

“Authorship Prevails in Nurseries”: Alice Meynell as Mother, Mentor, and Muse

Kirsty Bunting

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester,

UKABSTRACT

Viola Meynell was raised in an at-home magazine office and trained in aestheticist poetry of the 1890s by her mother, Alice Meynell. Making use of extensive and previously unpublished correspondence between Alice and Viola from the Meynell family archive, this essay charts Viola’s rebellious turn towards the novel form and early experimental modernism, and her rebellion’s impact on the mother-daughter relationship. The two women wrote about each other in myriad poetry, essays, fiction, and biography, and, when read side by side, these writings offer an intriguing picture of their lives together and trace alternating periods of generational distance and intimacy. Specifically, the article traces Alice’s reification in print as ideal wife, mother, and homemaker, and contrasts this ideal with Viola’s daily observations of her mother. Before and after Alice’s death, Viola fought to demythologize, reclaim, celebrate, and mourn the real Alice Meynell in her work, while her own literary reputation was damaged by her association with the domestic and her prolonged apprenticeship under her mother.

Alice Meynell (1847-1922) had her literary apprenticeship under the instruction of the high-Victorian literary giants of her parents’ bohemian circle, including Coventry Patmore, Ruskin, and Tennyson. She became one of the most celebrated female poets and essayists of the 1890s, contending for the role of Poet Laureate.¹ Brought up to the profession of poet, Alice similarly apprenticed her own children, and she tutored none more intensively than her daughter Viola (1885-1956), the only of Alice’s eight children who would go on to make a living by writing. Viola produced twelve novels, two volumes of verse, and around forty short stories over the course of her career. However, the daughter’s career was overshadowed by her mother’s, partly because Viola “fed the family legend” and catered to the appetites of “Meynell worshippers” with her many memoirs of her mother, as her obituary stated.² Viola published a full-length memoir of her mother in 1929, followed by essays, BBC radio broadcasts of childhood reminiscences, Viola’s orchestrations of Alice’s centenary celebrations, and a commemorative edition of Alice’s poetry.³ This essay argues that Viola’s memorializing represents an attempt to repair the severed literary connection with Alice who,

during her lifetime, never co-authored a work with her daughter. The article further posits that Viola's inability to penetrate Alice's reserve and to comprehend her mother's performance of femininity gave rise to Viola's fantasies of textual reconnection. Viola's biographer, Raymond Mackenzie, remarks on the intensity of their relationship: "[t]heir lives became deeply intertwined, to the point where mother and daughter are like two texts, each commenting on and explicating the other".⁴ By exploring how their writings exist as intertextual dialogues almost—but not quite—tantamount to literary collaboration, the essay signposts the tensions between Alice and Viola at the interstices of their private, professional, and textual lives. References to unpublished correspondence between Alice and Viola from the Meynell family archive help unpack the operation of late nineteenth-century matrilineage, memory, intergenerational influence, genre, and literary identity in these dialogic texts.⁵

Talia Schaffer has analyzed the oblique feminine aesthetic of Alice's literary persona and Alice's adoption of that persona in her everyday life. Alice recognized that the disguise of ideal, demure womanhood—the bearing of an "Angel in the House"—would be useful as she advanced her literary career.⁶ Alice's astute self-commodification allowed her to infiltrate, and make a living in, the literary marketplace while forestalling hostility to her independence and visibility. This strategy afforded Alice modes of self-representation beyond Patmore's reductive "Angel", particularly the subtle psychological, even erotic, drama beneath the surface. Only the suitably intrigued or aesthetically initiated were able to fathom these hidden depths, while much of Alice's audience—and even some of her friends—relished her version of genteel, beatified femininity.⁷ Schaffer argues that many of Alice's readers and critics detected her fluctuations between her conventional and more controversial aesthete personae. Her audience, unperturbed by these challenges to domestic motherhood, in fact appreciated the "interplay between these two competing models" and located "a viable model for female behavior precisely in the region between them".⁸ For the young Viola, this

multiplicity was difficult to decipher and contributed to their personal distance. What follows is the hitherto untold story of Alice's 'making' of Viola Meynell, and her daughter's literary efforts to demythologize, locate, and reclaim her mother.

