coraline's mother is still "maddening" and "infuriating" at the end; she still does not give Coraline her full attention; she does not even own a real tablecloth (Gaiman 161, 184). But Coraline has learned to accept her mother's faults just as her mother accepts Coraline's quirks. As Gaiman writes, "There are some people who keep track of every day and every hour, and there are people who don't, and Coraline's parents were solidly in the second camp (179). Coraline seems unperturbed by her parents' inattention to life's details; she has learned that there are more important factors involved in being a good parent, such as warmth, the ability to cope with rebellion, and a true understanding of an individual child's needs. True, Coraline's mother may not meet all of the conflicting twenty-first-century standards of perfection; she may not be a truly Good Mother. But she does seem like a "Good Enough" Mother. In fact, for independent and adventurous Coraline, she may be exactly the right kind of mother.

Future Mothers: Coraline

Like Turkey and Blue Eyes, Coraline attempts to assume a maternal role. But Coraline's maternal care begins much earlier. Because her mother works so much, Coraline

needs to remind her when school begins and to buy new clothes (Gaiman 19). Coraline microwaves herself dinners, and tends to her own wounds (Gaiman 11, 168). When her parents initially go missing, she goes shopping, makes dinner, completes hygienic routines, and puts herself to bed (Gaiman 59). She tells the neighbors, “‘I’ve probably become a single child family,’” as though this development is a burden she is prepared to bear (Gaiman 60). Later, she cares for the three children trapped in the Other Mother’s clutches, rescues her parents, and even holds and comforts the cat, despite his aloof persona (Gaiman 152). Unlike Turkey and Blue-Eyes who scrambled to compensate for their mother’s absence in the hopes of winning her back, Coraline has already developed a knack for independence. Her parents’ distractedness thus has the unintended benefit of teaching her an important life skill. Turkey and Blue-Eyes, foraging in the forest, might have benefited from a few such lessons in self-reliance.

Unlike Gretel, who already seems programmed to take her cues from Hansel; Marlene, who cries non-stop; and Turkey and Blue-Eyes, who equate tidying the home with conflict resolution, Coraline is not growing into a traditional maternal role. Parsons et al might disagree. They criticize Gaiman for his use of the tea party in the final chapter: “Coraline rids herself of the evil mother by performing the highly traditionalist female role of presiding over a tea party...While this is a ruse, and the reader is told that Coraline has outgrown playing tea parties, it is nonetheless her ability to perform appropriate femininity that saves the day for Coraline” (376).

The key words here are “perform” and “ruse.” It is clear to the reader and even to Coraline’s inattentive mother that Coraline is not actually “feminine” in the traditional sense. From the first page of the novel, Coraline is committed to exploring. Unlike the children of fairy tales, who fear the wild forest, Coraline relishes the outdoors: “that was how she spent

her first two weeks in the house—exploring the garden and the grounds” (Gaiman 6). She even seeks out animals. Unlike the Other Father, Coraline is never without voice or agency. Even if her parents, neighbors, and the local police fail to hear her, the reader never has any doubt as to her competency. Her entry into the Other Mother’s clutches is likewise done through her own volition. Her story valorizes the typically-male traits of bravery (through her father’s bee story) and strength (in the final door-closing scene). Only the Other Mother (or rather, the Other Mother’s hand), a relic of a past era, would believe that Coraline would play at tea party. It is precisely the Other Mother’s refusal to relinquish outdated mothering tactics that leads to her fall down the well. Coraline is—and perhaps Gaiman’s own daughters are as well—not destined for traditional motherhood. We can only hope that the culture of motherhood she grows into welcomes her as she is.

Conclusion: A Good Mom is Hard to Find: The Continued Impossibility of Our Ideals

Of course, the Other Mother is not completely gone from the final page of *Coraline*'s tale. Her hand still lurks somewhere, deep at the bottom of that old well. The tension between domestic idealization and monstrosity that she represents, too, continues to haunt our culture. Despite Gaiman's ability to produce a moderately acceptable mother, the tendency to create perfect and horrific mothers remains deeply engrained in Anglo-American culture. It has been four hundred years since the early modern witch hunts, and yet it is still terrifyingly easy to identify "monstrous" women in our society: obese women, anorexic-looking women, female body-builders, "trailer park trash" women, women with bad plastic surgery. Women, just as they did in every other era, must conform to certain standards of body size, age, race, gender, sexuality, class, education, and religion to be deemed acceptable (Essig).

