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Surrogate Power: The Agency of the Replacement Mother in Mid-Victorian Literature

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SURROGATE POWER: THE AGENCY OF THE REPLACEMENT MOTHER IN
MID-VICTORIAN LITERATURE

by

KATHRYN HUIE HARRISON

Under the Direction of Michael Galchinsky, PhD

ABSTRACT

Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, literary representations of replacement maternal figures helped normalize forms of surrogate motherhood within Victorian childrearing and caregiving structures. Through cultural and literary study, this dissertation articulates the dialectical relationship that developed between fiction and society as maternal norms developed and shifted. Through an analysis of advice texts and the social influence of Queen Victoria's performance of maternal norms, this work expands previous understandings of how motherhood came to be imagined and idealized in the early years of Victoria's reign. It then demonstrates how literature highlights the need to revise and expand prevailing understandings of maternity.

Next, it reveals how fictional surrogate mothers establish power to overcome the threats they pose to social, familial, and maternal constructions. It ultimately demonstrates that surrogate mothers help revise maternal norms by playing integral roles in enhancing the future prosperity of the middle and upper classes of England. By unmooring motherhood from biological constraints, fictional surrogate mothers call into question the intrinsic nature of dominant maternal norms and open up spaces for female social agency.

INDEX WORDS: Motherhood, wet nursing, stepmothers, performativity, Queen Victoria,
Charles Dickens, Dinah Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell, Frederick Marryat, Margaret Oliphant

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Georgia State University

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MID-VICTORIAN LITERATURE

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May 2015

DEDICATION

To my grandparents: Dr. Robert E. Bridges; and the late Marie Jones Bridges, M.S., Dr. Henry Mark Huie, and Mary Leftwich Huie, M.Ed. For demonstrating the value of higher education in a time when it was far less common, and for helping to instill in me a love of learning from my earliest days.

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1 INTRODUCTION

THE VICTORIAN (REPLACEMENT) MATERNAL IDEAL

“Over my heart, in the days that are flown,
 No love like mother-love ever has shone;
 No other worship abides and endures,
 Faithful, unselfish, and patient, like yours;
 None like a mother can charm away pain
 From the sick soul and world-weary brain.
 Slumber’s soft calms o’er my heavy lids creep,--
 Rock me to sleep, mother, rock me to sleep.”

– Elizabeth Akers Allen, “Rock Me to Sleep”

“Don’t poets know it
 Better than others?
 God can’t always be everywhere: and, so,
 Invented Mothers.”

– Sir Edwin Arnold, “Mothers”

The word “mother” is complicated to define, a heavily nuanced word with various meanings and interpretations about which differing, often conflicting, ideologies exist. Although early Victorian discourses of motherhood generally imagined it as referring solely to the biological relationship a woman bore to her child, it became much more complex throughout the nineteenth century. During this time, a combination of literary representations and cultural necessity helped normalize forms of surrogate motherhood within Victorian childrearing and caregiving structures. As sociologist Jessie Bernard has explained, motherhood “is more than the biological process of reproduction,” also encompassing many ways of nurturing children regardless of kinship connections (vii). Bernard’s seminal exploration of motherhood in 1974, *The Future of Motherhood*, set the stage for how generations of feminist critics to come would interpret past, present, and future understandings of maternity.

Bernard's work suggested that many contemporary, restrictive expectations for mothers were constructed in Britain and the U.S. during the nineteenth century. Bernard explains that codified, or "institutionalized," motherhood—that is, motherhood experienced through a limiting set of socially determined expectations—was "a nineteenth-century Victorian creation" (vii). More recent critics, such as Natalie McKnight, have supported this assessment, with McKnight claiming, "The modern, self-conscious mother originated in Victorian England" (2). Marianne Hirsch defined this timeframe slightly more broadly, suggesting, "The ideology of motherhood as the ideal of femininity coincides with the institutionalization of childhood during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (14).

Regardless of the specific time frame we accept, it is clear that maternal expectations were becoming increasingly codified in early-mid nineteenth-century England. From the 1970s forward, feminist critics have revealed the unnatural nature of these over-determined norms. Bernard demonstrated the difference between institutionalized motherhood, a phrase Adrienne Rich further popularized in the mid-late 1970s, and motherhood as biological reproduction. "As an institution," Bernard explains, motherhood "consists of customs, traditions, conventions, beliefs, attitudes, mores, rules, laws, precepts, and the host of other rational and non-rational norms which deal with the care and rearing of children" (vii). Idealized Victorian understandings centered on a mother who was "adored for her self-abnegation, her 'altruistic surrender,' even for her self-immolation" (Bernard 12). Bernard's descriptions convey the difficulty of living up to the standards of institutionalized motherhood, and representations of mothers in mid-Victorian fiction highlight these difficulties. They demonstrate the need to revise expectations for women and mothers, in part by encompassing surrogate maternal roles into Victorian conceptions of childrearing.

Although Bernard's work was written in the 1970s, many of her ideas remain relevant and poignant. Western, middle-class motherhood has been systematically structured since *at least* the early Victorian period. The proliferation of present-day advice books, parenting magazines, and the increasingly common "mommy blog" demonstrates the contemporary relevance of her observations. As Natalie McKnight suggested comparatively recently, at the end of the twentieth century, "the Victorian image of the ideal selfless mother still tenaciously clings to our psyches" (7). In this dissertation, I explore representations of motherhood and surrogate motherhood in the time period in which critics clearly suggest these expectations originated. While my focus is not directly on the connections between Victorian motherhood and contemporary maternal expectations, readers will certainly find many parallels between the two, demonstrating the current relevance of this historical study.

I focus primarily on middle-class maternal expectations as they were expressed in conduct manuals, domestic magazines, and other advice literature in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. Through cultural and literary study, I articulate the dialectical relationship that developed between fiction and society. This dissertation accomplishes multiple critical goals. First, through an analysis of advice texts and the social influence of Queen Victoria's performance of maternal norms, it expands previous understandings of how motherhood was imagined and idealized early in Victoria's reign. Second, it enhances previous critical discoveries about the response of period fiction to idealized maternal expectations, demonstrating how literature highlights the instability of familial structures and the need to revise and expand prevailing understandings of maternity. Third, it reveals how fictional surrogate mothers overcome the threats they pose to social, familial, and maternal constructions, establishing social power rarely attained by fictional biological mothers. In the process, these

characters help revise maternal norms to imagine surrogate motherhood as integral to England's future prosperity. Ultimately, by unmooring motherhood from biological constraints, fictional surrogate mothers call into question the intrinsic nature of dominant maternal norms and open up spaces for female social agency.

1.1 Literature and Victorian Motherhood

While advice literature¹ set out to codify strict expectations for mothers, most fiction played a more nuanced role in maternal discourse. Much popular fiction critiqued maternal norms by pointing out the impossibility of living up to prescribed expectations. Some fiction simultaneously re-inscribed and subverted notions of maternal ideology by depicting women whose adherence to certain norms caused them to ignore others. Such depictions reiterate the instability of the multiple and ever-shifting expectations. Most didactic literature, which often had a religious basis, functioned as a fictional extension of advice literature. Didactic fiction regularly worked to re-inscribe maternal norms by depicting successful mothers who adhered to the standard. Domestic magazines often serialized such didactic fiction, including stories like “The Model Wife,” a short story published serially in *Powell's Domestic Magazine* from September to November of 1860, which tells the fictional story of a model wife who becomes the model mother in the second installment. Prominent authors also sometimes produced

¹ I use the term “advice literature” throughout this dissertation to refer to nonfiction literature that aims to prescribe norms and advise women about how to behave accordingly. Such literature includes domestic magazines, which I discuss in chapter 1, conduct manuals, like Sarah Stickney Ellis's multiple advice texts *The Women of England* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843), and *The Mothers of England* (1843), and medical pamphlets.

didactic fiction; Mrs. Perez in Grace Aguilar's "The Perez Family," for instance, largely reinscribes ideological expectations by demonstrating the successes of traditionally good mothers, although she does undergo some hardships. Because fiction that was not meant to serve a didactic purpose regularly critiqued the maternal expectations set forth in advice literature, however, such fiction sometimes used ideal mothers for the opposite purpose, to highlight problems with prescribed maternal norms, as stereotypically good mothers in non-didactic fiction rarely produce good children.

These different relationships between literature and culture demonstrate that Victorian fiction was in dialogue with cultural norms. Throughout this dissertation, I aim to show the range of ways in which fiction engaged with sociocultural ideology. I follow Marianne Hirsch's example of using the word "ideology" in the Althusserian sense, imagining it as "system of representations by which we," or in this case, most Victorians, "imagine the world" (Althusser 233). Victorian fiction engages with ideological constructs in multiple ways through different scenes and different characters. Dinah Morris in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, for instance, breaks the traditional female mold by placing herself at the center of attention in the public sphere as an evangelical preacher. She also reifies Victorian female norms, however, when she gives up preaching to marry Adam and have his children. My readings, thus, imagine Victorian fiction as engaging in an ever-evolving dialectical relationship with shifting cultural norms, so connections are never static or one-dimensional.

Numerous critics have written about absent mothers in Victorian fiction, as the death or absence of the biological mother generally sets the stage for the hero or heroine's coming-of-age tale. As Carolyn Dever points out, Victorian literature conventionally opens with "a scene of family rupture, frequently a maternal deathbed or a tale of a wanton maternal abandonment" (1).

I will not provide a detailed look at these absent mothers because previous scholars have performed such examinations in depth,² but a brief overview of the prevalence of absent mothers in Victorian fiction will help set the stage for the readings in the following chapters. Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1852-1853), and *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) all follow the stories of orphans, as do Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), and *Villette* (1853), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1857), and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Similarly, countless other novels feature motherless characters, such as Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Wives and Daughters* (1864-66), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871). In a literature so devoid of mothers, it may seem odd that critics have, for decades, studied the roles of mothers in fiction, but it is precisely this absence that has made such study increasingly interesting.

Critics have suggested a number of reasons biological mothers are often absent in Victorian fiction. Natalie McKnight has noted two reasons, the first being that absent mothers “captur[e] the life-threatening reality of motherhood in the nineteenth century” (18). Victorian

² Carolyn Dever's *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud* is the most thorough analysis of absent mothers in Victorian fiction, although Barbara Thaden also provides a detailed consideration of the importance of nostalgic longing for the lost mother in *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction*. Natalie McKnight theorizes on the role of the missing mother as she lays the groundwork for her larger examination of suffering mothers in *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels*, as does Marianne Hirsch in the first section of *The Mother/Daughter Plot*.

literature regularly depicted the perils of childbirth, often coupling it with scenes of maternal death. Mary Barton's mother dies during labor, as does Mrs. Vanstone in Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862); Oliver Twist's mother dies almost immediately after giving birth to Oliver, much like the first Mrs. Dombey in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and the first mother in Adelaide Anne Procter's poem "A New Mother."³ Many other mothers are depicted as never fully recovering from childbirth, such as Milly Barton, the wife of the Reverend Amos Barton in George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). Still, despite rampant maternal deaths in literature, the number of dead mothers in Victorian fiction greatly outweighs the number of mothers who actually died as a result of childbirth.⁴

Because mothers died so much more frequently in fiction than in real life, critics have posited many other reasons for maternal absence in Victorian literature. The second reason McKnight suggests, for instance, is that the contradictory social expectations placed on mothers

³ I have been unable to confirm the initial publication date of "A New Mother," but the version I accessed was published in 1866.

⁴ As Carolyn Dever explained, "It is far more dangerous to give birth in a fictional world than in any region, under any conditions, within any social class in Victorian Britain" (11). Dever blames high maternal death rates on poor sanitary practices in lying-in hospitals, but she also demonstrates through reports by the Registrar General that, even if maternal deaths were woefully underreported, fictional mothers still die far more frequently than real-life ones (Dever 17). Her analysis is based on Registrar General Reports, reports generated by William Farr, and an article published by Roger Schofield in 1986. She indicates that "childbed death rates in Victorian Britain consistently remained well below 1 percent," and were likely closer to ".45 percent" of women who gave birth (18).

make them “better left out of the story because of the confusion and antipathy they inspire” (18). Barbara Thaden has suggested similarly that a mother who lives up to established social expectations would not be a particularly “interesting social character,” and she has indicated, along with Dever and Hirsch, that mothers must be absent “to allow the main character, especially if she is a young woman, greater scope for action” (Thaden 4). Additionally, Dever has noted that the absent mother, in certain types of novels, enables the invention of “a deeply emotional and abstract vocabulary of motherhood and family,” while in others, the absence “construct[s] radical new visions for female potential” (26). It is with this last suggestion that my analysis most closely identifies, as I ultimately claim that fictional and real-life surrogate mothers help reshape Victorian notions of womanhood and motherhood.

Although biological mothers are mostly absent in Victorian fiction, these works still reflect, reiterate, and reshape sociocultural maternal norms, and this dissertation explores how these relationships play out. Critics have successfully examined numerous mothers in Victorian fiction because, despite their regular absence, there are some biological mothers who appear, especially as secondary characters. The mothers who do appear are often “trivialized,” “ineffectual,” or “silenced” (Hirsch 44). Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens’s *Bleak House*, for instance, is a mockery of the ideal mother, so concerned with charity work that her home is dirty, her children are miserable, and her visitors are completely appalled by her unwomanly lifestyle. Even in texts that do not feature any biological mothers, however, the maternal role still deserves examination, as Dever suggests that “the maternal ideal” is “constituted in the breach” (19). “In the mid-Victorian period,” Dever has explained, “the *only* good mother is a dead mother” (19, emphasis in original). Finally, Victorian fiction offers the space for examining motherhood through the women who replace biological mothers, for in most cases where the fictional

Victorian mother is dead, there is a surrogate who takes her place. It is these surrogates who form the heart of my analysis.

Early in the nineteenth century, being a childless, middle-class woman was problematic because wifehood and motherhood were considered the only acceptable occupations for ladies. As the century progressed, however, more occupational options became available for unmarried middle-class women; although still limited, the mere existence of new possibilities was a major development. These new acceptable courses of occupation, however, were still related to the traditional role of motherhood; nursing, teaching, and other caregiving duties clearly mimic the responsibilities that were attached to the role of the mother early in the Victorian period. As Jane Long explains in her introduction to the subject of Victorian maternal ideology for the online database *Defining Gender*, “the definition of 'mother' far exceeds the bounds of biology.” New ideas of nurturing connected to old ideas of motherhood, so by the end of the nineteenth century, behaving as a mother did not necessarily require a biological connection with a child.

This dissertation examines the development of this new set of ideas and possibilities regarding the bounds of motherhood, discovering how surrogate mothers became normalized within Victorian discourses of maternity. Much as the late-century “new woman” represented a fictional construct to which Victorian women responded—some despising her, some envying her, some attempting to mimic her—so the surrogate mother became a tool for authors to explore possibilities for reimagining womanhood and motherhood. The literary surrogate mother became a site upon which new roles were tested, a repository for a set of gestures that could potentially be repeated in society.

1.2 Literature Review

Jessie Bernard's major work on motherhood was soon followed by Adrienne Rich's seminal study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Rich's ideas laid further groundwork for a feminist reimagining of motherhood as it was conceived from the Victorian period forward, leading to various studies specifically focusing on Victorian mothers. Joan Manheimer published an article in *Feminist Studies* in 1979 discovering how the "ideal of the Good Mother served a coherent [social] system" (531), and she contrasts that ideal to "the range of Terrible Mothers" that the Victorian novel provides for "scrutiny" (530). Ultimately, Manheimer suggests what will become a major point of inquiry in Victorian studies of motherhood. She notes that Victorian novels "teeter on the edge of a realization common and explicit in twentieth-century fiction: that the failure of mothers as often reflects a problem with the institutions the woman is expected to serve as it reflects a problem with the woman herself" (Manheimer 534). What separates Manheimer's ideas from those of many later critics is the suggestion that Victorian novels *almost* accomplish what later novels *do* accomplish. Most scholars studying literary Victorian motherhood, beginning most prominently with Elizabeth Langland, indicate a clear dialectical relationship between fictional representations of mothers and social ideology of motherhood.

In 1987, Elizabeth Langland published "Patriarchal Ideology and Marginal Motherhood in Victorian Novels by Women" in *Studies in the Novel*.⁵ She suggested that Victorian women

⁵ Although the eight-year gap between Manheimer's and Langland's studies may seem to indicate a lull in interest in Victorian maternal figures, scholars continued to discuss Victorian mothers during this time, but not in full works focused on mothers. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon* (1982), and Margaret

writers, particularly Anne and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, demonstrate the conflict between what she calls the “marginal mother” and the “dutiful daughter,” engaging in “dialogic narratives” that “challenge patriarchal ideologies” (Langland “Patriarchal” 392). A year later, Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments*, while not a study of motherhood, further invigorated scholarly interest in imagining the dialectical relationship between fiction and ideology. With heightened concern over the relationship between Victorian fiction and sociocultural gender construction, many critics in the 1980s and 1990s began exploring how cultural imaginings of motherhood translated to literary representations of the role.

Marianne Hirsch considers representations of mothers in Western literature by women in the Victorian, modern, and post-modern eras through a redefined understanding of Freud's *familienroman*, translated as “family romance.” While I discuss Hirsch in greater detail in the “Theory and Methodology” section of this introduction, it is useful here to recognize the connection she demonstrates between fiction and society. Hirsch suggests that the form of family romance allows female novelists to explore both the social reality and their own fantasy-constructions of family structures through narrative. This form also provides the space to imagine the discrepancies between those realities and fantasies, thus blending personal, social, and theoretical relationships between fiction and culture. The first part of her study focuses

Homans's *Bearing the Word* (1986), all consider Victorian motherhood as part of their larger discussions. Their examinations of motherhood, however, generally occur within the larger context of understanding the ideology of womanhood. It is not until the publication of Langland's article that we see a real resurgence of full texts focusing on the Victorian mother, which became a prominent critical focus over the next decade.

predominantly on nineteenth-century novels, beginning with Jane Austen and including Mary Shelley, George Sand, the Brontës, George Eliot, and Kate Chopin. Hirsch claims that mothers in these novels are depicted as silly, ineffectual, or silenced, but always insignificant within a traditional Freudian family in which the male role is central.

Sally Shuttleworth, in a 1992 publication, also discusses the centrality of the male in the Victorian cultural and fictional family, explaining that Victorian maternal norms, in both society and literature, help “constitute and maintain the gendered social hierarchy” (32). Shuttleworth argues that maternal expectations were highly codified in order to control a role that was seen as being linked with monstrosity. She uses a discussion of advice texts, medical pamphlets, and sensation novels to demonstrate that, “sacred though the social role of motherhood might have been, the female body was seen as a fertile source of anarchic disruption” (37). For Shuttleworth, representations of mothers in sensation fiction performed especially important ideological work, “actively exploring and exposing” the contradictory nature between the idea of the sanctified mother and fears of the maternal body as threatening or socially disruptive (50). Shuttleworth ultimately suggests that Victorian sensation novels “expose the degree to which the demonization of the maternal body is linked to the regulatory, economic ideologies of the era, and the maintenance of bourgeois male dominance” (50).

A few years later, Natalie McKnight's 1997 book maintains the emphasis on the relationship between representations of mothers in Victorian fiction and cultural maternal norms. McKnight, however, shifts the focus to consider how fictional representations of mothers reveal the tensions and difficulties inherent in living up to maternal expectations. She looks at literary depictions of mothers in the work of Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, William Thackeray, and George Eliot, considering how each novelist depicts mothers in relation to the “impossible

pressures and expectations” set out for them in sociocultural discourse (McKnight 1). Through a multi-layered analysis of the mothers in this mid-Victorian canon, McKnight suggests that major Victorian literary works “reveal the terrible tensions created by impossible social expectations for mothers,” while also demonstrating “intriguing aspects of the novelists’ psyches” (18).

What separates McKnight’s reading from those of most of her contemporaries is the heavily biographical aspect of her analysis. While Hirsch mentions but quickly moves past author biography, noting that “biographical parallels are not enough to explain the thoroughness with which the figure of the mother is silenced” (47), McKnight contends that considering author biography is essential. She explains, “It would be foolish not to look at the biographies of the novelists, in addition to the sociohistorical context, since the tensions of the fiction could not help but be influenced by personal psychological dynamics” (McKnight 142). One major difference between McKnight’s and Hirsch’s analyses, though, is that Hirsch is interested specifically in power dynamics, and only in novels written by women, while McKnight is concerned with social dynamics and is unconcerned with the author’s gender. McKnight ultimately concludes that there is a direct, converse “correlation” between “the amount of time” each writer “spent with mothers and the amount of hostilities vented toward maternal figures in their work” (142). She notes that Dickens, whose mother was present for much of his life, exhibits the most hostility toward mother figures, while Charlotte Brontë, whose mother died early in her childhood, exhibits the clearest “longing for a maternal union” (McKnight 142).

Like McKnight, Barbara Thaden is specifically interested in the biographical details of an author’s experience of motherhood, but unlike McKnight, she is concerned with how Victorian authors experience motherhood as mothers, rather than in response to them. Thaden’s 1997 *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction* examines representations of mothers in literature by

“mother/authors,” especially Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant. Her argument addresses cultural conflicts of Victorian motherhood—mainly the discrepancy between what mothers are expected to do for their children and their lack of legal rights over them. She suggests that mother/authors demonstrate a strong biological connection between a mother and child and, partially as a result, the mother’s need for increased legal and social power. According to Thaden, these mother/authors suggest the “indispensability of mother love” by demonstrating that a strong attachment develops between a mother and her child during the child’s infancy (12). Similarly to my argument, Thaden suggests that fictional representations of mothers help redefine maternal roles throughout the period. Her claim, however, only indicates that characters written by a limited range of mother/authors had such an effect, and that depictions of actual mothers, rather than surrogate ones, led to this outcome. Although a smaller part of Thaden’s argument, perhaps her most interesting claim for the purposes of this dissertation is that the God-like construction of the mother re-centers her role in the family, thus providing subjectivity to the maternal role by revising the Oedipal family romance. While Thaden’s argument is less wide-ranging, and frankly less convincing, than those of her contemporaries, it does provide bits of useful analysis regarding social maternal power that make it, if not an integral precursor to this dissertation, at least a study worth considering.

Carolyn Dever’s 1998 *Death and the Mother: From Dickens to Freud* continues the trend of providing a psychoanalytic reading of the mother as inherently objectified, both in culture and in literature, but she shifts the focus from living to dead mothers. She notes that fictional mothers are often constructed ideally through their children’s memories, but she is not convinced that such constructions grant mothers subjective positions because death is a prerequisite to fulfilling the maternal ideal through a child’s memory. Like most of her contemporaries, Dever

locates the origins of her argument in the Freudian idea that “the metaphor of maternal loss” serves as “the prerequisite for adult subjectivity” (xii).

In addition to simply reading Victorian fiction through this psychoanalytic framework, however, Dever also suggests how such tenets of psychoanalysis may have been influenced by Victorian fiction. Ultimately, both her theoretical and her fictional readings demonstrate how the “eternal absence” of the mother functions “as a dynamic signifying presence that exposes issues at stake in the containment of all that is potentially transgressive in the mother embodied” (xii). Thus, while her overall argument is less grounded in social understandings of motherhood, her ideas and her underlying narrative certainly imagine a social fear of the mother’s potential power. Additionally, while every major scholar who has studied Victorian motherhood has written in some way about the dead mother, Dever is the first to consider her the major object of a large investigation. The mothers Dever reads are, even when living, still dead to traditional maternal functions. For my purposes, Dever provides important theoretical background, astute readings of literary characters that serve as strong points of comparison, and useful context that explains the discrepancy between maternal death rates in fiction and society.

Clearly, Victorian motherhood was an important topic near the end of the twentieth century, and although scholars have continued to analyze the subject since that time, few have undertaken such lengthy studies. The only book-length text in English to consider Victorian motherhood in the twenty-first century is Ellen Rosenman and Claudia Klaver's 2008 *Other Mothers, Beyond the Maternal Ideal*. This edited collection notes the instability of Victorian maternity by investigating historical, ideological, and literary Victorian mothers. Ultimately, this text still links biological mothers directly to surrogate ones by discovering that, because “no one could live up to the perfect selflessness, purity, and love” expected of mothers, “in a sense, all

mothers are other mothers” (1). Although this is the only book-length study in recent years, current scholars are certainly interested in questions of maternal and surrogate maternal structures, which they have examined in shorter form through articles and book chapters. Laura Faulk, for instance, has recently discussed destructive mothers in *Aurora Leigh*, while Melisa Klimaszewski and Jules Law have provided useful interpretations of wet nurses as surrogate mothers. Similarly, Christine Poulson and Elizabeth Thiel⁶ have conducted exciting research on the experiences of childhood, especially in families with stepmothers.

These texts form the major canon of research on Victorian motherhood as it has shifted and informed my own ideas. Certainly, some important critics are left out, but only because their explorations of motherhood are encompassed in their much larger works on Victorian femininity, rather than focusing on motherhood itself. This dissertation engages in the conversations critics have been having for decades, as well as with recent scholars who engage with various types of surrogate motherhood, particularly wet nurses and stepmothers. What this dissertation adds to the current conversation is an examination of surrogate motherhood, which many critics consider briefly, but not as a central element of their overall arguments. This topic deserves much more thorough critical attention, which I provide in these pages.

1.3 Theory and Methodology

Many of the critics discussed in the literature review section have, at least to a small extent, considered surrogate mothers as part of their larger arguments about motherhood. I, however, am interested in the study of surrogate mothers for their own sakes. I investigate how

⁶ Thiel’s most recent study is actually book-length, but is a study of family structures and childhood, with pertinent chapters offering provocative insight on Victorian understandings of stepmothers.

they relate to women's roles in a larger frame than strictly as extensions of biological mothers. In a time when life expectancies were lower and postnatal maternal death rates were far higher than today, surrogate maternity was certainly a reality of daily Victorian life, despite not being as common as Victorian fiction would make it appear (Dever 10-13). Given this reality, surrogate mothers were essential to Victorian society, as the separation of spheres dictated that a nurturing presence must exist in the home to help rear middle-class children. If the mother was absent, some sort of replacement must fulfill her duties while fathers attended to business matters. Throughout the century, though, an essential difference arose between surrogate and biological mothers in Victorian culture: surrogate mothers became increasingly important in the public sphere, while biological motherhood remained a largely private, domestic experience throughout the nineteenth century. Thus, rather than viewing surrogate mothers as extensions of biological ones who function in ideologically similar ways, I envision the Victorian surrogate mother as a unique social necessity about whom a separate set of assumptions and anxieties exists; I suggest that surrogate mothers are regularly invoked in literature to reflect and revise their important cultural roles.

The theoretical portion of my analysis is most concerned with how surrogate mothers establish a sense of agency, using Lois McNay's conception of the term as referring to "the capacity of individuals to engender change within the socio-economic order" (178). I identify many fictional surrogate mothers as appropriating the agency that biological mothers are said to lack, and I imagine this agency as the locus that helped move surrogate mothers into professionalized roles in the public sphere. My assumption that surrogate mothers developed such agency arises from two different points. First, representations of surrogate mothers in fiction, as I will show, often suggest that surrogate mothers overcome stereotypes and controlling

surveillance to establish a sense of power, although it is often a limited experience. Second, there was a shift toward the normalization of non-biological mothers acting in public surrogate maternal roles, perhaps most famously epitomized by Florence Nightingale as a politically influential social caregiver. This shift epitomizes the changing nature of women's roles in the Victorian period, which, as nursing reform demonstrates, is directly connected with the professionalization of caretaking.

1.3.1 Psychoanalysis and Mothering Theories

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), popularized the notion that institutionalized motherhood oppresses women undergoing the actual maternal experience. Rich defines patriarchy as “an identifiable sexual hierarchy,” claiming that this system has historically arranged and controlled maternal expectations, leaving mothers powerless to live up to or alter impossibly ideal maternal norms (xxiv).⁷ Rich locates the cause of a mother's dialectical powerlessness in patriarchal oppression, explaining that “the language of patriarchal power insists on a dichotomy: for one person to have power, others—or another—must be powerless” (67). Within this dichotomy, if those who establish maternal expectations are powerful, then those women who attempt to function within those expectations are powerless, at least insofar as such power relates to the ability to help establish or revise the prescribed norms. Because of this dichotomy, Rich suggests that Victorian maternal expectations were established as a mechanism of control over mothers meant specifically to limit

⁷ When I use variations of the word “patriarchy” in this dissertation, I accept the definition Rich lays out. I imagine it as a social system that has historically privileged white, middle and upper class, heterosexual male perspectives in social power structures, but I recognize the essential fluidity of such structures at any given time.

a maternal power that the male order feared. She suggests, “The male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*” (Rich 11, emphasis in original). Rich claims that, because patriarchal ideology has historically seen maternal power as threatening, maternal agency has been suppressed through regulations of motherhood that imagine maternity as a predestined requirement rather than an empowering choice.

Critics have since developed their own understandings of maternal power and disempowerment, which often move beyond Rich’s dichotomy to imagine a triangulation based on Freudian and post-Freudian object-relations theory. In her consideration of power dynamics between mother and child through the lens of such theory, Marianne Hirsch draws on notions of a child's subject identification, arguing that, once a child recognizes itself as a subject, the mother must become its object. A mother's “representation is controlled by her object status,” Hirsch notes, “but her discourse, when it is voiced, moves her from object to subject. But, as long as she speaks as a mother, she must always remain the object in her child’s process of subject-formation; she is never fully a subject” (12). For Hirsch, the disempowering authority is not necessarily the patriarchy, as for Rich, but the child’s gaze, although Hirsch does understand Freud’s family romance structure as a product of patriarchal order in its situation of the father, rather than the mother, at the center of the family unit.

Natalie McKnight and Carolyn Dever use the same notions of object relations to articulate a lack of maternal agency. Their ideas are based partly on Freud's suggestion that “The freeing of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development” (Freud 156). Dever, however, is concerned with the female versions of these plots, given her interest in women's studies and the Freudian suggestion that children's

development is largely connected to the child's early desire to “be like” and later to “criticize” the “parent of his own sex” (Freud 156). Therefore, Dever suggests that a girl must objectify her mother in order to complete her own subject formation. In Dever’s words, “the maternal body figures an essential failure: the child, object-relations theorists argue, *must* eventually read the mother as inadequate in order to constitute a subject-position independent of hers” (3). This inadequacy, many critics claim, is emblemized through maternal absence, although it is also recognizable in many living, yet ineffectual, mothers in Victorian fiction. McKnight makes the same claim, and she grounds it even further in practical application. McKnight explains, the “mothers' absence in numerous novels creates a vacuum that destabilizes the protagonists and therefore incites their development . . . Without the protection and guidance of a mother, heroines can assert their independence and adventurousness more freely” (18). In other words, a child cannot attain autonomous selfhood until she either has no mother to oversee her choices, or until she recognizes herself as a subject, thus objectifying her mother. Either way, the mother is either dead, and thus powerless, or living but unable to ever fully be a subject again.

Having established that mothers become objectified during a child’s subject-formation process, Hirsch argues that daughters, subjective beings as long as they remain childless, intentionally avoid their mothers’ fates. In Hirsch’s words, the “little surrogate daughter . . . determined to shape a different plot for herself, tends not only to be separated from the figure and the story of her mother, but herself tries to avoid maternity at all costs” (4). It is out of this point that my argument germinates. While Hirsch suggests that the “little surrogate daughter” avoids biological maternity, I demonstrate that she actually seeks out surrogate daughters of her own. She takes on non-biological maternal roles, which I call “surrogate” or “replacement” maternal roles. These new, alternative forms of motherhood, I argue, ultimately redefine the

Victorian maternal ideal as a less restrictive set of expectations in which a woman can act as the nurturing caregiver to a child without succumbing to objectification when the child establishes its own subjectivity.

Given the centrality of a psychoanalytic framework in previous discussions of Victorian motherhood, it is impossible to ignore the utility of such ideas when discussing literary surrogate mothers, but an essential clarification is necessary: most of the aforementioned critics are careful to articulate that their psychoanalytic bases stem not from the original theories, but from feminist revisions of traditional psychoanalytic ideas. Certainly, because Hirsch revises Freud's notion of the "family romance," referring back to Freudian thought is sometimes necessary, but most of these critics' views are based in feminist revisions by theorists like Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray, and Melanie Klein, to name only a few. Hirsch explains that such revisions are concerned with "identifying a characteristically female pattern of selfhood and relation to language, and in locating that pattern not in autonomy but in fluidity and connectedness" (132). These revisions, Hirsch suggests, develop "a psychoanalysis much more in tune with the ideals of the feminist movement," than the historically androcentric theory as first developed by Freud (132). Of course, this is not to say that all of these theorists or the critics who use their ideas agree in their analyses. Still, it is important to note that many of the traditional psychoanalytic concepts that critics like Hirsch invoke have been revised. This circumstance also demonstrates why most of my analysis stems from the way mothering theorists and critics have used psychoanalytic concepts rather than referring directly to the sometimes better-known Freudian or Lacanian notions.

This framework is especially useful when considering the concepts of power and agency, which I identify largely with subjectivity. Although my argument is not primarily

psychoanalytic, it naturally relies on many tenets of the mothering theories scholars have used to discuss Victorian biological mothers for decades. Without utilizing similar models, at least as part of my argument, a comparison between biological and surrogate mothers would be moot. On the other hand, because my argument is largely social in nature, I will also shift from the psychoanalytic portions of my reading to cultural analysis, where I consider notions Judith Butler has laid out in her theory of performativity to demonstrate how surrogate mothers perform certain maternal gestures as a means of revising social norms.

1.3.2 *Performativity*

My examination of shifts that occur in Victorian maternal ideology relies on Judith Butler's notion of performativity as outlined in *Gender Trouble* and expanded in *Bodies that Matter*. Performative theory imagines the performance of a set of prescribed social expectations as a "representation" that serves as "the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true" about an identity category (Butler *Gender* 2). I use Butler's notion of performativity to examine the actions, behaviors, and assumptions that both constitute and are the results of Victorian maternal ideology. Specifically, I discover how the performances of mothers and surrogate mothers in fiction both "reveal" and "distort" social conceptions of maternal expectations. By distorting the same norms being enacted, these performances create a situation ripe for subversion or revision, rather than reification.

Butler explains that performativity requires a "reiteration" of "norms," noting:

That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for

rematerialization . . . That mark one domain in which the force of regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (*Bodies 2*)

Thus, according to Butler's notions, it is specifically the constraints on women that expose the vulnerabilities of female and maternal ideologies and allow space for their revision. "Sex" is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled," Butler explains, "and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices" (*Bodies 1*). This idea, of course, applies to any socially constructed role, including Victorian motherhood. Indeed, "regulatory ideals" for mothers were very much prescribed, but those ideals were never fully enacted, never fully performed, as they imposed impossible regulations on the maternal body. This inability to live up to the ideal emblemizes the instability of maternal expectations, highlighting the ability of repeated performances of slightly altered norms to revise the ideological constructions.

Examining familial roles, Butler explains, "the [psychoanalytic] law that refuses the girl's desire for both her mother and father requires that she take up the emblem of maternity and perpetuate the rules of kinship" (*Gender 38*). The key word in this statement is "emblem": while Hirsch suggests that fictive motherless heroines avoid biological maternity at all costs, Butler's notion coincides with my own; daughters must not necessarily become mothers, but they will take up the "emblem" of maternity by adopting practices and attitudes associated with prevailing maternal norms, despite not being biological mothers. This is exactly what many motherless Victorian heroines do, including Molly Gibson, Olive Rothery, Lucilla Marjoribanks, Dorothea Brooke, Aurora Leigh, Margaret Hale, and a plethora of others. Fictional daughters perform roles traditionally attributed to mothers, representing the idea of kinship outside the bounds of

biological maternity. This revision produces the possibility for the further reconstitution of normative ideals and values. Through performance, through a repetition of gestures and acts that mimic those ideologically connected to the maternal body, childless women incite a shift in the meaning of the word “mother.” No longer only a noun, “motherhood” comes to describe a process that is actively a verb: it does not describe what someone *is*; it describes what someone *does*.

I use Butler’s theory to demonstrate how the performative constructions in Victorian fiction reconstitute the prevailing norms of female and maternal identities. Of course, Victorian authors would have been unaware of these theories, but the very nature of such social theories is that they arise out of examination of cultural and historical practices, not that theory produces those practices. Thus, as nineteenth-century discourse defines and redefines motherhood, as new conduct manuals, journals, and magazines produce new ideas, suggestions, and even definitions of maternity, they simultaneously reiterate the instability of the notions they mean to instill, the terms they mean to define. It is these instabilities that mark the possibility for further redefinition; bodies that do not match the biological description of motherhood latch on to a role they do not fit, and, as we have seen, “spawn rearticulations” of that role (Butler *Bodies* 2). I examine these rearticulations—the changes the performance of motherhood by non-biological mothers brings about—the possibility of mothering without ever birthing a child through the option of nurturing as surrogate, possibly professionally.

I claim that the nurturing woman whose body has not been used for procreation incites more change to the ideals of womanhood and motherhood than the biological mother, and it is with this consideration that I suggest they enact agency. Ultimately, I argue that non-biological mothers who perform maternal roles help revise sociocultural notions of womanhood and

motherhood. These revisions separate motherhood from its connection to the female body and reconstitute the maternal role as one not bound to the inherent oppression and silence that psychoanalysts like Hirsch attribute to a body that has given birth. The primary revisions to the role of motherhood relate specifically to the greater freedoms of choice available to middle-class women by the end of the nineteenth century. While still expected to work within a limited set of occupations, the middle-class woman can at least remain single and childless while living respectably by supporting herself through surrogate maternal occupations.

1.4 Chapter Overview and Breakdown

1.4.1 Chapter 1

The first chapter of this dissertation provides a cultural analysis of the social expectations surrounding Victorian motherhood. It notes how strict maternal norms developed through religious notions, increased emphasis on sanitation, and a burgeoning print media market that depicted Queen Victoria as the ideal mother of England. The religious idea that motherhood was God's calling to all women infiltrated English society through sermons and religiously based periodicals and books. Publications like household instruction manuals also became more common, prescribing the proper ways for women to perform maternal roles. Further, as the Industrial Revolution led to the separation of male business and female domestic spheres, the idea that a woman's occupation was to care for her home and family became even further engrained. This shift isolated mothers from enacting much power outside their homes. Even within their homes, they were bombarded with explanations of *how* they should utilize their time.

Compounding the immense pressures placed on mothers was Queen Victoria, domestic ruler of the Royal family and mother of England, whose representation came to epitomize ideal motherhood. Chapter 1 provides detailed examinations of mid-century newspapers, magazines,

and conduct manuals to understand how maternal expectations were widely disseminated into culture, increasing expectations for everyday mothers. It also outlines the role Queen Victoria played in the development of a distinctly Victorian maternal ideology, demonstrating the confusing and often contradictory pressures that social norms placed on Victorian mothers. Because of the focus on sociohistorical norms, this chapter foregoes examinations of fiction. Rather, it has densely historical focus, establishing the cultural framework within which the literature I discuss in the following chapters is situated.