Before examining Viola's apprenticeship and the effects of the mother's inordinate influence over Viola's early career, I turn to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking analysis of literary matrilineage of the late-nineteenth century.⁹ According to Gilbert and Gubar, women of the twentieth century could "attempt the pen with energy and authority . . . because their eighteenth-and nineteenth-century foremothers" had struggled in the "isolation", "alienation", and "obscurity" that was "endemic to their literary subculture".¹⁰ They cite Elizabeth Barrett Browning's now-famous lament of 1845, "I look everywhere for grandmothers, and see none", as evidence of such isolation.¹¹ Virginia Woolf similarly complained in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924) that women who began to write novels in or around December 1910 (as Viola did) saw no immediate female influences to draw upon or to lead them by example to professionalism.¹² Gilbert and Gubar later revised the notion that early twentieth-century women writers could not rely on literary foremothers. By the *fin de siècle*, literary women had to confront for the first time not only the exclusionary patrilineal literary tradition but also an immediate matrilineal inheritance created by the vast numbers of women entering the literary professions between 1850 and 1900. This meant that women were, "for the first time in possession of a uniquely female literary history".¹³ Gilbert and Gubar argue that the desire for literary foremothers of the mid-nineteenth century was replaced after 1900 by an anxiety of influence similar to Bloom's model in which filial love and reverence for literary precursors was "inexorably contaminated by mingled feelings of rivalry and anxiety".¹⁴ This anxiety, according to Gilbert and Gubar, culminated when writers such as Woolf and Viola Meynell tested strategies for coping with the burden of matrilineage. Woolf, in response to her own desire to at once 'think back through' her literary mothers

while containing and controlling her daunting precursors, decided that the “feminine art” of modern fiction, “undoubtedly bids us break and bully her, as well as honour and love her”.¹⁵ The Meynells, this essay concludes, exemplify these intergenerational literary negotiations and revisionary tactics.

Viola’s apprenticeship prolonged

Alice wrote in 1896 that “[a]uthorship prevails in nurseries . . . and since the days of the Brontés [sic] there has not been a large family without its magazine”.¹⁶ She understood that many Victorian middle-class girls began their literary endeavors mimicking adults’ print culture, some recreating the small-scale magazine production taking place within their own homes. Linda H. Peterson argues that “the model of authorship as an extension of maternal function was common among women writers of the first half of the nineteenth century”. This familial model of authorship and its “special combination of maternal guidance and journalistic apprenticeship . . . became an important model for other Victorian women artists”, and, for the Meynells, this practice was still alive in the 1890s.¹⁷ Daughters within these hybrid spaces of private home and public office occupied an ambiguous position as assistants to their mothers who, in turn, acted as literary helpmeets to a professional literary father, as was the case with Peterson’s subjects, the Howitts. No matter how much public literary activity served as an “extension of maternal function”, to use Peterson’s term, it remained grounded in the private sphere as part of middle-class daughters’ domestic education. The Meynells’ correspondence offers insights into the pair’s public and private roles which, until now, has gone unobserved.

Mackenzie describes Viola’s education at a Catholic day school as roughly equivalent to her brothers’.¹⁸ The siblings’ equal access to education, as well as Alice and Wilfred’s equal division of intellectual labor, was motivated by Alice’s dream of future equality

between the sexes. At a young age, Alice had recorded her cultural anxieties about young women entering the professions without assistance:

Of all the crying evils in this depraved earth . . . the greatest . . . is the miserable selfishness of men that keeps women from work. . . . A girl may go mad with her own soul over needlework, but she could not do so at college, or studying for the bar or for a civil service examination. That is what I demand for myself and for my sisters . . . ¹⁹

Any daughter of Alice Meynell's was to be encouraged into work and independence, and the family home was the ideal site for that daughter's apprenticeship. Palace Court functioned primarily as a magazine office in which Alice and Wilfred edited *Merry England* and the *Weekly Register*, among others. It also operated as a literary salon, to which "every scintilla of fresh promise" was welcomed and from which Viola was never excluded.²⁰ Viola frequently accompanied her parents on visits to their publishers' offices, remarking that these excursions became so routine that the children were able to perform their parents' literary errands alone "at an almost incredibly early age" (90).

By 1901, the year of Alice's American lecture tour, sixteen-year-old Viola regularly submitted poetry and other writings to her mother for criticism. But her literary career did not begin until 1910, when Alice responded to Viola's manuscript draft of her first novel, *Martha Vine*. The first letter of this series is missing but Viola's mortified reply indicates that Alice berated her for her portrayal of an awkward romantic relationship between Martha, a clergyman's daughter, and Stephen, an inarticulate yet affectionate farm laborer. Alice detected an indelicately biographical "personal association", probably a reference to Viola's failing relationship with her then-fiancé.²¹ The tone of Viola's response is one of defeat and submission: she told her mother, "Darling, I have decided to put the book away". Alice, also wounded, retorted that Viola should not object to her mother's intervention:

I am somewhat grieved that you withdrew your novel so entirely from me. You know I never intended to mend or tinker with any phrase myself. The most I had thought of doing was to mark those which I believed you could mend. I cannot quite understand why I must not do so.²²

After reminding Viola of her position as apprentice, Alice went on to reiterate her previous grievance:

You must lessen and modify and veil the detailed and repeated record of caresses.

These are things that are in their nature delicate, unpublishable, modest. They aren't for print, especially not for print in a girl's book.