Mothers, in particular, must meet these standards. Otherwise, they are subject to media attack, whether they are educated writers like Ayelet Waldman or waning pop stars like Brittany Spears. Recent legal battles over gay marriage and adoption have brought lesbian mothers into the cultural spotlight. The inner-city welfare mother, cinematized through Mo'Nique's recent academy-award-winning performance in *Precious*, comes up repeatedly in conservative political discourse. Infanticidal mothers inevitably make the news. A Google Image search of "mom kills her kids" turns up demonic-looking mug shot after mug shot of accused mothers.²⁴ In the year before *Coraline*'s publication, Andrea Yates became perhaps the most famous murderous mother after drowning her five children in the bathtub (Spinelli xvi).²⁵

²⁴ A few recent examples of infanticidal mothers include Susan Smith (1994), Melissa Drexler (1997), Dena Schlosser (2004), Shaquan Duly (2010), Saiqa Akhter (2010), Stephanie Rochester (2010), and Jayne Peters (2010).

²⁵ In fact, some people like Linda Chavez go so far as to tie welfare mothers to infanticidal tendencies, suggesting that America's welfare policy leads "monster-women" to murder their children (Spinelli 10).

Mothers with too many children have lately become a topic of public vitriol. Kate Gosselin of the reality television show *John and Kate Plus Eight*, and “Octomom” (Nadya Denise Doud-Suleman Gutierrezaka) have each come under a shower of media criticism for their large, unruly families. Octomom’s portrayal has been especially negative.²⁶ She is judged for her use of in vitro fertilization, her poverty, and her single-mother status. People dress as her—this twenty-first-century monstrous mother—for Halloween (Essig).

Recent data from the Pew Research Center shows that over forty percent of the public considers the increase in single, unwed, and lesbian mothers to be “a bad thing.” Although working mothers and the childless seem more publicly accepted, there remains a substantial minority who believes these populations, too, to represent negative trends in our culture (see fig. 1) (“Decline of Marriage”). We still have a long way to go in eradicating our prejudices against certain types of mothers, and in ceasing to think about them as either “good” or “bad.” We must learn to accept less traditional forms of motherhood, just as we (or at least, eighty-five percent of us) have learned to accept interracial marriage (see fig. 1).

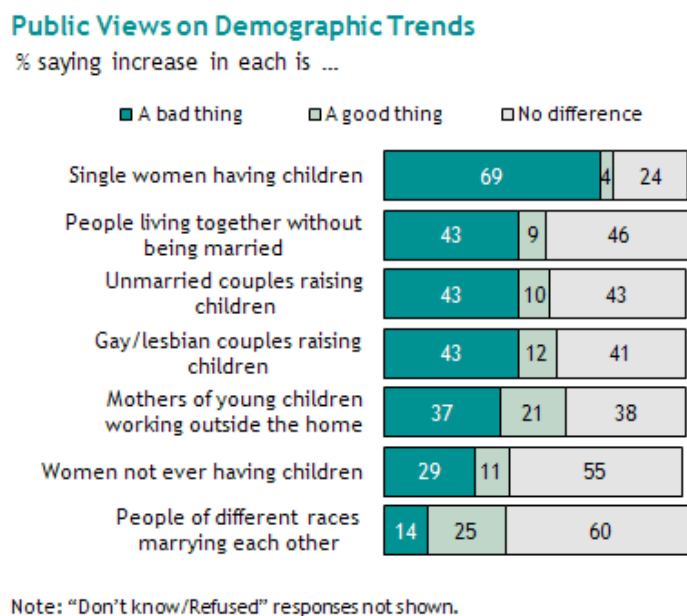


Fig. 1. This chart shows the findings of a Pew Research study released on November 18, 2010 about current attitudes towards the American family. The leftmost portion of each bar represents “a bad thing;” the middle, “a good thing;” and the rightmost, “no difference” (“Decline of Marriage”).

²⁶ Perhaps because Gosselin conceived within a Christian marriage, her children are more socially palatable.

Each era brings with it a host of norms and prejudices, Good Mothers and Bad. Octomom is not so different than Coraline's or Gretel's moms. Each faces enormous social pressure to become the perfect mother. Their stories tend to minimize their roles, personalities, and backgrounds, leaving a conflation of mythic "maternal evil" behind (*The Hard Facts* 140). No matter how bestial or otherworldly the monsters are, they are always distinctly female, always distinctly mothers.

But all is not lost. As Tartar so wisely says, "The omnipresent, powerful mother and the distant, separate father are still the most common coordinates in the world of childrearing, but enough has changed and is changing for us to produce new cultural stories to read to our own children" (*Off with Their Heads!* 228). We do not have to keep reincarnating the polarizing Split Mother. Future generations of mothers—perhaps Coraline, if she so chooses—will have the power to re-interpret old stories of motherhood, and write new ones of their own.

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