1.4.2 Chapter 2

The second chapter shifts to a fictional focus. It imagines how literature responds to the ideology discussed in chapter 1 and how it “reveal[s] the terrible tensions created by impossible social expectations of mothers” (McKnight 17). In this chapter, I discuss the nuanced roles of some of the few biological mothers who do appear in mid-Victorian fiction, demonstrating how literary biological mothers highlight the restrictive nature of Victorian maternal norms. This chapter provides close readings of Mrs. Jellyby in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Sybilla Rothesay in Dinah Craik’s *Olive*, and Hyacinth Kirkpatrick Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*. These readings reveal that fictional biological mothers struggle to live up to maternal norms and that they lack the social agency necessary to revise the expectations they cannot meet. Joan Manheimer and David Plotkin have already discussed Mrs. Jellyby’s defiance of maternal norms, and their readings invigorate my discussion. Manheimer notes the leniency with which Dickens treats Mrs. Jellyby’s bad motherhood because her children turn out surprisingly well. Plotkin, on the other hand, sees major ramifications for her behavior, explaining how Mrs. Jellyby’s lack of domestic management mimics the threat that improper domesticity poses to English society. I am similarly concerned with how Mrs. Jellyby threatens

Englishness and norms, but I am ever conscious of Manheimer's point; Mrs. Jellyby does not successfully overturn maternal expectations, but the fact that her children turn out well heightens the threat women like her pose by highlighting the instability of prescribed Victorian female and maternal expectations.

Detailed readings of *Wives and Daughters* and *Olive* appear twice in this dissertation, in chapter 2 as considerations of biological mothers and in chapter 4, which looks at surrogate ones. Reading both of these novels differently in two separate sections is especially significant. The discrepancies between depictions of biological and surrogate mothers within the same texts demonstrates not only the power of the surrogate mother, but also the nuances of the dialectical relationship between culture and fiction. Victorian novels often reveal within the same pages the limits biological mothers experience and how surrogate mothers overcome those same restrictions. Such overlapping representations highlight the instability of cultural norms and the fluidity of power structures through multiple characters' responses to the same set of regulations.

1.4.3 Chapter 3

In chapter 3, I turn my attention to surrogate mothers, specifically wet nurses and stepmothers. I demonstrate that these two groups are the most potentially subversive surrogate mothers because their ability to replace absent biological mothers threatens Victorian understandings of family structures. This chapter combines cultural and literary studies, using Victorian periodicals alongside historical research to demonstrate how wet nurses and stepmothers were viewed as socially threatening. Additionally, this analysis reveals how literature works to normalize these surrogate maternal roles by demonstrating the social stability that results from effective surrogate motherhood.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first discusses wet nurses, examining periodicals and other nonfiction alongside brief readings of Polly Toodle in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, Sarah in Captain Frederick Marryat's *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, and Old Alice the nurse in Alfred Tennyson's poem "Lady Clare." The second section discovers, through fiction and some nonfiction, how some literature worked to distance stepmothers from the wicked image that fairy tales and much cultural ideology perpetuated. My examination considers the revisionary nature of the stepmothers depicted in Hannah Ransome Geldart's mostly forgotten *The Second Mother*, which I rediscovered while researching for this project. Geldart's novel—while largely fitting the traditional didactic structure with its sometimes heavy-handed religious undertones and its clear attempt to teach readers a lesson about stepmothers—is integral for understanding how literature reimagined step-maternal roles. While most didactic Victorian novels re-inscribe social ideals, which demonized stepmothers, Geldart's novel subverts those expectations. *The Second Mother* suggests that a revision to public perceptions of stepmothers could lead to increasingly stable family structures. I also provide readings of stepmothers in Charlotte Yonge's more popular novel *The Young Stepmother* and Adelaide Anne Procter's poem "A New Mother," demonstrating that literature outside of Geldart's didactic model also proposed new social understandings of stepmothers.

1.4.4 Chapter 4

In the fourth and final chapter, I merge the psychoanalytic understandings of the Victorian *bildungsroman* established by Hirsch and Dever with Butler's theory of performativity. This chapter demonstrates how young heroines perform maternal gestures outside the bounds of biological maternity, and their success as surrogate mothers demonstrates the need to revise cultural Victorian maternal expectations. I study Molly Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and*

Daughters, Olive Rothesay in Dinah Craik's *Olive*, and Lucilla Marjoribanks in Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* because each character offers a unique aspect to the reading of performative surrogate motherhood and agency. The chapter contextualizes these readings with references to similar dynamics in other fiction, for instance, with Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, and Dickens's Esther Summerson. Molly, Olive, and Lucilla are appropriate for detailed analysis, partly because their performances reveal social power, but also because each of these novels is structured predominantly as a female *bildungsroman*. As such, these works best follow Hirsch's and Dever's readings of female family romances. Further, as Franco Moretti has explained that the "pliant and precarious" nature of "the truly central ideologies of our world" is apparent through the success of the *bildungsroman*, these novels provide useful sites for examining performances that re-imagine social structures (559). Additionally, as previously noted, reading Molly's and Olive's agency against the struggles of biological mothers in the same works demonstrates the greater power available to fictional Victorian surrogate mothers than to biological ones.

2 CHAPTER 1

VICTORIAN MATERNAL IDEOLOGY

The Industrial Revolution famously altered England's physical, economic, and social landscapes. It changed the structures of cities and homes, as well as the roles of men and women, leading to the establishment of new expectations that came to dominate cultural understandings of the maternal role. As workers flooded into urban centers like London and Manchester, shoddily built houses sprang up to accommodate the mass influx of people.⁸ As

⁸ More than six million houses were built in London in the last three quarters of the nineteenth century (Flanders 20). For further reading on how the Industrial Revolution changed living

overcrowding became a problem, slums developed, health diminished, and the influx of people into the city led to an exodus of middle and upper class families to the outskirts of town. Suburbs emerged, and the middle-class home came to represent a haven to which men could escape from the horrors of the manufacturing business in city centers. Home, in John Ruskin's terms, was imagined as "the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division," and it was up to women to make this ideal a reality (73). Providing a retreat for her husband meant the wife should remain at home to tend to household duties, leading to a phenomenon Elizabeth Langland popularly refers to as the "professionalizing housekeeping" ("Women's" 126). Within this new structure of belief, a middle-class woman's highest aims should have been keeping her home, pleasing her husband, and raising her children.

Although wives were responsible for maintaining orderly and inviting homes, middle-class families employed domestic servants, so few middle-class women handled the tedious daily details of housekeeping. Because they were relegated to the home but with few housekeeping duties, middle-class women were expected to shift their attention to raising their children. As we saw in the introduction, many historians argue that the nineteenth century was the first time the bond between mother and child became an object of scrutiny. Discussing the burgeoning maternal ideology in Victorian England, Ellen Rosenman and Claudia Klaver have explained, "As the sanctification of motherhood gained its full ideological force in the nineteenth century, the successful or failed performance of maternity became the ubiquitous subject of social debate and textual representation" (1). Deborah Gorham also notes the shifting Victorian emphasis on properly performing motherhood, explaining, "The Victorian middle-class mother was

conditions and the function of families in Victorian England, see the Introduction to Judith Flanders's *Inside the Victorian Home*.

encouraged to exhibit an unprecedented amount of concern with the child-rearing process” (65). The private performance of motherhood became a cultural issue as “a new sense of the family . . . emerged in which domestic life, the maternal bond, and the nature of childhood experience were considered important,” leading to increased social expectations for mothers (Poulson 60).

Whether or not the nineteenth century was the first time motherhood became socially significant, a uniquely Victorian maternal ideology clearly emerged. This chapter examines the influences that helped establish and engrain this ideology, specifically domestic magazines and journals, conduct manuals, and representations of Queen Victoria, who was imagined as the quintessential English mother. Maternal norms placed numerous strict expectations on mothers, and motherhood became both a defining factor and supposed goal in a middle-class woman’s life: her only occupation now centered on caring for her children. Because caring exclusively for children without the concerns of earning a living or attending directly to household duties required financial stability, the maternal ideology so pervasive in Victorian society was specifically class-based. Certainly, upper-class mothers were expected to adhere to some maternal norms, and elements of maternal ideology trickled down into lower classes, as evidenced by publications of penny pamphlets and tracts on motherhood in the mid-late Victorian period. On the whole, though, the primary object of socially established maternal expectations was the middle-class mother who had time to devote to childrearing.

Although women from the highest social ranks were not exempt from maternal expectations, they were not held to the same standards as middle-class mothers. Because aristocratic women were expected to devote time to designated social obligations, children were supposed to be important, but not the exclusive objects of their attention. Of course, Queen Victoria’s contribution to maternal discourse could suggest a correlation between maternal ideology and

upper class mothers. My readings, however, will demonstrate how representations of Queen Victoria's motherhood likened her specifically to middle-class mothers. Further, elements of upper-class maternity like the common employment of a wet nurse expressly opposes the notions of middle-class maternal ideology. Conversely, working-class mothers did not have the time to bestow upon their children that was expected of middle-class mothers, as they, and often their children, worked to earn livings. Thus, in this chapter, my examination will look specifically at representations of Queen Victoria and of publications meant for middle-class mothers, considering only a few exceptions when appropriate. In the chapters that follow in which I examine representations of Victorian maternal ideology in fiction of the time, my attention will likewise focus mostly on middle-class mothers. Although some major upper class and working class fictional mothers will be largely omitted from my examinations, I do mention them briefly to provide appropriate literary context.

2.1 Instinctual Maternity: Early Victorian Maternal Expectations

Various influences led to the development of a system of expectations to which middle-class Victorian mothers were subjected. The variety of influences complicated maternal expectations because they provided constant advice while lacking consistent norms, creating a complex, ever changing ideology. Mothers were expected to live up to growing and evolving expectations set forth by conduct manuals, religious sermons and tracts, advice columns in magazines and newspapers, medical pamphlets, and other didactic texts. The expectations these texts established were rarely attainable because they were "increasingly complex" and "contradictory," placing mothers in precariously difficult positions (McKnight 1).

Throughout the course of the Victorian period, at least two major understandings of maternal ideology emerged, sometimes overlapping and competing with one another. First, there

was the expectation that motherhood was God-given and instinctual, an idea that had its heyday in the 1830s and 1840s, but which was certainly questioned even during that time. Later, a new perception of motherhood developed. It began most prominently in the 1850s and no longer imagined caring for children as instinctual, but rather saw it as a difficult undertaking with serious repercussions if mothers were not carefully educated on how to perform their roles. This new idea developed largely in response to high infant mortality rates, and its advocates saw great fault with the expectation that raising children was a natural instinct. Proponents of this belief, especially medical practitioners, insisted that mothers needed guidance, training, and practice to perform their roles effectively and to keep their children safe. The earlier “natural” understanding of maternity stemmed from religious beliefs, while later revisions emerged due to more secular concerns. Although the two notions overlapped at times, they ultimately disagreed on whether maternity was a natural or socially produced experience.

Most early-Victorian advice texts considered maternity not only as natural and instinctual to women, but also as a religious obligation. According to this belief, a woman was expected to fulfill her procreative capacity as a duty to God. Religious revivals in both Britain and America strongly influenced Victorian notions of motherhood, and an emerging periodical market in the U.S. connected religious ideas specifically to maternal duty, imagining motherhood as woman’s God-given, biological destiny. *The Mother’s Magazine*, an American periodical, gained immense popularity in its home country in the 1830s, and it was later republished in Britain as *The British Mother’s Journal*. It originated as an “experiment . . . No similar periodical had been published, and it is believed that none had ever been contemplated” (“Our Past” 1). Its influence quickly became widespread as it propagated Evangelical notions of motherhood, deeply engraining religious maternal ideals into the Victorian frame of mind.

The Mother's Magazine, though certainly not the only means of spreading Evangelical principles in English society, disseminated religious notions of motherhood in England and opened up a discourse about motherhood in British periodicals. It aimed at assisting Christian mothers with the practice of “training up little children for heaven” (“Praying” 61). *The Mother's Magazine* was meant to inform and to guide through Evangelical principles. It told didactic stories to teach mothers how best to raise their children in Christian homes. The content varied, but it regularly featured fiction and non-fiction, outlined how to be a good mother, and printed letters to the editor that addressed maternal issues. Because the magazine had such heavy religious influences, it often quoted bible verses, using them either as titles of articles or in epigraphs. It often provided biblical examples to demonstrate proper maternal behavior, which made up large portions of the magazine's content.

First printed in 1833, the first issue of *The Mother's Magazine* preceded Victoria's accession to the English throne by only four years. It filled what its editors felt was a void in the growing discourse of motherhood by advising mothers about their emotional and spiritual duties to their children. The advice, however, was largely ideological. Practical elements of childrearing, like keeping children clean or feeding them appropriately, were only occasionally included in the content. Although *The Mother's Magazine* was the first of its kind, its success led to the emergence of various similar periodicals. These magazines, all focusing on motherhood and domesticity, became major contributors to the Evangelical expectations for mothers.⁹ As Jolein De Ridder has pointed out, “the early Victorian mainstream women's

⁹ The decades following the first publication of *The Mother's Magazine* saw an immense increase in the number of periodicals geared toward mothers, including *The Christian Mother's Magazine* (1844-45) [later *The Englishwoman's Magazine and Christian Mother's Miscellany*

magazine offered both amusement and instruction, and aimed to fulfill the role of the conduct manual. It stressed women's domestic duties, already established as a central element in women's reading" (178).

Before the publication of *The Mother's Magazine*, religious writers and thinkers had already imagined the idea of motherhood as a Godly endeavor, but it was not largely considered a religious obligation. In 1823, when Victoria was only a child herself, T.C. Hansard published his account of his late wife's maternal experience, *A Mother's Portrait*. Hansard points to the religious nature of motherhood by exclaiming, "How appropriate is [maternal affection] employed to illustrate other important and efficient emotions, and especially the most important and efficient of all—the love of God!" (55). Hansard's words represent a common sentiment, that the love of a mother for her children is an earthly representation of the love of Christ.¹⁰ The Evangelical notions in *The Mother's Magazine* and other similar periodicals extended Hansard's idea as motherhood became more than simply a Godly role. As Judith Flanders has explained, "Evangelical ideas had linked the idea of womanliness to women carrying out their biological destiny—to being wives and mothers. That was their job, and to expect to have any other job was a rejection of their God-given place" (13). This understanding became so mainstream that, even as late as 1888, when Evangelical sentiments were strongly questioned, religious texts still

(1846-54), then *The Christian Lady's Magazine* (1855-57)], *The British Mother's Magazine* (1845-1848) *The British Mother's Journal* (1845-64), and *The Mother's Friend* (1848-59). As such publications flourished, so did a number of other domestic periodicals, many of which also addressed mothers in their content, if not in their titles.

¹⁰ This same idea is expressed in Sir Edwin Arnold's poem, quoted in the epigraph of the introduction to this dissertation.

advised girls to consider bearing children their duty to God. One such work suggested that they “Look upon [motherhood] as God looks upon it, and respect yourselves as the instruments God makes use of to give His children to the world. He wishes you to bear fruit” (*Motherhood* 65).

The ultimate result of these Evangelical understandings of motherhood was the complicated array of norms that developed, making the “natural,” “holy,” “God-given” role of motherhood an immensely difficult one to perform. One issue Evangelists emphasized was the importance of the mother on her children’s educations, as she was considered the “natural teacher of her children” (Gorham 20). An article published in *The Mother’s Magazine* in June of 1844 specifically placed the pressure of moral education on mothers over fathers, explaining, “Both parents have their responsibility; and great and obligatory are the duties of both; but *the mother* has access to the mind of her child, and exercises a constant agency upon it” (“Duty” 347, emphasis in original). Although the article grants mothers agency through this power over their children’s minds, it inherently limits her sense of power by setting high stakes for her success:

The influence which [mothers] possess they must exercise, whether for good or evil; for the characters of their children will be insensibly moulded by their example Let every mother, then, in dependence upon the Divine blessing, exert herself to wield aright so vast a power; ever remembering, that the influence with which she is [e]ntrusted, extends beyond the limits of this mortal life; and that its consequences will be felt when time shall have given place to eternity.

(“Duty” 348-49, emphasis in original)

Thus, a mother is responsible for the moral training of her children, and the ramifications of failing in this duty are not only earthly, but eternal.

If fears of eternal retribution were not enough pressure on mothers, the earthly ramifications of educating children properly were also immense. According to much social discourse, the future of England as a political power rested on middle-class children being educated and molded effectively within Christian principles. An 1858 article in *The Ladies' Treasury* highlighted the national importance of a mother's educational impact over her children by boldly declaring, "On woman's influence may depend the fate of nations" ("Maternal"). Even later in the Victorian period, when religious aspects of maternal ideology were giving way, the burden to raise children who would help England prosper in future generations remained. By the end of the Victorian period, the Evangelical underpinnings of motherhood had long been surpassed by the secular desire to educate mothers about childcare. Regardless, as late as 1896, nationalistic expectations remained so pervasive that advice books still proclaimed the importance of mothers on England's future. "To be a mother is the grandest vocation in the world," Hannah Smith explains, because "to her is committed the making of the nation's citizens" (5).

In addition to placing pressure on mothers by highlighting the ramifications that would ensue if they performed their duties poorly, religious advisors further complicated the maternal role by denying mothers childrearing assistance. Evangelical notions insisted that mothers innately knew best how to care for their children, regardless of their childrearing experience. Because such ideas were so pervasive, the early-Victorian period experienced a push, promulgated by religious periodicals and tracts, for middle-class mothers to care for their children directly rather than to rely on help from nurses. Mrs. Pullan, in her 1856 advice book *Children and How to Manage Them*, insists, "No true mother will, if she can possibly avoid it, confide her children, even for a few hours daily, wholly to the care of a nurse" (28). Her

assertion that there are “true mothers,” and thus that some mothers do not fit that description, serves as a reminder that not all mothers innately know how to nurture. Thus, this statement highlights the tensions between the conflicting mid-century ideas that caring for children comes naturally to mothers and that childcare practices must be learned. This quote demonstrates the shift to an understanding that motherhood is not necessarily innate, although Pullan does question the value of mothers who do not know how to perform their duties.

Some people took this idea even further, questioning the actual humanity of mothers who let nurses have too much charge over their children. The writer of an 1840 article in *The Christian Lady's Magazine*, for instance, was appalled at parents who sent their children away to nurseries rather than keeping them entirely under the mother's care. This writer lamented, “Hundreds of acres of English soil are purchased and contracted for . . . the *nurseries for infants* already born, or about to be so, of parents who have willfully reduced themselves below the level of the brute creation, and who are eager to prove their vast inferiority, by flinging from them their helpless young” (“Protestant” 379-380).¹¹ This statement iterates the scorn mothers faced when they failed to live up to established social expectations, and it demonstrates an anxiety about the role of nurses that plays out in more detail in my discussion of wet nurses in chapter 3.

¹¹ There were two different periodicals, both published in London in the mid-nineteenth century, titled *The Christian Lady's Magazine*. The version referenced here was published from 1834-1849, edited by Charlotte Elizabeth. The other version, also mentioned in this chapter, was published later, from 1855-1857, edited by Mrs. Milner, and was a later version of Mrs. Milner's *The Christian Mother's Magazine*. All references to these magazines include dates so readers can distinguish between the two different versions.

Such scorn against mothers who did not live up to social expectations, which certainly heightened the pressure on mothers, arose as a result of the early Evangelical notions that infiltrated Victorian maternal ideology. The belief that women knew instinctively how to care for and educate their children simply because God granted them the ability to procreate was essentially problematic. The inherent assumption that “Womanly instincts . . . teach all a mother needs to know” amplified difficulties for many women, unfamiliar with the practice of childrearing, who would have appreciated pointed advice (“Details” 221). Jane Long notes in the internet database *Defining Gender* that, despite the fact that many women desired advice to help them care for their children, even “Doctors and authoritative commentators frequently deemed motherhood the ubiquitous 'natural' vocation of women.” As a result, “There were few instructions on how to teach small children . . . Mothers were supposed to know simply by virtue of being mothers” (Flanders 84).

The lack of clearly implementable advice amidst a proliferation of expectations intensified the burden on Victorian mothers. The June 1, 1847 edition of *The British Mother's Magazine*, for instance, reprinted an excerpt from Dr. Young's “Word for the Nursery.” It provided an enumerated list of supposedly practical advice to mothers that complicated maternal expectations rather than achieving its goal of helping to clarify them:

If your love for your children is to tell for good and not for evil, the following ingredients must be found in it: *First*, It must be cherished. It must be kept lively and active, not suffered to wax cold, or to sink into indifference . . . *Secondly*, It must be purified. Your love to your children is partly animal, and it ought to be animal, for you yourselves have an animal nature; but more than animal, it ought to be rational, for you have a rational nature; and, more still, it ought to be

Christian, seasoned and rectified by the cleansing efficacy of the grace of God in Christ Jesus . . . *Thirdly*, It must be enlightened. It is not possible that maternal affection, be it ever so strong or ever so pure, can fill its own appointed place, or accomplish its own appointed task, unless you take enlarged views of the interests of your children. You must not look at their bodies merely, but also at their souls . . . *Fourthly*, It must be guided by sound discretion. It is a sad mistake to suppose that a mother's love is altogether a yielding thing, or that its work consists in imposing privation on herself or on others, that her children may be gratified.

(Young, emphasis in original)

Although Dr. Young intends to provide practical advice to mothers, his advice is emblematic of much advice of the time in that it does not actually explain how to go about implementing the suggestions it makes. Young explains that a mother must “cherish” her children, but he fails to enumerate what behavior constitutes properly cherishing a child. Nor does he outline what a mother must do to be “purified,” or what thoughts she should have in order to be “enlightened.” Only the fourth of these supposedly helpful dictates comes near providing practical advice. Here, the suggestion that a mother have “sound discretion” at least demonstrates that loving a child does not always equal giving in to the child’s whims and fancies.

Published regularly in women’s magazines and advice literature of the early-Victorian period, recommendations like Dr. Young’s formed the most common type of advice for mothers, though doing little to help them understand how to perform their roles. Rather, such instructions enhanced maternal expectations without helping women learn to live up to the increasingly complicated norms. A primary reason advice literature contained so few concrete recommendations was because it was often written by religious leaders or evangelical mothers

who had little real-life experience in the professional fields from which mothers sought practical guidance. Because qualifications to give advice depended on piety and not on professional skill, advice focused not on everyday practicalities, but on the duties of motherhood and on the outcomes that were expected to arise from those duties being performed well.

The idea that caring for children was instinctual was so prevalent that even some fiction, mostly didactic fiction that functioned as an extension of conduct manuals, suggested that God gifted women with maternal instincts. George Cruikshank's "Cinderella and the Glass Slipper," for instance, notes, "It is in the nature of woman to love children, because the Almighty has appointed her to bring them up" (38). The result, at least in the early Victorian period, was that advice books, tracts, and periodicals that were meant to inform and to guide did not actually provide pragmatic advice. These texts hoped to demonstrate that maternal duty involved providing religious instruction to children, but they did not provide basic guidance regarding everyday issues. As a result, Victorian mothers were inundated with expectations, but many mothers had no idea how to practically apply the abundance of advice they were given, and they were scorned for failing to live up to these expectations. As the century progressed, however, expectations and advice shifted. Advice became more specific and concrete, but this change resulted in a new set of difficulties for Victorian mothers.

2.2 Teaching Motherhood: Shifting Expectations about Maternal Innateness

Periodicals like *The Mother's Magazine*, *British Mother's Magazine*, and *The Mother's Friend* played a prominent role in the development of a uniquely Victorian maternal ideology. These periodicals added to the discussions in which many conduct manuals, cookbooks, sermons, and lectures engaged. Some major works involved in this discourse included Mrs. J. Bakewell's 1836 *The Mother's Practical Guide in the Early Training of her Children*, Sarah

Stickney Ellis's 1843 *The Mothers of England*, Isabella Beeton's 1861 *The Book of Household Management*, and John Ruskin's 1864 "Of Queen's Gardens." Together, texts and lectures like these created a strong sense of duty surrounding maternity. We have seen how such works helped establish the idea that maternity was instinctual. This section examines how the focus of advice literature shifted throughout the mid-century, teaching mothers how to properly perform the maternal duties that were no longer seen as innate while still placing stringent expectations upon mothers.

Victorian advice literature saturated the conversation about women's roles, and Jane Long has discussed the contradictory nature of the messages it conveyed. According to Long, "There was no shortage of voices telling mothers how best to meet the challenge that lay before them . . . At once mothering was cast as both the most 'natural' state, and as a precarious role whose success was determined by the vicissitudes of social and economic life, morality, and education." While early advice literature highlighted what was expected of mothers, it was not until the mid-late 1850s that it began clearly explaining *how* women should go about adhering to maternal expectations. Deborah Gorham has shown that "motherhood came to be defined as a skill that had to be learned," noting that "the modernisation of motherhood implied a willingness to seek advice and information from those who were considered to have an expertise based on systematic knowledge" (65).

Charles Pardey's 1857 guide for mothers points out the change of attitude toward maternal education that was occurring in the mid-1850's. Pardey laments, "It is the misfortune of young mothers, that by the ideas of female education prevalent in this country, it is considered right that they should be left in ignorance of all that relates to early infancy, so that they are compelled to undertake the maternal responsibility without any previous instructions as to the

proper method of discharging the duties entailed upon them” (7-8). Clearly, people were discovering the necessity of educating mothers about day-to-day aspects of childrearing and questioning the evangelical version of the ideal laid out in early magazines. Still, the notion prevailed that a mother’s primary task was to care for her children’s moral and spiritual welfare.

In 1860, after the push to educate mothers had begun, *The Mother’s Thorough Resource Book* demonstrated the blend between emerging maternal notions and earlier ones that continued to maintain an ideological hold. “The instruction of a child in religious faith, religious sentiments, and religious principle, is a duty which specially devolves upon the mother,” the text noted, demonstrating the continued importance, at least to some, of religious sentiments (*Mother’s* 236). At the same time, however, the book called itself “a work of purely practical nature,” and it enumerated in detail many pragmatic aspects of the management of children (*Mother’s* 223). Thus, while showing that religious notions were still at play in later maternal ideologies, *The Mother’s Thorough Resource Book* likewise demonstrated how the need to provide mothers with practical guidance was blending with former advice practices.

Despite providing pragmatic advice, these later writings did not make it easy for women to perform maternal norms. Rather, because they aimed to address a major social concern, they enhanced the pressure for mothers to meet the standards of maternal expectations. The instinctual nature of motherhood was called into question largely in response to high infant mortality rates, leading advocates for maternal education to insist that proper maternal training could save children’s lives. Advice literature began to address more specific aspects of daily motherhood, with much advice directed at caring for “infants,” a term that seems to have somewhat indiscriminately referred to children under the age of either five or seven. An article from an 1859 issue of *The English Woman’s Journal* expressly lays out the crisis to which advice

literature of the mid-late 1850s responds. It explains, “The rate of infant mortality among our and other civilized communities, is something unparalleled in all creation. Out of every hundred of our little ones, thirty are cut down . . . before five summer’s suns have shown upon them, and a great part of the remainder grow up weak and sickly” (“Details” 219).

An article in *The Englishwoman’s Review and Home Newspaper* from the same year blamed the high infant mortality rate on general lack of sanitary knowledge, suggesting that mothers must learn to properly care for children in order to save lives. Noting that “sanitary science is in its infancy,” the writer lamented mothers making ill-informed choices like “soothing their babes with laudanum,” but remarked that efforts were being made to educate mothers (“Health” 234). “To remedy this crying evil a society has been formed,” the article explains, which “has already published several useful tracts” (“Health” 243). This society was the Ladies’ Sanitary Association, which formed both to help improve society and to teach mothers to care for their children. This association became a large contributor to the mid-late 1850’s push to disseminate practical advice to mothers; it published tracts and pamphlets on various topics related to physically caring for children, such as *How to Manage a Baby* and *The Cheap Doctor*.

These short tracts were not the only works that aimed to teach mothers how to care for their children’s health, as much advice literature of the time had similar goals. Advice columns appeared in most domestic magazines, and texts like *A Few Friendly Words to Young Mothers* (1856), *The Mother’s Nursery Guide* (1857), *The Mother’s Best Book: or Nursery Companion* (1859), and *The Mother’s Thorough Resource-Book* (1860) aimed to provide simple, practical advice on caring for the health of young children. The advice pamphlet *A Few Friendly Words to Young Mothers* was published in 1856, with a dedication to Dr. J.T. Conquest. The dedication and Dr. Conquest’s introductory letter validated the book by suggesting that a medical doctor

sanctioned the text's suggestions. In his letter of approval, Dr. Conquest wrote, "I have read the proof very carefully, and, so far as the Pamphlet goes, it contains much sound useful advice, and many important suggestions" (v). Dr. Conquest's endorsement helped validate this pamphlet as a useful parenting tool for two reasons. First, it enhanced the credibility of the author, demonstrating that she had both experience and the opinion of a medical expert to support her ideas. Second, it reminded readers that this pamphlet, although written by a mother, was not like earlier advice literature. Instead, it blended experience with medical knowledge and focused on more practical, physical aspects of childrearing. Priced at sixpence per pamphlet and directing much attention toward the importance of overseeing nurses, it was clearly geared toward middle-class mothers.

Like other texts aiming to educate mothers and reduce infant mortality rates, *A Few Friendly Words to Young Mothers* increased the pressure on middle-class mothers. It reiterated that caring for her children should be a middle-class woman's primary occupation, and it suggested that mothers should be willing to give up other pleasures in order to carefully monitor their children. "I pray you, Young Mothers," the author pleaded, "if you have any regard for the happiness of your dear ones, to 'hover' about them" (*Few* 2). The book suggested that mothers were better caregivers than nurses, explaining, "A mother's quick eye, her sympathy with the sufferings, her watchfulness of the wants of her child, are more keen than the cold experience of mere hirelings" (*Few* 3). Although attempting to avoid alienating mothers who were more concerned with social functions, the book still ultimately suggested that mothers should give up their own pleasures for their children. "Far be it from me to wish young mothers to *sacrifice* themselves to their family, or to relinquish the pleasures of society," the text noted, although it clearly suggested a middle-class mother should avoid leaving her children with nurses to attend

to other duties (*Few* 3). “A moderate attention to the duties we owe to society is, generally speaking, quite consistent with a fulfillment of the claims of home,” the author explained, “but whenever they are likely to clash . . . do not hesitate how to choose” (*Few* 3).

A Few Friendly Words to Young Mothers followed the later trend of providing practical advice, but it also held loosely to earlier tenets of maternal ideology by indicating that a mother’s instinct was better than acquired knowledge about childcare. For instance, while the book did not support relying on nurses, it recognized that most middle-class mothers employed nurses and offered advice for managing them. Despite recognizing that many nurses had undergone training and had much experience in childcare, though, the book still suggested that mothers trust their own feelings over the nurse’s experience. While this pamphlet provided many more practical details than most advice texts published before the mid-1850s, its advice placed an even stronger burden on the mother, playing into the expectation that a mother be ever present and ever watchful over her children.

The Mother’s Best Book: or Nursery Companion, published in 1859, had a similar aim as *A Few Friendly Words to Young Mothers*. It provided practical advice to mothers who needed help dealing with different medical issues their babies might face. Laid out like a magazine, its cover was filled with scare tactics to convince readers of the book’s necessity. It contained a quote attributed to the Registrar’s Statistics in large bold letters at the top of the front cover, which stated, “Forty babies out of every hundred die before they are five years of age.”¹² The

¹² This statistic differs from the one previously referenced in the 1859 issue of *The English Woman’s Journal*. If the numbers provided in the Registrar General’s report from the same year (published in 1861) are correct, it is possible that both magazines were providing inflated numbers. The 1859 report indicates that there were 689,881 births in England in 1859 and

content provided information about details like suckling, weaning, and treating diseases as serious as bronchitis, small-pox, whooping cough, measles, and croup, all in attempt to decrease the number of deaths among young children. At a price of only two pence, it opened medical advice to mothers with meager financial means. *The Mother's Best Book* blatantly blamed mothers and caregivers for the high infant mortality rate, claiming on the top center of the cover, "More children die from ill-nursing than from disease." Although the tone of the actual writing was much less harsh, the existence of such rhetoric in large, bold print on the cover perpetuated the idea that bad mothers were harming children.

Such texts heightened pressures on mothers for multiple reasons. First, texts like *The Mother's Best Book* blamed mothers for infant deaths, and second, they perpetuated a set of increasingly complicated expectations. They often followed the example of earlier advice literature by asserting that a mother's most important duty was to tend to the moral and spiritual welfare of her children. Even *The Mother's Best Book*, meant to teach mothers how to care for their children in order to decrease the number of child deaths in England, attested that moral care was a mother's most important task. "The moral care of children is the most sacred duty that can devolve on woman—one of the highest trusts committed to her care," it explains (*Mother's* 15). Unlike earlier advice literature, however, *The Mother's Best Book* did offer more pragmatic advice about morally training children. It explained, for instance, "Crying is the defensive weapon of a child, and if this resistance is successful, by the yielding of the nurse or mother, she

105,849 deaths of children under one year of age. This statistic would make the death rate 15.34% of infants, or approximately fifteen out of every 100 births, although it is more difficult to determine the number of children under the age of five who died during a specific period of time (*Twenty-Second*).

will often find difficulty in regaining her lost dominion” (*Mother’s* 15). Further, the book suggested, “Children are readily perceptible of feelings of *jealousy*. Therefore allow no marked preference to be shown. Such error is the common source of envy and hatred in a family” (15). Thus, while such texts perpetuated maternal expectations and complicated the maternal role, they usually also accomplished some aim toward explaining to mothers how to go about living up to social expectations.

2.3 Representing Queen Victoria as Ideal Mother and Mother of England

As a specifically Victorian set of maternal expectations emerged, the idea of maternity could hardly remain separate from Queen Victoria, who was both a biological mother and the ideological mother of England. Natalie McKnight explains Victoria’s unprecedented influence, calling her “second only to the Virgin Mother in her influence on Victorian expectations of motherhood” (14). “As a mother of nine and as the sovereign of England,” McKnight suggests that Victoria “became an emblem of the ideal mother—fertile; patient; long-suffering in her labors; devoted to her husband, children, and country; and very traditional in her public attitudes about the roles of men and women” (14). Among the plethora of maternal expectations emerging during Victoria’s reign were representations of the queen as the ideal English mother. These representations helped further engrain maternal norms through a commercial and literary market that flourished for decades. As John Plunkett has demonstrated, the expansion of the periodical press during the 1830s and 1840s coincided with Victoria’s accession to the throne. Subsequently, “the growth of a mass print and visual culture in the nineteenth century was a vital influence upon the development of the British monarchy” and of maternal expectations based on representations of Queen Victoria (Plunkett 1).

The monarchy influenced both the religious and practical guidance strains of maternal ideology, and it both shaped and was informed by the roles of Victorian mothers as they were imagined in the media. Through various media outlets, and thanks to the English excitement to embrace a virginal, moral young queen following years of libertinism in the courts of George IV and William IV, Queen Victoria became the preeminent icon representing British womanhood and motherhood. These representations, however, were strictly that; her private correspondences demonstrate that Victoria herself did not live up to the model she performed publicly. She ultimately functioned as an ideological surrogate mother to Victorian society, but the idealized representations of her maternity placed immense pressure on middle-class mothers who were unable to live up to the fabricated image of their queen.

The rapid dissemination of maternal expectations into middle-class ideology was largely a product of the complicated relationship between an emerging media market and a young Queen who capitalized on that market to establish her own ideal domestic image. “The modern, self-conscious mother originated in Victorian England,” McKnight notes, “amidst a proliferation of mother-oriented publications, within a socioeconomic situation that increasingly limited and isolated women, and under a fecund queen whose public example established high standards for mothers” (2). Queen Victoria came into power shortly after the media had begun to capitalize on the budding focus on maternal expectations. The beginning of her reign began only four years after the success of *Mother's Magazine* prompted a periodical market aimed at establishing maternal norms. Margaret Beetham touches on the cultural impact of these new publications for mothers, explaining, “The efflorescence of this new kind of magazine came at a moment when, historians have argued, new family patterns associated with industrialization had come into being and the periodical press was creating new forms and reaching new audiences” (“Thinking” 2).

The coinciding of this emerging market with the beginning of Queen Victoria's rule, as well as with the beginning of her career as a mother, heightened the notion of a national mother, and citizens and media alike began looking to Victoria as the ideal mother. Thus, while Queen Victoria was not responsible for the early establishment of an ideology that had been making its way to the cultural forefront for years, her appearance at the head of England's political scene further invigorated and heightened maternal expectations.

2.3.1 Queen Victoria as Mother of England

Victoria's domestic image arose both through an intentional marketing campaign utilizing popular media and through mechanisms over which she had no control. Because both print and non-print media were enthusiastic to embrace a morally upright monarchy, they readily produced material that perpetuated the idea of Victoria as the model domestic woman and mother. This enthusiasm, combined with recently increased public access to the press, made such representations ever-present to her subjects. John Plunkett has examined the representations of the royal family that disseminated to the public, noting, "Throughout Victoria's reign, the royal family enjoyed an exceptional degree of publicity. The royal image was constantly available on a diverse assortment of media, ranging from engravings to magic lantern shows to street ballads and photographs" (2-3). While this specific publicity does not touch on representations of Victoria as a mother, it reiterates the regularity with which images of her, some of which did disseminate maternal expectations, were produced.

The media frenzy to depict Queen Victoria in print culture intensified because society desired and readily consumed representations of the queen.¹³ Print media responded to the

¹³ The sales figures of Dixon and Ross, a major Victorian London copper-plate engraver, demonstrate the public desire for images of Victoria. "Demand for portraits of Victoria far

demand by reproducing domestic images of Victoria, and many subjects aimed to live up to the expectations of womanhood and motherhood they saw in those images. Plunkett has outlined how such media attention turned into social ideology, with society imagining Queen Victoria as an icon, an image, an ideal to strive to achieve:

As noun, 'the media' stands for an institutional bloc, a shorthand and overly homogenous term for a diverse ensemble of newspapers, periodicals, prints, and broadsheets. Yet the term also refers to the epistemological process of mediation, an act of linking and connection. The most important feature of Victoria's media making was thus not the precise parameters of her portrayal, where the same tropes were repeated with monotonous regularity. Rather, it was the individual and collective experience provided by the different media. The wealth of newspapers, prints, and photographs offered Victoria's subjects an intimate and personal interaction with the monarchy. The monarchy's prominence within national life was the sum product of Victoria's position within the interior lives of her subjects. (7-8)

In addition to being “an act of linking and connection,” mediation also functions as an act of filtering and framing, in this case, filtering out negative feelings toward motherhood and framing motherhood as a national service. A carefully framed version of the royal image was readily on display during the early years of Victoria’s reign. Because of this image and the “collective experience” people underwent in getting to know their queen through media, idyllic

outstripped that of all other engravings,” and the number of royal paintings available for public consumption also grew in number (Plunkett 71).

representations of Victoria infiltrated English social ideology, especially the ideologies of womanhood and motherhood.

Victoria's family was depicted with such regularity that *The Penny Satirist*, an inexpensive, satirical broadsheet news publication, issued a mock conversation between Victoria and Albert in July 1845 discussing the media's constant royal representations. A cartoon version of Victoria points out the ever-presence of her image in the media by asserting that people will remember more about her monarchy than any before because "all our movements are recorded in the papers" ("Court" *Penny*). In fact, Victoria and her family, especially Victoria and Albert, were the most commonly depicted subjects in most forms of media; they were among the most frequent subjects of ballad sellers, they regularly appeared on the cover of illustrated magazines, they were common subjects in the non-illustrated press, and Victoria's portrait was reprinted and distributed with regularity (Plunkett 70).¹⁴ A small portrait of Victoria from the bust up also appeared at the top of each cover of *The Lady's Newspaper*, an illustrated broadsheet intended for higher-class readers that was actually dedicated to the queen.¹⁵

Middle-class women felt the importance of living up to these images, especially those that portrayed Victoria in a model manner. Many subjects were willing to accept ideal representations of the queen because they were so pleased to have a monarchy that was not

¹⁴ Between the years of 1842 and 1847, the royal family was depicted on the cover of more than 18% of the issues of *The Illustrated London News* and the *Pictorial Times* (Plunkett 100).