Viola, at this point aged twenty-five, wrote her novels for adults, and Alice's reference to "a girl's book" can be construed as a slight. Such tensions over Viola's writings of female sexual experience intensified as Viola grew older. Pondering her mother's sensitivity to personal revelation in print, Viola noted in the *Memoir* that "the exposure of pain and expression and uncontrol, were dreadful to her if they were things to be recorded and remembered" (248). Alice, "not a great reader of new novels", often disagreed with "the implied convictions of the author on the conduct of life" which "too often dissatisfied her for her pleasure" (243). Viola ultimately bent to her mother's wishes, since anything biographical or sensual was excised from *Martha Vine*, as are the other stylistic "great and painful blemishes" which Alice listed in her letter.

Significantly, Alice had not asked Viola to *cut* the love scenes from her novel, but to "lessen", "modify", and "veil" them. Schaffer has described how Alice used her "characteristically oblique literary strategies" and her subtly "performed femininity" to address controversial topics, such as feminism or sexual desire, while diverting readers' attention with captivating imagery of beauty, color, and nature.²³ Angela Leighton, emphasizing the importance of such veiling for many Victorian women poets, writes that

“much more than for the woman novelist, life, for the woman poet, is a text to be written according to certain contours of myth and desire”.²⁴ At the end of the Edwardian era, however, women novelists could afford to write without many of the older veiling strategies. Alice refused to recognize these new generic possibilities or the changing literary and cultural landscape, as she imposed the covert techniques—so central to her own poetry—upon her daughter’s novel. Although Alice’s letter was critical of Viola’s use of new novelistic strategies, particularly explicit descriptions of sexuality, it ends with encouragement: “Your poems are wonderful, a poet’s work, beyond all question, exquisite poems of intellect and passion”.²⁵ Alice made no secret of her disappointment that, having provided Viola with an apprenticeship in poetry, Viola chose to write novels.²⁶ In total, Viola published fewer than thirty poems—and none after her mother died. In a letter concerning the forthcoming publication of Viola’s triple-decker novel *Lot Barrow* (1913), Alice only remarked, “anyway it is a *book*”.²⁷ Alice perhaps felt affronted by Viola’s plans for a sprawling, three-volume prose work, anathema to the luxurious, slender volumes produced by Alice and others in her aesthetic circle.

Viola’s next novel, *Modern Lovers*, appeared in 1914. Effie, the protagonist, is torn between her duty to marry a widowed man—with whom she had an affair while his wife was still alive—and her love for another man. The final and only extant letter of the correspondence between mother and daughter about this book demonstrates the breadth of their stylistic schism. Alice explains apologetically:

I have to confess to you that I have done your book some injustice. I was very sensitive about it—which I am afraid means rather selfish. I could not bear to think either that my darling daughter had “observed” such people or that she had thought them interesting enough to “create”. In fact—I thought people would wonder where she had seen such. This was a kind of worldly pride, and I am sincerely sorry. I saw

that you thought rightly of their *morals*, but I thought you were hardly conscious of their bad *manners*. And that hurt me somehow . . . I have been irritated, and you must forgive me. Let nothing come between you and me, for the love of you and trust in you are my life.²⁸

Viola later wrote that her mother “knew a great deal about yielding, but nothing about it in literary matters” (209). Here, however, Alice yielded and, as Viola reached her mid-thirties, a more reciprocal and collaborative exchange developed between them. Viola proudly records that her mother wrote to her, “Your praise is worth all the rest of the world’s to me” (250). Alice began to redraft sections of her own work in response to her daughter’s advice, such as her “The Second Person Singular” from 1922 (323). However, this mutual accord was to be the height of their collaboration.

The mentor-mother becomes the muse

Throughout Viola’s childhood, Alice drew upon Viola and her siblings as her muses, resulting in a series of essays of “shrewd but exquisite observation” (147). These essays, filled with “amateur child [psychology]”, as Lee Behlman notes, have received scant scholarly attention despite revealing much about the mother-daughter literary dyad.²⁹ Written with the typical Victorian appetite for the “surveillance of the child”, and responding to readers’ interest in “mischievous ‘madcaps’ or ‘pickles’, like the naughty children then in literary vogue”,³⁰ Alice published *The Children* (1896) and *Childhood* (1913), previously printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and elsewhere. In one of the pieces, Alice describes Viola’s thought processes and idiosyncratic use of language, calling her the “unconscious little author of things told in this record”.³¹ Everard Meynell, Viola’s brother, frustrated with Alice’s publication of personal details in one of the essays, stole and destroyed Alice’s proofs, as Viola records in the *Memoir*:

I thought it a betrayal—to be made a character in a short essay, when there was the whole of our life together to be considered. It was my revolt against impressionism, selection. To be an article, instead of a son. (153)

Viola's poem "Child to Parents" (1930) reflects upon and shares in this process of observation, abstraction, and loss eight years after her mother's death.³² The narrator directly addresses her parents as a child:

I am your Colony where you have dispatched
 What your own selves could spare.
 I am your portrait where you look upon
 Your eyes, your hands, your hair.