¹⁵ Costing six pence for a copy, *The Lady's Newspaper* was geared toward middle-and upper-class readers, although its predecessor, *The Queen*, specifically "defined itself as an upper-class journal" (Beetham and Boardman 53).

constantly full of scandal. One subject pointed out, relieved to finally have a “moral” Royal family on the throne:

With wickedness on the throne, pollution in the palace, infidelity at the head of the Church, how can the nation increase in piety, virtue and goodness? The great blessing of a female reign is in its purity of court morals, and in its decorum of manners This example of strict virtue on the British throne was imperatively needed; hence the great blessing conferred by the reign of Victoria, who is, in her private life, a model for her people. (Hale 145)

This example makes two essential points. First, representations of a moral Royal family were essential for strengthening the English nation. Second, even Victoria’s “private” life was actually public, so all of her actions were likely carefully constructed or contrived.

Even forms of media known for satire were careful how they depicted Victoria’s monarchy. *Punch*, for example, cleaned up the genre of royal satire during her reign. Richard Atlick has pointed out that satirists and caricaturists during the reigns of George IV and William IV “had a libertine, scandal-ridden court at their disposal,” while “*Punch* had the staid court of a girlish, totally uncompromised Queen and her upright, cultivated Prince. Scurrility was out; light satire was in, restrained by the sense that Victoria’s accession marked a new beginning” (423). Even street patterers followed suit, portraying a clean image of the queen that perpetuated the domestic stereotype. By trade, street patterers engaged in what Henry Mayhew called “oral puffery” by telling outrageous, scandalous stories (213). Still, during Mayhew’s research for *London Labour and the London Poor*, these patterers reported that Victoria’s morally upright persona made it difficult for even this group to sully her name or attack her virtue. One expressed that “he never had much to say about the Queen,” while another interjected that,

“Nothing can be said against her, and nothing ought to; that’s true enough” (Mayhew 228).

Although one patterer did admit to devising a story that her most recent pregnancy was actually triplets, Plunkett’s astute assertion about this tale further supports my claim about the centrality of Victoria’s maternity to English society. Plunkett calls it a “telling sign of the stability of the royal family that, by the early 1850s, Victoria’s maternity had become so unshakeably matter of fact that it could only be made newsworthy by the birth of triplets” (103).

Although these examples do not directly deal with depictions of Victoria as an ideal mother, they demonstrate the early media trend to positively portray the queen and her family. Through such carefully constructed representations, the media developed a strong image of Victoria’s domesticity and virtues, both precursors to the focus on Victoria as a model mother that infiltrated maternal ideology. These precursors are important because it was only natural for the media to pay more attention to Victoria’s domesticity than to her motherhood at the beginning of her reign. She acceded the British throne in June of 1837 as a single monarch, only marrying Prince Albert in 1840 and birthing their first child later that same year. Throughout her reign, however, Victoria would give birth to a total of nine children. Representations of this domestic queen eventually shifted to depictions of an ideal royal mother of England. Such representations imagined Queen Victoria as a surrogate mother to her subjects and a model maternal example within discourses of motherhood.

Concerns with Victoria’s maternal performance arose in the media nearly as soon as it was publicized that the young queen would be a mother. Although Victoria would, in the coming years, become the preeminent icon of proper maternity, even she was not entirely exempt from the advice so readily passed on to mothers. This advice, however, showed an immediate concern with the queen’s success as a maternal example. In its January 1841 issue, published

shortly after the birth of Victoria's eldest child, *The Christian Lady's Magazine* printed a poem written "a few hours after the birth of the infant princess" (S.B.H. 127). This poem was addressed from a British mother to Queen Victoria, begging the queen to nurse her child rather than following the aristocratic custom of hiring a wet nurse. The poem noted that women throughout England would follow Victoria's example, iterating early the importance of Victoria on widespread maternal expectations.

"Oh, Royal Mother! Condescend to hear a mother's voice," the poem opened, begging the queen to hear the advice of someone so above her in maternal experience, yet beneath her in social station (S.B.H. 127). The poet, identified only by the initials S.B.H., invoked the Christian principles so common in maternal advice of the time. She also noted the influence Victoria would have over other mothers, who would look up to their queen as a model:

Thyself a nursing-mother to thy royal infant be,
 And highborn dames henceforth would then a pattern take by thee;
 'Tis the birthright of the new-born babe, and by the skillful hand
 Of God, our wise Creator, it is beautifully planned.
 O why should babes of royal birth, and why shouldst thou, my Queen,
 Of those sweet pleasures be deprived which in a cot are seen?
 Then, Royal Mother, deign to hear a parent's pleading voice,
 Let on thy own maternal breast thy royal babe rejoice. (127)

Although Victoria did not heed the poet's advice,¹⁶ the mere publication of this plea in the first issue of a popular magazine following the Princess Royal's birth indicates the immediate media concern with the queen's success as a mother. It also demonstrates the common recognition that Victoria would become an example to other mothers, and thus that it behooved society for her to be a good mother, or at least to be represented as such.¹⁷

Other publications from the same month began the process of positively representing Queen Victoria in her role as a mother, and this trend continued throughout much of her reign and even after her death. Most periodicals featured sections with titles like "The Court" or "Court Circular," which followed the queen's daily actions as they related to both her political and family life. When Victoria and Albert became parents, the media depicted their parental performances, as well, focusing specifically on representing the queen as a mother. As more children were born, representations of Victoria as an ideal mother grew in popularity, becoming so prevalent that they spanned continents and decades. Even after Victoria's death, publications across the world spoke of her strong maternal instinct, as we will see.

¹⁶ Queen Victoria hired a wet nurse for each of her children. *The Court Magazine and Monthly Critic* (London) noted in the same month that S.B.H.'s poem was published (January 1841) that the royal family had hired a wet nurse from Edinburgh named Mrs. Packer.

¹⁷ A discourse emerged in the mid-late 1850s in which critics expressed outrage over the trend of wet nursing, which had recently seen a resurgence in popularity, as I will discuss in detail in chapter 3. It is beyond the scope of my argument to suggest that Victoria's decision to hire wet nurses for her own children led to the fashion that developed. Still, the existence of such a trend gives some credence to S.B.H.'s claim that "dames henceforth would then a pattern take by thee."

The Court Magazine and Monthly Critic published an account of Victoria's care for her baby in "The Queen's Gazette" section of its January 1841 issue, noting the "great anxiety" felt by the "royal parents" for the infant's health and well-being (70). The article explained that Victoria was personally attentive to her child, detailing, "Immediately her Majesty has risen in the morning, and entered the breakfast-room, intelligence of the state of health of the Infant Princess is communicated to the Queen by the Baroness Lehzen; and as soon as breakfast is concluded, her Majesty (who is generally accompanied by Prince Albert), proceeds to the nursery" (70). This account highlighted that attending to her child was one of Victoria's primary desires, and the article goes on to indicate that visiting the nursery was also her last concern before going to bed each night. While this may not sound like much attention by contemporary standards, the idea this account aimed to represent was that Queen Victoria was focused on her baby and did her best to spend as much time with her as possible. Most Victorian readers would have understood that obligations of the state would pull Victoria away from her child more than most mothers. Additionally, upper-class mothers were less heavily criticized than middle-class ones for relegating their children to the care of servants because society recognized their additional obligations. Still, the article in no way indicated that morning and evening were the *only* times Victoria spent with her infant. In fact, details in Court Circular-type sections of newspapers for years to come suggested that Victoria walked with her children, took them with her to events, and otherwise spent regular time with them.

Later publications continued the trend of detailing Queen Victoria's interest in her children, generally noting that she performed her duties as a mother with loving affection. These articles painted a picture of an ideal mother that Victorian women should aim to mimic.

Trewman's Exeter Flying Post explained in its issue covering Princess Louise's christening,

“There was a most gratifying and interesting sight. The Queen was surrounded by four of her children, who attended to her directions A gentleman, who was present, said that he never felt so much heartfelt delight as he did on that occasion, to behold the great Sovereign of the land acting the part of an affectionate mother” (“Mother” *Trewman’s*). While this statement demonstrates the type of maternal praise Victoria regularly received in the press, it also troubles the manifest meaning of the comment. The words “acting the part” suggest, possibly inadvertently, that such proper maternity, at least at the hand of the queen, must in some way be acted or performed. If the prototypical mother can only perform maternity rather than actually live up to its standards, then the model certainly can be understood to have been unrealistically burdensome for everyday mothers.

Other praise appeared regularly throughout Victoria’s reign, such as in an 1853 article in *The Era*, which boasted of the queen’s maternal skill, asserting, “As a wife and a mother Queen Victoria is equal to all praise” (“Long”). Victoria’s maternity continued to be lauded for decades after she became a parent, and even after Albert’s and her own deaths, because of the widespread nature of the positive image she had developed. An article appeared in the American *Ladies’ Repository* in 1866, for example, which praised Queen Victoria and Prince Albert for their ideal family. It admired the “devotion of the husband and wife” and the “faithfulness of the father and mother” for providing a “beautiful example of happy home-life in high places that will constitute the grandest legacy the illustrious pair will leave to the world” (“Queen” 552). An 1864 article in *The Mother’s Treasury* also praised Victoria’s maternal skill because of her interest in being a grandmother. It announced the royal birth of Prince Albert Victor, the eldest son of Victoria’s eldest son, Albert Edward (later King Edward VII). This article noted, “On this occasion, as on every other, our good and gracious Queen has shown herself to be the true English matron and

mother” (F.G. 18). Unlike the example from Princess Louise’s baptism, this representation suggests not that Victoria was performing, but rather that maternity came naturally to her.

Representations of Queen Victoria as a domestic wife and mother also appeared in full articles outside of “court circular” sections, as evidenced by “Long Live the Queen” in an April 1853 issue of *The Era*. Such depictions were so widespread that they sometimes appeared in more unusual places through more nuanced manners, such as a metaphoric representation of Queen Victoria in an 1844 “Review of New Publications” in *The Christian Mother's Magazine*. This review of Isabella Caulton's poetry collection, *The Domestic Hearth and Other Poems*, equates the religious home to Queen Victoria through metaphor. Of all the poems in Caulton's collection, the reviewer selects an excerpt from “To the White Water-Lily” to reproduce in this short review. Here, Caulton refers to the water-lily the way many advice writers of the period refer to the mother, as the spiritual head of the religious home.

At this time, the water-lily would have called forth images of Queen Victoria. A new flower, at the time considered a type of water-lily, had recently (in 1837) been discovered in the Amazon by Mr. Schomburgk, and had been named after Victoria. The *Victoria Regia*, scientists who published a book on the flower hoped, would be worthy of a “Sovereign who has known how to unite the dignified charge of public duties with a constant regard for the cares of domestic life; and who has thus borne a noble and enduring testimony to the value of woman's intellect and heart” (Hooker viii). The review in *The Christian Mother's Magazine* lists a specific purpose for selecting Caulton's poem on the water-lily: “The ‘aim’ of the author of this interesting little volume is ‘to represent,’ as she states in her dedication, ‘the influence, the importance of a Religious Home—of a whole and happy hearth—of woman’s sway, in its best and purest sense—of the love, the duties, the mutual delight, that should unite the members of

one family” (“Rev.” 381). This poem, and the review that chooses to represent an entire collection of poetry through it, praises a flower that has become synonymous to Queen Victoria, for having a religious influence over the home that could bring peace to the home and the family, thus equating Victoria with the ideal religious mother.

Other representations of the queen as an ideal mother were prevalent, as well, and each reiterated the high precedent of Victoria’s maternal performance that middle-class mothers aimed to achieve. In her 1850 book *Woman’s Record*, which provided sketches of women of note from antiquity to the present, Sarah Hale reiterated that Victoria was a mother to be admired. “The royal pair,” Hale noted, “have already had seven children . . . All these children are carefully trained under the supervision of their royal parents, and the family of the Queen is one of the best governed and guided in England” (808). An American account of Victoria’s maternal example, published in a Scottish newspaper in May 1874, further indicates the far reach of Victoria’s positive maternal image. *The Dundee Courier & Argus* reported that an American court circular had claimed, “Queen Victoria is world-renowned for being a good, common-sensed mother” (“Latest”). Such accounts appear to have been common outside England; another American who visited England sent a gleaming report of Victoria’s maternal image back to *The Mother’s Magazine*, and it was later reprinted in *The British Mother’s Magazine*. “During my late visit to Europe,” the traveler announces to her American readers, “I had frequent occasion to admire the system pursued by English mothers in the education of their children.” The speaker then narrows her praise, explaining, “She of whom I am now about to speak, deserves a separate notice, as she stands separate and alone from all the other mothers of England. Victoria, the Queen . . . has won golden opinions from all ranks. This arises from her

amiable character, and the strictness with which she fulfills the duties of a wife and mother” (“Royal Matron” 197).

Although many media representations of Victoria were beyond her control, this positive image of a domestic queen and her ideal family was exactly the one Victoria hoped to portray. She capitalized upon the media’s iconography of her domesticity to establish herself as an ideal English mother. “The figure of Victoria never existed in-itself,” John Plunkett points out. “It was always for-itself, always aware of its own being. Necessarily so, given that the creation of a media monarchy could not but imply a self-consciousness towards its own representation” (68). Victoria was so careful to protect her public image throughout her reign that, when sending private letters that highlighted the Queen’s frustrations about motherhood and other domestic roles, she reminded her eldest daughter to “paste your letters for I assure you elsewhere they may be opened” (*Victoria Dearest* 149). Such precautions clearly paid off, as she established a strong image of herself as a domestic woman and ideal mother, as we have seen through media depictions. Victoria was so proud of the image she created that she bragged about it in a private letter to her Uncle Leopold in 1854, boasting “they say *no* sovereign was *more loved* than I am (I am bold enough to say), and *that*, from our *happy domestic home*—which gives such a good example” (*Letters*, 29 October 1854, emphasis in original).

In addition to these media representations, Victoria implemented many of her own mechanisms to promote her maternal image. Although she was one of the only women in England with much legal authority, she downplayed her political role and highlighted her domestic one through a marketing campaign that depicted her husband, Albert, as the head of the family, despite her role as head of state. Through this campaign, Victoria capitalized on Coventry Patmore’s notion of the “Angel in the House” by perpetuating the idea that she was

what Carolyn Dever has called an “Angel in the Palace,” a domestic woman, a wife, a mother, and the mother of England (9). Publicly, Victoria avoided certain political gestures and symbols to demonstrate that her primary role was that of wife and mother, preferring to wear a bonnet instead of a crown at state events, and “prefer[ing] her wedding lace and veil to the robes of state” (Homans *Royal* 5).

Victoria also used commissioned royal portraiture to help develop her own image as a maternal monarch, and this portrayal of the domestic queen helped lead to her strong image as an ideal mother. After the birth of her second child, her first son, Albert Edward, Victoria began capitalizing on her image as mother by commissioning paintings in which her children surrounded her and physically clung to her. Franz Xaver Winterhalter, one of the Queen’s favorite artists, illustrates this image in an 1848 oil painting. In this painting, Albert is in the front, indicating his role as the public representative of the home, while the young Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) clings to his mother, whose arm is around the child in the background. Four of her children are at her feet, and her two eldest daughters are holding and mothering the newest baby, Princess Louise. Because images of Victoria and her family were readily printed and shared, the queen could safely assume that copies of commissioned portraiture would eventually appear into the public sector. Margaret Homans notes the calculated use of such portraiture. She explains that a propensity for royal family portraiture existed in the seventeenth century, and “Victoria’s reign marked a revival of these strategies with altogether novel meanings and effects,” as such maternal portraits only further enhanced the idea that Victoria strongly embodied the ideal mother (Homans *Royal* 4).

Victoria’s maternal campaign further used what the British Library has called “opportunistic marketing,” in which Victoria and emerging media outlets developed a symbiotic

relationship that fostered positive publicity for both (“Advert”). An advertisement for *The Daisy Family Story Paper*, for instance, praised Victoria for her “Her Majesty’s example” as a maternal figure, but this praise served multiple purposes. It spread the queen’s maternal image while simultaneously promoting the paper itself by boasting that Victoria had written “most kindly about *The Daisy Family Story Paper*” (“Advert”). Notably, this advertisement for the paper relied on its readers’ trust in the queen’s judgment as a domestic woman and mother. By printing Victoria’s words, the paper capitalized on her positive maternal image while simultaneously re-inscribing that image; it used her endorsement as a reason that “parents may introduce the *Daisy* to their children without a moment’s misgiving” (“Advert”). Thus, it was Victoria’s direct praise of the paper, at least in part, which elicited the paper’s positive portrayal of the queen, a symbiotic promotional relationship that occurred across a range of media.

2.3.2 Circulated Images of Queen Victoria as National and Imperial Mother

Through careful management of her image as a young queen, Victoria became a repository for maternal expectations, spreading an ideal concept of motherhood that women, both in England and abroad, aimed to mimic. Her image as the quintessential mother figure fostered the development of the discourse that periodicals like *The Mother’s Magazine* had only recently returned to the forefront of domestic ideology. Victoria functioned as an example to her subjects as she became a surrogate mother to the mothers of England, and the media worked to make that connection for her. In its first year of publication, *The Illustrated London News* announced its intention to create a strong tie between the queen and her citizens by focusing on the domestic ideas “that form the links of that beautiful chain, which should be fastened at one end to the cottage, at the other to the palace, and be electric with the happiness that is carried into both” (“Our Principles” 17). This line evokes a modern metaphor through the reference to electricity

that denotes a modern form of family life and of monarch-subject relations specific to the Victorian period.

The media regularly depicted this modern relationship by representing Victoria as a surrogate mother through charity work. Such work allowed the queen to literally provide for and nurture her subjects, especially children and the poor, and print media capitalized on her charity at every turn. What writers who depicted representations of the queen's charity work failed to recognize, or at least to articulate, was that Victoria's charitable gifts would have come largely, if not entirely, from the public treasury. Thus, although such work helped the public imagine their queen as a benefactress and surrogate mother, Victoria acted on behalf of all of England's governing bodies.

Still, updates on the royal court regularly announced charity that Victoria performed. An account published in *The Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times*, for instance, reminded the public that Victoria cared for her subjects when they were in need. "Yesterday her Majesty's annual gifts were distributed in the riding-school, to nearly five hundred poor families of this neighbourhood," the 1847 column noted ("Court" *Lady's* 5). "The gifts consisted of blankets, bread, meat, plum-pudding, cloaks, coals, &c." ("Court" *Lady's* 5). Such publicity clearly performed its function, as Victoria's subjects recognized the queen as their own charitable mother. In her description of Victoria in *Woman's Record*, Sarah Hale notes Victoria's charitable nature, explaining, "She is liberal in her charities, and, from her private purse, has pensioned many deserving persons" (808).¹⁸

¹⁸ Various such allusions to the queen's "private purse" occur in writing of the Victorian period. This phrase indicates that Victoria was herself charitable with personal funds outside of those from the national treasury. Aside from such mentions of her private charity, however, I have

Many other papers published reports that reminded Victoria's subjects of her charity, as well, but they emphasize less whose funds she used and more the personal connection she established with subjects through such work. The “Court Circular” in *The Englishwoman’s Review and Home Newspaper*, for instance, discussed Queen Victoria’s charity on January 1, 1859. This article gave the following account of her holiday plans:

The commencement of the New Year will be marked at Windsor by the distribution of her Majesty’s bounties to the poor of the royal borough, and of the adjacent parishes the humble recipients of her Majesty’s bounty enter, and, *often in the presence of the Queen herself and the members of the Royal Family*, receive those substantial tokens of kindness and consideration. (7, emphasis added)

The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine printed similar accounts of Victoria’s charity, especially around the holidays. It noted in 1869 that “her Majesty *personally* distributed Christmas gifts to the labourers on the Osborne estate and their wives,” further explaining, “The Queen has for many years kindly presented the school children at Osborne with gingerbread cakes at Christmas time, and the custom was kept up this year” (83, emphasis added). Notably, each of these descriptions emphasizes the personal aspect of this exchange. They directly linked Victoria to her subjects by carefully pointing out that she met personally with her poorer subjects and provided, from her own hand, the bounty they required. This personal touch enhanced the connection between Victoria and her subjects, and it was also reminiscent of the physically caring relationship between mother and child. Thus, Victoria’s personal interactions with objects

found no specific information to indicate that these funds were any different from the national funds to which Victoria would have had access.

of charity were imagined as intimately maternal, making her a stand-in mother to her own subjects as she demonstrated how to properly perform maternity.

An article in an 1853 issue of *The Era* also noted the close connections that were arising between Victoria and her subjects. It stated, “We now confidently take our stand by the throne of Queen Victoria, and seeing her share with her subjects and fellow women the domestic life common to all wives and mothers, we know that she makes an appeal to the national heart which her illustrious predecessor [Queen Elizabeth] never exhibited” (“Long”). The “appeal to the national heart” to which this article refers resonates as the appeal that Queen Victoria and the press both aimed to make to the public. Victoria’s appeal was through performances of charity work and attempts to care for her subjects. The media’s was through their often overt representations of Victoria’s efforts.

The British print media was not only concerned with representing Queen Victoria as a surrogate mother to her English subjects, but also with demonstrating her maternal connection with people all over the world. British media representations of her imperial subjects poised her as the ideal mother across the globe. Various media outlets highlighted instances in which people from far-away parts of the British empire desired a personal connection with their “Great Mother, Queen Victoria” (“Whit”). One article included a poem supposedly penned by an Iroquois Indian of Caughnawaga, near Montreal, that praises Victoria and calls her, in the introduction to the poem, “Our great and good mother” (“Canadian”). Media outlets made the devotion of Victoria’s subjects as children especially apparent following the death of Prince Albert; a New Zealand newspaper exclaimed, “Oh, Victoria our mother!—We greet you! . . . We, your Maori children, are now sighing in sorrow together with you . . . All we can do now is to weep together with you, O, our good mother, who has nourished us, your ignorant children of

this island, even to this day” (“Britain's” 316). This exclamatory love for their mother, the queen, demonstrates the media-produced idea that many subjects viewed Victoria as a surrogate mother.

In 1856 and 1860, numerous accounts of subjects traveling far to meet with their “Great Mother” appeared in newspapers across England and Scotland. An 1856 account in the *Daily News*, for instance, told the story of a party traveling from Canada solely to see their “Great Mother”:

The sights and exhibitions of London have been augmented this week by the arrival of a party of British North Americans from Lake Huron, Canada West The party consists of six warriors, four squaws, and an infant in the cradle. They are fine looking men, and express sympathy with our Queen, they having rendered their services in the late war The exhibition must be interesting to all, as making us familiar with the race of aborigines who are stated to be nearly extinct, and who have come, as they say, many thousands of miles to see their Great Mother, Queen Victoria. (“The Whit”)

A similar account appeared in various news outlets in 1860, which all told the same general story. One such story reported that “Catherine Sutton left her family alone and unfriended in order to . . . prevent her tribe from being driven from their homes and farms by the cupidity of the white man. She braved the terrors of the ‘big salt lake,’” the report explains, “and sought and obtained an interview with ‘the Great Mother,’ Queen Victoria” (“Nah-Ne-Bah-Wee-Quay”). *The Bury and Norwich Post* also reported, “The Garo Hill tribes have included Queen Victoria, ‘mother of the Feringhis,’ among their goddesses, and worship her as they do Mahadeva” (“India”). Such stories served to remind Victoria's subjects at home of her far-reaching influence, and they reiterated the idea that Victoria was a surrogate mother to all of her subjects,

near and far. Of course, these accounts also served English imperialistic purposes, suggesting that Victoria's imperial subjects were happier because of her rule, and implying the superiority of the nation whose queen functioned as a global "great mother."

The idea that Victoria was a national and imperial surrogate mother became so thoroughly engrained that, six years after her death, *The Daily Mail* (London) reported the praises Lord Roseberry sang at a poetic address remembering the late queen. This article stated, "Lord Roseberry delivered a remarkable panegyric of Queen Victoria," during which he called her a "mother" who "knit her peoples together" ("Mother" *Daily* 5). Because Lord Roseberry was Scottish, the obvious implication of this statement is that Queen Victoria, through her image as surrogate mother to all of her subjects, made her English and Scottish subjects feel connected. The implications, however, especially in light of the media coverage just examined, are far broader. The impression so clearly given by the media indicates that Victoria knitted all of her people together, so that her subjects envisioned people from across the globe feeling a kinship to one another through this idealized maternal connection.

2.3.3 Connecting Queen Victoria to Middle-Class Mothers

As Queen Victoria, or depictions of her, created a feeling of kinship between her subjects from across the globe, the media image of Victoria also encouraged a close kinship between everyday citizens and their queen. A main reason women's periodicals were so influential is that they encouraged a bourgeois domestic image of Queen Victoria, "domesticat[ing] the appeal of the monarchy" and "encourag[ing] a personal and familiar relationship between Victoria and her female subjects" (Plunkett 87). Both social and domestic periodicals depicted images of Queen Victoria that showed her as the epitome of the English wife and mother, and the ideals Victoria supposedly enacted "trickle[d] down through the ranks from Queen Victoria herself" to the

ideology of everyday middle-class citizens (Dever 8). “She is placed perilously high in station,” one article, “so that all eyes look at her; and her life is what it ought to be—really exemplary” (“Long”).

Generating both photographic depictions as well as written explanations of maternal expectations, magazines played a prominent role in the establishment of the Victorian expectations regarding motherhood across different classes. Many middle-class mothers felt a kinship to Victoria and looked up to her as a shining example of motherhood, trying to imitate her maternity in their daily lives. Plunkett suggests that the women’s media market, including not only periodicals, but also books of beauty prior to the mid-1840s, and later ladies’ journals and illustrated newspapers, “encouraged a personal and familiar relationship between Victoria and her female subjects” (87). Readers, thus, felt a connection to their queen that normalized the hope of imitating her in their maternal and domestic lives. In fact, an American writer pointed out, “The life of Queen Victoria as a mother was hardly different from that of any other women, except that the occupations of state forced her to see less of her children than most mothers do. The royal nursery was like that of any other household” (Jeune 623). Thus, even when Victoria’s shortcomings as a mother were recognized—Jeune points out that Victoria was unable to spend as much time with her children as most mothers—the idea persisted that her maternal example felt relatable to middle-class women because they functioned similarly.

Elizabeth Langland notes Victoria’s domestic performance, especially as it capitalized on middle-class principles. Langland explains, “In her reliance on Albert, in her professed ineptitude for public rule, Victoria constructed herself through emergent middle-class values; she presented herself through a scrim of domestic virtues emphasizing home, hearth, and heart” (*Nobody’s* 63). Thus, despite her higher class status, middle-class mothers were compelled to

live up to Victoria's maternal image because the representations she produced were so clearly in line with middle-class values. The numerous media representations of Queen Victoria and her family felt relatable to middle-class mothers, despite the fact that Victoria actually performed a domestic role for public consumption. She never admitted publicly to facing challenges as a mother. *Homans* has described Victoria's monarchy as a "popular spectacle," illuminating how her life on display worked to establish various domestic ideals and values, many of which are still recognizable as uniquely Victorian (*Royal* 4). Speaking to the relationship between Victoria's performance and her mostly middle-class audience, *Homans* explains, "The association between royal spectacle and middle-class practices and values came to seem the permanent hallmark of the royal family" (*Royal* 4). Media depictions of Victoria's domesticity were just the first of many royal values that middle classes would try to emulate through the years.

Homans also notes the connection between Victoria and middle-class mothers, and her understanding of this connection raises the stakes of Victoria's success in her campaign to relate intimately to the middle class. "Serious-minded middle-class domesticity was becoming the behavioral norm for England," *Homans* explains, "and in behaving publicly like members of the middle class, Victoria and Albert helped their nation to become powerful and prosperous by helping it see itself as a middle-class nation" (*Royal* 5). Thus, the importance of the connection Victoria established with her middle-class citizens was even more elevated, as Victoria's image as an ideal middle-class mother set the standard for the future prosperity of the nation. We have seen how middle-class mothers were told they bore this same burden, as well.

The problem with Victoria's ideal maternal image was that her private feelings were much colder toward her children than she demonstrated outwardly. She did not actually live up

to the ideals she imparted to her subjects, and the fact that the queen could not live up to her own standard suggests the difficulty placed on middle-class mothers. “It is now accepted,” Richard Atlick explains, “though scarcely to be thought of in her own lifetime, that Queen Victoria did not like babies; the more that came, the less welcome they seem, in retrospect, to have been” (423). “She was not what the guidebooks said mothers should be,” Natalie McKnight further notes (15). In fact, Victoria describes newborn babies as “froglike,” expressing that “an ugly baby is a very nasty object” (*Dearest Child* 191).

Victoria admitted privately to her eldest daughter, Vicky, “I hated the thought of having children and have no adoration for very little babies” (*Dearest Child* 167). When Vicky announced her first pregnancy to her mother, the queen called it “horrid news” that “upset us dreadfully” (*Dearest Child* 108.) Of course, Victoria did not harbor *only* negative sentiments toward her nine children. As Margaret Homans has pointed out, Victoria:

Both publicly impersonated a domestic woman and really was one. She did indeed appear to be an ordinary, happily married woman. She represents palatial Balmoral Castle and Osborne House, the settings for some of her and Albert's most impressive performances of domesticated monarchy, as homes and herself as an ordinary woman who adored her husband and took an uncommon interest in raising her children. (*Royal* 5)

Thus, Victoria was not necessarily a bad mother, but simply a realistic one who succumbed to shortcomings like any other mother, only she did not show those shortcomings publicly.

The frustration Victoria sometimes felt toward motherhood highlights the imperfections in her largely perfect image, reaffirming that her maternal representation was, to a degree, a performance. Victoria’s realistic experience of motherhood, in which she struggled with various

facets of motherhood while also enjoying many of its moments, are evident in her private letters. She admitted to Vicky, “No one recognizes more than I do, the blessing of having children, but the anxieties and trouble—not to say sorrows—are quite as great as the blessings” (*Dearest Mama* 304). The sentiment Queen Victoria expressed in this statement is perhaps the closest connection to true middle-class motherhood that she made, but she avoided making these feelings known publicly. She recognized that her maternal image was largely the source of her popularity and that middle-class English mothers aimed to mimic the model she had created. Victoria “perpetuated the gap between the ideal and the real that conduct books for mothers had developed,” McKnight explains, “inspiring and furthering the expectations of mothers established by guidebooks, periodicals, and novels” (14, 15). This discrepancy between theory and practice, however, created problems for middle-class mothers, who attempted to follow Victoria’s example, not knowing that the ideals to which they were trying to live up were nearly impossible to achieve.

Although motherhood was not a new institution in the mid-nineteenth century, emerging and changing norms regarding Victorian expectations for motherhood were only beginning to take shape. The varying norms regarding middle-class motherhood created a difficult set of expectations that most mothers could not realistically achieve. The heavily nuanced expectations were ever changing and sometimes contradictory. Thus, no specific set of rules can define what was expected from Victorian mothers. Rather, an abundance of rules and ideas constantly made their way into public discourse through various forms of media and through ideal representations of Queen Victoria. These expectations placed immense pressure on mothers, and middle-class mothers struggled to achieve the ideal, a problem regularly depicted in fiction. In the chapters that follow, I examine the nuances of maternal expectations from different angles through

literature of the mid-Victorian period. I highlight different aspects of maternal expectations, discovering how the norms regarding motherhood, and eventually alternative forms of motherhood, changed throughout the nineteenth century.

3 CHAPTER 2

WHEN MOTHERS MOTHER BADLY: INEFFECTUAL MOTHERS IN MID-VICTORIAN FICTION

The burgeoning maternal ideology discussed in chapter 1 made it difficult for mothers to live up to the expectations laid out for them. Literature of the Victorian period responded to those expectations in a variety of ways, although depictions of mothers were rarely positive outside of didactic fiction. “Despite this apparent emphasis on pure and self-sacrificing mothers within the dominant cultural ideology,” Carolyn Dever has pointed out, “good mothers are not a staple of canonized Victorian literature, even among the female authors. Too often, mothers are either dead, unimportant, ineffective, or destructive” (4). Joan Manheimer has noted a similar trend, discussing the prevalence of “terrible” mothers who are “devouring or uninterested, malicious or neglectful; they pose a serious threat to the lives of their offspring (530). While the terrible mother is certainly common in popular Victorian fiction, mothers also react to maternal expectations in other, less extreme ways. This chapter is concerned with understanding the many responses of fictional mid-century mothers to the expectations set forth by emerging maternal norms.

The living biological mother is generally a minor character who only receives minimal attention in Victorian popular fiction. Although various biological mothers are present, few of those characters are mothers of actual heroes or heroines. Victorian heroines especially are mostly motherless, if not orphaned entirely. Still, a plethora of mothers exist with a range of

depictions, growing out of the Austenian tradition of depicting silly, but interesting and sometimes useful mothers, as in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and *Mansfield Park* (1814). Such Victorian mothers include Isabella Linton in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Becky Sharpe and Amelia Sedley in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), Helen Graham in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Mrs. Pryor in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Clara Copperfield in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850), Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), Mrs. Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Mrs. Pocket in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), Mrs. Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), Mrs. Hare and Lady Isabel in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), Lady Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Mrs. Hamley and Mrs. Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1865), and Mrs. Davilow and Maria Alcharisi in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), among others.¹⁹ The nuanced depictions of such mothers demonstrate the instability of maternal expectations, as very few of

¹⁹ I intentionally omit examinations of some major fictional mothers in this chapter because they are either not mid century or not middle class, the primary focus of this study. I forego consideration, for instance, of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), both because of class distinctions and because the novel was published at the end of the nineteenth century. I similarly omit a reading of Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) because her lower class status minimized the social expectations placed on her. I also leave out detailed discussions of mothers like Lady Dedlock from Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and Lady Cumnor from Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1865) because upper-class mothers were subject to slightly milder expectations. Still, Lady Cumnor's behavior and Lady Dedlock's suffering do indicate that upper-class mothers faced strong pressures, even if not as intensely as middle-class ones.

the above mothers respond to those expectations in the same way and almost none of them live up to prescribed norms entirely.

I claim that maternal expectations function as mechanisms of control over biological mothers in popular Victorian fiction because mothers are unable to achieve the social standard regardless of the effort they put forth. Those who attempt to reach Queen Victoria's benchmark still meet social disapproval or become caricatures. They are never effective, powerful women. Many characters openly criticize Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, for instance, for being overly protective of her son, Arthur. Further, as Barbara Thaden has noted, "Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, actually mocks the stereotype of the good mother in his portrait of Amelia Osborne," whose doting makes her son vain and selfish (4). Mothers who ignore or attempt to subvert such norms, however, experience equal difficulty. As we will see, Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby is the antithesis of the ideal Victorian mother, but her vast work outside of the traditional maternal sphere does nothing to alter female or maternal expectations in the novel. In fact, it is strict expectations about female morality, a large aspect of maternal ideology, that leave Esther motherless and lead to Lady Dedlock's demise. Thus, in non-didactic Victorian fiction, maternity sentences women to social critique or death regardless of their performances of prescribed norms. The nuanced literary representations of biological mothers iterate that fictional mother's lack the agency to change these limiting expectations. This agency, at least in fiction, seems more readily available to non-biological mothers, and I examine this paradigm in chapters 3 and 4.

My argument is not that biological mothers are entirely disempowered, for the fluid and changing nature of power demonstrates the impossibility of this suggestion. Also, mothers arguably had a great deal of power for domestic purposes. In fact, in certain cases, like Mary

Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley, the mother's ineffectuality is a conscious choice. Lady Audley abandons her child, along with any chance of positively impacting his rearing or education, to increase her independence and improve her own happiness. While leaving her child behind is a choice, an indication of power, it still ultimately results in her inability to affect change in her son's life. Additionally, the personal power she does attain only lasts for a short time. The eventual consequence of her attempt at independence is her total disempowerment when she is banished to a Belgian madhouse.

Joan Manheimer articulates the struggles such "terrible" literary mothers face as a result of Victorian maternal expectations. She notes that mothers like Lady Audley "reveal terrible failings in their world, a world in which activities are so codified that giving proper nurturance drains the self of all possibilities of self-interest, sexuality, and activity outside the home" (Manheimer 545). My interest similarly lies in the ways in which maternal power is limited, although never nonexistent, because of the expectation of maternal selflessness. I am also concerned with other ways maternal expectations, the "codified" activities and norms to which Manheimer refers, limit maternal power. As Natalie McKnight has pointed out, "Mid-Victorian mothers often suffer because of their attempts and failures to live up to the maternal ideal" (3). This chapter examines three Victorian literary mothers, understanding each character as representing a common fictional maternal archetype. Through examinations of Sybilla Rothesay in Dinah Craik's *Olive* (1850), Mrs. Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1865), and Mrs. Jellyby in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), I demonstrate the difficulty fictional mothers experienced negotiating their highly codified roles.

Sybilla Rothesay emblemizes the tropes of the infantilized and the invalid mother, both ever present in Victorian popular fiction. She is especially reminiscent of Clara in Dickens's

David Copperfield, of whose youth the reader is constantly reminded. Clara was so young when she married that she recalls arguing with Mr. Copperfield about the girlish nature of her handwriting. Clara is described, similarly to Sybilla, as spoiled, unable to keep house on her own, and more like a child or doll than a mother. The more common type of mother Sybilla represents than the infantile one, however, is the invalid, a trope that accounts for maternal ineffectiveness in much Victorian fiction. Mrs. Hare in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, for instance, is constantly troubled by headaches and sickness. Mrs. Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times* is described as "a little, thin, white, pink-eyed bundle of shawls, of surpassing feebleness, mental and bodily" (19). Gaskell's fiction is full of invalid mothers, as well, including Mrs. Hale in *North and South* and Mrs. Hamley in *Wives and Daughters*, and these examples are only a few of the many invalid mothers who appear in popular Victorian fiction.

While Sybilla represents invalid and infantilized mothers, Mrs. Gibson embodies the mother who cannot live up to the strict tenets of maternal expectations despite strongly adhering to some. Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a precursor to this nuanced type of mother. Such a mother is largely portrayed as silly and ineffectual, but still ultimately working to her daughter's advantage. As Manheimer demonstrates, "Mrs. Bennet is a more complicated phenomenon than the naive reader might suspect: we must distinguish between what she is, an inadequate mother, and what she does, which is inadvertently to make herself of considerable use to those daughters in whom we are asked to take an interest" (536). Similarly, Anne Brontë's Helen Graham neglects certain prescribed aspects of wifedom and motherhood by deserting her husband and living in hiding. Although she is criticized for being overprotective of her young son, she is mostly depicted as a good, nurturing mother.

Mrs. Jellyby represents the type of mother who fails at her duties because she refuses to adhere to the basic tenets of female and maternal ideologies. Such “terrible” mothers, to use Manheimer’s word, are common in Victorian fiction. Maria Alcharisi in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, abandons her son for the sake of her acting career. Lady Isabel in Wood’s *East Lynne* and Mrs. Pryor in C. Brontë’s *Shirley* abandon their children, at least for parts of their lives, as do Becky Sharpe in *Vanity Fair* and Braddon’s Lady Audley. Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is guilty of disregarding maternal expectations before she even births her child. She miscarries after ignoring the insistence of her husband, also her doctor, that she forego riding horses while pregnant. We have seen that mothers were regularly blamed for high infant mortality rates, and Dr. Bull insisted that being careful enough would allow women to prevent miscarriages. He indicated that many miscarriages were the result of “habits of indulgence,” like Rosamond’s decision to defy medical advice for personal amusement (Bull 103).

Despite the proliferation of bad mothers in novels by most popular Victorian writers, Dickens is the most famous for his depiction of terrible mothers. McKnight has attributed his awful maternal characters to his “desire to wreak vengeance on his own mother,” whom he resented for leaving him to work in a blacking factory when his father would have had him return home (37). Although Mrs. Jellyby is not a primary character, Dickens devotes two entire chapters to examining her unorthodox form of womanhood and motherhood. Mrs. Gibson and Sybilla Rothesay, on the other hand, are both major characters, which we have seen were rare in Victorian fiction. Their care for their daughters is under intense scrutiny throughout most of their respective novels. My examination uses these novels to understand how biological mothers were represented, interpreted, and imagined both in line with and against the maternal ideal.