The child becomes a "portrait" in which the parent recognizes her own reflected features. The next lines are Viola's sharp-sighted critique of Alice's literal and literary (re)creation of her daughter: "I am a book wherein you wrote a life; / Also your book to read". Here is a child aware of herself as a double for, and product of, her parents. Yet there is no comfort in this mirroring, because the parents' gaze upon their child is one of recognition without understanding. Viola describes the failure of the parent-creator to 'read' her child:

I am a road you took knowing not where
 Its way would lead.
 I am a mystery on which you dwell,
 Though made of your own parts you know so well.

"Child to Parents" questions the parent-child relationship by pitching adult dominance and appropriation against the child's enforced passivity. The parents are described in active terms: colonizing, dispatching, looking, reading, writing, travelling—dwelling upon but never fully coming to know, the child whose world they invade. The theme of Alice's failure of understanding her children occurs in much of Viola's writing on childhood, in her memoirs

and fiction, as well as her poetry. Alice also explored this failure in her own poetry on motherhood.

As Leighton has argued, Alice Meynell subverted the Victorian tradition of framing the experience of maternity in maudlin, saccharine terms infantilizing the mother-poet by associating her with baby talk or idealizing in her self-sacrifice. Instead, Alice produced a number of “unsentimental poems about mothers and children which are unrivalled in their unobtrusively suggestive scepticism”.³³ Alice was ambivalent about her maternity as well as about imagining herself as an ideal angel-mother. Alice’s “Cradle-Song at Twilight”, a poem written in 1895, illustrates this. The poem depicts a resentful, bored, and wholly “unmaternal” mother, longing for the romance and escape of “other playfellows”.³⁴ The poem does not judge the “too young” mother for her absence of maternal feeling. Rather, the poem’s quiet reserve prompts sympathy for the lonely, dissatisfied woman. Leighton’s reading of this poem centers upon Alice’s employment of oblique literary strategies such as the merging of the poem’s two central images—the young “nurse” and the personified “slender Night”—which diverts readers’ attentions from the poem’s shocking rejection of maternity.³⁵ The sleepless child is first nursed by her mother, lost in dreams of “flight”, and then by the “slender Night”, the shadowy figure that finally dominates the poem. The mother’s absence of joy over her newborn is compounded by a discomfiting loss of identity resulting from the demands of maternity. Meynell blurs the boundaries between mother, dreams, darkness, and child, finally obliterating the overwhelmed mother’s identity. Alice had experienced this loss of self, as she confided to her closest friend, Coventry Patmore: “You know what it is when I am mending frocks and everyone is calling me. These are all sweet duties, but sometimes I am on the verge of crying” (99).

Everard and Viola’s protests gestured towards the discrepancies between idyllic scenes in Alice’s essays and the reality of their childhoods. The essays offered a comforting

depiction of Alice enveloped in domestic joy with her quirky, angelic children, the recipients of sustained maternal attention. Both “The Unready” and *Childhood*, for example, describe endless family games of hide and seek.³⁶ Viola complicates these scenes with accounts of her mother’s unavailability, distractedness, and sheer busyness. Alice’s life was taken up by the pressures of work which “[confiscated] for ever. . . leisure from my mother’s life” (61), as Viola notes:

Blandishments we had little of; we were taken to her arms, but briefly; exquisitely fondled, but with economy, as if there were work always to be resumed. We were at once the most befriended of children, yet the most slighted; we fitted into the literary life and business of the household. (89)

Viola further describes Alice, bedridden with neurasthenic exhaustion in 1898, while working on her book about Ruskin:

The children visiting now their mother’s bedside—invading even her last retreat from them—realised that the books and sheets and manuscript they saw there represented an unusual strain. Common as it was for that bedside to be visited by wandering children and found to be given over to work, the Ruskin time created for them a new standard in bedside silence, the spectacle of interminable hour-after-hour work, a new pitch of headache in their mother (161).

Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, Barbara Z. Thaden, Ann Dally, and Carolyn Dever theorize maternal absence in the late nineteenth-century. Since middle-class children were increasingly raised by nannies out of their parents’ sight, children came to idealize their mother.³⁷ Such idealization was only magnified by the Victorian valorization of maternity. Viola writes that Alice “had a glamour for us that is perhaps lost by parents who occupy themselves more with their children’s affairs” (91). Alice, ever reticent, “preserved the privacy and formality of a stranger in her personal things” (344), even around her children.

June Badeni, who wrote Alice's biography in consultation with the Meynell children, further records that Alice "managed, in the house crowded with children, never to be seen by those children except when she was prepared to receive all comers".³⁸ As Viola remembers, the siblings came to "understand our mother's abstracted look when she has her pencil and writing-pad; we understand it less when there are no implements of work" (67). Alice's workload and her insistence on privacy and formality required a significant failure of intimacy.