Ultimately, I claim, the different representations of ineffectual mothers in non-didactic Victorian fiction highlight the social disempowerment that mothers faced. They demonstrate the instability of the maternal ideal—both its malleability, in that it was ever changing but constantly restrictive, and its vulnerability, in that such an impossible ideal might topple at any given moment. By demonstrating such vulnerability, Victorian fiction proposes a less restrictive and more stable model of motherhood.

3.1 Maternal Infirmary and Infantilization in Craik's *Olive*

Infirmary is perhaps the most recurring circumstance that prevents otherwise well-intentioned literary mothers from adequately performing maternal duties. Fictional mothers are often unable to enact their prescribed roles because they cannot even care for themselves. Many novels, however, suggest that their illnesses are often brought on as much by mental concerns as by physical malady. Mrs. Bennet in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* most clearly begins this trend. She regularly complains about her “nerves,” and she takes to her bed after learning of her daughter Lydia's elopement. Following this canonical work of fiction, the character of the invalid mother became a recurring trope throughout the Victorian period. Such mothers do not fail in their roles because of the physical impossibility of caring for their children, but rather because they are so focused on their ailments that they believe they are incapable of mothering actively.

Mrs. Hare in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, for example, spends much of her time bedridden. Despite being depicted as a loving, even doting, mother and nurturer, as “all children loved Mrs. Hare,” she is unable to physically act as a caregiver (585). Rumors develop in the village of West Lynne that her daughter Barbara is engaged in an affair with a married man, and the actions that lead to these rumors are a direct result of Barbara corresponding with Mr. Carlyle for her

ailing mother. Thus, Mrs. Hare's infirmity not only prevents her from protecting Barbara's reputation, as is her duty, but it indirectly causes the rumors that arise. Although Barbara's actions do not have long-term consequences as in many novels, her need to act for her mother indicates the limitations that infirmity, whether real or imagined, placed on a mother's ability to live up to prescribed norms.

The invalid mother is often represented as an infantilized character that must be cared for like a child. Dinah Craik's 1850 novel *Olive* reverses the role of mother and child by depicting an unusually mature daughter who nurses her childlike mother from a young age. Although Olive's mother is only infantilized, not ill, early in the novel, she later succumbs to illness that enhances her need to be cared for by others, especially Olive. This role reversal demonstrates Sybilla's ineffectiveness as a mother that results from the powerlessness she experiences over her own temperament and health, as well as over her daughter and her domestic, social, and financial circumstances. Sybilla experiences perhaps the least personal power of any mother discussed in this chapter, and my reading will show that her powerlessness is not solely the result of her personal failure, but also of the oppression she experiences as a result of maternal norms.

While the story begins with Olive's birth, it spans nearly three decades of her life, most of which she spends caring for her sometimes ailing, eventually blind, always childlike mother. The novel tells the story of Olive, described as "*deformed*—born so—and will remain so for life" (6, emphasis in original). Olive's deformity is a minor one—"not a humpback, nor yet a twisted spine; it was an elevation of the shoulders, shortening of the neck, and giving the appearance of a perpetual stoop" (23). Olive's parents' vanity, combined with her mother's sense of personal failure, makes it difficult for them to look past their daughter's physical imperfections, and they shun Olive during much of her childhood.

The childlike Sybilla cannot fulfill the expectation that she will be “pulsed with true motherly affection, regard[ing] her children as the natural heirs to love” because she is too overcome with shame about Olive’s physical appearance (“Model” 32). She faints at the news of the infant Olive’s deformity, which she considers “a curse, a bitter curse . . . a shame on its parents, and a dishonour to its race” (14). As Sally Mitchell has explained, “Olive is rejected by her pretty, girlish mother, who feels inadequate because she has given birth to an imperfect child” (29). Mitchell’s focus on inadequacy is essential, as it indicates not simply that Sybilla chooses not to love Olive, but that she imagines Olive’s deformity as a personal punishment. Maternal discourse told mothers to recognize their children’s flaws as results of their own faults, insisting that we should all “learn to see the mother’s disgrace in the disgrace of her children” (Sparrow). Sybilla feels her own maternal inadequacy early in Olive’s infancy, an inferiority that becomes even more difficult to overcome when she is unable to healthily birth any other children. During Olive’s infancy, Sybilla “positively refused to see or notice her child,” and the narrator goes so far as to suggest that “in her madness, the unhappy mother might almost have desired” for Olive’s weak infant stature to succumb to death (15). Thus, from the outset of the novel, the reader observes Sybilla’s failure to live up to the selfless expectations of the maternal ideal, but her failure is largely the result of the pressure this ideal produces.

Sybilla never utters a word regarding the child’s deformity in her letters to her husband, Captain Angus Rothesay, who is away in Jamaica for the first three years of Olive’s life. Upon his return to England and his first sighting of his child, Captain Rothesay is shocked and appalled by his young daughter’s physical appearance. Although his sense of paternal duty makes him disgusted with his wife for her apparent lack of interest in their daughter, he feels no love for the deformed little girl. While young Olive has longed for the day when she would meet her father

and he would hold her and “kiss” her as the nurse said he would, Captain Rothesay’s response to the sight of his child is to turn away, “putting his hand before his eyes, as if to shut out the sight” (27, 23). Still, he insists, “Whatever affection may be wanting,” he will “never forsake his duty,” so he vows to see his daughter once per day so not to neglect his “stern sense of right” (28). Despite his focus on duty, Captain Rothesay’s determination suggests a difference between himself and his wife that highlights the different parental expectations. Because the mother was blamed for her child’s faults, it is easier for Captain Rothesay to overcome his disappointment in Olive’s appearance than for Sybilla because, despite his duty, he is not to blame.

In part because of her childlike nature, but also because of the overwhelming pressures of Victorian motherhood, Sybilla has no such sense of obligation. Rather, she is generally “indifferent,” although “the mother’s heart” slowly awakens in her throughout the novel (31). Though the word “indifferent” could suggest that Sybilla does not feel a sense of personal failure, this word describes the attitude she portrays outwardly, while the word “shame” is used to describe her interior emotions (31, 14). Thus, it is apparent that her sense of maternal inadequacy leads to her poor performance of motherhood. As a result, Olive is raised for the first twelve years of her life by a loving surrogate mother while her biological mother remains in the background. Olive’s nurse Elspie feels a “passionate and selfish love” that “could not have borne that any tie on earth, not even that of father or mother, should stand between her and the child of her adoption” (27). Notably, as a surrogate mother, Elspie is free to love Olive unconditionally in a way that Sybilla is not. The nurse can adore Olive because she need not incur any blame for the child’s deformity.

Although Sybilla is described in terms that fail to live up to the Victorian maternal ideal, Craik frames her descriptions to point out that she is not a cruel, malignant, or ill-intentioned

mother. Rather, Sybilla is simply too child-like to overcome her vexation and guilt about Olive's physical appearance, or to understand what her role as a mother requires. Although she merely "endured her child's presence," for years after learning of Olive's deformity, Craik is careful to remind readers that "there was in Sybilla no hardness or cruelty, only the disappointment and vexation of a child deprived of an expected toy" (15, 16). Sybilla is not a harmful, or necessarily even bad mother; she is merely such an infantilized creature that, without the guidance she never received during her own orphaned childhood, she cannot understand how to perform her maternal role. As a result, she struggles to love the child whose appearance both disappoints her expectations of beauty and suggests a personal failure.

Sybilla is constantly described in the early chapters of Craik's novel through adjectives that point out her immaturity like "childish" and "careless." She is "small in stature and proportions—quite a little fairy. Her cheek had the soft, peachy hue of girlhood; nay, of very childhood. You would never have thought her a mother" (8). It is in part this childishness that makes Sybilla unprepared for mothering Olive, whom Sybilla plays with like a toy more than she nurtures her like a child. Sybilla is referred to as a "baby-mother" who "plays with her infant as, not so very long ago, she had played with her doll" (9). Indeed, Sybilla is young even for a Victorian mother, only eighteen years old when she births Olive.²⁰ The childlike descriptions are reminiscent of other fictional Victorian mothers who also struggled to mother their children effectively. Clara Copperfield, for instance, is described as a "very Baby," a "childish mother,"

²⁰ While the average age for birthing children was much lower in mid-nineteenth century England than at present, eighteen was still especially young. Women, on average, married between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, and generally birthed a child within the first year of marriage (Branca 75).

with “pretty hair” and a “youthful shape” who also married and gave birth young (3, 7). Called “child” five times in the first chapter of Dickens's novel, Clara is similar to Sybilla. She is unsure how to manage her home and baby, and both the young Olive and David are regularly under the care of surrogate mothers.

As these descriptions of Sybilla's childishness show, she does not have the maternal instinct that early advice literature considered innate, suggesting the novel's proposal of a different model for motherhood that demands less strictly and blames less readily. Sybilla may not know how to show her love, but she tells Elspie, “I have a mother's heart, though I am only eighteen” (13). Although Sybilla does experience successful moments nurturing Olive even in her early years, most of those successes result from her experience playing with inanimate dolls. One of Sybilla's few nurturing moments occurs just before Olive's deformity is pointed out to her—she knows so little of babies that she does not even notice the deformity on her own. “With a deeper shadowing of mother-love piercing through her childish pleasure,” Sybilla successfully lulls her infant to sleep. Still, even this small maternal success is couched in comedic terms that liken Sybilla's care for Olive to child's play. “She took [the baby] up, awkwardly and comedically enough,” the narrator explains, “as though it were a toy she was afraid of breaking, and rocked it to and fro on her breast” (10).

These childlike descriptions of Sybilla directly contrast the more mature descriptions of the young Olive, foreshadowing Olive's later care for her mother. While Sybilla is regularly described as “childish,” the narrator describes the three-year-old Olive as peering at her father with “wistful, pensive eyes, in which there was no childish shyness—only wonder” (23). Although a more detailed examination of Olive as a surrogate mother to her own mother will feature in chapter 4, it is worth noting here that Olive eventually becomes more of a mother to

Sybilla than Sybilla ever is to Olive. This role reversal eschews blame from Sybilla's orphaned background for her inability to act as a strong mother figure because Olive did not have a nurturing mother either. Sybilla is "an orphan" who "had been brought up like a plant in a hot-bed, with all natural impulses either warped and suppressed, or forced into undue luxuriance" (16-17). Although Sybilla's understanding of maternity is "warped" according to the Victorian ideal, this suppression of what was considered a natural impulse cannot be the product only of Sybilla's status as an orphan. After all, Olive becomes an ideal mother, surrogate mother, and stepmother, despite being emotionally abandoned by her own parents.²¹ This abandonment again suggests the novel's questioning of the theory of maternal innateness; Sybilla cannot manage to mother well, yet nurturing comes easily to Olive, who is childless through most of the novel.

When Elspie dies, the loss of the surrogate mother is especially difficult for Olive because she has never known any other maternal tenderness. Although surrogate maternal care was significant during Olive's childhood, her relationship with her mother is clearly the most important one for Craik's plot. After all, Elspie's passing takes place on page forty-three of this more than three hundred page novel. Upon hearing of Elspie's death, young Olive pleads with her mother to become the loving figure she has not previously been, telling Sybilla, "Now I have no one to love me but you" (44). Sybilla's response suggests that she paid careful attention during the twelve years in which Elspie nursed Olive. She has learned, at least in part, how to perform her maternal duty. Sybilla offers a tenderness that is new to Olive, an attitude shift that

²¹ Arguably, the figure of Elspie could be credited for the difference between Olive's and Sybilla's understandings of motherhood. However, because Elspie dies while Olive is only twelve years old, and because we hear little of Sybilla's surrogate parentage, this argument would be difficult to make.

is especially evident when the maid asks where Olive will sleep, having previously spent her nights in Elspie's room. Sybilla responds that Olive will sleep with her, imploring, "Darling, do not cry for your poor nurse; will not mamma do instead?" (44). This transformative moment is an essential one that shapes the future bond between mother and daughter. Sybilla temporarily acts as a mother to Olive, leading Olive to develop an adoration for her mother that will guide her later as a selfless caregiver to Sybilla. "And looking up," the narrator explains, "Olive saw, as though she had never seen it before, the face which, now shining with maternal love, seemed beautiful as an angel's. It became to her like an angel's evermore" (44).

Although this transformative moment in Sybilla's maternal affections toward Olive leads to a loving, even doting relationship between the two, it does not mark the turning point readers might expect for Sybilla's daily nurturing of Olive. Sybilla is henceforth emotionally present for Olive, but it is Olive who often takes on the more active maternal role, and Sybilla's shortcomings as a mother remain readily apparent. Following Elspie's funeral, the action of the novel jumps forward three years, when Sybilla requires nurturing from her fifteen-year-old daughter more than Olive requires it from her mother. Craik juxtaposes these scenes in a compressed timeframe, highlighting the role reversal between mother and daughter.

In this scene, Captain Rothesay informs his wife and daughter that Olive cannot have a new gown or a coming out party because of the family's impending bankruptcy. Generally, when a young girl's hopes for such refinements are dashed, readers expect a frightened mother to comfort her devastated daughter. In this scene, however, the opposite occurs. At Captain Rothesay's announcement, Sybilla "trembled—grew terrified . . . trembled more and more. Finally, she passed into a violent fit of nervous weeping—a circumstance by no means rare" (51). Although Sybilla has recently begun providing her daughter with affection and support, her

strength gives way, apparently as it often does, and Olive is left to care for her mother. The reminder that this circumstance is “by no means rare,” especially coupled with a note that Olive must comfort her mother “not for the first time,” demonstrates that Sybilla often fails in her ability to nurture her young daughter. Readers are reminded here of the childlike image painted of Sybilla early in the novel; again, she means her child no harm, but she is simply unable to perform traditional maternal duties.

We see this pattern again and again throughout the novel. Sybilla was early oppressed by maternal expectations, and she never learns to mother as society expects her to do innately. “So rich, so full, had grown the springs of maternal love, long hidden in her nature,” though still, love is all Sybilla can offer her daughter (67). Olive takes over as maternal caregiver, and “the often ailing mother” is for the rest of her life “dependent on her daughter’s tenderness” and support (68). Although Sybilla’s inability to fulfill her expected maternal duties could be seen as a personal failure, Olive’s success at the same role suggests a larger ideological problem, calling into question the theory of maternal innateness.

3.2 Conflicting Maternal Expectations in Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*

Similarly to Sybilla Rothesay, Hyacinth (Clare) Kirkpatrick Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* reveals the stifling, unnatural nature of Victorian maternal expectations. Mrs. Gibson demonstrates the problems with public expectations about a personal role because her performances of maternity for public approval often prevent her from mothering well in private. What Mrs. Gibson desires most is for others to admire her. As a result, she overperforms certain maternal expectations publicly, putting so much effort into appearing to be an ideal mother that she often neglects to actually care for her child. As Natalie McKnight has explained, such women “overplay certain aspects of the maternal ideal to the detriment of

themselves and others” (3). Mrs. Gibson emblemizes this trope, publicly exaggerating her positive maternal aspects to the point of exhausting herself, her family, and readers.

Mrs. Gibson’s need to perform motherhood demonstrates that caring for her daughter does not come as naturally to her as advice books suggested it should. If maternal nurturing were innate, she would not need to publicly perform the aspects of maternity she believes society values, like demonstrating Cynthia’s education in female accomplishments and exhibiting equal treatment to her daughter and stepdaughter. Rather, she would simply be a good mother by virtue of being a mother, so her over-determined performance indicates a critique of maternal expectations. As Laurie Buchanan has suggested, through women like Mrs. Gibson, “Gaskell challenges patriarchal notions about women’s ‘natural’ capacity for mothering” (501). By publicly performing maternity and privately embodying a variety of weaknesses that fictional mothers exhibit, Mrs. Gibson’s character contests the realistic ability to adhere to various norms as iterated in mid-Victorian maternal discourse.

When we first meet Clare Kirkpatrick, who will later become Mrs. Gibson, Gaskell indicates that she has not been the ideal mother, although she has experienced motherhood through different circumstances than many middle-class mothers. Clare Kirkpatrick is a poor widow who must earn a living, a circumstance rarely taken into account in the advice provided to middle-class mothers. This circumstance perhaps excuses her, at least to an extent, for neglecting some aspects of social middle-class maternal ideology. Although advice manuals insisted mothers be ever watchful of their children and focus most of their attention on them, the newly widowed Clare has to send her daughter Cynthia to school. While Cynthia is away, Clare can earn a living, a separation the novel calls “perhaps necessary” (144).

Despite the “perhaps” necessity of the separation, however, Clare does not undertake it with the mindset suggested by most maternal discourse. An article in *Hearth and Home* explained that working mothers “are at least working for their children; if it is not theirs to give all their time to the little ones who are their dearest possession, they have at least the satisfaction and the comfort of knowing that each pecuniary . . . success . . . will be for the benefit of their offspring” (“Unmotherly” 207). Clare, however, does not fit this description. Rather than treasuring time with Cynthia, Clare leaves the child alone or at school in France during holidays while she visits “some great house or another” (Gaskell 493). She does not even bring Cynthia to England to act as bridesmaid at her wedding, although Dr. Gibson provides the funds for Cynthia’s journey. Instead, Clare prefers to keep Cynthia away, feeling “how disagreeable it would be to her to have her young daughter flashing out her beauty by the side of the faded bride, her mother” (125). Clare’s decision to leave Cynthia in France demonstrates that her daughter is not her “dearest possession,” as the *Hearth and Home* article suggests she should be (“Unmotherly” 207). It further defies maternal norms that insisted, “There should be no feeling of” jealousy or “antagonism on either side” of a mother/child relationship (Smith 33).

Of course, these are all internal considerations, for Clare is careful to publicly appear to live up to maternal expectations. She blames Cynthia’s absence at her wedding on her inability to leave school at that time. The reality, however, is that the long separation between mother and daughter “has lessened the amount of affection the former had to bestow” (144). Additionally, “the value affixed to the money” required for Cynthia’s journey “had increased” in Clare’s mind, despite being provided by her husband-to-be (144). In the years of financial hardship before her second marriage, Clare has grown accustomed to being more concerned with her own financial state than with Cynthia’s. Clearly, this private concern defies the suggestion that mothers’

pecuniary successes “will be for the benefit of their offspring” (“Unmotherly” 207). Rather, Clare has a history of putting financial concerns ahead of Cynthia’s comfort; we later learn that she entirely failed to leave Cynthia money during the holiday when the child engaged herself to Mr. Preston. Notably, although Clare might be blamable for putting her own interests ahead of Cynthia’s, the practical nature of her financial choices suggests that such actions are not exclusively selfish. After all, Clare meets Dr. Gibson, who will provide both herself and Cynthia with future financial security, during one of these visits to “some great house” (493). Similarly, while her concern with securing Cynthia a wealthy husband may be a indication of vanity, it also demonstrates maternal concern. Clearly, Clare wants to ensure that Cynthia does not experience the financial difficulties her mother has endured.

When Clare marries Dr. Gibson, she re-enters the society toward which mid-Victorian maternal advice is geared. At this point, Clare—now Mrs. Gibson—must shift the way she relates to her daughter because outsiders will hold her to the same standard as other middle-class mothers, if they did not before. We saw in chapter 1 that mothers were widely considered the natural teachers of their children, boys when they were young, and girls throughout their lives. Mrs. Gibson’s awkward attempt to perform this educational role speaks both to her difficulty performing maternity according to social expectations, as well as to problems with Victorian female education.

Mrs. Gibson is a proponent of traditional female education, which lauds “accomplishments” like drawing, playing the piano, singing, and sewing, all skills she fosters in Cynthia. She chides her stepdaughter Molly for reading what Mrs. Gibson calls “deep” books, and she upsets Molly by calling her a “bluestocking” (279). However, when Molly and Cynthia go to the Easter Ball, which Mrs. Gibson views as their “coming out” event, Mrs. Gibson learns

that she has perhaps misunderstood the aspects of female education valued by some people in high society. Regardless of the general tenets of female education, she sees that she been discouraging the very type of learning that will impress some upper-class gentlemen and draw them to her daughter. At the ball, Molly makes a good impression on Lord Hollingford by discussing a scientific book he enjoys. When Mrs. Gibson hears that a lord was pleased by Molly's discussion of a subject generally so far outside of woman's knowledge, she laments Cynthia's deficiency in such areas. After all, Mrs. Gibson's ultimate goal is to ensure Cynthia marries a man who will allow her lifelong social and financial stability.

Mrs. Gibson's response to this experience highlights the difficulty of understanding specifically *how* mothers were expected to educate their daughters. On the morning following the ball, Mrs. Gibson exclaims to Cynthia, "Can't you take up a book and improve yourself. I am sure your conversation will never be worth listening to, unless you read something better than the newspapers . . . you really must settle yourself to some improving reading every morning" (312). This is the first instance in which Mrs. Gibson has suggested that Cynthia read more than she does, as she previously imagined such knowledge to be outside of the female realm of education. Mrs. Gibson has carefully cultivated Cynthia's fashion sense, as well as other traditionally admirable female qualities. Before this point, however, she has scoffed at women interested in reading "deep" books, as we saw when she mocked Molly for this interest (279).

Humorously, the book Mrs. Gibson suggests Cynthia study is one she has ridiculed Molly for reading. Mrs. Gibson suggests that Cynthia take up "some French book that Molly was reading—*Le Règne Animal*, I think." This "improving reading" she suggests is not a text to be skimmed for pleasure, however, but a detailed piece of scientific writing by Georges Cuvier on the arrangement, history, and anatomy of the animal kingdom. Mrs. Gibson's lack of

understanding of the type of reading Cynthia needs to do to impress intellectual men like Lord Hollingford demonstrates the limitations of traditional female education, which is mostly devoid of such scientific material. Similarly, it suggests the difficulty of living up to maternal expectations because, like expectations for female education, they were often contradictory. Mrs. Gibson's interest has always been to educate Cynthia in a way that will make her attractive to eligible men, but most discourse on female education suggested the types of accomplishments Mrs. Gibson has fostered. Thus, her discovery that the interests she has previously scorned will also impress some eligible aristocrats confuses her understanding of how to perform motherhood properly. Regardless of the educational path she chooses, she will disappoint some expectations.

In addition to suggesting that mothers are the primary educators of their children in social and academic matters, we saw in chapter 1 that a mother was also responsible for overseeing her child's moral education. Providing moral training, however, is perhaps Mrs. Gibson's greatest maternal failing. Cynthia regularly tells Molly that she is not accustomed to being held to a high moral standard, and she insinuates that her occasionally improper behavior stems from her mother's ineffective moral training. "I never consider myself bound to be truthful," Cynthia says, explaining, "I have grown up outside the pale of duty and 'oughts'" (230, 233).

Throughout most of Cynthia's life, Mrs. Gibson fails at what is considered one of her primary maternal duties specifically because she performs motherhood to meet public approval. Morally training a child occurs privately through disciplinary action, while Mrs. Gibson focuses on the maternal duties that are visible externally.

When Mrs. Gibson does attempt to educate Cynthia on moral matters, she generally does so as part of a performance. When others are not watching, she gives Cynthia essentially free reign, only reprimanding her bad behavior when outsiders notice it. For instance, Mrs. Gibson

tells Miss Browning a story that is meant to demonstrate that she mothers Molly as well as Cynthia. Instead, however, she inadvertently highlights that she often neglects her duty to correct Cynthia's bad behavior. "Why, it was only yesterday," Mrs. Gibson explains, "I went up into Cynthia's room and found her reading a letter that she put away in a hurry as soon as I came in, and I did not even ask her who it was from, and I am sure I should have made [Molly] tell me" (478). Rather than making Mrs. Gibson look good for her increased watchfulness over her stepdaughter, however, this moment highlights Mrs. Gibson's unwillingness to hold Cynthia to a high moral standard. Although mothers were told to make their children "feel that you expect them to do right," Mrs. Gibson rarely requires such ethical behavior from Cynthia because she fears Cynthia's response (Smith 49). The narrator explains that "Mrs. Gibson shrank from any conflicts with Cynthia, pretty sure that she would be worsted in the end" (478). Mrs. Gibson's refusal to challenge Cynthia demonstrates her lack of concern for training Cynthia morally, but when other people begin to notice this failing, Mrs. Gibson is quick to perform her expected role as a display.

When Lady Cumnor learns that Cynthia's "jilted" Mr. Preston, she places the blame for Cynthia's misconduct on Mrs. Gibson. Her blame is indicative of the common belief that mothers are to blame for their children's failings, reiterating that Mrs. Gibson has not held Cynthia to a high enough moral standard. Although attempting to console Mrs. Gibson for the way Lady Cumnor has blamed her, Lady Harriet also implicates Mrs. Gibson in Cynthia's improper behavior. She explains that Lady Cumnor "only wanted to warn" Mrs. Gibson, but her follow-up statement clearly suggests that Cynthia's mother is largely responsible for the child's moral failing (568). "Mamma has always been very particular about her own daughters," Lady Harriet explains, saying, "She has always been very severe on the least approach to flirting"

(568). This statement implies that Mrs. Gibson has not been severe enough to Cynthia. Had she been stricter like Lady Cumnor, Cynthia's moral standards might be more in line with social expectations.²²

When Mrs. Gibson realizes that others are judging her for Cynthia's behavior, she enumerates to Lady Harriet all of the ways in which she does guide Cynthia morally, suggesting that she is not responsible for her daughter's moral conduct. She also attempts to act as the guiding influence she has not previously been, but even this action demonstrates the performative nature of her maternal behavior. Mrs. Gibson scolds Cynthia, but she tells her daughter that she will only hold her accountable for improper behavior when it injures her mother in the eyes of others. "I don't want to know your secrets," Mrs. Gibson explains, "as long as they are secrets" (571). She insists, however, that Cynthia should tell her about her problems "when all the town is talking about them" so Mrs. Gibson can play proper damage control (571). Even in this attempt to act as a guiding influence, Mrs. Gibson demonstrates that being a moral educator does not come naturally to her, but that she is attempting to live up to the strict social maternal code.

In addition to demonstrating that motherhood, as defined by mid-Victorian expectations, is not innate to Mrs. Gibson, her difficulty educating Cynthia morally suggests the difficulty of deciphering conflicting maternal advice. Although Mrs. Gibson does aim to teach Cynthia what she believes will help her attract a financially stable husband, the advice book *Marriage and Home* suggests that such an aim defies proper moral instruction. The book complains that mothers often "inculcate maxims of worldly prudence" on their children, teaching their

²² Lady Cumnor's severity also suggests that aristocratic mothers are subject to certain maternal expectations, as well, despite the middle-class focus of Victorian maternal ideology.

daughters “to set a higher value upon wealth, position, or influence than upon godliness, worth, wisdom, or any quality that can assure love or esteem” (13). According to this belief, Mrs. Gibson’s failure proves an essential one in that it indicates she will fail at her ultimate goal of marrying Cynthia well. Of course, this is an exaggerated view of the case. Still, according to the ideas laid out in *Marriage and Home*, Mrs. Gibson’s failure in providing Cynthia’s moral education will prevent her daughter from finding a husband who will be able to love or esteem her. Further, by fostering the accomplishments that Mrs. Gibson believed were part of her maternal duty, she has succeeded in nothing but making Cynthia “a display among the frivolous” (*Marriage* 14).

This example clearly demonstrates the impossibility of living up to the various, contradictory aspects of Victorian maternal expectations. Mrs. Gibson cannot educate Cynthia properly because the advice conflicts too directly. If she fosters accomplishments, she risks making her daughter frivolous, but without such accomplishments, other advice would suggest Cynthia is not worth attracting male notice. To further complicate matters, those accomplishments do not attract Lord Hollingford, who is impressed by more bookish learning. Roger Hamley, on the other hand, is attracted to Cynthia before Molly and, as Elizabeth Langland has pointed out, “Roger never loves Molly until she has acquired her stepsister’s charms” (*Nobody’s* 139). Thus, there is no clearly correct educational model, despite different advice texts suggesting that different models are best. No matter what aspects of education Mrs. Gibson chooses to emphasize, she cannot possibly please everyone, and she will remain subject to the public ridicule she so strongly tries to avoid.

Mrs. Gibson’s failures also suggest that adhering to maternal norms may not have such far-reaching consequences as maternal discourse would suggest. After all, she cannot possibly

adhere to all maternal expectations regarding Cynthia's education, yet both her daughter and her stepdaughter marry upper-middle class men, which is her ultimate goal. As Langland has noted, although she seems "insensitive and selfish" as a mother, Mrs. Gibson "demonstrates fine discrimination . . . Her masterful negotiations of signifying practices—etiquette . . . dining rituals, household décor, and dress—make her a key player in the socially prestigious marriages of Molly and Cynthia" (*Nobody's* 134). Despite failing to live up to maternal expectations, Mrs. Gibson's daughters turn out just as she hopes, a circumstance that could subversively suggest the inconsequence of adhering to maternal ideals. Through her maternal performance, Mrs. Gibson demonstrates the contrived nature of maternal norms. She further reveals the inherent problem with a system that is so strict that fear of failing to live up to expectations is stronger than the fear of simply not mothering well.

3.3 Neglecting Maternal Duties in Dickens's *Bleak House*

The many ways in which literary mothers fail in their maternal performances highlight the limitations of Victorian maternal ideology. Mothers like Sybilla Rothesay forsake their nurturing roles due to illness or inability, and Mrs. Gibson demonstrates the difficulty of living up to the numerous and conflicting maternal expectations. Both call into question the realistic possibility of adhering to Victorian maternal norms. Some mothers, however, fail to adhere to any aspects of maternal expectations, often because they are fixated on some other aspect of their lives. Mrs. Pocket in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, for instance, cannot focus on her children because she constantly dwells on the idea that her family's high social connections should have destined her for a better life. As a result of her misdirected focus, Mrs. Pocket constantly puts her children in harm's way. She accidentally bangs her baby's head on the table despite the nurse's warning (223). She gives the baby a nutcracker to play with and only avoids injuring

him because another child prevents it (224). She even allows her baby to play with needles as toys (299). Despite her imbecility in the few scenes where she appears, however, Mrs. Pocket is not Dickens's most detailed depiction of a distracted mother. In *Bleak House*, Mrs. Jellyby is entirely ineffective as a mother, yet her negative example actually subverts Victorian maternal expectations, although she affects no change to cultural expectations within the framework novel. Her children are constantly dirty, hungry, and having accidents that leave them full of bumps and bruises. She neglects domestic duties because of her intense focus on charity work in Africa. Some might argue that Mrs. Jellyby puts her children in harm's way, given the frequency with which they have accidents, although Joan Manheimer has pointed out that there is a marked "absence of consequences to her behavior" (538).

Resolute in her determination to solve the world's problems, Mrs. Jellyby looks far into the distance, ignoring the issues directly under her nose. As a result, while her philanthropy abroad is admired, her home is in shambles. The chapter that introduces Mrs. Jellyby is aptly titled "Telescopic Philanthropy," suggesting the narrow vision of her far-reaching work. Esther reiterates this point in her first description of Mrs. Jellyby, noticing her "handsome eyes" and their "curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if . . . they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" (52). Despite the surrogate maternal nature of charity work, Mrs. Jellyby's telescopic tendencies paint a much bleaker picture of her as a biological mother. As Manheimer has noted, "Everywhere the woman sits, she spews forth waste paper, and her typic activity, the dictation of letters, is symbolic of her involvement with the distant at the expense of the immediate. Active in the outside world and indifferent to the affairs of the hearth, she is the negation of the Victorian myth of the Good Mother" (536-37).

The flaw of focusing so distantly has implications regarding Mrs. Jellyby's effectiveness not simply as a mother, but specifically as an *English* mother. Like Queen Victoria, Mrs. Jellyby appears publicly to be a strong woman. Therefore, it is no surprise that those who are less acquainted with the state of her home—like those who did not personally witness Queen Victoria's domestic habits—would be impressed with her philanthropic work abroad. Engaging in such work, after all, mimics Queen Victoria's imperialistic endeavors. It is for this reason that people like Mr. Jarndyce and Mr. Kenge admire Mrs. Jellyby as “a lady of very remarkable strength of character,” not knowing that her public strength causes domestic weakness (49).

Even before we meet Mrs. Jellyby, Mr. Kenge foreshadows her failure to adhere to traditional domestic and maternal expectations. He explains that she “devotes herself entirely to the public,” while the Victorian ideal, especially in Ruskin's well-known conception, requires a woman to focus solely on private domestic matters (49).²³ Additionally, as David Plotkin has pointed out, *Bleak House* “presents home as a part for the whole, the homeland or nation” (17). Thus, when the home is in a bad state, it threatens the nation. Plotkin discusses this concern by explaining, “Unless they are properly trained within a carefully maintained household, not only do children suffer, but the notion of what it means to be English is itself endangered. Neatly ordered homes and proper families are necessary for the cultivation and growth of English children” (17). An early indication that Mrs. Jellyby's home is backwards according to Victorian notions appears when Kenge explains that he knows “nothing whatever of Mr. Jellyby . . . he is, so to speak, merged—Merged—in the more shining qualities of his wife” (50). In Victorian notions of domestic ideology, however, the woman should be merged into the man, not the other

²³ In his lecture “Of Queen's Gardens,” John Ruskin imagines women as queens of their homes, asserting the importance of the home by considering it a microcosm of Victorian society.

way around. Thus, readers are given to understand before ever seeing Mrs. Jellyby or her house that her domestic affairs are in backwards order, despite characters like Mr. Kenge and Mr. Jarndyce failing to make these connections themselves.

When the scene turns to the Jellyby home, it becomes clear that Mrs. Jellyby's success as a mother does not mimic her achievements as a philanthropist. When Esther first arrives at the Jellyby home, the household is in chaos with no parents in sight, and a young boy has "his head through the area railings" (51). Esther is surprised to discover that such incidents are common under Mrs. Jellyby's neglectful eye because she chooses not to concern herself with these potentially dangerous matters. Esther helps free the little boy's head herself, and she is taken aback when she discovers that Mrs. Jellyby was at home throughout the whole affair, only preferring to busy herself with African philanthropic work than to attend to her children's safety. Shortly after, during her introduction to Mrs. Jellyby, Esther is distracted by "a great noise" caused by "one of the poor little things" falling down a flight of stairs (52). Although Esther and Ada are fearful for the child, Mrs. Jellyby is not bothered by this accident. Rather, her face "reflected none of the uneasiness which [Esther and Ada] could not help showing in [their] own faces, as the dear child's head recorded its passage with a bump on every stair" (52).

Aside from failing to care for her children's safety, it is apparent from the outset that Mrs. Jellyby also shirks other domestic duties. She explains, "The African project at present employs my whole time . . . It involves the devotion of all my energies" (53). Her lack of domestic effort is clear, as Esther points out various aspects of the house that indicate a lack of domestic order. She notes that the nameplate on the door is "tarnished" and calls the boy whose head is stuck "one of the dirtiest little unfortunates I ever saw" (51). She further discovers a room "strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter," which she calls

“not only very untidy, but very dirty” (53). The general clutter in the house is so great that no kettle can be found to boil hot water, which indicates both a lack of domestic order and, relating more specifically to maternal expectations, that washing and personal hygiene are of low importance to Mrs. Jellyby. Esther and Ada are unable to obtain any hot water at all, while Richard “washed his hands in a pie dish,” although the maids eventually find the missing kettle on Richard’s dressing table (55-56).

In addition to this mess and filth, Esther finds everything in the morning, “just as we had left it last night, and was evidently intended to remain so. Below stairs the dinner-cloth had not been taken away, but had been left ready for breakfast. Crumbs, dust, and waste paper were all over the house. Some pewter-pots and a milk-can hung on the area railings; the door stood open” (64). This disorganization clearly demonstrates Mrs. Jellyby’s lack of interest in housekeeping. In fact, when Esther tidies her own room before going to bed, she feels “that Mrs. Jellyby looked down upon” her “for being so frivolous” (58). Thus, it is clear that Mrs. Jellyby is aware that her home and family are out of order, but she simply chooses to concern herself with Africa instead of with domestic issues. She even tells to Esther, the novel’s surrogate mother, “Do you know, Miss Summerson, I almost wonder that *you* never turned your thoughts to Africa?” (53, emphasis in original).

The unkempt state of Mrs. Jellyby’s home, and of her lack of interest in improving it, have much broader implications than simply her neglect of domestic duties. By failing to keep her home orderly and to care for her children properly, Mrs. Jellyby defies the norms that represent English womanhood and motherhood, thus defying Englishness itself. As Plotkin notes, the far-off Africa seems to have inhabited the Jellyby’s domestic habits, for “the inhabitants of Borrioboola-Gha seem to have sprung from the letters Mrs. Jellyby writes on

behalf of the African mission; they have corrupted her and infected her home. The lack of sweeping, scouring, cleaning, repairing—the lack of order—keeps her house from being home and represents, for Dickens, exactly what England should not be” (24).

Ironically, Mrs. Jellyby uses English imperial philanthropy to subvert maternal expectations. She proudly cultivates the Victorian English mission of “civilizing” the objects of her charity in Africa, while the effects of her domestic failures could be dangerous to the English nation. Still, such far-reaching implications do not appear directly in the novel. While Plotkin suggests that “the disorder of the house transforms Mrs. Jellyby’s children, raised in dirt and chaos, from English children to ‘savage’ Others,” the end results for the children are not so bad (24). “Mrs. Jellyby’s household may be dirty,” Manheimer notes, “but no one sickens from the grime. Her children may fall every which way, but Dickens’s perspective makes them art works rather than sufferers” (538). Even the ramifications of Mrs. Jellyby’s bad motherhood are not what readers might expect. Peepy, the boy with his head between the stair rails, eventually finds a patron, and her eldest daughter, Caddy, becomes the epitome of the English wife and mother.

Caddy’s insistence on becoming the ideal woman is a direct result of her refusal to be anything like her mother. In this way, Mrs. Jellyby could be seen as an ironically good mother because she teaches Caddy to be a domestic angel by her negative example. Further, as we will see, the effects of Caddy’s achievement on maternal expectations are not positive. The better outcome, according to traditional English standards, is actually from Mrs. Jellyby’s maternity, a circumstance I suggest subverts Victorian norms. Mrs. Jellyby is either unwilling or unable to teach Caddy how to perform the role she longs to fulfill. “The middle-class mother was expected to supervise every aspect of her daughter’s life,” Christine Poulson explains, “to train her in womanly skills such as sewing . . . for her future role as wife, mother and housekeeper”

(64). Caddy, however, cannot take care of herself and is obviously not an adept seamstress; her hair is “tumbled,” her “slippers trodden down at the heel,” and “she really seemed to have no article of dress upon her . . . that was in its proper condition or its right place” (53).

Caddy is acutely aware of her mother’s shortcomings and the way they negatively impact her marriageability. She laments that her mother has never taught her any female necessities or accomplishments. Caddy complains of her lack of womanly skills, lamenting, “I can’t do anything hardly, except write. I’m always writing for Ma” (60). She also calls the state of her home “disgraceful,” bemoaning to Esther, “You used to teach girls . . . If you could only have taught me, I could have learnt from you! I am so very miserable” (62). This line very clearly marks Mrs. Jellyby’s failure to attend to her prescribed maternal duties because “more than any other individual, a good mother could teach a daughter how to be a truly feminine woman” (Gorham 47). Caddy, however, has to seek outside help to learn what Victorian ideology suggests her mother should have taught her (47). It is only because of the help of a surrogate mother, Miss Flite, that Caddy ever learns the skills in tune with Victorian propriety, such as cleaning, cooking, placing household orders, and sewing. Thus, because Mrs. Jellyby is unwilling to cast her glance closer to home toward domestic duties, her children are unkempt and her daughter, by self-proclamation, is “miserable.” Despite her abundant surrogate maternal charity work, as a mother in her own home, Mrs. Jellyby is entirely ineffective because she is so distracted, yet the ramifications of her ineffectiveness are almost nonexistent.

Despite Mrs. Jellyby’s negligent maternal manner, Caddy fulfills the ideal of Victorian wifehood and motherhood. Deborah Gorham has suggested that fictional girls like Caddy often turn into ideal domestic women, explaining:

In the case of the daughter who has a mother who is ineffectual, flighty, or worse

still, unwomanly, the good girl's virtuous nature will still triumph. Indeed, nineteenth-century writers frequently used such a situation to demonstrate the inner strength of a good girl. The inference that the reader was meant to draw from such tales was that a good girl's femininity could be stronger than a bad mother's lack of such qualities. (48)

I would argue, however, that instead of demonstrating Caddy's inner strength and virtue, her ability to achieve the ideal of Victorian domesticity negates social fears of Mrs. Jellyby's bad maternal example. While the problems of growing up in a household like Mrs. Jellyby's are clear, the ultimate indication is not that such atypical mothers produce terrible children. On the contrary, Mrs. Jellyby's children turn out perfectly well, while Caddy, who strives to epitomize ideal notions of English wifehood and motherhood, delivers a child who is both deaf and dumb, perhaps indicating the silencing effects of "proper" Victorian motherhood.

Thus, the combined representation of Mrs. Jellyby and Caddy highlights the problems with Victorian maternal expectations. Caddy demonstrates that ideal Victorian motherhood does not necessarily produce strong children, and although Mrs. Jellyby ignores Victorian maternal ideals, her offspring are resilient and independent. Still, although she frees herself from the constraints of Victorian maternal ideology, Mrs. Jellyby does not escape the ridicule of Esther, Caddy, or many other characters, and she does nothing to shift expectations on a larger cultural level. "Mrs. Jellyby becomes less funny and less culpable," Manheimer notes, "if we consider that, perhaps, only rigidity such as hers can overcome the powerful seduction of self-sacrifice to which most mothers fall prey. In this light, her far-sightedness becomes something other than a joke: it suggests a corrective to the disfigurement which the Victorian ideal of motherhood requires" (539-40).

Although such fictional mothers highlight the limiting nature of Victorian maternal norms, they are still subjected to the pervasive expectations. While I have only examined in detail a few fictional mothers in this chapter, they function as representative samples of biological mothers in fiction throughout the early-mid Victorian period. Other fictional mothers also speak to the weaknesses inherent in Victorian maternal ideology, pointing out the limiting nature of the maternal ideal. Maria Alcharisi in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, speaks specifically to the limits of maternal expectations. She leaves her son, although in good circumstances, with a patron who cares for him as a father, in order to pursue her own dreams outside of motherhood. Unlike Lady Audley, Alcharisi attains the power she desires by being unencumbered by motherhood. She only loses her freedom when she plays into societal expectations by (re)marrying.²⁴ As Marianne Hirsch points out:

Alcharisi is neither object nor victim; she is, she tries to be, the author of her own fate and Daniel's, to the point of leaving her son, of changing his patronym and his religion, and thereby freeing herself to 'live out the life that was in me' without being 'hampered with other lives.' The theme that dominates her narrative is the desire for freedom from bondage—both the bondage of Judaism and the bondage of femininity. (76)

By so openly representing the restrictive nature of motherhood, Alcharisi, notably not an English woman, highlights the limitations of expectations for mothers, certainly including English norms. Still, she is not entirely spared from judgment, as she is miserable in her second marriage and is

²⁴ One could argue that Alcharisi does feel remorse for giving up her son, but her repentance deals more directly with depriving him of his Jewish heritage than with withholding her love and guidance.

dying when Daniel finally meets her. Through portraits of women like Alcharisi and Lady Audley, but also like the infantilized Sybilla Rothesay, the selfish Mrs. Gibson, and the subversive Mrs. Jellyby, Victorian literary mothers clearly speak to the problematic limitations of Victorian maternal ideology. They indicate the need to expand maternal expectations to make them less restrictive and disempowering.

Like those examined in this chapter, failing literary mothers highlight problems with Victorian maternal expectations. Very few are able to mother well, according to the complicated and ever-changing standards, and the implication is that the stakes of bad motherhood are not necessarily as high as cultural ideology would suggest. The mothers who adhere the most closely to the ideal, like Caddy Jellyby and Amelia Sedley Osborne, often have the children who turn out the worst. This circumstance indicates that performing motherhood according to Victorian expectations does not necessarily lead to the production of strong children. Still, I in no way claim that Victorian authors, especially Dickens, aimed to indicate that good mothers produce bad children and that bad mothers produce good ones. I do, however, suggest that the array of depictions of fictional mothers highlights that the restrictive nature of maternal ideology is often incongruous with successful parenting.

The problem reflected by fictional Victorian mothers lies in the limiting nature of motherhood as it was culturally prescribed. Mrs. Jellyby, the only mother who does not attempt to adhere to expectations, demonstrates that adhering to cultural norms is not necessary to produce good children. Sybilla Rothesay is infantilized to the point that she cannot care for herself or her child. Clare Kirkpatrick Gibson cannot effectively negotiate contradicting maternal advice. Caddy Jellyby's ideal motherhood produces a deaf and dumb child while Mrs. Jellyby's negligent maternity produces strong children. Each woman is, in some way, stifled by

maternal expectations, except Mrs. Jellyby, who suggests that attempting to adhere to such expectations is unnecessary. Only Mrs. Jellyby is able to break away from the bonds of maternal norms, and even she affects no change to social ideology, as I will suggest surrogate mothers do in chapters 3 and 4.

4 CHAPTER 3

SURROGATE SUBVERSION: BREAKING THE MATERNAL MOLD THROUGH WET NURSING AND STEPMOTHERHOOD

“I, who guessed what her last dread had been,
Made a promise to that still, cold face,
That her children’s hearts, at any cost,
Should be with the mother they had lost,
When a stranger came to take her place.”

-”A New Mother” by Adelaide Anne Procter

Cultural feelings toward replacement mothers varied, and fictional depictions of surrogate mothers likewise filled a wide range. Retellings of the Cinderella story, which were common in the mid-Victorian period, iterate how surrogate mothers were controversial figures, represented as both angelic, like the fairy godmother, and monstrous and unloving, like the wicked stepmother.²⁵ Surrogate mothers were simultaneously appreciated for their ability and willingness to help rear motherless children and feared for their capacity to usurp the places of biological mothers. The classically demonic, wicked surrogate appears in much literature, such as the stepmother in George Cruikshank’s “Cinderella and the Glass Slipper.” Another example is the bad nurse who terrifies children into obedience, such as the nurse who frightens her young

²⁵ For more detailed descriptions of how Victorians reinterpreted the Cinderella tale, see Bonnie Cullen’s “For Whom the Shoe Fits” in the first issue of Volume 27 of *The Lion and the Unicorn* (January 2003).

charge with stories about Simon the Jew in Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington* (1817). These monstrous literary replacement mothers are contrasted to overtly positive surrogates, especially the angelically influential fairy godmother, as seen in Mary de Morgan's "The Toy Princess" and in Victorian iterations of the Cinderella story like Cruikshank's.

This monster/angel dichotomy is also clear in representations of surrogate mothers in many popular nineteenth-century novels. Mrs. Norris in Austen's *Mansfield Park* is cruel to her niece, constantly reminding Fanny of her low position in the family. Miss Temple in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, however, provides Jane with a sense of loving maternity that Jane has never before experienced. Lady Audley is a selfish character who cares little for her stepdaughter, Alicia. Peggotty in Dickens's *David Copperfield* and Hester in Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story," on the other hand, take loving care of their charges. The varied depictions of surrogate mothers demonstrate the contentious cultural understandings of the role. When a mother was absent or ineffective, a surrogate mother might adequately supply her place and rear her children. The idea that biological mothers were replaceable often led to social anxiety about the women who succeeded them, an anxiety echoed in the epigraph to this chapter.

During the mid-nineteenth century, life expectancies were shorter and childbirth was dangerous. There is debate about the accuracy of the number of deaths due to childbirth recorded in the Victorian period, but a common speculation is that the maternal mortality rate in the 1860s was about "4.7 per 1000 live births in England and Wales" (Poulson 61). This rate supposedly held steady for the rest of the century. Because childbirth was threatening, it was of course necessary to consider alternative childrearing options, but finding suitable replacements for dead or absent mothers became both a cultural necessity and an anxiety. Replacement mothers, especially stepmothers, were controversial because "marital and parental relationships

were under intense scrutiny and were seen by many as being under threat” (Poulson 60). As a result, Poulson explains, “the step-family was often seen as problematic, unnatural, and deviant rather than as a normal part of the social structure and of family life” (60).

The concern about stepfamilies that Poulson notes echoes a larger concern, a fear of the power experienced by women who upset traditional family structures by supplanting biological mothers. This fear played out through the 1835 Marriage Act, which officially outlawed the marriage of a widower to his deceased wife’s sister. This legislation remained in place in England until the passing of the Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Marriage Act in 1907, and Anne Wallace has explained that “the issue was revisited almost yearly” in the interim. This legislation, and the regularity with which the topic was revisited, clearly demonstrate the intense scrutiny to which replacement mothers and family structures were subjected. Although aunts were expected to act as surrogate mothers to their orphaned nieces and nephews, they were legally forbidden to do so in the official form of stepmotherhood.

Such surrogate mothers as governesses, teachers, aunts, friends, and dry nurses were largely accepted because they did not threaten to replace biological mothers. They performed necessary roles caring for motherless children, yet they only stood in for absent mothers in unofficial capacities. The more subversive surrogate mothers were those who physically and ideologically took the place of biological mothers: stepmothers, by becoming the new mother legally, and wet nurses, by biologically infiltrating a child through breast milk. Such replacement was feared for a number of reasons. Certainly, mothers who sacrificed themselves unduly would likely have preferred to think of themselves as irreplaceable. The mother described in Procter’s “A New Mother,” for instance, dies as a result of childbirth, and as she gives her life for her child, the nurse’s assumption is that her “last dread” is that someone will

usurp her place in her children's hearts, despite their mother's fatal sacrifice (222). Further, conduct manuals so exalted the role of the mother that she become nearly irreplaceable. Thus, wet nurses and stepmothers who physically stood in place of biological mothers threatened the maternal ideology Victorian social commentators had so painstakingly established.

Despite being less commonly accepted early in the Victorian period because of their seemingly "unnatural" connection to families, much literature integrated positive surrogate mothers into understandings of Victorian motherhood. These works recognized the need for surrogate mothers to replace absent or ineffective biological mothers in English family structures. This chapter demonstrates how such literary representations helped shift understandings of motherhood in the social imagination, separating the role from the maternal body to encompass surrogate motherhood. Elaine Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar have long imagined the concept of the monstrous double as one that allows for the portrayal of Victorian women who counter the ideal norms; the split psyche, constituted through two separate characters, becomes a means through which prototypically ideal Victorian heroines can be examined in a subversive context. In many Victorian representations, positive surrogate mothers, especially stepmothers and wet nurses, function not as monstrous doubles, but as monstrous replacements. They are not monstrous in their treatment of children, but in the social mindset because they act as other mothers, notably not biological mothers, upon whose body the site of maternity can be examined outside of its ideal context. The stepmother and wet nurse were dangerous specifically because they could destabilize social conceptions of the family, and this subversive power is what ultimately gave them the ability to affect the world around them, including affecting perceptions of their own roles.

The cultural shift that slowly took place is especially evident in advice literature. While early Victorian advice texts spoke almost exclusively to biological mothers, later advice literature also considered surrogate mothers, demonstrating a clear shift in Victorian maternal understandings. As we will see, Mrs. J. Bakewell began including articles providing advice to stepmothers in her later publications, accepting them as appropriate maternal replacements, and many other writers and editors followed suit. Although wet nursing eventually decreased in popularity near the end of the nineteenth century due to the rise in reliable infant formula, wet nurses still benefited from nurses coming to be imagined as important surrogate maternal figures. This shift was largely thanks to influences like Florence Nightingale and the professionalization of nursing as an extension of motherhood beyond the domestic sphere after the Crimean War, when nurses began to play prominent roles in advice manuals and periodicals.²⁶

Jules Law has also demonstrated the ideological shift that took place throughout the mid-Victorian period. He examined ideological shifts between the 1840s and the 1860s, discussed in chapter 1, as existing in two phases. “In the earlier phase [1840s],” Law explains, “the most pressing questions had to do with the relationship between individuals and domestic structure, while in the later phase the question was how to locate individuals in the context of a rapidly transforming social infrastructure” (29). In a more concise explanation, Law describes a “shift from discrete and enclosed to open and permeable spaces” (29). This change echoes the move from staunch maternal expectations that developed in the 1840s and 1850s to more permeable boundaries for mothers that later began to take shape, allowing surrogate mothers to inhabit the

²⁶ For more on representations of Nightingale as an emblem of ideal surrogate maternity, see Chapter 6, “Social Construction of Florence Nightingale,” in Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments*.

space that was earlier available to biological mothers alone. While this shift does subject surrogate mothers to some of the strict expectations placed upon biological ones, it also decreases the expectations placed on any type of mother by creating a more fluid ideology in which mothers and mother figures are less restricted. This change, I suggest, occurred partly through the power of the literary surrogate mothers I discuss in this chapter.

The following chapter examines representations of wet nurses and stepmothers in mid-Victorian England through both cultural and literary lenses, considering how literature reflects and reinterprets cultural understandings of alternative maternal roles. The positive surrogate mothers in Victorian fiction do cultural work on a symbolic level. They highlight the anxiety that surrogate mothers like wet nurses and stepmothers engendered, yet they simultaneously ameliorate this angst by demonstrating the stability that can arise as a result of effective surrogate motherhood. Ultimately, by demonstrating the benefits of effective surrogate motherhood, literature works alongside social reformers like Florence Nightingale to normalize, within limits, many surrogate maternal roles.

4.1 The Threatening Breast: Wet Nurses and the Embodiment of Power

One of the most controversial sites of surrogate maternal power in the Victorian period was the wet nurse who established a biological connection with a child through breast milk, rather than placenta. Social fears related to the direct connection between lower class wet nurses and their higher class charges, and society and employers alike implemented an intense system of surveillance intended to stifle the wet nurse's power, which they feared would upset the class-based social system. Victorian fiction produced various representations of the rampant surveillance real-life wet nurses endured. The literary wet nurse, despite attempts to limit her sense of agency, still manages to wield power because her job makes her indispensable, a

circumstance that echoes her similar power in society. Because the wet nurse performed the life saving task of nourishing an infant, and because finding suitable wet nurses proved difficult thanks to an overabundance of socially-imposed requirements, once a wet nurse was employed, she was the most necessary servant. If a family could not keep a wet nurse happy, she could take away their child's source of food, likely resulting in the child's eventual death. The wet nurses featured in much Victorian fiction highlight this anxiety, ultimately ameliorating it by nourishing infants who become healthy, prosperous members of the English middle and upper classes.

4.1.1 The Prevalence of Victorian Wet Nursing

While most recent historians agree that wet nurses were common in early- to mid-Victorian England and that they played an important role in discourses of maternity and of childcare, it is impossible to determine the exact prevalence of the practice due to the terminology used in census data. The same word, "nurse," was used to describe both wet nurses and dry nurses, an ambiguity that "has led to a lack of reliable census data and some disagreement over the regularity with which wet nursing was practiced" (Klimaszewski "Examining" 325). As a result, it is impossible for present-day scholars to determine the exact prevalence of wet nursing in the Victorian period. This vague phrasing sometimes leaves readers uncertain of nurses' duties in literature, as well. While the novels I discuss here clearly include wet nurses, the context, not the terminology, generally separates them from dry nurses. Thus, while I note various works of Victorian fiction that depict wet nurses, it is possible that more women who nurse infants in literature do so from their breasts.

Although census data did not separate wet nurses from dry nurses, opponents of wet nursing certainly made a clear distinction between the two in their outcries against the practice in their own writing. While only a small portion of period fiction and nonfiction are available

today on digital sites like *Google Books*, the sample size of digitized publications is growing. What is available can provide important insights into historical trends in print literature. An inquiry into the prevalence of the phrases “wet-nurse” and “wet nurse” throughout the nineteenth century in all British works available through *Google Books* indicates that the phrase shows a fairly steady increase in usage beginning around 1842, reaching its highest peak in 1870.²⁷ This trend supports what my own research suggests, that wet nursing was a prominent topic of debate during the early- to mid-Victorian period. A closer look at the literature that discusses wet nursing, such as conduct manuals, women’s magazines, and medical pamphlets, suggests that it was an important topic because it was becoming a popular practice among middle-class mothers, although not all scholars have historically agreed with this assertion.

While my research indicates that wet nursing was, to an extent, a “fashionable” middle and upper class practice during the early- to mid-Victorian period, the lack of reliable data previously caused some major historians to disagree with this suggestion. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy contended in 1972, for example, that the wet nurse virtually disappeared in the nineteenth century, citing diminishing ads for wet nurses in *The Times* as the basis for this claim.²⁸

²⁷ Although the limitations of the *Google Ngram viewer* prevent me from discovering the actual number of texts in which the words appear, I am able to determine the percentage of books in which they can be found each year. Of course, the percentage out of every book published is nominal, but from 1842 to 1870, the phrase “wet-nurse” increased in prevalence in British English texts available on *Google Books* by a margin of 146%.

²⁸ Gathorne-Hardy does note that wet nurses were more prevalent in the early decades of Queen Victoria’s reign than in the later years of the nineteenth century, but he suggests that wet nursing was never the common practice that much literature of the time indicates.

Similarly, Patricia Branca noted in 1975, “It seems fairly clear that middle-class mothers did not resort to wet-nurses extensively at any point during the nineteenth century, despite the pattern that has long been assumed. The considerable discussion of wet-nurses as the only alternative to nursing in the [conduct] manuals was almost completely irrelevant to the middle-class situation” (103).²⁹ Although wet nursing did become a less common practice near the end of the Victorian period, my research suggests that wet nurses not only still existed in mid-nineteenth century England, but that they formed an immensely controversial topic.

Although “the incidence of private wet nursing steadily decreased as the century progressed,” this decline did not occur until bottle feeding improved very late in the century (Fildes 204). More recent historians believe that wet nurses were far more prevalent in mid-Victorian England than either Gathorne-Hardy’s or Branca’s research suggests. Only a year after Branca’s study, Ann Roberts made a contrary claim that coincides with my analysis and with mid-Victorian assertions about wet nursing. “It has been suggested,” Roberts notes, “that the practice of substitute breastfeeding, or wet-nursing, was past its heyday in 1850; certainly as a common resort in any class of society its days were numbered. It nevertheless remained for another twenty years a more or less flourishing practice” (279). Similarly, Jules Law has indicated that, while wet nursing was “not the dominant mode of infant feeding,” it still remained

²⁹ Although Branca articulates a clearly formulated opinion that wet nurses were not common in middle-class Victorian practice, she includes no citations or footnotes to support this claim. This issue is especially troubling because most of her text is heavy with references, as well as because she herself admits that there is no clear data regarding the regularity with which wet nurses were employed. As Branca has explained, “No clear statistical evidence on the number of wet-nurses is available at any point during the century” (101).

“a significant cultural practice in Victorian England” (23). The reason Gathorne-Hardy offers a skewed understanding of the decline of the practice stems from the source of his analysis.

Although advertisements for wet nurses in *The Times* may have decreased earlier in the century, this decline occurred largely because families began to employ wet nurses directly through lying-in hospitals, negating the need for public appeals in newspapers. While advertisements decreased, an 1859 letter in *The English Woman’s Journal* notes that London’s lying-in hospitals were “besieged by applications for wet-nurses” (MAB 212).

An early letter to Queen Victoria written upon the birth of her first child, discussed in chapter 1, demonstrates a social anxiety that wet nursing would become a common middle-class practice if Victoria were to hire a wet nurse for her own children. While I cannot claim that the increased popularity of employing wet nurses arose directly as a result of Queen Victoria not nursing her own children, there does appear to be a correlation between the birth of the Princess Royal and the increased popularity of wet nursing. The Princess Royal was born at the end of 1840 and, to the extent that we can rely on the *Google Ngram Viewer*, print usage of the word “wet-nurse”³⁰ begins to steadily increase between 1841 and 1842. Further, outcry against the number of mothers hiring wet nurses for their infants arose in the 1850s, clearly suggesting that wet nursing appeared in at least somewhat popular form during the early years of Victoria’s reign, regardless of the cause of this trend. Notably, Victoria herself was not heavily criticized, at least in print, for her decision to have wet nurses suckle her infants. Of course, the queen was largely immune to much public maternal scrutiny, as we saw in chapter 1 how print publications aimed to depict her as the ideal English mother. Additionally, it took time for the negative

³⁰ The hyphenated form was the most common usage in Victorian England.

effects of wet nursing that led to public outcry to become apparent, and by this point, Victoria was largely past her childbearing period.³¹

4.1.2 *Social Fear of the Wet Nurse's Power*

As the popularity of wet nursing increased, public outcry against middle-class families employing wet nurses criticized mothers for deviating from maternal expectations, which called women to feed their children at their own breasts. “*The best food is [the infant’s] mother’s milk,*” advised the 1859 tract *How to Manage a Baby*, published by the Ladies’ Sanitary Association (emphasis in original).³² Many commentators disparaged mothers for choosing to hire wet nurses rather than suckling their own children. One article called the employment of a wet nurse “disgraceful” and the wet nurse’s presence a “reproach” in instances where the biological mother was physically able to nurse her child (“Miscellaneous” 188). Much advice equated breastfeeding with a woman’s natural role, with opponents of wet nursing insisting that the biological mother’s breast milk was a child’s only natural food. “The first food an infant takes should be that which nature has provided for it—its mother’s milk,” notes an early tract published by the Religious Tract Society (*Wife* n. pag.). This same tract declares, “It can scarcely be deemed necessary to press on a mother, the fulfillment of so natural and so delightful a duty, as that of herself nourishing for the babe to which she has given birth” (*Wife* 229).

³¹ Opponents of the practice of wet nursing became most vocal at the end of the 1850s and throughout the 1860s, just after Queen Victoria’s childbearing years; her youngest child, Princess Beatrice, was born in 1857.

³² No pagination is available for this particular quote; although the tract itself is paginated, this quote comes from an unpaginated foldout insert.

Such rhetoric about the natural nature of a mother breastfeeding placed strict expectations on biological mothers, suggesting that mothers who chose to hire wet nurses were inadequate. “The act of suckling is both a duty and a pleasure,” *The Mother’s Best Book* claims, and “Every mother is guilty of lessening her own maternal dignity, who does not avail herself of that fountain of nutrition which nature has bountifully bestowed on her as the support and preservation of life” (6). We see examples of such women who choose not to breastfeed in literature; the hero of Frederick Marryat’s *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, although raised by his parents in his own home, is suckled by a wet nurse as an infant because “Mrs. Easy did not find herself equal to nursing her own infant, and it was necessary to look out for a substitute” (21). In Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp, a notoriously uninterested mother, leaves her son Rawdon with a wet nurse in France; the negative depiction of Becky’s character indicates the scorn that such supposedly unmotherly women faced. This ridicule is unsurprising because opponents of wet nursing questioned the morality of the occupation and of those who perpetuated it.

Doctors also began questioning the morality of recommending wet nurses because the practice often led to the death of the nurse’s own child. As a result, the *British Medical Journal* waged “a long campaign against both baby farming and wet nursing during the 1860s and 1870s” (Fildes 196). Having a ready supply of milk required that a woman must have given birth recently, so the new mother who needed income sent her own infant away to a “baby farm” where the infant was under the care of a dry nurse. These dry nurses often cared for multiple children at a time, and they rarely received enough money from the mothers to sustain the babies properly. Additionally, because they relied on bottle feeding, the babies lacked proper nourishment. Consequently, infants who lived on baby farms often died within mere months of

being sent away from their biological mothers.³³ As a result of what was often perceived as infanticide, the subject of wet nursing became a hot topic in mid-Victorian discourses of childrearing, and various people spoke out publicly against the practice. From associations like the Ladies' Sanitary Association and the Harveian Society to writers in women's magazines and outspoken social campaigners like Mrs. Baines, a well-known opponent of the practice of wet nursing, opponents decried the immorality of wet nursing as a popular middle-class practice.

Although outcry against wet nursing was often connected to the humanitarian concern of baby farming, many challengers also opposed the "unnaturalness" of the connection between a wet nurse and a child. One opponent of wet nursing criticized not only the mother who chose not to nurse, but the entire social class that used financial means to outsource infant feeding. She called regular requests for wet nurses at Lying-In Institutions "a shame to the mother of the middle and upper classes of society," and the class shaming in this statement highlights the social anxiety that surrounded the institution of wet nursing (M.A.B.).

Because her milk physically infiltrated and gave life to the future generations of higher classes, the wet nurse embodied perhaps the most dangerously powerful surrogate mother in early- to mid-Victorian culture and fiction, although she lost much of her hold as the century progressed. She upset social norms both by replacing the biological mother and by contaminating a child of a higher class with lower-class milk, which Victorians feared might also transmit characteristics like the wet nurse's physical appearance, temperament, and intellect. A tract published by the Ladies' Sanitary Association, for instance, warned of the possibility of

³³ For a detailed explanation of the relationship between wet nursing and baby farming, see the first half of Chapter 12, "The Demise of the Wet Nurse c. 1800-c. 1914" in Valerie Fildes's *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to Present*.

“transmission of depraved appetites and propensities, from the nurse to the child, through the milk” (*Evils* 10). As Law explains, breast milk was an especially dangerous fluid in Victorian England because its “telos—unlike that of blood—is to pass out of the body, and into the body of another” (5). Thus, many Victorians feared the cross-class contamination that could occur through this transmission, leading to the outcry from groups like the Ladies Sanitary Association and *The British Medical Journal*.

Such contamination was especially threatening in a time when sanitary reform was a major social concern, and the wet nurse posed an enhanced threat due her occupation’s reliance on the sexualized female body to produce value. The eroticized nature of the wet nurse’s role, combined with the direct transmission of her fluids to higher-class children, led to increased social fears that wet nurses could function as “immoral pollutants, the cause of the decline of whole communities” (Mort 47). We saw in the previous chapters that middle-class mothers were said to be responsible the future prosperity of England; based on Victorian beliefs about the power of breast milk to transmit moral values, however, a wet nurse posed a far greater social threat than a bad mother because the values she could impose were both immoral and lower class. Because the circulation of milk from a wet nurse to a child did not follow the “natural” course of transference from a mother to her biological child, her milk became “a particularly rich and loaded site for the contestations of and between the social and the individual” (Law 5). The wet nurse, thus, formed what Melisa Klimaszewski calls a “contested site of maternity.” In addition to posing a social threat to children of higher classes, these lower class, sexualized women problematized social understandings of maternal connections. They threatened the dominant ideological expectations for motherhood by providing for children better than their own higher-class biological mothers.

Victorians feared the potential repercussions of nourishing an infant with such socially contaminated milk, but their alternative options were limited. Infants who were not fed breast milk were generally given donkey's, goat's, or cow's milk, but the lack of nutrients in these alternatives made it difficult for a baby to healthily survive infancy, which is one reason so few infants survived on baby farms. Such children who were not breastfed were referred to as being "brought up by hand," and their healthy survival was an anomaly, not a norm. *The Mother's Medical Adviser* notes that "to bring up a child by hand is a task of great difficulty and risk" (Wakley 9). Characters in Dickens's *Great Expectations* regularly remark how strong Pip's constitution must have been to have survived being brought up "by hand," reminding readers of the perils most babies on this dietary regimen faced.³⁴ The lack of alternative feeding options gave the wet nurse a power over her employer unavailable to other servants, and employers regularly feared the wet nurse would abuse this power without repercussions. Thus, the wet nurse was simultaneously an essential and threatening familial and social figure; she had the

³⁴ Although many readers attribute the phrase "by hand" in *Great Expectations* to the physical abuse Pip suffers and the hand of his sister's switch, "Tickler," this misunderstanding is specific to contemporary readers who are unfamiliar with the Victorian meaning of the phrase, which indicated spoon or bottle-feeding a baby ("Hand"). Pip explains that he did not, as a child, know what the phrase meant, but knowing his sister "to have a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon" himself, Pip "supposed that" he and Joe "were both brought up by hand" (44). While this passage would have been funny to Victorian readers, the humor is lost on current readers who assume Pip's assertion is correct. Later context clues, however, indicate the actual meaning of the phrase; Pip explains that Bidley is "an orphan like myself; like me, too, had been brought up by hand" (80).

ability to destroy the future of middle and upper class families by contaminating, or even eliminating, their children, but the necessity of her role limited the ways in which the higher classes who regularly controlled society could control her.

Wet nurses were additionally threatening because, unlike for other potentially subversive surrogate mothers like stepmothers, the mother did not have to be absent in order for a wet nurse to take on a powerful position within a home. Rather, it was possible for a wet nurse not only to establish a temporary biological connection with a child of a higher class through her breast milk, but also, in the process, for her to supplant the living mother who chose not to breastfeed. The wet nurse, after all, had something positive to offer a child, physically milk, but metaphorically love and nurturing, that the biological mother either could not or would not provide. Because Victorians considered breastfeeding a natural demonstration of a mother's love for her child, her choice to withhold breast milk could have been seen as a lack of love for her infant, "a common reproach against the mother," theorist Marilyn Yalom notes, who "gave the child too little milk" (153).

Of course, this reproach pertained mostly to middle-class mothers, as Queen Victoria was not publicly ridiculed for her decision not to breastfeed. The class-based nature of such disapproval reiterates the middle-class focus of Victorian maternal ideology; because upper-class mothers were not expected to be as ever present in the nursery, they were also more likely to be excused for being physically absent enough to require the services of a wet nurse. Trollope's *Doctor Thorne* suggests the regularity with which wet nurses were employed in upper-class families. Following the birth of Frank Gresham, the narrator explains, "Of course Lady Arabella could not suckle the young heir herself. Ladies Arabella never can. They are gifted with the powers of being mothers, but not nursing-mothers. Nature gives them bosoms for show, but not

for use. So Lady Arabella had a wet-nurse” (20). Though the passage takes on a sarcastic tone, the sarcasm suggests humor more than it indicates actual ridicule. Its light-hearted nature reiterates the different expectations upper-class mothers faced; a middle-class mother would likely have been overtly blamed for loving her child too little, while Lady Arabella is mockingly made jest of for being part of a class that is simply not made to suckle.

Middle-class mothers had more at stake, however, and theorists have since further connected breast milk with maternal affection. Freudian notions have long equated a mother’s fulfilling flow of breast milk with love for her infant. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein explains, “The infant projects his love impulses and attributes them to the gratifying (good breast), just as he projects his destructive impulses outwards and attributes them to the frustrating (bad) breast,” the “bad” breast referring to the breast that provides either too little or potentially poisonous milk (63). In Klein’s conception, the “good” and “bad” breast are the same breast, understood differently at different times by the infant’s split psyche. My consideration of these dichotomous breasts refers to two different breasts on two different women, placing the biological “bad” breast, the breast that withholds its milk, in opposition to the surrogate “good” breast, the breast that provides for the infant. The “good” breast offers sustenance to the child that the “bad” breast does not, giving the wet nurse an explicit power—the power of giving life—the biological mother either rejects or lacks.

If wet nursing occurred largely because mothers simply *chose* to adhere to the fashion of hiring a wet nurse rather than suckling their own children, then those mothers were, by choice, withholding what such psychoanalysts suggest represents love in the mind of the infant. Thus, the transfer of milk from the wet nurse to the infant could result in the transfer of the infant’s love and attachment from the mother to the wet nurse. We see this possibility come into play

when Paul Dombey in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* cannot remember the biological mother who died on the day of his birth, having never internalized her milk. He claims, however, to remember the wet nurse who was dismissed when he was just a young infant, an idea only slightly less farfetched than remembering his mother.

Living mothers who chose not to breastfeed excited the greatest social unrest regarding wet nurses because they were imagined as perpetuating the socially subversive practice. Victorians feared the wet nurse replacing the living biological mother in the eyes of the infant, and they criticized mothers who opted not to breastfeed for being more concerned with adhering to "fashion" than with losing a child's love. The object of a child's affection would have been an individual concern, while the larger cultural anxiety was more focused on the social ramifications of women's choosing to hire wet nurses rather than breastfeeding. People feared the potential repercussions of wet nursing for two major reasons. First, as we have briefly seen, wet nurses often abandoned their own babies, and this abandonment was considered a social evil. Second, and more importantly to the subversive potential of wet nurses, higher classes feared the power that wet nursing provided to otherwise socially disempowered women.

Cultural anxiety about the role of the wet nurse grew largely from the fact that she was necessarily a biological mother herself, yet she worked outside of dominant social norms, leaving her own child with a replacement mother in order to use her breast milk as a commodity to earn high wages for giving life to another's child. As biological mothers, wet nurses were socially disempowered because they were ostracized from society due to their "fallen" status, usually having given birth out of wedlock. Still, the somewhat precarious occupation of wet nursing provided the opportunity for increased structural power. It granted access to an occupation, though still a position of servitude, that provided higher wages and better living

situations than most household servants received. A wet nurse generally came from a lower social class than her employer, and her “fallen” status would have made her unwelcome in most positions of household servitude.³⁵ For such a young woman, acting as a wet nurse provided a way to separate herself from her shame and to regain a sense of agency over her own future. By physically distancing herself from her own infant and forming an attachment with another child, the fallen wet nurse could earn a good living with the possibility of transitioning into a different, more respectable role as dry nurse once the child of her charge weaned. Certainly, the wet nurse was not free from scrutiny, but the severity of judgment she faced as an unmarried woman with her own infant at her breast far surpassed that which was launched at her for helping to nourish a legitimate child of a higher class. Additionally, regardless of the criticism she received, wet nursing also provided an occupational escape from a fallen woman’s otherwise dismal wage-earning options, so a wet nurse was able to use her surrogate maternal role as a mechanism for increased financial stability, if not for major upward social mobility.

4.1.3 Surveillance of the Wet Nurse

A deep cultural anxiety developed regarding the wet nurse’s increased agency over middle-class society and her own future. Because of her power, the wet nurse, or at least her milk, became something to be feared, interrogated, and scrutinized. In *Dombey and Son*, the elder Paul demonstrates this concern when he refuses Polly Toodle the right to see her own

³⁵ Esther Waters, the protagonist of George Moore’s 1894 novel of the same name, is dismissed from her position as kitchen maid when her employer learns of her illegitimate pregnancy. Even Mrs. Barfield, described as a saintly woman regularly willing to give second chances, is unwilling to continue to employ Esther in such a state because keeping her on staff would set a bad example for other servants.

children while she is in his service. He fears she could swap the higher-class child for her own in order to provide a better life for her baby. This concern is exemplified in Tennyson's "Lady Clare," a poem in which a young lady, upon her betrothal, learns that "old Alice the Nurse" is actually her mother, and that she herself is a mere peasant, raised falsely as a Lord's daughter after the nurse feared to tell her master that his own child, to whom she had acted as wet nurse, had died at her breast.

To alleviate social fears, conduct manuals and domestic magazines developed lists of suggestions to help families select wet nurses. They also advised them on how to treat a wet nurse once she was employed in order to control her experiences of power. One attempt to prevent the overturn of English power structures was the suggestion that wet nurses be married women from middle-class backgrounds, thus removing the concern about an immoral, working-class woman infiltrating middle-class England. The obvious problem with this suggestion was that such women were rarely, if ever, willing to leave their own children to nurse someone else's because they did not generally require the monetary support of wet nursing.

Because most wet nurses were necessarily from lower classes, advisors suggested at least hiring the most moral women possible, married when feasible, but again, this set of expectations was often overly ambitious. In *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, for example, Mr. Easy asks the doctor to confirm that the proposed wet nurse, Sarah, has good character, to which the doctor replies, "If you are too particular in that point, you will have some difficulty in providing yourself" (22). Later, Mrs. Easy is appalled to learn that Sarah has never been married but has born a child, but the doctor is quick to remind her, "My dear madam . . . This is the only person that I could find suited to the wants of your child, and if you do not take her I cannot answer for its life. It is true, that a married woman might be procured; but married women, who have a proper feeling, will

not desert their own children” (24). Because finding a wet nurse who met these high standards was nearly impossible, conduct writers and medical professionals produced other suggestions to help families choose the least threatening wet nurse, as well as to control whatever power she might wield.

Doctors and advice texts suggested that families, or at least their respective doctors, perform controlling acts of inspection in attempt to limit the wet nurse’s experience of power. Isabella Beeton’s *The Book of Household Management* provided suggestions for choosing the best wet nurse, which required the physical investigation of the potential wet nurse’s body, including her breasts. *The Mother’s Medical Adviser* insisted, “If a wet nurse is to be hired, she should always undergo the inspection of a surgeon or physician” (Wakley 10). One doctor, Dr. Tilt, suggested that wet nurses come from the country because they would be healthier than wet nurses from the city and it would be easier to ascertain their moral stances from neighbors. He also suggested that “her hair be brown and dark rather than flaxen or red because, in the latter, the milk was less rich in nutrient value and she was more liable to inflammation of the breast” (qtd. in Branca 101-102). *The Mother’s Medical Adviser* offered advice about aspects of the body of the proposed wet nurse—from her breath, gums, and teeth, to the size and shape of her breasts, veins, and nipples, to the food she should eat and the amount of sleep she should get each night (Wakley 10-11). Finding a nurse who met these expectations proved difficult, however, so families had to settle on many points.

The suggestions encouraged by such advice led to an intense system of surveillance. Even after the initial inspection, wet nurses were often watched while in the physical act of nursing. This visual penetration was meant to counter the tactile penetration of the nurse to the child to balance the power dynamic. In Marryat’s novel, Sarah immediately nurses the infant in

front of Mr. and Mrs. Easy and the doctor in order to “try the baby” as part of her application for the position, so multiple eyes watch while the infant “Master John Easy was fixed to Sarah as tight as a leech” (25). Similarly, in *Dombey and Son*, Mrs. Chick and Miss Tox are regularly present in the nursery while Polly nurses the infant Paul, and Mr. Dombey establishes a method for surveying Polly and watching her nurse. Because Melisa Klimaszewski and Jules Law have provided detailed readings of Mr. Dombey’s surveillance of Polly, it is unnecessary to make a similar argument in these pages. Still, a brief overview of their ideas will help establish how families who hired wet nurses attempted to use surveillance to suppress her power, and to demonstrate how the wet nurse still maintained a sense of agency.

Both Klimaszewski and Law focus on issues of surveillance as they disrupt power dynamics in *Dombey and Son*. They both note that Mr. Dombey insists on giving Polly the gender ambiguous name of Richards, thus stripping her of her identity, and perhaps also her power, within of his home. What Klimaszewski and Law emphasize that is most useful for this argument is the way in which Mr. Dombey himself gazes upon Polly in attempt to control her. As Law notes, the experience of having a wet nurse infiltrate both the home and Paul iterates “the novel’s most fundamental anxieties about the autonomy of personal identity,” while also promoting what Law considers the novel’s “vision of renovated family structures” (16).

Both critics pay careful attention to the scenes in which Mr. Dombey attempts to relieve his anxieties by having Polly parade Paul for his father to view in a glass room in the interior of the home, which Klimaszewski notes is similar to Foucault’s panopticon. “In this room,” Klimaszewski explains, “Polly is surrounded by glass, and the configuration is such that she and the infant are entirely visible to Mr. Dombey, but they cannot readily see him . . . Mr. Dombey is using his gaze to compensate for what he perceives as a loss of power in the home”

(“Examining” 337). He uses this surveillance, Klimaszewski claims, as an attempt “to establish control over the wet nurse with visual access at the very moment that her breast penetrates the infant” (“Examining” 337).