The Meynell children invented ways of catching Alice's attention, of "detaining her love and interest", and of "circumvent[ing] the inevitable partings made by [Alice's] outings". They left letters for Alice to find, often asking for night-time visits to their bedsides where she must leave tangible "signs" of her presence. According to Viola, these signs became a "feature of our childhood—a shoe hanging on the wall, a chair turned upside down, a sweet or fruit by our beds", by which the children "managed not entirely to lose her" (91-92). Alice also wrote about these signs in "Children and their Ways", eliding that they spoke to her children's anxiety about her absence.³⁹ She presented herself instead as central to the activities of the jolly domestic scene and provided detailed accounts of her children's habits:

But in order that they have assurance of her visit, which takes place after they have fallen asleep—or, as they phrase it, "in the miggles of the night"—they ask her to leave a sign . . . the mother . . . began to devise a sign in the shape of a biscuit or a fruit.

And it is the reflex pleasure of thinking that a little creature will wake alone and feel for his "sign" that amounts in time to a veritable preoccupation of the mind. It has to be at least confessed; when her friends, perhaps, respect her abstraction, rashly assigning a literary cause, she is wondering whether it shall be a Carlsbad plum or two black currant lozenges.⁴⁰

These moments of night-time sign-making reflect a more habitual pattern of mediated communication between Alice and Viola. Hypnagogic or partial ‘meetings’ become a trope in their writings about mothers and daughters in which scenes of love, direct communication, or confrontation are deferred through the use of dream-like, disjointed narratives and images. They indicate that Alice existed for Viola in ethereal impressions or shifting guises.

The absent, ethereal mother features in Viola’s earliest published poem, “Dream of Death”, in the collection *Eyes of Youth* (1910):

In sleep my idle thoughts were sadly led
 By wild dark ways: it strangely seemed that I
 Must join the number of the silent dead,
 And with my young and fearful heart must die.

Despite the unreality of the dream-vision, the narrator experiences guilt and distress at the pain her death would cause her mother. Stanza two continues:

But ah, what drew my bitter moans and sighs,
 And pierced my sleeping spirit, was that she
 Who with the saddest tears would close these
 eyes
 And with maternal passion mourn for me,

The enjambment leads into stanza three which begins with the caustic observation, “She on some pleasure-errand stayed away”.⁴¹ The poem’s focus abruptly changes from the stoic child’s suffering into a candid protest against the mother’s absence, and demonstrates Viola’s adept use of oblique poetic strategies similar to Alice’s. Just as the reader begins to sympathize with the child, the day breaks, the child wakes, and her suffering ends. The judgment over the mother is short-lived; the poem abandons the issue of the mother’s absence during her “pleasure-errand” just as abruptly as it introduces it. With the child’s awakening,

the final stanza returns to the central focus of the poem: the child's distress at causing her mother heartache:

And in the sun my new life I could kiss,
 And look with prayer and hope to future
 years,
 Did I discern God's mercy still in this—
 That I was spared the anguish of her tears.⁴²

The child's health as well as her reverent concern for the mother are restored. The anxiety of the nightmare with its implicit accusation are left behind in the unreality of dreamed illness and delirium; the child's sense of abandonment has been doubly veiled. This poetic device of diffusing anger and self-pity by a focus on positive altruistic filial love recurs throughout Viola's poetry.

Although "Dream of Death" invites other, less directly biographical and more figurative interpretations inspired by Viola's memories of her mother, there is a strong case to be made that this poem corresponds to Viola's own childhood near-death experience. After falling "over the banisters of the wide open staircase. . . thirty feet into the hall below", Viola lay "unconscious and unrecognisable" (96). Alice recounts the same incident, Viola being "obliged to lie for some ten days on her back . . . every movement was, in a measure, painful". Yet, Alice concedes, Viola was "sparing of requests, reluctant to be served, inventive of tender or pious little words that she had never used before. 'You are exquisite to me, mother' she said, at receiving some common service". Shortly after the fall, Viola, "overwhelmed with pain and covered with blood", screamed "[t]ell mother it's nothing!", echoing the child narrator of "Dream of Death".⁴³ Contrary to the public image of her "exquisite" nursing, Alice did not feel in control and worried that she was an inept nurse. She confessed to Patmore: "I have kept them in bed and nursed them—very badly. Among all the

things I do badly that is the thing I do most stupidly”.⁴⁴ Viola does not mention Alice’s failure as a nurse, using only oblique revelatory techniques in her poetry to say what she dared not say in prose. In *Martha Vine*, for instance, Viola’s eponymous protagonist experiences an identically anguished night of illness and despair. Martha, alone in bed with rheumatic fever, desperately wishes to see her mother but refuses to admit the strength of this desire—she begs, “[d]on’t tell mother”.⁴⁵ The scene of a child’s illness recurs throughout Alice and Viola’s works, and their texts comment on, challenge, and contradict, one another. The multiple conflicting representations of Viola’s illness and Alice’s nursing prompt questions about how memory, testimony, and reliability operate in the dialogic writings of Alice and Viola. When read together, they provide a composite picture of their shared experiences and highlight the tensions that existed where their private, professional, and fictional lives touched.