Both critics demonstrate the idea that most concerns this argument, that Mr. Dombey’s surveillance is unsuccessful at stripping Polly of her agency. Rather, he actually provides her with more direct power, as she turns his gaze back on him and uses her position to establish her own clearly defined authority within the Dombey home. Polly “continuously demonstrates an ability to influence even the most objectionable arrangements” in the Dombey house, and “her looking back” at Mr. Dombey from the glass room “is a symbolic gesture that disrupts the ‘automatic functioning’ of his power” (Klimaszewski “Contested” 142, 144). “In the Panopticon model,” Klimaszewski explains, “the observed is defamiliarized and made distant. Here, Mr. Dombey is trapped by the scene of surveillance he has created” (“Contested” 144). He does not actually “reduc[e] Polly completely to an object under surveillance,” but instead creates the opposite power dynamic from that which he intended. Instead, “Polly Toodle repeatedly gazes back at Mr. Dombey, and the narrative perspective at this moment shifts to one that favors Polly’s point of view” (“Examining” 338).

Klimaszewski further notes that the chapter’s title is in passive voice, indicating not that Mr. Dombey sees Polly in the panopticon-like room, but that he “*is seen* at the Head of the Home Department” (“Examining” 338-339). She argues that this grammatical construction “temporarily obscures the agency of the person doing the seeing,” suggesting that Dickens uses the passive construction to “empower” Polly by “pass[ing] judgment on her employer without calling attention too overtly to the privileging of a working-class servant figure” (Klimaszewski “Examining” 339). Law takes this notion a step further, connecting the surveillance of Polly to a

re-envisioning of power structures not only in the Dombey home, but also in society. He explains:

The structure of surveillance that is supposed to halt the play of substitutions opened up by the traffic in bodily fluids is turned back on itself and produces a mirroring structure uncannily like the fluidity it was intended to arrest. This paradox echoes throughout the novel, as the dual implications of wet-nursing—new kinship configurations and new efforts at regulation—are reproduced in household after household. (36)

It is precisely these “new kinship configurations” that interest me. As we see through novels like *Dombey and Son*, wet nurses establish themselves as essential mother figures, despite a social fear of the power they exhibit within their roles.

Despite clear attempts to limit her power through mechanisms such as surveillance, the wet nurse often remains a powerful figure in most mid-Victorian literature, successfully nourishing and strengthening the higher-class children of her charge. Polly’s milk is strong nourishment for young Paul; he “suffer[s] no contamination from the blood of the Toodles,” and he grows “stouter and stronger every day” that he imbibes the wet nurse’s milk (58). Polly, thus, successfully nurtures young Paul, and although she is fired for seeing her own children,³⁶ her important role as Paul’s surrogate mother becomes even more apparent after her dismissal. The infant “cried lustily” the night Polly left, “for he had lost his second mother—his first, so far as

³⁶ The fact that Polly is fired for seeing her own infant while in Mr. Dombey’s service suggests that, despite public outcry, the major social concern was not actually the moral problem of a wet nurse abandoning her own child, but was rather the fear of the power wet nurses wielded over middle-class families.

he knew” (100-101). Paul’s health deteriorates from the moment his wet nurse is dismissed, and despite growing “stronger and stouter” while drinking Polly’s milk, he is described later as being “naturally delicate” because he “pined and wasted after the dismissal of his nurse” (107).

Eventually, although almost six years after Polly’s dismissal, Paul’s health diminishes so greatly that he dies, but even upon his deathbed, Polly’s power as his surrogate mother is reasserted. Although the young boy could not possibly have any memory of the woman who nursed him during infancy, he believes he recalls seeing a “kind face, like a mamma’s, looking at [him] when [he] was a baby” (251). Asking to see his old nurse, the face he recalls, Polly returns to the dying boy’s side and is present on his deathbed with his closest family. She is granted a natural right to be by Paul’s side, with his father and sister, as his surrogate mother. “No other stranger,” the narrator explains, “would have shed those tears at the sight of him, and called him her dear boy, her pretty boy, her own poor blighted child. No other woman would have stooped down by his bed, and taken up his wasted hand, and put it to her lips and breast, as one who had some right to fondle it” (252). By establishing Polly’s rightful place to love and nurture Paul at her breast, these lines reassert her power as his surrogate mother. They naturalize her role, and reiterate that even her dismissal from the Dombey home cannot take away the power she obtained through wet nursing.

There are two ways in which the portrayal of Polly Toodle reiterates the ultimate power of the wet nurse. First, by the end of the novel, Polly has arguably infiltrated a higher class, although not specifically through her breast milk. When she returns to nurse Mr. Dombey after his marriage, counting house, and health all simultaneously fail, she does not actually need a living because her husband has become more financially stable by driving trains. Although this is not necessarily a middle-class profession, it does remove Polly’s need to work in a position of

servitude. Still, she goes to nurse Mr. Dombey as a favor because, in her husband's words, "Favours past, Polly, is never to be forgot" (902). Second, this is the only major mid-Victorian novel featuring a wet nurse where the employer actually dismisses the nurse despite understanding the necessity of the milk she provides,³⁷ and it is also the only novel in which the child being nursed does not survive into adulthood.³⁸ So, although Mr. Dombey asserts a seemingly final authority over Polly when he dismisses her despite his son's needs, the outcome reminds readers of the true power the wet nurse holds: the power of life over a child who could play an integral role in the future of middle and upper classes. Paul Dombey is heir to one of the most prosperous counting houses in England, and young Paul's survival might have prevented the fall of that house had Mr. Dombey allowed his son's health to continue flourishing under the care of his wet nurse.

Dombey and Son provides the most comprehensive depiction of the power of the wet nurse in popular Victorian fiction, as it follows the story of the wet nurse, the child she nurses, and the family that employs her over the greatest period of time. Still, other novels also demonstrate failed attempts to control the wet nurse's power with surveillance through their depictions of the initial physical examination of the wet nurse. Melisa Klimaszewski astutely

³⁷ Esther Waters is also dismissed from her position as wet nurse, but this novel is outside the timeframe appropriate for discussion in this chapter. Esther also leaves her post voluntarily, and is only fired as a result of her insistence on leaving to care for her own sick infant, a circumstance that is reminiscent of Polly Toodle.

³⁸ The child in Tennyson's "Lady Clare" does die during infancy despite her wet nurse's nourishment, but the social implications of this death are fewer both because the reader never meets this child, and because the child was a daughter, rather than a male heir.

breaks down how employers use physical examinations as mechanisms of control over wet nurses, suggesting, “A complicated exchange of physical and visual penetrations occurs as employers attempt to exert control over a servant whom they perceive as an extreme threat” (“Examining 324). She further explains, “This inspection enables the higher classes to attempt to reassert power over the working-class body that they perceive to be violating their family spaces in a most intimate way” (“Examining” 324).

During these inspections, either a family member or doctor examined the potential wet nurse’s body. The person performing the examination visually inspected the shape, size, and color of her breasts and nipples, and they physically fondled them to confirm the production of nutritious milk. Thus, before a potential wet nurse could assume the powerful position, she must be degraded while someone physically surveyed her body as a landscape. As a farmer might survey a plot of land to ensure its ability to grow healthy and substantial crops, so an employer surveyed a wet nurse’s body to determine whether she could produce nourishing milk. These inspections functioned to control the wet nurse. No matter how much nourishment she provided to a child, she would, her employer hoped, constantly recall the visual and tactile violations to which she succumbed in order to obtain her post, checking any feelings of authority that might otherwise arise.

Although literary representations of the surveillance of a wet nurse rarely note the specific details of the examination she undergoes, most scenes of a wet nurse becoming engaged with a family indicate that some sort of examination occurs. In *Dombey and Son*, Mrs. Chick, “enter[s] into a close private examination of Polly” (27). This inspection is described as an “ordeal” from which Polly “come[s] out unscathed,” a comment that reiterates the emotional turmoil that such an examination might wreak on the proposed wet nurse (27). The examination

features even more prominently in *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, where the wet nurse, Sarah, submits to an unusual kind of inspection, despite already having been examined by a doctor. “Mr. Easy was a philosopher,” the narrator explains, “and had latterly taken to craniology, and he descanted very learnedly with the Doctor upon the effect of his only son obtaining his nutriment from an unknown source” (22). These lines suggest the social fears of children being contaminated by someone from a lower class, a fear Mr. Easy attempts to quell by inspecting the milk source. “I have examined her,” the doctor explains, but this response is insufficient, and Mr. Easy insists on taking the power of inspection into his own hands. Not only must Mr. Easy curb any feelings of authority that may arise in the wet nurse, but he must also ensure that it is his own authority that keeps such feelings in check, demonstrating from the outset that he has power over Sarah, even if she is responsible for nourishing his son. For Mr. Easy, the doctor’s “examination is only preliminary to the more important,” and he continually insists on examining her himself (22).

Although Mr. Easy is focused on asserting his own dominance, his wife’s concerned reply demonstrates the trauma that most middle-class women imagined such an examination to incite, especially at the hands of a male. Unable to believe her husband actually plans to inspect Sarah himself, and potentially jealous of the tactile connection her husband will establish with the young wet nurse, Mrs. Easy not only questions, but “exclaims” her concern. She asks, “Examine who,” and “examine what, Mr. Easy?” She urges him not to inspect Sarah, insisting, “I think you had better leave her alone . . . I shall question her pretty severely” (22). Mrs. Easy’s response, while humorously pointing out her desire that her husband have no physical contact with the wet nurse’s breasts, simultaneously reiterates the importance of asserting some sort of authority over her. Although she does not want her husband to have any tactile connection with

Sarah, Mrs. Easy recognizes the necessity of one of the employers, rather than just the doctor, demonstrating their position of power, so she offers to take on this authoritative role herself.

Mrs. Easy's suggestion, however, does not satisfy for her husband. Still insistent upon examining the wet nurse himself, Mr. Easy reiterates the tactility of the invasion of the wet nurse's personal space. He responds to his wife's assertion that she "shall see" if her husband will conduct the inspection with the humorous and poignant response, "And I shall feel" (23). When Sarah enters at this moment, Mr. Easy acts on his plan, although finally clarifying it for his wife, the doctor, and the reader. His first words to Sarah are, "Young woman, come this way, I wish to examine your head" (23). Mr. Easy takes off Sarah's cap while "putting his fingers through her hair," ultimately pronouncing that he is satisfied because she has "a large portion of benevolence . . . And veneration also," while "the organ of modesty is strongly developed" (23).³⁹ While Mr. Easy's examination provides a great deal of humor for the reader, Sarah's "fear and astonishment" during the investigation of her head suggest the invasive nature of such a physical inspection. Further, the metonymic substitution of the phrenological head for the breast indicates just how frightened and discomfited a woman might have been when succumbing to a similar inspection of her breasts, especially at the hands of a man, if she is so mortified by an examination of her skull.

³⁹ The Victorian science of craniology, or phrenology, claimed that the physical characteristics of a person's skull directly correlated with that person's moral makeup. Dr. Gall founded this system of study in Vienna in 1796. According to George Combe's 1824 examination of the subject, "The form of the brain can be discovered . . . by inspecting the cranium" (13).

4.1.4 *The Agency of the Wet Nurse*

While Sarah undergoes an examination that her future employers hope will prevent her from experiencing any power within their home, she makes herself useful enough to eventually rise to the status of dry nurse, a position a fallen woman was otherwise not likely to obtain. Thus, the surveillance she undergoes does not prevent Sarah from moving up through the ranks of servitude, and her counter penetration of the child actually allows her the power to procure a better position than she otherwise would have acquired. Despite engaging in an occupation that society aimed to suppress, the later lives of major literary wet nurses are generally improved through their performances of this precarious role. This upward mobility suggests that some sort of social power accompanies this controversial form of replacement motherhood. The wet nurse in Tennyson's "Lady Clare," for instance, continues as dry nurse and passes her own daughter off as gentry for years. Even when she tells her daughter that she is not truly Lady Clare, the daughter's lover accepts her as she is and makes her Lady Clare through marriage.

Literary wet nurses often rise in social positions, at least within limited bounds, and literature also suggests that fears of wet nurses' negative biological propensities contaminating higher classes are unfounded. In *Vanity Fair*, *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, and *Doctor Thorne*, the wet nurse's milk nourishes higher-class male infants who grow into robust, healthy English landowners. Rawdon Crawley becomes a kind estate owner despite never having received nourishment or love from his mother. John Easy, the nurse-fed child in Marryat's novel, ultimately becomes a competent Navy officer and restores his father's crumbling estate. Frank Gresham, hero of Trollope's novel, marries the woman he loves despite having always believed she had no fortune, and his marriage rescues his aristocratic family from potential financial ruin. The only major literary child who is suckled by a wet nurse but does not prosper later in life is

Paul Dombey, and he is also the only instance in which the employer dismisses the wet nurse before the child has properly weaned.⁴⁰ In most instances, literary wet nurses nourish healthy children who go on to do good for themselves and for England. The wet nurse's potentially destructive fluids do not prevent their nurslings from growing into socially prosperous men. Further, the negative depictions of Rawdon Crawley's mother Becky, Frank Gresham's father, and both of Jack Easy's parents suggest that the boys actually thrive despite the influences of their parents, not their wet nurses. The wet nurse, it seems, restores the very social and family structures she originally threatens.

Much literature represents wet nurses as overcoming social fears of their power as a direct result of their refusal to adhere to the bounds of Victorian regulations over women's bodies. The wet nurse disrupts social expectations by using her body as currency, as a form of exchange. Although she gives up some immediate freedom within this exchange—she is relegated to her employer's home and rules, she undergoes social scrutiny, and she is often subject to an intense system of surveillance—she recognizes the value of the commodity she possesses, and she capitalizes on it, despite being objectified at certain moments. Because her body, her breasts, and her fluids, have the highest possible value to a family of means with an infant in need of nourishment, the wet nurse ultimately has the upper hand in this transaction. She uses her advantage to extract the maximum personal benefit from her employer, earning a good wage, a comfortable living situation, and enhanced occupational opportunities after the child of her charge weans.

⁴⁰ The Gresham family does dismiss Frank's first wet nurse because "she was fond of brandy," but they replace her immediately (20).

By using her body within the system of exchange, the wet nurse maintains her value in future exchanges that do not commodify her body, yet she would never have achieved such value without the initial transaction that relied on her physicality. The currency she uses to negotiate a strong position for monetary exchange, thus, also leads to a social exchange, where the working class, often fallen woman exchanges her position of outcast and charitable dependent for one of authority over her own future, at least within the bounds of domestic servitude. She achieves a sort of social redemption by exchanging the same body that led to her initial Othering, a shift that demonstrates the volatility and instability of understandings of the female body as both a private space to be protected and a valuable public commodity. It is precisely because of this instability that higher class Victorians fear the wet nurse, especially her body. Much Victorian fiction, however, indicates that such fears are unfounded, allowing a commodified exchange of the female body to mutually benefit both parties—and social classes. Literature only punishes the people, namely Mr. Dombey, who disrupt this exchange.

Although the wet nurse incites social fear, the literature examined here demonstrates that fictional representations of her role, despite noting and perhaps even participating in attempts to limit her power, ultimately reiterate that she maintains the power society attempts to deny her. Although she successfully replaces the mother and often improves her own social status, two of the major causes of social angst about her position, literary wet nurses ultimately benefit the middle and upper classes that so readily fear them. They nourish young boys who later protect the social structure by becoming strong English landowners, demonstrating that surrogate mothers who simultaneously benefit children and families in need can have a positive impact on the very social systems they threaten.

4.2 Normalizing Step-motherhood through Literature

Because stepmothers legally took the places of biological mothers, they incited a similar fear to wet nurses. Unlike wet nurses, however, stepmothers generally married men from their own social classes, making them at least the less controversial of the two most threatening types of surrogate mother. Still, stepmothers often took over the mother's name, either when the children chose or were forced to call her "mamma." We have seen Christine Poulson suggest that stepmothers threatened the structure of middle-class families because stepfamilies deviated from traditional norms. Further, Elizabeth Thiel has explained that, because her role, "aris[es] from the negativity of death and 'wrenching loss,'" the stepmother "exemplifies the otherness that stands in opposition to the perfect mother and, by implication, is a threat to the domestic ideal" (74). Despite being considered threatening, however, both fiction and nonfiction sometimes depicted positive images of stepmothers because many Victorians recognized the need to provide legal substitutes for dead mothers. Children's journals such as *The Girls' Own Paper*, for instance, taught young girls to obey their stepmothers. Domestic magazines like *The British Mother's Journal and Domestic Magazine* (originally Bakewell's *The British Mother's Magazine*) provided advice to stepmothers. Additionally, much children's fiction demonstrated that "domestic happiness could once more be gained through" a stepmother's "love and affection" (Thiel 74).

One distinction, however, did make stepmothers more potentially threatening than wet nurses. While wet nurses sometimes stood in the place of living mothers, the biological mother whom a stepmother replaced was necessarily deceased, and thus entirely powerless to observe or

control her replacement or to impact her children's lives.⁴¹ The dying mother in Adelaide Anne Procter's "A New Mother," the poem quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, iterates the biological mother's fear of being forgotten and replaced, begging "with her last struggling breath / 'Let my babies still remain my own!'" (223). Many Victorians worried that the stepmother would fully supplant the biological mother and that stepfamilies would upset traditional family structures. Even to Bakewell, whose writing generally supported stepmothers, "the wicked stepmother of fairy tales remain[ed] a potential threat to the loving and tranquil environment that typifies the idealized nineteenth-century domestic sphere" (Thiel 78). Victorians internalized negative representations of stepmothers in fairy tales, and the cultural ideology that formed around the role was immensely contradictory. Stepmothers, though rarely as feared as wet nurses, formed perhaps the most contested site of surrogate maternity of the Victorian period.

In this section, I study literature that disconnected the idea of the stepmother from her monstrous mythical antecedent to examine the contested understandings of mid-Victorian stepmotherhood. My readings reveal the social angst the role invoked and the prejudices that stepmothers faced. Ultimately, though, the literary stepmothers I consider in this chapter demonstrate, like wet nurses, that positive surrogate mothers, even the ones society feared, had

⁴¹ It was possible for a stepmother to replace a living mother because divorce became easier and more common after a series of Matrimonial Causes Acts during the Victorian period. Still, divorce was not a regular occurrence, and literary representations rarely depict remarried fathers whose first wife is not dead. In Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, Mr. Carlyle alludes to a social code that would prevent staunchly moral men from remarrying unless their previous wife is deceased when he refuses to consider remarrying after Isabel abandons him. He only takes that step when he believes she has died in a train accident.

the capacity to improve the English nation. On the whole, this examination is less concerned with either the monstrosity or goodness of stepmothers because both appeared readily in Victorian fiction and nonfiction. Rather, this study focuses on the way some literature re-envisions the stepmother's role, demonstrating the domestic and social stability that can arise as a result of effective step-motherhood.

4.2.1 Contested Understandings of Stepmothers

The varying representations of surrogate mothers in Victorian fiction demonstrate that alternative mothers were not necessarily feared, but simply that women who threatened to physically or legally usurp the place of biological mothers invoked a heightened level of social anxiety. The evil reproductions of stepmothers in the Victorian imagination resulted largely from the routinely monstrous depiction of stepmothers in fairy tales. "For the Victorians," Thiel explains, "immersed in the tales of the Brothers Grimm, the wicked stepmother was evidently something of a potent image" (74). Thiel suggests that the stepmother had "a stigma attached to her breed" that she had to overcome in order to obtain her stepchildren's love and affection, as well as the good opinion of others (76). The common reproduction of the Cinderella story during the Victorian period supports Thiel's claim that social ideology was haunted by the spectre of the wicked stepmother. In most iterations of this tale, the wicked stepmother foils the fairy godmother. The stepmother is depicted as selfish, cruel, and unloving. The fairy godmother, on the other hand—the unofficial and thus less potentially subversive surrogate mother—performs her motherly duties in a loving, unselfish, ideally maternal manner. This dichotomy is especially notable because the ideal mother is not the biological mother herself, but is still a replacement mother. Thus, surrogates could acceptably stand in for biological mothers, but only in unofficial roles that did not threaten that biological mothers might be forgotten.

Victorian society internalized fairy tales' monstrous representations of stepmothers, and such negative depictions became common in other types of literature, as well. Although novels, which aimed to be more realistic than fairy tales, rarely depicted stepmothers in such demonic capacities, many literary stepmothers were, if not entirely cruel, at least uninterested in or cold toward their stepchildren. Mrs. Gibson in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, while not actually cruel to her stepdaughter Molly, is largely unloving and selfish, often making Molly unhappy and jealously thwarting Molly's previously close relationship with her father. Similarly, Lady Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is unloving toward her stepdaughter Alicia, who is nearly her same age, and Lucilla Finch's stepmother in Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* has no time for her stepdaughter between reading romance novels and caring for her abundance of biological children.

Because negative representations of stepmothers were so common, children were often taught to be prejudiced against their stepmothers, making the role an immensely difficult one to perform. A letter entitled "Trials of Stepmothers," published in an 1838 edition of *The Mother's Magazine*, explained that a naughty child had recently informed his stepmother, "I was told not to mind you" (12). This declaration suggests that outside influences made it difficult for a stepmother to guide and discipline effectively. Such instructions often came from extended family members, friends, and other community members, who assumed that a stepmother could not have the proper "feelings of love and good will" toward her stepchildren ("Trials" 12). In 1856, Bakewell added a section on the claims and responsibilities of stepmothers to *The Mother's Practical Guide in the Physical, Intellectual, and Early Training of her Children*. In this section, she used the words "stigma" and "prejudice" in her discussion of the way children

were taught to imagine stepmothers (qtd. in Thiel 75).⁴² These negative perceptions led to a cyclical problem; stepmothers could not perform their roles well if their stepchildren and surrounding communities thwarted their every effort, and their inability to overcome such prejudice made them less effective, reinforcing the injurious bias against them.

Although various works of Victorian fiction clearly indicate a concern with a stepmother's potential monstrosity, even versions of the Cinderella story recognize the potential good that can arise from step-motherhood. George Cruikshank, for instance, indicates that a stepmother can be a necessary and useful addition to a young girl's life. In his tale, Cinderella's father's "lady friends advised him to marry again . . . for the sake of his little daughter . . . although the love and care of her natural mother could never be replaced," but the actual depiction of the stepmother once she enters the home is much more grim (41). Other literature indicates such contested understandings of the stepmother's role, as well. Characters comment early in *Wives and Daughters* that Dr. Gibson's should remarry to provide Molly with a mother figure, yet the character of Mrs. Gibson, although far from evil, is equally far from being loving and nurturing. Thus, despite indicating the important role of the replacement mother, the stepmothers in these stories are not likable. They also turn out to be selfish characters; Cruikshank's is described as being "proud, selfish, and extravagant, and these bad qualities led her to be unjust and cruel" (39).

⁴² Thiel's version of Bakewell's text is from 1864, and contains the pertinent quotes on pages 268 and 290. I have only been able to access the 1836 version, in which the stepmother section does not exist, but *WorldCat* indicates that the addition of the chapter on stepmothers appeared in 1856.

Still, in a world that was apparently prejudiced against stepmothers, the regular literary suggestion that a young girl could benefit from her father's second marriage highlights the contested nature of the role. Stepmothers were becoming normalized and were sometimes considered necessary to society, yet they still evoked much anxiety. *Wives and Daughters* especially iterates these conflicting social feelings, as Hollingford society simultaneously recommends and rebukes the sometimes bad stepmother. Before he proposes to Clare Kirkpatrick, various characters recommend that Dr. Gibson remarry, noting that Molly is at an "awkward age for a motherless girl," and suggesting that she needs the guidance of a stepmother (103). Roger Hamley even tells Molly, "It must be almost a duty to find some one to be a substitute for the mother" (119). Still, despite understanding the need for Molly to have a surrogate mother, many characters also recognize the potential shortcomings of a stepmother, and it is those shortcomings that play out most apparently in the narrative that ensues. These discrepancies highlight the contested nature of the stepmother's role. Characters recognize the necessity of stepmothers, yet they cannot entirely break away from the stigmas attached to them, and works like retellings of the Cinderella story and *Wives and Daughters* do little to alleviate such anxieties.

4.2.2 *Overcoming Prejudice*

Works of both fiction and poetry appeared in the mid-Victorian period that highlighted the social stigma against stepmothers. Some of these texts illustrated the problems that arose from such prejudice and, in some instances, demonstrated how strong stepmothers could ultimately strengthen domestic and social structures. Charlotte Yonge's *The Young Stepmother* (1860) tells the story of a naive stepmother who is unprepared for the prejudice she will face raising her husband's children. Adelaide Anne Procter's poem "A New Mother," referenced in

the epigraph of this chapter, tells the story of children overcoming their biases against their stepmother when their father goes off to war.

The Young Stepmother portrays a young woman, Albinia Kendal, set on positively influencing her stepchildren, but extended family members and neighbors regularly thwart her efforts. The most common offenders are a meddling grandmother and aunt, the mother and sister of the children's late mother. In addition to attempting to preserve the children's memories of their biological mother, these unofficial surrogate mothers are in competition with the new stepmother. They prejudice the Kendal children against their new mother, assuming that Albinia cannot possibly care for her stepchildren lovingly, and they spread rumors about her selfish behavior that turn her stepdaughters against her. This early prejudice makes it difficult for Albinia to develop a strong relationship with her stepdaughters, who often disobey her wishes and ignore her advice, demonstrating how prejudice against stepmothers thwarts their efforts to mother effectively.

Although Albinia never feels as successful as she would like as a stepmother, she ultimately earns the love and respect of her stepchildren and surrounding community through her refusal to play into the wicked stepmother stereotype. Because she does not feel like she achieves her goals, Thiel suggests that Albinia is ultimately unsuccessful specifically because of her insistence on being kind and loving to her stepchildren. According to Thiel, Albinia's "inability to resemble her tyrannical, mythical counterpart in any way" ultimately "results in the overall failure of her unruly transnormative family" (74). The fact that the stepchildren are not living happily ever after at the novel's conclusion, however, does not take away from the idea that stepmothers can ultimately be effective. Albinia's failure to provide a happy future for her stepdaughter Lucy is not the result of her failure to love and nurture. Rather, it is the effect of

Lucy's refusal to take Albinia's advice when her guidance might have prevented Lucy's unhappy fate. Thus, Yonge's text seems to suggest that the prejudicial belief systems that prevented Lucy from listening to her stepmother are to blame, rather than the stepmother herself.

Albinia is more implicated in the death of her beloved stepson Gilbert than in Lucy's unhappiness, but even Gilbert's death demonstrates the nationalistic success of this young stepmother. As the allegorical connection between Albinia's name and the historic name for England suggests, she can do good for her country through stepmotherhood. Gilbert joins the British army to fight in the Crimean War specifically because of Albinia's suggestion and connections. Although Gilbert ultimately dies because of this choice, his death is the result of his inability to fully recover from an injury he obtains during the charge of the light brigade at the Battle of Balaclava, the ultimate English sacrifice. Thus, although Albinia never feels as successful as she would like to in her role as stepmother, and although she loses her stepson because he takes her advice, his death suggests Albinia's ability to advance the future prosperity of England through stepmotherhood.

Hannah Ransome Geldart's 1862 *The Second Mother* especially emphasizes the difficult plight Victorian stepmothers faced. It suggests that the cultural assumption that stepmothers will inadequately fill the mother's place perpetuates a harmful stereotype, reinforcing prejudice against stepmothers that makes it difficult for them to mother successfully. Written to call its readers' attention to the problematic position of the stepmother, this Evangelical didactic novel is especially fruitful because it plays the opposite social role of most didactic fiction. Didactic novels generally function as extensions of conduct manuals, and much advice literature of the time perpetuated prejudices against stepmothers, rather than countering them. *The Second Mother*, however, is written with the explicit purpose of refuting prejudices against stepmothers.

Thus, while it is didactic in that it aims to teach its readers a lesson, it performs a vastly different cultural function than most didactic fiction.

Although a fictional text, the preface, written by Geldart's sister, Emma Marshall, clearly demonstrates the novel's place in an important ongoing discussion about social understandings of step-motherhood. Geldart died before completing her tale, but Marshall finished and published the book, knowing how important it was to her sister to produce a work that encouraged sympathy toward "the chosen guardian and mother of another's children" (vi). In a preface to the novel, Marshall explains that Geldart was "deeply interested in the subject, although without the personal experience of a stepmother" (v). Marshall herself admits to having taken a "sad pleasure in the attempt [to complete the novel], and a satisfaction in believing that one whom I loved would have rejoiced that some of her last thoughts on this 'vexed question' should thus be made known to Second Mothers, who have long had her earnest sympathy" (v).

The phrase "vexed" is especially poignant here. It points specifically to the conflicted role of stepmothers, a role rife with problems and disagreements in Victorian understandings of family structures. Geldart joined the conversation about stepmothers in hopes of enlightening others to the benefits good stepmothers could provide, drawing sympathy toward what she considered a difficult, important, and overly scrutinized role. Through her story, Geldart aimed to show the need to eliminate the social stigma against stepmothers, suggesting that stepmothers should not be feared, but rather supported. Her novel suggests that stepmothers who are able to overcome the prejudices against them can create stronger domestic and social structures.

The Second Mother tells the story of Janet Fielding, a teenage girl who, like Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, is devastated to learn that her father plans to remarry, feeling

that she “should *never* be quite happy again” (10, emphasis in original). Before even meeting her stepmother-to-be, Janet’s assumptions are based entirely on social prejudice. Outside influences engrain negative expectations into Janet’s mind, and the result is that Janet makes her stepmother’s job nearly impossible. Miss Sterne, an old family friend of the Fieldings, engages in what Geldart calls a “wrong, nay . . . sinful . . . romantic sentiment over the past, which does but serve to increase the difficulties of the present, and sow fresh seeds of unhappiness” (73). She comments on the great contrast between Janet’s caring, patient mother and her new stepmother, despite Miss Sterne’s having never actually met the new Mrs. Fielding (71). Although Miss Sterne does not intend to disparage Janet’s new stepmother, but merely to remember fondly her biological mother, the comparison makes Janet resent the woman who has come to take her dead mother’s place. As a result, Janet becomes colder and less obedient toward her stepmother.

The nurse, another surrogate mother who is in competition with the stepmother, especially vocalizes her prejudice against the new mother in Geldart’s novel.⁴³ Hugh, for instance, the eldest boy, is the first Fielding child to readily cling to his stepmother. Still, despite Hugh’s devotion, “The voice of the servants at Sunnyside,” led by the nurse, “decreed that Mrs. Fielding was unkind to Hugh” (78). The nurse’s negative sway is so noticeable that Mrs. Fielding blames her for the children’s bad behavior, bemoaning, “The mischievous influence in the nursery has been at work” (102). The nurse is so outspoken against her new mistress, in fact,

⁴³ It is also the nurse who struggles to accept the stepmother in Procter’s “The New Mother.” In fact, despite the children eventually warming to their stepmother in Procter’s poem, the nurse never allows the stepmother to entirely replace the biological one. She closes the poem with the line, “—Well, I loved my own dear lady best” (230).

that Hugh eventually scolds her, saying “It’s absurd to put everything down to mamma, and it’s not good thing to teach the children” (110). He continues to explicitly make Geldart’s point, saying, “No good can come of forever slanging mamma, as we all have done: it makes her miserable, and doesn’t improve our own spirits much, that I can see” (110-11).

Similarly, extended family complicates the stepmother’s role by increasing Janet’s prejudices against her. As the aunt and grandmother prejudice the children in *The Young Stepmother*, so Janet’s aunts, also the mother’s relatives and unofficial surrogate mothers, prejudice her against her stepmother. Aunt Ellen, never having met Katharine Fielding, warns Janet that her family is rumored to “have absurd ideas about their own importance,” suggesting that Katharine “is just the same: ‘poor and proud’” (13). Aunt Ellen’s prejudice taints the expectations of the young, impressionable Janet, leaving Katharine with a stigma to overcome that she is not even aware exists. Aunt Ellen further tells Janet that she pities her situation, saying in letters that she “can’t help being sorry for” the girl, “from all she knows” (13). Novels like Geldart’s and Yonge’s suggest that such prejudice is common from outsiders, and in this instance, it comes from the very aunts who should function as supportive surrogate mothers themselves.⁴⁴ Instead, they establish “a prejudice in Janet’s mind at the very outset” that makes it even more difficult for her to accept and obey her stepmother (13).

Janet’s aunts continue to influence the girl against Katharine, even after Janet resigns herself to treat her stepmother with more love and respect. Throughout the novel, Janet turns to the work’s most enlightened character, Mrs. Leicester, for advice. Mrs. Leicester, the reader is

⁴⁴ Although Yonge’s text demonstrates similar prejudicial trends to Geldart’s, it does not take on the overtly didactic nature that is apparent in Geldart’s text, despite Evangelical undertones in a few scenes.

surprised to learn, is a stepmother herself, and she has a thorough understanding of the difficulty of prejudices against stepmothers because she has slowly and painstakingly overcome them herself. Understanding the struggle Katharine Fielding faces, Mrs. Leicester charges Janet to improve her behavior, if not for her stepmother's sake, then for her father's. Janet attempts to follow the advice, "not encouraging nurse's gossip about Mrs. Fielding in the nursery" and holding her tongue more often (91). "Since the talk by the firelight the preceding winter with Mrs. Leicester," the narrator explains, "Janet had really as we have seen, tried to render duty to her second mother" (113). This peace, however, only lasts until Janet goes to visit her aunts. Knowing the threatening influence of the late mother's family, Mrs. Leicester "inwardly hoped" that Janet's visit would not make "home life more trying again" (113).

Despite Mrs. Leicester's hopes, Janet's visit with her aunts leads her to revert back to many of her old prejudices against Katharine, and Janet complains of her stepmother in the aunts' presence far more than she realizes. When they learn that Katharine has given birth to a baby boy, the aunts lament, based on what Janet has apparently said, that Katharine is unfit to raise another child. "No one could be more unfit for the post of stepmother than Edward's wife," Aunt Ellen boldly exclaims (129). While Janet is surprised to realize that she given her aunts the idea that Katharine is an unfit stepmother or mother, it is clear that their opinions have influenced Janet's previous words and behavior. Janet's frustrations do not arise from anything specific that Katharine has done, but are the result of what the novel suggests is an almost universal prejudice. Mrs. Leicester is enlightened from her practice overcoming prejudice, but Janet's aunts have had little experience with stepmothers outside of fiction. Thus, social stigma

is to blame for Aunt Ellen's ignorant statement, "But what is one to expect from step-mothers? It is the same story all the world over; nothing will ever alter it" (130).⁴⁵

After her visit to her aunts, despite having temporarily become more sympathetic toward her stepmother, Janet cannot imagine that Katharine could ever fill the void left by her mother's absence. She instead succumbs to prejudice that suggests Katharine is "an intruder in the circle of home, usurping the throne of her father's heart, influencing him in his daily life, giving him children to supplant those he had already" (131). Although she is willing to be dutiful toward her new stepmother, Janet feels especially unwilling to love her. She laments, "As to love—love for mamma's successor, love for one with whom I have not a thought in common!—Mrs. Leicester may say all she likes; I cannot love her" (132). Although Janet "want[s] someone to love so much," and while Katharine tries to provide nurturing support, Janet is so blinded by outside prejudice that she cannot imagine finding the care she seeks in her mother's replacement (132).

Even Katharine is aware of the negative influence of Janet's aunts, calling Aunt Emma's letters to Janet "intolerably silly" and lamenting that they "foster discontent with her home" (158). Katharine sadly recalls Janet's improved behavior before visiting her aunts, noting that, at that earlier point, "there was really an improvement, and we were getting on so well" (159). Later, when Janet expresses her frustration with her stepmother, Mrs. Leicester places the blame directly on the influence of Janet's aunts. She remonstrates, "I observe that you have a great

⁴⁵ While Janet's aunts' prejudices suggest their competition with Katharine for influence as Janet's surrogate mothers, it also demonstrates the varying depictions of unofficial surrogate mothers in Victorian fiction. Not all unofficial surrogate mothers were angelic like a fairy godmother.

many letters from Briarhampton, from your aunts,” and she explains that it is wrong of Janet to allow such negative influences to make Katharine’s life so difficult (166).

Geldart makes it clear that such negative influences are not only limited to Janet, but are a common experience among stepchildren. Emily Leicester, who adores her stepmother and calls her “mamma,” admits that her aunts had once done the same harm as Janet’s. Of course, aunts are not the only bad influences, but they certainly play a prominent role in Geldart’s text, as well as in Yonge’s. Their importance stems from their competition for influence as surrogate mothers, as well as from their desire to protect the memory of their own relative, the late mother.⁴⁶ Emily explains that the pity outsiders, though not only aunts, expressed toward her siblings and herself made them imagine that others thought “it dreadful to have stepmothers,” and she says that these negative opinions directly caused her initial dislike for Mrs. Leicester (35). “If the several friends on either side had left us alone,” Emily explains, “and allowed our better feelings and principles to have play, and had forborne interference and advice, we should have responded to mamma’s care and unselfish love much sooner than we did” (38). Emily points out the problems that misconceptions about stepmothers perpetuate, reiterating that English domestic life would benefit from the debunking of prejudices against stepmothers.

The negative influences the perpetuate prejudice are clearly abundant, and their effects are numerous. Geldart suggests that most servants either warn children that a negative change will come with a new stepmother or that they call attention to that change after her arrival. Recognizing the harm such behavior causes, and recalling it from her own past, Emily explains,

⁴⁶ Of course, aunts could also be the father’s sisters, but in Geldart’s and Yonge’s texts, they are the mother’s relations. Further, the 1835 Marriage Act demonstrates that it is the late mother’s sisters who incited the most social angst.

“These dear old servants do always take it into their heads to make children unhappy, and foster morbid fancies and dislikes when they ought to encourage and strengthen them in every possible way” (32).

Mrs. Worth, the third stepmother in the novel, laments that neighbors are likewise discriminatory. She complains that the neighbors say she “ill-used” her stepdaughter, Katie, “because she screeched when I put her in a good tub of water at night” (19). Mrs. Worth notes how such prejudices make her job more difficult. She explains that Katie “caught” Mrs. Dunn’s words “up quick enough, and said to me one night, as pat as could be, ‘Mrs. Dunn says stepmothers always *beat* and ill-use the children’” (20, emphasis in original). Because Katie hears that her stepmother will treat her poorly, she assumes she is being treated badly anytime Mrs. Worth does something the child does not like. Despite putting every effort into promoting her stepchildren’s good, it is nearly impossible for Mrs. Worth to care for them without being accused of wrongdoing. These negative attitudes make it nearly impossible for her to nurture the children well, and a circular pattern develops. Her inability to mother effectively, regardless of the cause, simply reiterates to outsiders that she is an unfit stepmother.

Incidentally, although Mrs. Dunn describes Mrs. Worth as “ill using” her stepchildren, the phrase would better apply to Mrs. Dunn’s treatment of her own children, demonstrating that many biological mothers are as bad as stepmothers are accused of being. *The Second Mother* displays three good, loving stepmothers who eventually win the love of their children—Mrs. Leicester, Mrs. Worth, and Katharine Fielding—and Mrs. Dunn foils these strong stepmothers. One of the only biological mothers in the novel, Mrs. Dunn abuses her children. Janet and Mrs. Leicester hear one of Mrs. Dunn’s children scream as a result of this abuse, and Mrs. Leicester notes, “Mrs. Dunn is a living witness that it is not stepmothers *only* who beat their children” (21).

Unlike the social maternal discourse of the period, *The Second Mother* explicitly points out that biological mothers regularly experience failures. Further, it suggests that stepmothers can raise children equally as well or as poorly, thus likening stepmothers to biological mothers without perpetuating the fear that stepmothers will replace them.

Geldart makes this comparison between stepmothers and mothers clear early in the novel when Janet vents her frustrations over the mere idea of her currently unknown stepmother-to-be to Mrs. Leicester. “You cannot deny that there are miserable second marriages,” Janet insists, “and that very, very few stepmothers make their husbands' children happy, and generally end in making him wretched as well” (14). Mrs. Leicester gently points out the problems inherent in *any* institution of caretaking, explaining that stepmothers are as likely as biological mothers to perform their roles either well or poorly. She claims, in line with the Evangelical tones of the novel, that both require God's guidance: “Mothers and stepmothers alike must get their strength where it cannot fail, or both will often be grievously disappointed. Many and sad are the failures of stepmothers, I admit; but it is also the same in the natural relation. *Mothers*, fail too” (15, emphasis in original). This claim demonstrates early in the novel what will become one of Geldart's main points: stepmothers need to be given as much credit for attempting to mother well as biological ones, and neither will necessarily live up to the idealized expectations laid out in conduct manuals and other didactic fiction.⁴⁷

What Geldart demonstrates through these dichotomous depictions, while not clearly suggesting that maternal expectations are impossible, is that social understandings of both

⁴⁷ Although Geldart does indicate that many mothers—biological or stepmothers—will not live up to Victorian maternal expectations, her idealized depiction of Mrs. Leicester does not seem to suggest that she believes achieving the model is impossible.

biological and step-motherhood are troubled. Because the expectations of mothers to be self-abnegating are so impossibly high, it is difficult to imagine a woman taking on that mantle for another person's child. As a result, because people were so convinced that stepmothers could not live up to expectations that were also unachievable for most biological mothers, the entire group was subject to an unfair vilification. Because of their own personal experiences, Mrs. Leicester and Emily are able to help others give stepmothers the benefit of the doubt. Together, they demonstrate the difference that treating stepmothers with respect can make in a family. Further, if Victorians imagined the home as a microcosm of society, as Ruskin suggested, a new respect for stepmothers would also benefit the English nation.

Mrs. Leicester understands before Mr. Fielding's second marriage the anxiety Janet feels about her coming relation. She plays the opposite role from most outsiders by attempting to positively influence Janet's behavior, attempting to alleviate Janet's fears and urging her to give her own stepmother-to-be the benefit of the doubt. Mrs. Leicester does not point to herself as an example of a good stepmother because she knows that Janet considers her a unique and lucky case. Instead, in hopes of training both Janet and the reader to sympathize with the stepmother's plight rather than to judge her, Mrs. Leicester attempts to show Janet another example of a loving, sacrificing stepmother. Mrs. Leicester takes Janet on a walk to the home of the Worth family, which was in complete disarray following the death of the mother, until Mr. Worth remarried in hopes of returning his home and children to order. Mrs. Leicester reminds Janet what the home was like the last time she saw it, before the new stepmother became its mistress, recalling, "The food was so wasted by bad cooking, and the clothes so thrown away for want of mending, and the furniture all going to wrack and ruin" (16). Mrs. Leicester then reminds Janet

how selfless a decision it was of the new Mrs. Worth to undertake the charge of being wife and stepmother in such a home, explaining:

And now here is the poor stepmother come in to this unruly household, to reap what others have sown perhaps, and to try to build up what others have pulled down. She has left a life of comparative ease and comfort as a servant in a gentleman's family, and has set herself to the all-but-hopeless task of restoring order and respectability to Worth's cottage. Will you not say she deserves *some* sympathy and some charity, even if she stumbles and falls over the rough, uneven path she has to tread day by day? (16-17)

Through this explanation and appeal, Mrs. Leicester points out to both Janet and the reader that, simply by virtue of entering a man's home and taking charge of his children, a stepmother is acting in a self-sacrificing manner. Thus, she deserves to be forgiven for stumbling over some of the difficulties that will inevitably arise, especially as self-sacrifice is the primary expectation of motherhood so commonly expressed in Victorian maternal ideology. In this way, stepmothers are inherently adhering to a major tenet of the maternal ideal before even entering their new husbands' homes.

Though Janet first sees Mrs. Worth as a "sour, miserable, discontented looking woman," Mrs. Worth's patience and resilience throughout the novel make her an example that reminds Janet and the reader that the positive influence of stepmothers is not limited to Mrs. Leicester. In fact, as quickly as the second time Janet sees Mrs. Worth's home, she notices that "the aspect of things was certainly improved here," and she even hears one of the young children call her stepmother "mammie" (67). For Janet, watching Mrs. Worth grow in importance and love

within her home reminds her that stepmothers other than Mrs. Leicester can be good. For readers, this change suggests that such positive stepmothers can exist outside of literature.

Although Janet ultimately undergoes the change Mrs. Leicester encourages, it is not until the end of the novel that she realizes her own prejudice against her stepmother has made their relationship tumultuous and that Katharine shares very little of the blame. Sharing Katharine's sorrow over the loss of her only child and Janet's youngest brother, Janet comes to feel that she is largely responsible for her stepmother's rapidly declining health. Janet "longed to throw herself into those thin arms, and tell her story of repentance and of love" (223). Her moment of repentance, in which she cries, "Oh, mamma! mother! I do love you! indeed, I do! I am so sorry for the past!" serves as a reconciling moment for all who adhere to the common and strong prejudice against the stepmother (224). Her stepmother's "faint response" of "My child!" solidifies a point Geldart made clear much earlier: Janet's loving stepmother has wanted desperately to be allowed to view Janet as a daughter. Katharine's aim has always been to love Janet, but prejudices against her have prevented Janet from accepting the love Katharine was uncertain how best to give (224). Although this moment of transformation for Janet may feel heavy-handed, it is this change that ultimately demonstrates the power of the stepmother. Even in her weakened state, having lost her child and seemingly on the verge of death herself, Katharine finally prevails over Janet's prejudices and earns her love and affection. Still, Katharine does not accomplish this transformation entirely on her own; it is the power of another stepmother, Mrs. Leicester, which ultimately helps her achieve her goal.

It is specifically Mrs. Leicester's status as a stepmother that gives so much power to the role throughout the novel, as she is instrumental in the transformations that occur in the Worth and Fielding homes. Geldart achieves this effect in part by introducing Mrs. Leicester as a

loving mother before acknowledging that she is not a biological mother. Still, Mrs. Leicester's ultimate power demonstrates the possibility that a good stepmother can change the perception of the world around her and create a harmonious home and community. Because Katharine Fielding and Mrs. Worth need her help in achieving the same end, however, Geldart suggests that the feat is too great for every stepmother to accomplish, much like living up to the expectations set for biological mothers. Thus, a larger cultural shift that is more openly accepting of stepmothers and less strict on actual mothers would allow the two types of mother to work in greater harmony, which would ultimately benefit English society.

From the beginning, the reader understands that Geldart's stepmothers, or at least one of them, will have the power of affecting change in the hearts of those around her, and Geldart reiterates at the end of the novel that this influence expands outside of the powerful stepmother's small domestic sphere and into the larger public community. Through Mrs. Leicester, Geldart demonstrates the need to shift and expand maternal and domestic expectations, to make ideals more malleable, in part to help stepmothers and their stepchildren, and in part because re-envisioned family structures might be the closest option to the former ideal. With the biological mother dead, the traditional domestic structure is already shattered, and while Thiel suggests that stepmothers in such cases are simply "making do," Geldart aims to show that "making do" can be just as good as the actual doing (100). For Geldart, stepmothers do not replace biological mothers; they reflect, or act as extensions of them.

Near the end of the novel, the newly married Emily Leicester (now Grantley) points out to her husband the error in his prejudices against stepmothers, noting that there are three good stepmothers present in the scene, Mrs. Leicester, Mrs. Worth, and Katharine Fielding. Emily

says to her husband, who has been complimenting Katharine for appearing a strong stepmother, “I hope you will give up your old prejudice against the poor stepmother. Look at those two—mine and Janet Fielding's—and never say again, as I have heard you say, ‘They are all alike!’” (227-28). Emily’s comment iterates Geldart’s main point; outsiders refer to stepchildren as “poor,” but Emily, and Geldart by extension, chooses to pity the stepmother herself. Her husband’s response “Well, I have known some disagreeable ones in my time” epitomizes the misconception Geldart aims to disprove about the nature of stepmothers. Still, his acknowledgment of the good stepmothers present at the party points out that, eventually, the influences of powerful stepmothers can extend beyond their initial spheres of influence. Before Mrs. Leicester assumed her surrogate maternal role, every character was likely prejudiced against stepmothers. Slowly and powerfully, she has exerted an influence over her entire town and has helped other stepmothers to be successful. Now, her influence is expanding further, as Emily and her visiting husband will take his new understanding away back to their own home.

Through characters like Mrs. Worth and Katharine Fielding, but especially through Mrs. Leicester, Geldart aims to normalize the role of the stepmother. She demonstrates the damaging nature of stereotypes that arise from social fear, and she suggests that such prejudices often cause the very problems they claim to reveal. Further, Geldart demonstrates how overcoming such biases can allow stepmothers to function in a way that will largely benefit both domestic and social structures. Mrs. Leicester wields a power rare to literary stepmothers, one that shifts social perceptions within the world of the novel and that echoes a shift that is simultaneously occurring in Victorian society. Characters like Mrs. Leicester suggest that stepmothers can act as extensions of biological mothers, rather than as replacements, as caregivers who love, nurture, and fail in the same ways mothers do.

Surrogate mothers were prominent in literature of the Victorian period and received a variety of representations that ultimately helped shape understandings of alternative maternal roles in society. Because wet nurses and stepmothers had a capacity to physically replace biological mothers, they were more threatening socially than unofficial surrogate mothers such as governesses, nurses, teachers, aunts, and family friends. Therefore, examining representations of wet nurses and stepmothers provides some of the ripest insights into the ways in which surrogate maternal roles became normalized within Victorian discourses of maternity. Although representations of wet nurses and stepmothers were contradictory, some mid-Victorian literature aimed to normalize the roles by demonstrating the benefits of strong surrogate mothers to both social and domestic spheres.

5 CHAPTER 4

RE-APPROPRIATING MATERNITY: HEROINES AS SURROGATE MOTHERS

As we have seen, mothers are regularly absent from Victorian fiction, and surrogate mothers are often responsible for raising literary children. In this chapter, I shift my attention from the fictive surrogate mothers who rear children to those young characters themselves. Heroines in Victorian *bildungsroman* novels often re-appropriate surrogate maternal roles, acting as surrogate mothers to other characters. While Marianne Hirsch has suggested that Victorian heroines specifically avoid motherhood, I argue that they instead utilize the time between the death (or ineffectiveness) of their own mothers and marriage to perform surrogate maternity, either to individuals or to entire communities. Characters like Gaskell's Molly Gibson and Margaret Hale, Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, Dickens's Esther Summerson, Craik's Olive, Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, and Oliphant's Lucilla Marjoribanks appropriate either domestic or social agency—often both—through the performance of surrogate motherhood.

Drawing upon Freudian and post-Freudian object-relations theory, Hirsch imagines Victorian mothers as being disempowered in the moment when their children recognize themselves as subjects because the mother, by relation, becomes an object. If mothers are unavoidably objectified by their children, then in order for a woman to maintain the position of subject in her own story, she must be either childless—like the stepmother who does not have biological children of her own—or, as Élisabeth Badinter has suggested, removed from her child—like the wet nurse whose child is no longer at her breast. Unlike a mother, because a surrogate mother is not tethered to the child in her charge by biological bonds, she is capable of maintaining her subjectivity and, thus, of creating of a new space that mimics maternity without requiring its biological factor or objectification. This space allows women to act in maternal ways while still having the agency necessary to speak for *a* child, notably not *her* child, while maintaining her own unique voice. Various women take on this role in novels, from the surrogate mothers who nurture motherless heroines to the heroines themselves as they care for others.⁴⁸

Because psychoanalysts understand Victorian mothers as being inherently silenced by their children and because Victorian maternal expectations pushed mothers to be self-sacrificing, Hirsch suggests that Victorian literary heroines attempt to avoid their mothers' objectified fates. According to Hirsch, "the nineteenth-century heroine, determined to shape a different plot for herself, tends not only to be separated from the figure and the story of her mother, but herself tries to avoid maternity at all costs" (4). Similarly, Victorian mothers were told to be selfless, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted, "To be selfless . . . is to be dead" (25). Thus,

⁴⁸ When I use the word "motherless" in this chapter, I refer not only to heroines whose mothers are absent, but also to those with living mothers who are almost entirely ineffective.

Hirsch suggests, heroines plan different life paths than motherhood to avoid their mothers' fates—either death or the death of personal autonomy.

Although an integral point for Hirsch, the question of whether motherless nineteenth-century heroines intentionally avoid biological maternity is not important for this discussion. I am not concerned with whether heroines will ever birth their own children because the typicality of the fictional marriage plot makes it impossible for readers to be certain about a heroine's procreative future. Because most Victorian novels end with the heroine's marriage, readers often imagine that those characters will likewise follow the expected social pattern of procreation. Instead, I am concerned with the scenes that appear in these novels, with how heroines act as surrogate mothers before they marry and have the opportunity to have children, often when they are barely more than children themselves.

Carolyn Dever has also studied coming-of-age heroines, not considering whether they become mothers, but instead investigating their power based on maternal involvement in their lives. Dever claims, "Motherlessness is equivalent to womanhood" (33). In other words, heroines whose mothers are dead or absent have authority over their own actions that they could not obtain if their mothers were more involved in regulating their lives. Thus, the "new notion of womanhood" that a heroine attains upon her mother's death "entails a new level of autonomy" (Dever 33). Through this autonomy, Dever suggests that motherless heroines have a unique ability to revise gender norms. Through readings from *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *North and South*, Dever ultimately suggests that Victorian authors "utilize the protagonist's motherlessness to produce revisionary, often proto-feminist, representations of marriage, the family, and women's roles" (31). She proposes that it is "precisely the *absence* of a maternal role-model that allows these texts to challenge conventions of female behavior" (31, emphasis in

original).

Thus, motherless heroines have a unique power over their own futures and over the future expectations of Victorian women. A psychoanalytic framework would suggest that becoming mothers would cause them to give up the personal and social agency that maternal loss provided. As a result, the ways in which different heroines navigate motherlessness and the complex structures of maternity have strong implications for the future of female power dynamics in the novel and in Victorian society. For Hirsch, “female family romances,” which were plots written by women about the stories of women within family structures, “necessarily situate themselves in a revisionary relationship to the Freudian pattern. In these novels, the fictional heroine often has to occupy both the position of subject and that of object in the narrative,” rather than simply the object position Freud attributed to the mother (10). For Dever, because motherless heroines “exist in less conventional relationships to one another, they are free to critique and revise conventions more generally” (31). Their autonomy over their own private lives extends into the public sphere as a power over social conventions.

Using this unique revisionary power, many motherless literary heroines rework social understandings of womanhood and motherhood. More specifically, Victorian *bildungsroman* heroines use the time between motherlessness and marriage to re-appropriate maternal norms through surrogate maternity. As Dever has explained, “The period between mother and marriage functions within each text as an opportunity to experiment with alternative forms of power; in each case, the heroine uses this opportunity to test the limits of her social, political, and discursive agency” (Dever 29). Ultimately, the *bildungsroman* heroine establishes herself as both a strong maternal figure and an autonomous subject, not through biological maternity, but by performing surrogate motherhood. Through the performance of traditional maternal norms in a

non-traditional setting, Victorian heroines function in a space that lies somewhere between ideal domesticity and proto-feminism, ultimately helping revise social understandings of motherhood. Through performances of surrogate maternity, they demonstrate that women need not have birthed children in order to mother effectively; this circumstance also suggests that a woman's *sole* life goal need not necessarily be motherhood.

Natalie McKnight has studied the category of heroines who avoid biological motherhood at some point, but many of the heroines she investigates *do* become mothers, like Eliot's Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel (*Adam Bede*), as well as Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*). In her reading of Eliot's heroines, McKnight suggests that such characters, also including Gwendolen Harleth (*Daniel Deronda*), make "conscious decisions" that help them "avoid motherhood" (136). Of these characters, however, Gwendolen is the only one who does not birth a child before the end of the novel. Because so many of the heroines McKnight studies do eventually have children, she highlights the need to study their subjectivity during their childless years, regardless of whether they eventually become mothers. She convincingly demonstrates how heroines enact more personal agency within their plots before they become mothers. She explains, "We see Dorothea expend far more energy and excitement in any of her projects, whether it be building cottages or clearing Lydgate's name, than in mothering her children, for the narrator pulls so far back from Dorothea in the finale where we discover that she has become a mother that she hardly seems present. We get no specific picture of her or words from her" (McKnight 128). By contrasting Dorothea's personal agency before having children to her minimal presence after, McKnight's demonstrates the importance of understanding a heroine's power in the time between motherlessness and motherhood. Despite hearing little of her at the end of the novel, Dorothea is an integral character in *Middlemarch*. Thus, the power she

establishes through surrogate maternal tasks like building cottages is significant regardless of her eventual maternal state.

In *Nobody's Angels*, Elizabeth Langland similarly notes the disappearance of Dorothea's subjectivity at the end of the novel, only attributing it to her marriage and not her motherhood. Langland explains that Dorothea's story becomes enclosed within her husband's, recalling the line, "Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another" (Eliot *Middlemarch* 513). I would argue, as it also seems McKnight would, that it is specifically her status as a mother that makes Dorothea become so absorbed after her marriage to Will. After all, she remains an important character doing social good during her childless marriage to Casaubon. Regardless, despite Dorothea's seeming unimportance at the end of *Middlemarch*, McKnight's reading of her social value before her marriage to Will demonstrates the utility of analyzing heroines' lives as surrogate mothers before they marry and have the possibility of becoming biological mothers, regardless of their eventual maternal states.

My reading of motherless and childless Victorian heroines who appropriate surrogate maternal roles draws from Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This theory suggests that performing gendered norms reiterates strict gender identifications because "construction . . . is itself a temporal process which operates through the iteration of norms" (*Bodies* 10). By repeatedly performing norms in a new context over time, however, the expectations of gender identifications can be reconstructed. Using Butler's model, I suggest that, by identifying themselves as surrogate mothers through the repeated performance of maternal gestures, literary heroines ultimately destabilize maternal understandings by demonstrating the ability of non-biological mothers to successfully perform maternity. Ultimately, these performances help

revise social understandings of womanhood and motherhood. Butler's ideas suggest that, when mothers perform the duties typically ascribed to them, they re-inscribe these roles as maternal. When surrogate mothers perform these same roles, however, and especially when they repeat those performances over time, they offer possible revisions to social expectations by demonstrating that motherhood need not be a biologically determined relationship.

We have seen how Austenian heroines regularly function as precursors to models that become conventional in mid-Victorian fiction, and Hirsch claims that Austen's Emma "manages to reproduce herself," not through sex, but through "a little girl who is not her own daughter, but rather Miss Taylor's" (64). This reproduction significantly demonstrates how selfhood continues, and can even be enhanced, through surrogate motherhood. Following the Austenian tradition, the mid-Victorian heroine who appropriates surrogate maternal roles performs the actions and gestures of motherhood, creating a substantive identity outside of prescribed norms. This identity merges different discursive injunctions—the ever-evolving Victorian maternal ideal, as discussed in chapter 1, and the professionalization of motherhood through occupations like nursing—allowing for a reconfiguration of the discourse of maternity until it becomes more fluid and more encompassing of alternative maternal roles. McKnight demonstrates, for instance, how Dickens's Esther Summerson (*Bleak House*) merges these two different ideas. McKnight suggests that, through the performance of surrogate motherhood as a teacher and caregiver, Esther "reverse[s] the bleakness by setting up a new world of her own, one in which she serves as the kind of selfless, loving, ideal mother that [Sarah Stickney] Ellis promoted in her guidebooks," despite not being a biological mother at all (47).

Like Esther, numerous mid-Victorian heroines act as surrogate mothers to other motherless children, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Gaskell's Margaret

Hale (*North and South*). Others even mother people who have living mothers of their own, such as Gaskell's Molly Gibson, who mothers her stepsister, Cynthia, as well as various other characters throughout the text. Other heroines take on larger surrogate maternal roles, acting as nurturing influences over society, such as Eliot's Dorothea Brooke. Among the most interesting heroines, however, are those who directly reverse maternal roles. Although unable to fulfill her desire because her mother turns out to be dead, Mirah in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* longs to act as caregiver to her own lost mother. Similarly, the heroine of Dinah Craik's *Olive* actually performs the role of surrogate mother to her own mother, an especially ripe text for analysis because it demonstrates that physical motherlessness is not the only key to individual identity.

In this chapter, I examine three heroines who act as surrogate mothers, with brief readings of other heroines interwoven. I imagine how these characters establish agency and how the specific actions and gestures they perform help re-envision Victorian maternity. In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson acts as a surrogate mother to her stepsister, Cynthia, and creates a unique power as a positive mother figure. She directly contrasts the depiction of Cynthia's biological mother that we saw in chapter 2. Olive Rothesay is a surrogate mother to her own infantilized mother throughout much of Craik's novel, blending feminine and masculine roles and subverting traditional maternal structures. Lucilla Marjoribanks, heroine of Margaret Oliphant's comedic *Miss Marjoribanks*, acts as a surrogate mother to her entire town, mimicking most directly the actions of Austen's Emma. Lucilla provides the most detailed example of a heroine both creating personal and social agency and using her social power to affect change to female and maternal norms.

Wives and Daughters and *Olive* are both fairly traditional *bildungsroman* novels that tell the story of an innocent, naïve young girl coming into her own. *Miss Marjoribanks*, however,

performs a quite different function. A satirical novel, it turns the domestic structure examined in Gaskell's and Craik's texts into comedy. This revision of the traditional domestic form allows *Miss Marjoribanks* to go even further in its re-envisioning of female power and of maternal and women's roles. Although Oliphant's text does the most of the three to demonstrate surrogate maternal power, the readings of Gaskell's and Craik's novels are especially enlightening because of the clear contrast between the mothers I examined in chapter 2 and the heroines/surrogate mothers considered in this chapter. Through their performances of traditionally maternal actions and gestures, these heroines take up the emblem of maternity without actually becoming biological mothers themselves, and their repetition of maternal gestures allows them to expand female and maternal understandings.

5.1 Performance and Protection in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*

Molly Gibson is one of a multitude of motherless heroines who establishes a strong identity as an independent woman while taking on a surrogate maternal role. Although Molly has no memory of her mother, she follows the pattern Carolyn Dever suggests when she explains that "the iconography of the maternal ideal achieves its cultural power through a poetics of abandonment," in which the dead mother is imagined as "virtuous, pure, noble, and true" (xi). Molly imagines her mother as an angelic figure, the near antithesis to her stepmother. In like form, she acts as a surrogate mother to Cynthia, mimicking the mother she imagines she once had and providing a substitute for Cynthia's own mother, who lacks socially ideal traits.

Although Molly's maternal performance is largely in line with many tenets of Victorian maternal ideology, she is not merely a reproduction the ideals set forth in conduct manuals. Rather, while her overtly dignified character in some ways exists staunchly within the bounds of expectations for middle-class females, she simultaneously detests many of the feminine niceties

her stepmother brings into the Gibson home. Miss Browning mentions Molly's "tomboy ways" (Gaskell 247), while John Kucich has described Molly as "masculine" (188). Still, she is loving and often selfless, and by sacrificing her own comfort for the sake of others, she establishes agency through surrogate motherhood. While most mothers experienced little power in self-sacrifice because selflessness was a social expectation rather than a choice, Molly creates power by performing this otherwise stifling maternal trait. Through her success overcoming social restrictions to mother Cynthia, this straight-laced young woman subverts traditional boundaries and power structures through the performance of surrogate maternity.

Molly acts as a surrogate mother to various characters throughout the novel, and she demonstrates early her willingness to overstep traditional boundaries for the good of promoting what she believes is right. Karen Boiko describes Molly as having "strong character and bedrock values" (87). Molly demonstrates these traits by moralizing to Lady Harriett in an attempt to both stand up for her friends and provide Lady Harriet with a moral education, which we have seen was considered one of the primary maternal responsibilities. Although Lady Harriet is above Molly in both age and social rank, and although she has protective charge of Molly during this specific scene, Molly overtly reprimands her superior because she believes Lady Harriet is doing wrong. After Dr. Gibson's wedding, Lady Harriet conveys Molly home to Hollingford. During her father's honeymoon, Molly will stay with the Miss Brownings, whom Lady Harriet mockingly calls by the nicknames "Pecksy and Flapsy" (169). When Lady Harriet tells Molly she will visit her at the Miss Brownings's home, Molly asks her not to, explaining, "I think that I ought not to have one coming to see me who laughs at the friends I am staying with, and calls them names" (169).

Impressed by Molly's willingness to sacrifice such a high connection for the sake of her friends, Lady Harriet apologizes, promising to "be respectful" to the Miss Brownings "in word and deed" (169). Even if Lady Harriet slips in this resolve occasionally, Molly's bold reproof mimics a mother scolding her child to teach her to treat others kindly. Further, before Molly even meets Cynthia, whom she will mother most significantly, this scene demonstrates that Molly is willing to subvert established order for the sake of doing right and improving others. Molly demonstrates her willingness and ability to affect change within the space of the novel, not allowing social restrictions to prevent her from mothering others effectively. She is also reminiscent of social surrogate maternal figures like Florence Nightingale when she acts as a nurse to Aimee, a working class French Roman Catholic woman, demonstrating that such surrogate maternity is not limited by nation, class, or religion.

Molly is herself mothered by a loving, nurturing, albeit ailing surrogate mother, Mrs. Hamley, who helps Molly cope with her father's remarriage and who acts as a foil to Mrs. Gibson. Mrs. Hamley's youngest son, Roger, who eventually becomes Molly's love interest, is the first person to overtly liken Molly to a surrogate maternal figure. After Mrs. Hamley's death, Osborne, the eldest Hamley son, grows distant from his father by concealing his marriage to Aimee. In the midst of this family rupture, Roger tells Molly, "I fancy if you could come [to Hamley Hall] it would put us a little to rights It is just what my mother would have put right very soon" (256). Although Squire Hamley and Osborne are unable to get along, Roger knows that a maternal influence could help mollify each member of the household.⁴⁹ The loving, doting late wife and mother would have quickly solved their problems. Roger recognizes Molly's

⁴⁹ The poignancy of Molly's name is also clear, as she mollifies most major conflicts throughout the novel.

nurturing ability to have a similar effect to that which Mrs. Hamley would have had, as Molly was educated about the performance of motherhood by Mrs. Hamley herself. Although Roger recognizes Molly's ability to create a new space at Hamley Hall as surrogate wife and mother, Molly does not take her boldest step into the role of surrogate mother until later in the novel.

In chapter 2 of this study, I showed how Mrs. Gibson largely failed to adhere to maternal expectations while raising Cynthia, and early aspects this failure had unique implications on Cynthia's subject-formation process. While Molly's mother died when she was young, Cynthia suffers from the effects of what some fiction seems to suggest is a worse lot: having a living mother who largely fails to love and nurture. According to object-relations theory, Cynthia's ability to obtain subject status requires that she first have a mother whom she can safely objectify. As Marianne Hirsch has explained, "to free the girl's imaginative play," or to give her subjectivity over her own self, "the mother must be eliminated," either physically or through Cynthia's imagined castration of the mother (56). While Molly has had some agency over her own choices due to her motherless state, at least before her father's second marriage, Cynthia is stuck in a more liminal position that grants her less personal autonomy. Her mother is neither absent enough to allow Cynthia power over her own decisions, nor physically present enough for Cynthia to read her as inadequate.

By failing to adhere to the advice of conduct manuals and spending plenty of time with her child, Cynthia's mother temporarily avoids being objectified by her daughter, thus preventing Cynthia from identifying herself as a subject. Cynthia is stuck longing for a mother whom she cannot objectify because she desires her. Cynthia's need to turn to Mr. Preston for financial support when she is only sixteen demonstrates that she does not yet have power over her own life. Her fear of telling her mother about her borrowed money or engagement a few years later

likewise demonstrates that she fears her mother more than if she had fully objectified her. Cynthia's desire for her mother is evident as she bemoans to Molly that her mother "never seemed to care to have me with her" (493). Although such a line, in another story, could indicate the maternal absence necessary for subjectivity, Cynthia's desire that her nearly-absent mother might return and fulfill her longings prevents her from attaining such selfhood. She explains, "I would have stinted and starved if mamma and I had got on as happily together as we might have done" (493).

It is because of Mrs. Gibson's unwillingness to be fully absent or present, to allow Cynthia autonomy or to give her the chance to cast her mother off, that Cynthia finds herself in need of Molly's surrogate maternal intervention. Molly *must* act for Cynthia because Cynthia cannot yet act for herself, and the success of Molly's surrogate maternity leads Cynthia to recognize the inadequacy of her own mother against Molly's surrogate motherhood. Cynthia is trapped in an engagement with Mr. Preston that she does not wish to keep, but to which she naively consented when she was "only a girl, barely sixteen" who was "without any friend" or good mother "to help her and protect her" (504, 510). Molly's extrication of Cynthia from this relationship demonstrates the superiority of her surrogate motherhood to Mrs. Gibson's motherhood, allowing Cynthia to complete the objectification process of Mrs. Gibson. Cynthia's personal agency arises from this end. Although Cynthia is unable to enact the power necessary to break off her engagement with Mr. Preston before Molly's intervention, she later manages to end her engagement to Roger Hamley without regarding anyone else's opinion.

Because Mrs. Gibson has not provided Cynthia with a "proper" moral education, which we have seen was considered one of the Victorian mother's primary responsibilities, Molly steps in to act as Cynthia's surrogate mother. She provides Cynthia with moral training and protection

against past indiscretions. Because mothers were often blamed for their children's shortcomings, Molly does not hold Cynthia entirely accountable for her past conduct because her mother never taught her how to behave properly. Molly's desire to protect Cynthia and to contribute to her moral education imitates the expectations of Victorian mothers, a step Molly takes further by nurturing Cynthia in a manner that infantilizes Cynthia while centrally positioning Molly in the role of a loving mother. Ironically, this infantilization ultimately allows Cynthia to emerge as an independent self. When Cynthia first confesses to Molly that she is secretly and unwillingly engaged to Mr. Preston, she fears that Molly will judge her past conduct. To avoid blame, Cynthia couches her story within lamentations that she was never taught the same high standards as Molly, bewailing, "I was such a child to be left all to myself" (491). Cynthia becomes overwrought telling her story, and her final description of a set of letters Mr. Preston refuses to return points not only to her suffering, but also to the volatility of family dynamics and the breakdown in them that Cynthia foresees. Cynthia cries that the letters "are like a mine under my feet, which may blow up any day; and down will come father and mother and all" (498).

Cynthia's fear is threatening and poignant: if her past is exposed, her family will unravel because half of her family, Molly and Dr. Gibson, have higher moral standards than those by which Mrs. Gibson raised Cynthia, and Cynthia fears her past misconduct will not be forgiven. The implications of this line are even greater in the larger context of the novel. They suggest the possibility of the destruction of the family at the hands of the ineffective mother, a disastrous fate that Molly averts through surrogate motherhood. Molly's success signifies the importance of surrogate mothers in Victorian understandings of family structures. Molly saves Cynthia's secret from being exposed, and by extension, she exhibits an important power by protecting the status of the middle-class family.

As Cynthia simultaneously fears for her position in her family and questions the stability of the entire family romance when faced with an unreasonable mother, she breaks down into tears “out of weariness of body and despair of mind” (498). The “weariness” and “despair” suggest that Cynthia experiences a sort of physical and emotional paralysis, and Molly reacts like a mother soothing her hurt child. Molly performs the maternal role Mrs. Gibson has never enacted by physically embodying the mother, putting her arms around Cynthia and “press[ing] the beautiful head to her bosom” (498). Already invoking the idea of nursing, a role typically attributed to the biological mother, but which we have seen can also be re-appropriated by surrogate mothers, Molly soothes Cynthia as a mother might console a young child at her breast. Molly further lays “her own cheek upon” Cynthia’s head, and she “hushe[s] her up with lulling words, just as if Cynthia were a little child” (498). The words “hush” and “lull” are particularly effective, as they onomatopoeically invoke the sounds that accompany caresses in the nursery. Thus, this description suggests that Molly’s caresses are maternal. The infantilization of Cynthia further cements Molly's position as surrogate mother, presenting Molly as the idealized maternal figure who loves and comforts unconditionally. Lulling her surrogate child to sleep, Molly tells Cynthia, “Now do go to bed . . . you’ll be ill if you don’t get some rest . . . and you’re shivering with cold” (499).

After physically comforting Cynthia, Molly agrees to confront Mr. Preston to make him return Cynthia’s love letters, which attest to their engagement and speak ill of Mrs. Gibson. Molly creates a unique position of selfless authority through her determination to protect Cynthia from harm and scandal without regarding the potential consequences to her own reputation. Molly recognizes that the most socially acceptable way for an unmarried girl to publicly meet an unmarried man is under the protection of her father, a protection that would prevent Molly from

tarnishing her own reputation with rumors of a clandestine relationship if she is seen with Mr. Preston. Because Cynthia insists that she will leave Hollingford to become a governess if Dr. Gibson ever learns of her engagement, however, Molly is unable to use this protective resource. Rather than back down from the task or go against Cynthia's wishes, Molly makes a daringly subversive move. When she steps out of her home and into the public sphere to meet Mr. Preston, Molly is in a space traditionally uninhabitable by a morally upright unmarried girl. Still, she takes this risk out of selfless love for Cynthia. She creates a space for herself as a subject and assumes rights and power on Cynthia's behalf that simultaneously mimic maternal and paternal protection, thus overturning traditional gender boundaries.

The selflessness, and perhaps naivety, of this act are reinforced by the fact that, by disobeying the rules of propriety, Molly opens herself up to the same scrutiny from which she is protecting Cynthia. Despite feeling "oppressed with shame and complicity in conduct which appeared to her deceitful," Molly barely hesitates to venture into the unprotected public sphere to meet Mr. Preston privately and "bear all and brave all, if she could once set Cynthia in a straight path" (503). Although Molly does endure the ramifications of small-town gossip as a result of her boldness, she still establishes social power in this scene. She repeatedly utters that Mr. Preston will return Cynthia's letters and release Cynthia from all obligation to him. Her relentless insistence and her canny understanding of the threats necessary to make him adhere to her demands establish Molly as an agent with the authority to incite change through surrogate maternal protection.

Throughout her conversation with Mr. Preston, Molly consistently reiterates that he has no authority over her. Rather, she insists that she has power over him for three reasons. First, her power stems from her upright morals—she has done nothing wrong in her relationship with

Mr. Preston except for meeting him clandestinely, while he has defied a number of social norms in his relationship with Cynthia. Second, she has power in her connections, knowing that Lady Harriet respects her and will intercede if Molly asks. Lastly, and most importantly, she has the wit to discover how to effectively use both. Because her strong morals have gained Lady Harriet's high esteem, Molly threatens, "I will tell it all, from beginning to end, to Lady Harriet, and ask her to speak to her father. I feel sure that she will do it; and I don't think you will dare to refuse Lord Cumnor" (507). Although she has no intention of actually going through with this plan, Molly knows she can see the threat through without risking her own reputation specifically because Lady Harriet is unequivocally convinced of Molly's upright conduct.

Because of her power, Molly does not give in to her emotions when Mr. Preston offends her, but she "mastered herself" and "gained courage by doing so" (504). Molly's power to create a subjective space for herself is solidified with the word "master," which demonstrates her ability to act as a powerful individual, even as an unmarried girl, through surrogate maternity. By joining the discourse of power, she establishes a voice for herself that, while not part of the hegemonic discourse—she will, after all, still undergo scrutiny for this move—is not entirely outside of it either. The liminality of Molly's position allows her to work within two conflicting discourses. Interrupting one of Mr. Preston's speeches, Molly creates an agency she would otherwise lack by threatening to appeal to Lady Harriet and Lord Cumnor for assistance, yet she recognizes that her agency is not inherent, but must be created. By combining the different "discursive injunctions," to use Butler's terminology, Molly converges two distinct roles—

unmarried girl and surrogate mother—and “produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment” of social power (185).⁵⁰

Like many motherless nineteenth-century heroines, Molly uses her role as surrogate mother to create a new position of authority. Her power as her own agent and Cynthia’s surrogate mother is solidified when Mr. Preston sends the letters back to Cynthia rather than risk Molly destroying his reputation with Lord Cumnor. Although Mr. Preston gave no indication during his meeting with Molly that he would return the letters, he “felt at once” when Molly threatened to ask Lady Harriet to intercede “that he should not dare” to refuse Lord Cumnor (507). Despite being “high up in the earl’s favour,” Mr. Preston is aware “that the conduct of which he had been guilty about these letters, and the threats which he had held out about them, were just what no gentleman, no honourable gentleman, no manly man, could put up with anyone about him” (507).

The result is that Molly establishes power over Mr. Preston, saving Cynthia and, by extension perhaps, the structure of the middle-class family. Although Molly must endure Hollingford gossip and a confrontation with her father after her “clandestine” meeting, she again pushes back her tears, hides her sensibilities, and takes responsibility for herself and her actions. Further, she continues to protect Cynthia by not confessing the full truth to her father, yet she

⁵⁰ Judith Butler has suggested that the performative constitution of agency occurs by responding to and merging variations of different discursive injunctions. Molly modifies and combines the expectations of unmarried girl and surrogate mother. “The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment,” Butler explains, and this redeployment creates new identities, subjectivities, and agencies (*Gender* 199).

upholds her moral standards by avoiding lying, as well. She tells Dr. Gibson, “What I did, I did of my own self If people choose to talk about me, I must submit; and so must you, dear papa” (545). Clearly, Molly’s new agency does not come without consequences, but she ultimately succeeds in carving a new space for herself, and for other women like her.

5.2 Mothering One's Own Mother in Craik's *Olive*

Molly’s new, if still limited, power parallels that of other motherless heroines. She adheres to many social norms yet performs new, slightly revised iterations of traditional female roles. The repetition of such maneuvers by a number of heroines ultimately helps reconstitute female and maternal expectations. Olive, much like Molly, blends traditional aspects of femininity with masculine actions as a subtle subversion of gender norms, largely through the performance of surrogate motherhood.

I discussed in chapter 2 how Olive’s mother, Sybilla, is described through infantilized terms throughout the novel, and while such descriptions demonstrate Sybilla’s weakness as a mother, they also set the stage for the role reversal that occurs between mother and daughter. Understanding Sybilla’s maternal weaknesses also helps readers make sense of the personal agency Olive develops, despite the idea that heroines establish subjective roles specifically because their mothers are absent. Olive’s mother, to the contrary, is living, but the fact that Sybilla has never had much will of her own allows Olive many of the same freedoms that Dever ascribes to motherless heroines. Unlike Cynthia, who suffers because her mother’s will is so strong but nontraditional, Olive is able to inhabit a subject position because her mother essentially has no will at all. Olive also functions outside of traditional female and daughterly limitations because of her physical deformity, which characters within the novel assume negates her marriageability. As a result, it essential that she find a different role to play as an adult

woman than traditional motherhood. Thus, while Dever suggests that being motherless allows a girl agency over whom she will marry, Olive's parents always assume she will never marry. This circumstance in itself grants Olive a freedom most daughters never experience, while also placing her outside of traditional female expectations.