The psychological impact of maternal absence is also the focus of Viola’s poem, “A Daughter to her Mother in Illness”, first printed in *Verses* (1919). Here, Viola reverses the scenario of “Dream of Death”, imagining the mother unconscious and feared dying. Unlike the mother in “Dream of Death”, the daughter is not only dutifully present but again alone in her agony:

Now in your sickness and your need
 When your breath is fast and wild,
 And your faint call none is near to heed
 Save only I your child,—

Viola fantasizes that mother and daughter share the intimacy of the death-bed, yet, crucially, they are separated again by the impenetrable barrier of the mother’s unconsciousness. The complex, conflicted emotions of the final section warrant its full quotation:

You were not very ill,

And yet with cold quiet will,
Standing beside your bed,
I wished you dead.
I thought, let it be now the end,—
As one might speed some parting friend,
Saying “Good-bye, good-bye, go now.”
So would I then have kissed your brow
And wept to see you die
And mourned you forever quietly.

For if it be not so, some other death
Will wait for your last breath.
And when I think what death can be
What pitiless terror and agony
May come to take you, and how I
Shall clasp you to my distraught bosom and cry
For mercy, mercy, mercy unto us,
Thus do I pray, O God, O God, not thus!—

And so you will forgive
—you who still live—
That standing there beside your bed
I wished you safely dead,
Dead of this little agony, this moderate pain,
This wavering fear that comes but goes again.⁴⁶

At first glance, this poem seems to speak of a daughter's distress at her mother's suffering. However, Viola again subtly displaces the emotive heart of the poem. The poem's focus is not the mother's possible death, but the daughter's ambivalent feelings about her mother's survival. This is not a depiction of an actual death scene as the mother is "not very ill". Even so, the daughter "with cold quiet will" wishes her dead. Viola here experiments with a role reversal, subverting the image of the breastfeeding mother when the daughter tells her to "[f]orget how, years ago, I lay, / an infant of your breast". By stanza three the daughter has become the nurse, cooing over her infantilized mother who she calls, "my own, my child".

We must not underestimate the conflicted emotions evident in this poem. The daughter at once fantasizes the mother's death while fearing it, as evinced in her tender kissing, weeping, and mourning. When Alice died in 1922, Viola described the moment as "the horrible unbearable thing I have been waiting all my life for".⁴⁷ "A Daughter to her Mother in Illness" allowed Viola to rehearse and prepare for the inevitable severance of their bond, and explored their future separation and her resulting independence. Consistent with Viola's masking of her repulsion of maternal authority, she does not allow this poem, her most daring poetic denial of the mother's power, to arrive fully at the crisis point: the mother survives. Viola, habitually self-censoring, withdrew the poem's challenging undercurrents by omitting the poem's middle section, the mother's imagined death, from her collected edition *The Frozen Ocean* (1930), therefore preserving the mother's authority.

The motif of estranged parents and children, communicating only indirectly, forms a general thread in Viola's writings as it does in Alice's poetry on motherhood. While Alice's busyness certainly contributed to Viola's sense of alienation from her mother, I do not wish to overstate this point—or vilify a working mother—as other factors also contributed to Viola's alienation, as I have shown above.

Viola's reception: caught between two traditions

Viola's earliest works were well-received by critics, many of whom were part of the Meynell circle. She also appealed to a broad female readership as a novelist in the tradition of Austen. Wilfred Scawen Blunt's review for the *Nation*, a journal to which Alice had contributed since 1875, draws attention to Viola's indebtedness to earlier literary models:

Martha Vine's style owes much to Miss Austen, more to Miss Yonge, a little to George Eliot, but hardly anything to later writers . . . it is all good English, crisp and direct, without a loose tag or end, like a piece of needlework done by a conscientious sewer.⁴⁸

C. E. Lawrence, in a review from 1912, also remarks that Viola's novel, *Cross-in-Hand Farm*, contained "something of the delicate truthfulness, charm of detail, and capable simplicity of Jane Austen's work".⁴⁹ Viola had perhaps heeded her mother's advice that writing in a naturalistic, confessional style would repulse readers of Alice's generation. This meant that Viola alienated younger critics rebelling against the Victorian "habit of moral discursiveness".⁵⁰ This new generation of readers and reviewers found Viola's work sentimental and outdated, none more than Virginia Woolf, who reviewed Viola's *Second Marriage* in 1918:

Miss Viola Meynell is not likely to upset anyone by the obvious novelty of her methods. . . . She does not experiment with phrases that recur like the motive in a Wagner opera. She has no animosity against adjectives, nor does she exterminate verbs upon principle. Her characters are related to each other in the normal way . . . the story is too simple to require much analysis . . . everything is told to you; it never happens, nor is it ever said. Indeed the dialogue is curiously timid.⁵¹

Does Woolf detect the influence of Alice Meynell's performative femininity in Viola's writing?⁵² After reading Viola's *Memoir*, Woolf commented that "[i]t would be a wonderful

relief if Viola would give up being pointed & precise & tell us something casual & familiar—only she can't: her mind [is] in stays".⁵³ Phyllis Bottome, a close family friend, similarly felt that Alice's influence on Viola's writing was detrimental:

Whatever she saw or said had a peculiar sincerity, enriched with ardour, that was like her mother's . . . although her emotions and imagination roved in fields unvisited by her mother, she had been caught in the same spiritual strait-jacket, and could not move at will.⁵⁴

D. H. Lawrence publicly attacked the Meynells in his short story, "England, My England" (1915), after staying as a guest in the family's home. The prudish Prissy Marshall, a thinly veiled Viola, suffers from "an almost barbaric sense of duty and of family", petrified by a "sense of permanency in the past". Alice, unfathomable and obscure, is said to have "won some fame in the narrow world of letters", now long in the past. The family is "lingering on" as a remnant of an "ancient" and "[s]avage England", out of place in the modern world.⁵⁵ Similarly scathing, the "Vorticist Manifesto", published in Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound's *Blast* (1914), included "Clan Meynell" in its list of things consigned to the cultural rubbish heap.⁵⁶

Viola is thus situated in an ambivalent relation between two literary eras. Her literary friends and contemporaneous critics thought her outmoded—Woolf suffered from "Meynell claustrophobia" in 1931⁵⁷—while literary figures of her mother's generation praised her work. Associated with her mother's angelhood whether she liked it or not, Viola had a reputation of looking backward, owing to Alice's influence over her writing while she lived and Viola's memorializing of her mother after death.

¹ Linda Peterson, "On the Appointment of the 'Poet Laureate to Her Majesty', 1892-1896", *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Felluga (2015), www.branchcollective.org.

² C. E. Maguire, "Obituary: Another Meynell", *Renascence*, 11.4 (1959): 175-84 (175).

³ Viola Meynell, *Alice Meynell: A Memoir* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929); henceforth cited parenthetically within the text. See also “Alice Meynell: A Personal Note”, *Dublin Review*, 220 (1947): 13-19; “Alice Meynell: An Incident in her Reading Life”, *Renascence*, 5.2 (1953): 111-13.

⁴ Raymond Mackenzie, *A Critical Biography of English Novelist Viola Meynell 1885-1956* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p. 22.

⁵ At the time of the author’s visit the Meynell family papers were owned privately at the Meynell family home, Humphrey’s Homestead, Greatham, Sussex. The archive was uncatalogued; therefore, postmark dates are used to reference correspondence, and are cited here as *Archive*, followed by the date. The only existing collection of Alice Meynell’s letters does not include letters exchanged between Viola and Alice. See *The Selected Letters of Alice Meynell: Poet and Essayist*, ed. Damian Atkinson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013).

⁶ Talia Schaffer, “The Angel in Hyde Park: Alice Meynell’s ‘Unstable Equilibrium’”, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 2000), pp. 159-96.

⁷ See Maria Frawley, “Modernism and Maternity: Alice Meynell and the Politics of Motherhood”, *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-readings*, ed. Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson (Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 1997), pp. 31-43. Frawley details Meynell’s construction as ideal angel and tempting seductress in the poetry of Patmore, Francis Thomson, and George Meredith.

⁸ Schaffer, p. 161.

⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000 [1979]); Gilbert and Gubar, “‘Forward Into the Past’: The Complex Female Affiliation Complex”, *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 240-65.

¹⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, p. 51.

¹¹ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic Kenyon, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1897), vol. 1, p. 232.

¹² Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924)

¹³ Gilbert and Gubar, “Forward into the Past”, p. 164.

¹⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, “Forward into the Past”, p. 195.

¹⁵ Woolf, “Modern Fiction”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), vol. 4, pp. 157-165 (164).

¹⁶ Alice Meynell, “Authorship”, *The Children* (London: John Lane, 1896), pp. 75-77 (75).

¹⁷ Linda H. Peterson, “Mother-Daughter Productions: Mary Howitt and Anna Mary Howitt in *Howitt’s Journal*, *Household Words*, and other Mid-Victorian Publications”, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 31.1 (Spring 1998): 31-54 (35, 31).

¹⁸ Mackenzie, p. 51-52.

¹⁹ Qtd. June Badeni, *The Slender Tree: A Life of Alice Meynell* (Cornwall: Tabb House, 1981), p. 28.

²⁰ Edward Marsh, *A Number of People: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), p. 320.

²¹ *Archive*, dated Aug. 1910, Viola to Alice. Viola’s brief engagement is documented in Mackenzie, p. 65-75.

²² *Archive*, dated 13 Aug. 1910, Alice to Viola.

²³ Schaffer, p. 160-61.

²⁴ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Virginia: Virginia UP, 1992), p. 5.

- ²⁵ *Archive*, dated 13 Aug. 1910, Alice to Viola.
- ²⁶ Family friend Phyllis Bottome wrote, “I thought that her mother was right in believing that Viola was more naturally a poet than a novelist” (Bottome, *The Challenge* [New York: Harcourt, 1953], p. 366).
- ²⁷ *Archive*, undated. (ca. 1912-13), Alice to Viola (Alice’s emphasis).
- ²⁸ *Archive*, dated 1913, Alice to Viola (Alice’s emphases).
- ²⁹ Lee Behlman, “‘The Pencilling Mamma’: Public Motherhood in Alice Meynell’s Essays on Children”, *Mothers who Deliver: Feminist Interventions in Public and Interpersonal Discourse*, ed. Jocelyn Fenton Stitt and Pegeen Reichert Powell (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), pp. 99-117 (103).
- ³⁰ Christine Alexander, “Nineteenth-Century Juvenilia: A Survey”, *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*, ed. Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), pp. 11-30 (27); and Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), p. 205.
- ³¹ Alice Meynell, “Fellow Travellers with a Bird”, *The Children*, pp. 9-13 (12).
- ³² Viola Meynell, *The Frozen Ocean and Other Poems* (London: Martin Secker, 1930), p. 23.
- ³³ Leighton, p. 257.
- ³⁴ Alice Meynell, *The Poems of Alice Meynell: Complete Edition* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1923), p. 33.
- ³⁵ Leighton, p. 260. Christina Richieri Griffin argues that Meynell analogizes the moment of giving life as the giving of inevitable death. See Griffin, “Writing the Rhythms of the Womb: Alice Meynell’s Poetics of Pregnancy”, *Modern Philology*, 112.1 (2014): 226-48. Griffin’s work on Alice Meynell also describes how her poetry on motherhood “deftly resists sentimentality” (227).
- ³⁶ Alice Meynell, “Children and Their Ways, No. 2.—The Unready”, *The Delineator: A Journal of Fashion, Culture and Fine Arts*, 51.2 (February 1898): 226-27 (226); *Childhood* (London: E. P. Dutton, 1913), p. 32.
- ³⁷ See Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nanny* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972); Barbara Z. Thaden, *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction: Rewriting the Patriarchal Family* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* (New York: Schocken, 1983); Carolyn Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1998).
- ³⁸ Badeni, p. 211.
- ³⁹ Alice Meynell, “Children and Their Ways, No. 3.—Signs”, *The Delineator: A Journal of Fashion, Culture and Fine Arts*, 51.3 (March 1898): 362-63.
- ⁴⁰ Qtd. Badeni, p. 86
- ⁴¹ Viola Meynell, “Dream of Death”, *Eyes of Youth*, by Padraic Colum, Shane Leslie, Viola Meynell, et al. (London: Burns and Oates, 1912), p. 41, line 10.
- ⁴² Viola Meynell, “Dream of Death”, p. 41, lines 15-19.
- ⁴³ Alice Meynell, “Illness”, *The Children* (London: John Lane, 1896), pp. 107-9 (107).
- ⁴⁴ Qtd. Badeni, p. 85.
- ⁴⁵ Viola Meynell, *Martha Vine: A Love Story of Simple Life* (London: Herbert and Daniel, 1910), p. 8.
- ⁴⁶ Viola Meynell, “A Daughter to her Mother in Illness”, *Verses* (London: M. Secker, 1919), pp. 14-16.
- ⁴⁷ Mackenzie, p. 146.
- ⁴⁸ Wilfred Scawen Blunt, “Martha Vine”, *Nation*, 8.15 (7 Jan. 1911): 620.
- ⁴⁹ C. E. Lawrence, “Miss Meynell’s Novel (*Cross-in-Hand Farm* by Viola Meynell)”, *Bookman* 41.246 (March 1912): 302-3 (302).

⁵⁰ Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1984), p. 142.

⁵¹ Virginia Woolf, "Review of *Second Marriage* by Viola Meynell", *Times Literary Supplement*, 849 (25 April 1918): 195.

⁵² Schaffer discusses Woolf's strong personal reaction against Alice Meynell's poetry and person. See Schaffer, "A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell", *Victorian Poetry*, 38.1 (Spring 2000): 49-61.

⁵³ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, 5 vols. (New York: Harcourt Jovanovich, 1977-84), vol. 3, p. 251.

⁵⁴ Bottome, p. 366.

⁵⁵ D. H. Lawrence, "England, My England", *England, my England and Other Stories* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990), pp. 5-33 (11, 9, 7, 6, 5).

⁵⁶ Wyndham Lewis et al., *Blast*, 1 (June 1914), 12.

⁵⁷ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth P, 1975-80), vol. 4, p. 361.

Notes on contributor

Kirsty Bunting is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Manchester Metropolitan University. Recent research includes essays on Vernon Lee and Clementina-Anstruther Thomson's experimental physiological aesthetics (*Forum for Modern Language Studies*); and the literary professionalization of the radical suffragist Ada Nield Chew (*Victorians: Journal of Culture and Literature*). Dr. Bunting is book reviews editor for the *LATCHKEY: Journal of New Woman Studies* and co-ordinator of select *Victorian Popular Fiction Association* symposia.