Olive, who ends up caring for her mother throughout most of the novel, is described even during childhood as having a face with a “look of premature age,” a description that clearly contrasts Olive with her childlike mother (49). Such descriptions foreshadow the role reversal that will eventually take place between Olive and Sybilla. This reversal begins with the scene described in chapter 2 in which Olive consoles Sybilla after learning of their family’s impending bankruptcy. My examination of Sybilla left off following this scene, and my consideration of Olive picks up in the same place because this moment marks the shift when Olive begins mothering her own mother. It is also reminiscent of a scene in *Sense and Sensibility*, again demonstrating Austen’s influence on Victorian domestic *bildungsroman* novels that explore maternal and surrogate maternal roles. In *Sense and Sensibility*, “Elinor, the eldest daughter whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother” (8). At fifteen, Olive plays a similar role, also during impending bankruptcy. Olive consoles and soothes her mother, lulling her until she finally succumbs to rest.

While this evening marks the beginning of Olive’s surrogate maternity, it is also the first time she begins to simultaneously inhabit both male and female spheres. Once Sybilla is asleep, Olive creeps downstairs to check on her father. Although she resumes her childlike status in her father’s presence as he “lift[s] her to his knee,” she gains his confidence as an adult, rather than a child (52). In this scene, Olive’s father sees in her “the strong will and decision of a man, united

to the tenderness of a woman” (52). He speaks to her openly for two hours, detailing their financial problems in a conversation he could not have with the less sensible Sybilla. This loaded scene demonstrates how Olive will upset traditional structures by inhabiting both male and female spheres. This space is not traditionally open to most young women, but Olive’s soothing of both mother and father suggests what the novel will reaffirm time and again: by overturning these structures, Olive brings further stability, rather than a subversion to be feared.⁵¹ While she acts as a nurturing surrogate mother, she also enters the male sphere of business through her father’s confidence, foreshadowing the unique, subversive, yet stabilizing position Olive will navigate throughout the rest of the novel.

Sybilla adjusts better than might be expected to the family’s subsequent move into a smaller home, but Olive must care for her mother more as Sybilla descends into invalidism and becomes even less able to nurture Olive physically or emotionally. Sybilla is “often ailing,” and “dependent on her daughter’s tenderness” (68). As a result, Olive rarely succumbs to the sentiments of most teenaged girls, remaining content with her quiet life at home, and she willingly overcomes her own emotions when she does feel upset in order to nurture her mother. When attending a ball with her beautiful friend, Sara Derwent, Olive overhears an upsetting conversation between Sara and another girl. Through their words, Olive understands, for the first time in her life, that she has a physical deformity that people think will prevent her from ever marrying.

Unlike in the scene where Olive learns she will not have a coming out party, Olive turns to her mother for support after the ball, but she ends up having to console Sybilla instead. Olive

⁵¹ This structure also occurs in Gaskell’s *North and South*, in which Margaret Hale blurs the lines between male and female as she takes care of both of her own parents.

tells Sybilla, “with much agitation,” that she has “found out something” that she “never knew,” that she is “different from other girls” (68). Olive cries to Sybilla, “Oh, mother! Am I then so painful to look upon? Shall I, indeed, cause people to dislike me wherever I go?” (68). Sybilla’s instinctual reaction, far from the expected reaction of a loving mother, is to lash out at Olive, blaming her daughter for making her mother “wretched” and “unhappy” (68). Despairing, Sybilla asks, “Why should Heaven have punished me thus?” (68).

Although Sybilla recognizes almost instantly that she has responded improperly, apologizing to Olive, taking back her words, and “embracing” her daughter, she continues to make herself the subject of Olive woes (68). Sybilla “continued weeping,” so that “Olive had to cast aside all other feelings in the care of soothing her mother” (68). Olive does specifically what her mother cannot, overcoming her personal feelings for the selfless care of another, one of the major tenets of Victorian maternal expectations. Even if Olive is denied subjectivity here, the scene still reiterates the role reversal that is occurring between Olive and Sybilla, and it also demonstrates why Olive functions similarly to many motherless heroines. Although Sybilla lives well into Olive’s adult life, Olive never receives, and rarely expects, the nurturing and tenderness Victorians expected mothers to provide. Her experiences are barely different from motherless girls, as Olive recognizes that “henceforth her bitter thoughts must be wrestled alone” (68).

From this point, Olive realizes she will not get the support she sometimes desires from her mother and the balance shifts almost entirely. Olive becomes personally autonomous, thinking for both herself and her mother and acting primarily as caregiver rather than as child. Olive’s agency within the family is solidified a few scenes later upon the death of Olive’s father. Although the relationship between Captain Rothesay and Sybilla has been strained for years, Sybilla still relies on her husband, and his presence allows Olive to behave in a childlike, if

mature, manner, as he constantly calls her “little Olive” and actually admits to forgetting her age (52). When her father’s lawyer, Mr. Wyld, comes to tell Olive and Sybilla that Captain Rothesay is dangerously ill, he is hesitant to speak only to the child when he finds Sybilla at church. Upon Olive’s urging, however, he finally tells the girl, now sixteen, the full state of her father’s dangerous condition.

Although Mr. Wyld expects Olive to respond like a childish girl, she takes the news as an adult, recognizing that she is about to become her mother’s full protector. Though Mr. Wyld “thought she fainted,” “it was not so,” and Olive’s strength and resilience again contrast her from the weaker Sybilla. When Olive considers how hard the news will be on her mother, she awakens “to consciousness and strength There came to her the wisdom and forethought that lay dormant in her nature She became a woman—one of those of whom the world contains few—at once gentle and strong, meek and fearless, patient to endure, heroic to act” (100). Through these binary descriptions of traditionally masculine and feminine traits, Olive blends the two gender roles. This amalgamation demonstrates the revisionary space Olive encompasses. In part because of her deformity, Olive has some social leave to blend feminine and masculine traits to create her own unique place in her family and society.

Through the scenes that ensue, Craik clearly contrasts the strength of Olive’s and Sybilla’s emotional constitutions, demonstrating that Olive will forever remain the primary caregiver of the family. Olive makes arrangements to go to her father and plans how best to tell “her timid, delicate mother, whose feeble frame quivered beneath the lightest breath of suffering,” about her father’s illness (102). When Olive does tell Sybilla of Captain Rothesay’s condition, Sybilla faints, and lies “for some time, quite motionless, supported in her daughter’s arms—to which never had she owed support before” (102). Craik reiterates the contrast between

Olive's strength and Sybilla's weakness as Olive takes both physical and emotional charge of her mother, acting as both the husband who is on his deathbed and the mother Sybilla never had.

"The natural instinct of filial tenderness seemed transmuted into a devotion passing the love of child to mother, and mingled therewith was a sense of protection, of watchful guardianship" (103). When Sybilla awakens, still somewhat senseless, Olive explains her resolve to care for her mother henceforth. She tells Sybilla, "I will think for us both. Be content; you are quite safe with your daughter," and she inwardly vows to "take care of" Sybilla "until death" (103). Again blending traditionally masculine and feminine traits and power structures, Olive's vow echoes a husband's marriage vow. As the sickness and impending death of Captain Rothesay threatens to leave his childlike wife uncared for, Olive assumes his role, simultaneously bending both gender norms and parental power structures.

As Olive takes on the full surrogate maternal charge of her own mother, she simultaneously takes over her father's masculine position as breadwinner and head of household, already carving out the unique position she will establish throughout the novel. Notably, Olive bears similarities to some other fictional Victorian daughters in this performance, a circumstance that demonstrates the far reach of heroines bending norms and establishing agency through surrogate motherhood. Margaret Hale similarly forces the doctor to tell her about her mother's illness, and Margaret protects her father following the news much like Olive protects Sybilla. Gwendolen Harleth in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* is also depicted similarly to Olive when she soothes her mother upon their financial ruin, providing monetary support and "tenderly pressing her handkerchief against the tears that were rolling down Mrs. Davilow's cheek" (196). Eliot is even more direct in her description of Gwendolen as surrogate mother to her own mother in a

later scene, describing Mrs. Davilow as being “like a frightened child under her daughter’s face and voice” (225).

Olive takes a traditionally masculine care of her mother following Captain Rothesay’s death, when she learns that her family is in a state of almost complete financial ruin. She takes on the joint traditionally feminine and masculine roles foreshadowed earlier in the novel, caring for her mother while managing the bankruptcy sale to settle her father’s estate, a task the narrator calls “unsuited for her sex and years” (105).⁵² Olive manages the financial and business matters alone, “for her mother was incapable of acting, and this girl of sixteen was the sole ruler of the household now” (104). Through such actions, Olive becomes both father and mother; Sybilla “had looked entirely to her husband for guidance and control, and now for both she looked to her child” (106). “From the moment of Captain Rothesay’s death,” the narrator explains, “Olive seemed to rule in his stead—or rather, the parent and child seemed to change places. Olive watched, guided, and guarded the passive, yielding, sorrow-stricken woman, as it were, with a mother’s care; while Mrs. Rothesay trusted implicitly in all things to her daughter’s stronger mind” (106).

Although the narrator suggests that girls Olive’s age are generally “unsuited” for the new position Olive takes on, Craik clearly demonstrates that, regardless of whether they handle financial matters, daughters often nurture their own mothers. This role reversal “may seem a new theory of maternal and filial bond,” the narrator explains:

But in the world it is frequently so. If we look around on those daughters who have best fulfilled that holy duty Are they not women of firm, steadfast

⁵² Again, Olive is reminiscent of Elinor Dashwood in this scene, managing the financial affairs that her mother cannot.

nature—able to will and to act? Each of them could say, ‘I am as a mother to my mother. I, the strongest now, take her in her feeble age, like a child to my bosom—I shield her, and cherish her, and am to her all in all. (106)

Of course, we see such depictions not only in life, but in other literature, as well. Olive and Gwendolen care for their mothers following financial ruin. Mirah Lapidoth (*Daniel Deronda*) has what McKnight calls “a strong maternal streak,” longing to take care of her own mother if her mother turns out to be living (134).⁵³ Esther Summerson also cares for her mother, if only in one scene, when she discovers that her mother is alive in Dickens’s *Bleak House*, and Carolyn Dever suggest that Esther mimics the maternal role while also establishing subjective agency. When Esther and Lady Dedlock embrace, Dever suggests, “Esther is agent in this scene, lifting her mother from the position of abject misery and embracing her with an ideal of natural maternal love” (84). As she embraces her mother, Esther establishes power over Lady Dedlock for two reasons: first, it is in her power to forgive Lady Dedlock for abandoning her as a child, and second, because her mother has never been present, Esther has had autonomy over her own choices since the death of her aunt. Olive and Gwendolen, on the other hand, can enact authoritative positions because their mothers’ wills have always been too weak to oppose their daughters. To use McKnight’s words, Sybilla and Mrs. Davilow have never “frustrate[d]” their “daughter[s]’ demands” (135).

These circumstances demonstrate the regularity with which daughters nurture their own mothers, and Craik’s quote about daughters being “as a mother to my mother” naturalizes the

⁵³ Because Mirah eventually learns that her mother is dead, she is unable to perform the surrogate maternal role she desires, but the desire still demonstrates the regularity with which daughters enacted such roles.

powerful positions such maternal daughters establish. By suggesting that a nurturing daughter brings her mother to her breast “like a child to my bosom,” Craik appropriates at least the caretaking, if not also the life giving, power of the breast like a wet nurse experiences. Further, by evoking the notion of a daughter’s “holy duty” to provide maternal care to her aging parents, Craik normalizes the potentially subversive role daughters like Olive assume. She links such care of mothers directly to the same natural calling that evangelical notions of motherhood suggested Victorian mothers should feel toward their children. Thus, while acting as a surrogate mother, Olive is linked, by extension, to the biological one. This connection demonstrates that normalizing surrogate maternal roles can strengthen familial structures within given Victorian norms while also reducing any fear that might arise over Olive’s infiltration of the traditionally male sphere. Although Olive takes on financial and wage-earning obligations that are generally considered masculine responsibilities, she does so as part of her larger efforts to fulfill her God-given duty of caring for her mother, removing any social threat from the subversive aspects of Olive’s gender ambiguous responsibilities.

The scene detailing her father’s illness and death is the last one in which Olive overtly has to overcome her own childlike feelings in order to nurture her mother. The narrator suggests that Olive develops a selfless nature as she mothers her own mother for the remaining years of Sybilla’s life. The novel passes fairly quickly over the rest of Sybilla’s life, devoting only 100 pages to those nine years, but the language Craik employs indicates the regularity of the care Olive provides Sybilla. After Captain Rothesay's death, Olive moves with her mother to a cottage in London where they live as tenants of an artist and his sister. Olive supplements her emotional and physical support of her mother with a financial one, working as a protégé of the artist, Michael Vanbrugh, until she becomes successful enough to earn a living herself. Notably,

the living Olive earns is not essential for hers and her mother's existence, as they still have "the small settlement from Mrs. Rothesay's fortune . . . so they were not left in actual need" (107). Rather, Olive's decision to earn her own living is a response to her need to care for her parents; she wants to repay a debt to Harold Gwynne for the sake of her deceased father's reputation, and she wants to make her mother's life more comfortable so that "she may have not merely necessities, but comforts" (107). Such an undertaking again reiterates the dual role that Olive plays, both as financial supporter in the male sphere of business and as a maternal caregiver over her mother. Importantly, though, the occupation Olive does discover allows her to earn her living from her own home, somewhat curtailing the risk of her subversion.

The need for Olive to help physically care for her mother becomes even greater throughout the remainder of Sybilla's life. Sybilla slowly goes blind, and thus becomes more dependent on her daughter, but Olive combines emotional nurturance with this physical care. "The more helpless [Sybilla] grew," the narrator notes, "the closer she was clasped by those supporting arms of filial love, which softened all pain, supplied all need, and were to her instead of strength, youth, eyesight!" (140). When Sybilla tells Olive that she cannot see to thread her needle, noting, "I really must be growing old" (110), Olive's reply of, "Nonsense, darling," shows how Olive has re-appropriated traditional familiar configurations. Terms of endearment are by nature informal, and thus traditionally used for either a lover or a beloved younger family member, but rarely for an elder. Olive clearly intends for the word "darling" to make Sybilla feel protected, not simply loved, as the narrator explains, "Olive often said 'darling,' quite in a protecting way" (110). Olive then shifts from emotional nurturance to the physical care of her mother, taking her mother's hands, "snatch[ing] away the work, and clos[ing] the strained, aching eyes with two sweet kisses" (111). An article in an 1857 edition of *Berrow's Worcester*

Journal notes the healing impact of a mother's kiss on her child, suggesting that there is "no wound that a mother's kiss cannot heal" ("Shadows" 3). When Olive kisses Sybilla's eyes, she again assumes a maternal role toward her ailing mother, kissing to nurture and to heal a wound, a sore, or in this instance, troublesome eyes with failing sight.

The rhetoric Craik uses in this scene echoes that which appears time and again throughout the novel, as she explains tasks that Olive "often" performs, suggesting that Olive's many small maternal actions are regular occurrences. When Sybilla first receives a letter from Harold Gwynne, for instance, detailing the debt Captain Rothesay owed him before his death, Olive reads it aloud to her mother and, per Sybilla's request, replies to it. "She had long taken upon herself all similar duties," the narrator notes, indicating in part that Olive has taken over duties that might tax her mother's fading eyesight, but also suggesting that Olive undertakes whatever tasks seem disagreeable to Sybilla. Although we only see momentary glimpses of scenes where Olive nurtures Sybilla, those scenes represent larger habitual trends. In a later scene, Olive "assist[s] her mother to bed—as she always did" (152), and she "often" sits by her mother's bedside until Sybilla falls asleep (161). Even until Sybilla's last breath, such scenes occur, reminding readers of the regularity with which Olive cares for her mother as a nurturing, maternal caretaker. The two sleep together, another circumstance reminiscent of Gwendolen and Mrs. Davilow, "closely clasped in each other's arms" (205), their heads "on the same pillow" with Olive's "arm thrown round her mother's neck" (208). Even when Sybilla awakens feeling ill the night before her death, Olive is not overly alarmed because "she was long accustomed to all offices of tender care by night and by day" (205).

Such "offices of tender care" are represented differently throughout the novel, but they consistently depict Olive as physically and emotionally stronger than her mother. The clear

contrast between Olive and Sybilla demonstrates that the stability that results from effective surrogate motherhood can be even more effective than biological motherhood. When Sybilla, ever childlike in certain anxieties, is frightened by “a sudden flash and distant thunder growl” in the night, “it took all Olive’s powers of soothing to quiet her [mother’s] nervous alarms” (148). Still, while Olive has a soothing effect on her mother, it is the contrast between the two in Craik’s description that has the strongest impact on the reader. “Hush, darling! You are quite safe with me,” Olive explains, again evoking a nurturing tone through a term of endearment, though it is the physical description that solidifies Olive’s ability to protect her mother (148). “They stood—Mrs. Rothesay trembling and cowering—Olive with her pale brow lifted fearlessly, as though she would face all terror, all danger, for her mother’s sake” (148). The “cowering” Sybilla is directly contrasted to the “lifted” Olive, the biological mother small and trembling compared to the surrogate mother standing tall with fearless resolve, unafraid of whatever storms may come, be they physical, familial, or social.

It is the physical descriptions of Olive next to her mother, coupled with their physical affection, that most strongly demonstrates the maternal role Olive adopts. Olive regularly holds and caresses her mother in attempt to soothe her anxieties, pains, and fears. Sybilla is described as clinging “tremblingly to her sole stay—her devoted child” (169), often holding “closely to Olive’s hand or Olive’s dress” (205). The two regularly “clasp” each other, “their arms around one another,” Sybilla “in her daughter’s arms” (207), or Sybilla “leaning on Olive’s shoulder” (204). This physical dependency again reiterates Olive’s strength, a masculine quality that allows her to perform a maternal role. Shortly before Sybilla’s death, Olive actually offers to physically carry her mother, saying, “Tired, are you? I wish I could carry you, darling; I almost think I could” (204). Sybilla’s reply reiterates the importance of Olive’s surrogate maternity,

demonstrating how Olive has cared for her and nurtured her. Sybilla exclaims, “You carry me in your heart, evermore, Olive! You bear all my feebleness, troubles, and pains. God bless you” (204). When Sybilla finally succumbs to death, Olive again kisses her mother, and “with that last kiss she received her mother’s soul” (209). Even after Sybilla’s death, however, Olive’s surrogate maternity does not end, as she continues to educate and nurture Harold Gwynne’s daughter Ailie. Olive eventually becomes Ailie’s stepmother, and she also assumes maternal responsibility for her half sister, Christal.

By performing surrogate maternity to her own mother, Olive clearly upsets traditional familial structures, and by earning a living and attending to the family's business endeavors, she simultaneously subverts gender and social norms. What makes Olive's performance of non-traditional roles most powerful is the stability that arises from them. She cares for her mother throughout her life so that Sybilla considers Olive almost an angel. She shows adeptness at domestic economy by keeping herself and her mother comfortably despite their modest income. She brings religious stability to Harold Gwynne's household even before she enters it as his wife. She ultimately receives the marriage proposal—two, actually—that everyone had once imagined would be forever out of her power. Even more notably, she marries the late Sara's husband, and through her honesty, her goodness, and other traditional feminine values, she makes Harold happy in a way Sara, a more physically ideal woman, never could.

Perhaps most importantly, it is specifically through her iterations of traditional feminine behaviors that Olive successfully performs surrogate maternity and masculine roles. By performing some masculine tasks better than her father, who is not able to pay off the debt that Olive does, she demonstrates the need to expand the typical woman's sphere. Further, by performing motherhood better than her mother, she iterates the importance of surrogate

maternity in Victorian understandings of maternal and family structures. As Juliet Shields notes, Olive “posit[s] a contiguity rather than an analogy between home and nation, whereby family becomes the moral center of Britain’s empire” (288). Thus, Olive's re-appropriation of the maternal role has broad and poignant implications: normalizing surrogate motherhood and thus strengthening family structures will simultaneously strengthen Britain and its empire, a suggestion that Lucilla Marjoribanks echoes.

5.3 Power and Performance in Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks*

Like Molly and Olive, Lucilla Marjoribanks shifts expected roles by performing surrogate maternity. She also provides perhaps the richest site of examination for this argument, as Oliphant's novel makes explicit the direct connection between Lucilla's power of persuasion and the prosperous future of the British nation. Lucilla exemplifies the heroine Dever has suggested produces “revisionary” ideas about women’s roles and family structures (31). She responds directly to prescribed norms for women and revises social understandings of those expectations as they affect both women and mothers. Dever has indicated that heroines like Lucilla derive power from motherlessness, and her power is also a product of her repeated performance of maternal gestures outside the bounds of biological maternity.

Of all the characters discussed in this chapter, Lucilla’s personal autonomy most directly opposes the agency her mother did not have. The first sentence of Oliphant’s text introduces the death of fifteen-year-old Lucilla’s mother, and it is clear that Mrs. Marjoribanks felt she was of very little consequence during her years of motherhood. An invalid who rarely left her couch, Mrs. Marjoribanks is described as “not feeling herself of much account in this world” (3). Mrs. Marjoribanks was inconsequential to such an extent that, “when she disappeared from her sofa—except for the mere physical fact that she was no longer there—no one, except her maid, whose

occupation was gone, could have found out much difference” (3). Although Mrs. Marjoribanks may have been of more consequence in her younger years, she was of little significance in the latter years of her life, arguably those in which she was a mother. “The pretty creature whom Dr. Marjoribanks had married,” the narrator explains, “had vanished into thin air years and years ago” (6). Little else is said of Mrs. Marjoribanks, aside from a brief mention later in the text that, upon her deathbed, she “had nobody in particular to take farewell of” because of her “useless life” (46).

Lucilla, however, is starkly contrasted with her mother. A fixture on her sofa, Mrs. Marjoribanks is never described as a subject, but rather simply as a relation to others, either her husband or, more often, Lucilla. Mrs. Chiley, surrogate mother to Lucilla, makes the distinction between the mother and daughter clear early in the novel, telling Lucilla, “Your poor dear mamma was so delicate. I have always been a little anxious about you on that account; and I am so glad, my dear, to see you looking so strong” (40). Although the contrast Mrs. Chiley notes is one of health, it represents a larger difference, as well. Lucilla, unlike her weak mother, has strength of body and of will. She uses this combination to establish a personal subjectivity, both as the heroine and primary subject of Oliphant’s novel, but also as an agent of change in the town of Carlingford and, ultimately perhaps, England at large.

The rhetoric that describes Lucilla indicates her unique strength and power as a woman, likening her to a ruling monarch come “to revolutionize society in Carlingford” (14). She is described as “possess[ing] by nature some of the finest qualities of a ruler” (17), and Carlingford is called Lucilla’s “kingdom” (26). Within this kingdom, she “establishe[s] her throne” on the same couch that had kept her mother confined to invalidism (44), and she demonstrates her “masterly” “conception of social politics” (90). Mrs. Chiley even plans to “work [Lucilla] a

footstool in water-lilies,” and we saw in chapter 1 of this dissertation the direct association between water lilies and Queen Victoria (78).

Margaret Homans has provided a detailed comparison of Lucilla to Queen Victoria, calling attention to the parallels between the deaths of Prince Albert and Dr. Marjoribanks. She questions how Victoria’s and Lucilla’s experiences of mourning affect their power, noting that Victoria’s deep mourning lasted for so long after Albert’s death that her full abdication was rumored and “indeed called for” (Homans *Royal* 82). Similarly, after Dr. Marjoribanks’s death, “Nobody doubted that Lucilla would abdicate at once” (416). Homans notes that, although she does recover the power her mourning threatens, Lucilla’s retreat into mourning “dislocate[s]” her “from public image” at the important moment of a political campaign to elect Carlingford’s new member of Parliament (*Royal* 83).

Ultimately, of course, neither abdication occurs, as the women have developed such strong forms of power that neither desires to relinquish. Queen Victoria would remain in power until her death in 1901. Lucilla re-emerges following her mourning to marry her cousin Tom, settle her family’s ancestral estate Marchbank, and extend her surrogate maternal powers even further into the public sphere by revitalizing the poor villages surrounding the estate. Quite the opposite of threatening her power, Lucilla’s mourning is key to her assertion of power as a woman and surrogate mother. It allows her to perform a cultural norm according to strict social expectations, and the power she wields as mistress of Marchbank emerges directly from these circumstances. I am, however, troubled by Lucilla’s seeming retreat from power during the scene in which she agrees to marry Tom. Despite having rejected him ten years earlier, during the scene in which he successfully proposes, “All Lucilla’s powers seemed to fail her” (474).

Still, despite her temporary lack of self-command, this scene, like her mourning, is essential to her ultimate power.

Lucilla's performance of different aspects of femininity—mourning and accepting a proposal included—specifically allows her to wield power and to affect social change (474). Had Lucilla accepted Mr. Ashburton's proposal, she would have become the wife of Carlingford's new member of Parliament. While his position would have been a powerful one and she may have had influence over him, she still would have moved into his house and been forced to live within his world. On the whole, she would not have been able to arrange matters her own way, as she has been accustomed to do. By marrying Tom, however, she chooses the man—even if she does so in a moment when her “powers seem to fail her”—who is not clearly set in his occupation and who will allow her to arrange their life, and surrounding society, as she sees fit. Although she does leave her father's home, she moves with Tom to their ancestral family estate, and even this move is Lucilla's idea and the result of her calculated maneuvering. Thus, as Tom's wife, Lucilla has a power over her own home, society, and time that she would not have had if she had married a man in Mr. Ashburton's important social position.

Although Homans suggests that Lucilla's “psychologically deep emotions” during mourning turn her into the type of heroine Nancy Armstrong has described as “justify[ing] the perpetuation of a separate private, domestic sphere,” her marriage to Tom upsets the social structure that revolves around two separate spheres (*Royal* 82). As Homans notes, “this new emotional Lucilla never entirely goes away,” so when Lucilla agrees to marry Tom, she also marries the effectiveness of her new, emotional self with the power she has demonstrated throughout the novel to shape the world around her (*Royal* 82). Like Olive, she marries her feminine and masculine traits, combining them to enact a more socially effective agenda than her

previous arrangement of Carlingford high society. In the early part of the novel, Lucilla reigns over Grange Lane, the wealthy area of Carlingford, and her sovereignty takes its shape through simple arrangement of society. Later, however, Lucilla's new introspection leads her to want to help the poor and, thus, to have a larger effect that does not relegate her to the domestic sphere. Rather, it specifically places her in the public one, where she will publicly perform domestic acts. In this way, Lucilla is reminiscent of Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*), whom McKnight notes "chooses to devote herself to [Casaubon's] scholarly book and to community aid projects; she'll mother on a large scale," McKnight explains, "not a small one" (125).

The introspection Lucilla undergoes during her mourning, coupled with Rose Lake's suggestion that Lucilla turn her father's house into a House of Mercy, leads Lucilla to determine that she can have an even greater social influence under the right circumstances. The social impact Lucilla desires is similar to the kind of influence Dorothea has when she establishes an infant school, builds cottages, and otherwise tries to help improve the lives of the poor. Achieving this aim involves marrying Tom and taking possession of Marchbank, where Lucilla will oversee the arrangement of the surrounding town to help improve the lives of the poor through her sovereignty and surrogate maternity. Becoming "conscious" of "capabilities" that are "greater than" the work she can do in Carlingford, Lucilla decides that she can be of greater use acting as a ruler and surrogate mother to the poor, who need her influence more than the people of Carlingford high society (483). She determines to accomplish "some more worthy end," humorously noting that the poor "could not help being the better for what one did for them. They might continue to be as stupid as ever, and ungrateful, and all that; but if they were warm and comfortable, instead of cold and hungry, it would always make a difference" (483).

To achieve her plan, Lucilla persuades Tom to purchase the estate of Marchbank, where

she will take on domestic duties in the public sphere, effecting change and establishing influence. The “disorder and disarray” of the surrounding village make Lucilla itch “to set all the crooked things straight, and clean away the rubbish, and set everything, as she said, on a sound foundation” (486). Lucilla is excited to clean, organize, and arrange, in what the novel calls “a new sphere,” a sphere in which Lucilla does not “perpetuate” the separation of the private and domestic spaces, but rather overturns that separation by deliberately merging the two (485). Sarah Dredge has demonstrated a similar effect of the work Gaskell’s Margaret Hale does with the poor, suggesting that she is the central agent of the “unsettling of gender and class relations through the ambiguous category of philanthropy” (84). As a “visitor” in a “worker’s home” with what Victorian reviewers imagined as the “opportunity to exert her beneficial middle-class influence,” Dredge suggests that Margaret blurs the lines between male and female, private and public (84). According to Dredge, Margaret assumes power as “the primary social agent in her family,” blending the “social” public and the domestic private sphere of the “family” (91). This fusion, Dredge suggests, demonstrates the instability of each sphere, and of the separate sphere dichotomy altogether, thus suggesting the benefit of “a more malleable notion of social organization” (95).

Representations of Lucilla that liken her to Queen Victoria are especially pertinent for understanding how she distorts the boundaries between public and private spheres; they are also useful for considering how Lucilla reconstitutes surrogate maternal power, given that we saw in chapter 1 how the media market likened Queen Victoria to middle-class mothers. Through her queenly representation, Lucilla is connected to both social power and middle-class maternity. Her calculated performance of both queenly and maternal gestures extends domestic influences into the public sphere. She uses her power as sovereign of Carlingford and as a woman

unencumbered by children to establish a new, important social role through surrogate maternity. By repeating such performances over a period of time, Lucilla successfully creates such a “new sphere,” to use the novel's own terms (485). She demonstrates how the performance of maternal gestures can give childless women the power to revise female and maternal expectations.

Oliphant demonstrates from the outset of the novel that Lucilla's actions are often contrived and her behavior largely a performance, and members of her own society regularly find themselves assuming Lucilla is acting even when her behavior is in earnest. When Lucilla first returns home to mourn her mother's death, she does not seem to be grieving, but rather has “floods of tears at her command” (3). Her tears are not the result of an excess of emotion, but are a tool; she cries when the performance of emotion will best serve her purposes. Before even arriving home, Lucilla has not only “settled upon everything that had to be done,” but has actually “rehearsed, everything, according to the habit already acquired by a quick mind” (5). She has practiced being received by her father and imagined “rush[ing] up to the chamber of death and weep over dear mamma” (5). She has also planned the effect this demonstration will have on her father when she ultimately comes “down-stairs again, pale as death, but self-controlled” to “devote herself to papa” (5). Although Lucilla's performance does not achieve her goal on this first occasion, readers are given to understand immediately that Lucilla will regularly perform, as opposed to simply reacting, when it will suit her purposes. Although her father sends her back to school for three more years, these performances are much more effective when she returns home from school at the age of eighteen.

In the time before Lucilla's final return home, Oliphant underscores the contrived nature of Lucilla's actions, as she plots her future reign over her father's home and Carlingford. Lucilla “manag[es]” and “influenc[es]” her schoolmistress and “direct[s] the future tenor of her own

education” (11). She ensures that she is well schooled in the area of political economy, which she believes will help her best manage her father's home and Carlingford society. When she is invited to accompany a friend on a tour of Europe, Lucilla accepts the invitation not for the sake of enjoyment, but because she sees it as a “tool” (15). She imagines that experience traveling will provide useful conversation topics to assist her later in the reorganization of Carlingford society. When she finally returns home, she puts a meticulous plan in to action, and the result immediately demonstrates the power Lucilla will wield through successful performances, and thus the success she is likely to experience in her domestic and social efforts.

Upon her arrival at home, Lucilla acquires power over domestic policy through the calculated performance of traditional female roles. Although Butler's theory suggests that the performance of traditional gender roles further engrains them as normative, Lucilla performs conventional norms specifically to achieve power. As Andrea Tange has noted, Lucilla “challenges the notion of the Angel in the House not by rejecting it altogether but by carefully exploiting the position in which it places her” (165). Lucilla prudently plays the role that is prescribed for her, but her contrived performance is manipulative. As Joseph O’Mealy has demonstrated, Lucilla is “described as being subversive by ‘appearing to personify conventionality itself’” (Tange 164).⁵⁴ Lucilla states clearly that she has “no desire to shock anybody's prejudices or wound anybody's feelings” (79). Thus, in order to be successful in her subversive endeavors, she must appear to be adhering to the standard.

Lucilla performs traditional gender roles, but she uses her performances for calculated purposes that allow her to wield power. Once she has that power, she performs roles differently

⁵⁴ The quote within this quote comes from page 72 of Joseph H. O’Mealy’s “Miss Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), and the Victorian Canon” (1992), which I have not been able to access.

in order to reconstitute them. Through her amusing chatter about her “adventures and achievements,” Lucilla “succeeded in doing what is certainly one of the first duties of a woman—she amused her father” (28). As a result of the merriment she provides Dr. Marjoribanks, he joins his daughter in the drawing room for tea, “though it was against his principles; and on the whole, Lucilla had the satisfaction of feeling that she had made a conquest of the Doctor, which, of course, was a grand and most essential preliminary” to her larger conquest (28). Shortly after, Lucilla performs “another fundamental duty of woman” by rearranging furniture in the drawing room, thus “harmonising the room” so well that her father is “moved” (28). Although she gains no immediate power through this reorganization, its effect on her father foreshadows the later impact of her social campaign, as she metonymically substitutes the rearrangement of the drawing room for her planned reorganization of society at large.

Lucilla continues to manipulate her traditionally female tastes and propensities to forward her own agenda. The next morning, Lucilla begins her domestic campaign in full force, and although the audacity of her actions often takes others by surprise, she accomplishes her aim in large part by acting as if such actions were part of her womanly duty. When her father comes down to breakfast on Lucilla's first morning home, he finds Lucilla, “to his intense amazement, seated at the foot of the table, in the place which he usually occupied himself, before the urn and the coffee pot” (29). Dr. Marjoribanks “hesitate[s]” before sitting in a different seat with Lucilla at the head of the table (29). He is so “stricken dumb,” however, “by this unparalleled audacity” that he sits in the seat “where everything was arranged for him, and to which Lucilla invited him sweetly” (29). Using the supposed female talent for arranging the table and maintaining a soft temperament for the sake of soothing her father, Lucilla overcomes his “touch of mental perturbation” (29). By placing herself where she can access the coffee pot to serve her father,

she couches the bold move of usurping her father's place at the head of the table in the context of performing a domestic duty. The narrator describes Lucilla's tone when telling her father why she has arranged the table thus as being one of "ingenuous sweetness," suggesting the contrived nature of Lucilla's actions (29). She achieves her desired effect, as Dr. Marjoribanks "became aware . . . that he had abdicated, without knowing it, and that the reigns of state had been smilingly withdrawn from his unconscious hands" (29).

Upon taking command of her father's house, Lucilla immediately implements plans to mold society by blurring the lines between public and private spheres. Again playing up traditional female roles, she tells her father, "I always was so domestic. It does not matter what is outside, I always find my pleasure at home" (45). Her performance of domesticity helps convince her father to let her refurnish the drawing room, which is the first place where she blends public and private spaces in her quest to create a new sphere that resists the dichotomy. Lucilla makes all of her plans, like painting the room a "pale spring green" to match her complexion, openly (46). The narrator notes how Lucilla is already breaking traditional molds because "a timid young woman would have" determined what wall color would best suit her complexion "by herself," but Lucilla does it "publicly, with her usual discrimination" (46). Lucilla will continue blending private and public spaces in her weekly Thursday evenings, as well as in her roles as social reformer and surrogate mother.

As she begins reforming Carlingford society, Lucilla exhibits a heightened consciousness of what society expects of an unmarried woman. When she prepares for her first "evening," Lucilla simply expands upon the weekly Thursday night dinner parties her father has previously hosted with a group of men, only bringing in women to infiltrate the male dinners. Always aware of the importance that she perform traditional roles appropriately, Lucilla asks Mrs. Chiley

to act as her “chaperone” at dinner (51). Despite the power she is already achieving, Lucilla recognizes the importance of appearing to function within prescribed social boundaries, and as an unmarried young woman, there should be a married woman present to “take care of” her (51). Lucilla tells her father, “I always make it a point to give in to the prejudices of society. That is how I have always been so successful” (51). All of Lucilla's “arrangements” for the evening make her first dinner a “complete success,” and she accomplishes what she considers her crowning achievement to begin her social campaign in Carlingford (63, 88).

Lucilla realizes this success not simply through a performance of gender roles, but through an actual performance, a musical one. Recognizing the need to entertain the party with her accomplishments while maintaining the appearance of feminine modesty, Lucilla arranges a performance she feels is perfectly suited to surprise and impress her guests. She performs a duet with Barbara Lake, the drawing master's daughter whose contralto voice is “precisely adapted to supplement without supplanting” Lucilla's “own high-pitched and much-cultivated organ” (33). Lucilla selects the duet, practices with Barbara, and brings her to the “evening” specifically for the purpose of this performance. Even foreseeing the curiosity her guests will feel toward Barbara, with whom they are mostly unacquainted due to Barbara's lower class status, Lucilla “paused a moment, under pretense of selecting her music, to take full advantage of” the company's interest in herself and her companion (87).

The phrase “under the pretense” recalls the calculated nature of each of Lucilla's arrangements. Further, her calm restraint under the “applause” that “reached the length of a perfect ovation” impresses Lucilla's modesty upon her guests, as she gives up the piano after only one song to allow another guest to perform. Lucilla's efforts pay off; as the narrator explains, “No more complete success could be imagined than that of this first Thursday Evening,

which was remarkable in the records of Carlingford” (88). The narrator even marks the effect of Lucilla’s prepared modesty, noting, “perhaps Miss Marjoribanks, like other conquerors, was destined to build her victory upon sacrifice” (88). The word “sacrifice” is particularly important here, as it serves as a reminder not just that Lucilla is meticulously plotting her own rise to power, but that she will ultimately use this power in a way that is reminiscent of maternity.

Through her clear calculations, her performance of traditional female norms, and her restraint, Lucilla achieves the social power she seeks. This conquest allows her to shift her efforts outside of her home, where she acts as a surrogate mother and protector to others as she oversees “the organisation and welfare of her kingdom” (113). Once she achieves her powerful status, it is less necessary for Lucilla to be as calculating; in fact, after this point, “even what most people took for the cleverest calculation was” often merely “a succession of happy instincts” (113). Still, if every move is no longer a performance, Lucilla utilizes her ability to perform gestures, now including those that are less traditional for her role, to slowly incite social change. Also important to this shift from a complete performance is the use of the word “instinct.” Although Lucilla is not a biological mother herself, she has the instincts to arrange society and to nurture the people within it. Thus, as social understandings were coming to acknowledge that nurturing and caring for others was not necessarily natural to all biological mothers, characters like Lucilla simultaneously iterate how such roles can be natural to women who are not mothers. Thus, Lucilla’s behavior and nature together suggest the need for social expectations to encompass such non-biological mothers as Lucilla into caregiving structures, as they can do the world around them much good.

Lucilla is regularly described as “motherly” and “sacrificing,” and those around her have an “instinctive faith” like they might have in a mother, “which came naturally to everyone under

her influence” (239). In her early interactions with her cousin, Tom, she takes “fast hold of Tom's hands with her motherly grasp” and speaks to him “in her motherly way” (74, 75). She brings Barbara Lake, who Lucilla notes on multiple occasions “has no mother to keep her right,” into society (110), and the narrator even suggests that Lucilla “nourish[es]” Barbara “in her bosom” (114).⁵⁵ Although the move somewhat backfires when Barbara forms a socially inappropriate relationship with Mr. Cavendish, the pair does eventually marry, as Lucilla suggests they should do even earlier. Thus Lucilla is largely responsible for performing the very motherly duty of forwarding a socially prosperous marriage for the young girl.

Lucilla similarly mothers Barbara's younger sister, Rose, who turns to Lucilla for advice anytime her family undergoes a trial. Even if Rose is not always satisfied with Lucilla's response, she continues to seek Lucilla when she is in need. Lucilla, often calling her mentee by endearing and infantilizing names like “dear little Rose” (236), provides motherly advice and support, “minister[ing] to the sufferer” to help her “keep up her courage” (328). In one instance, Lucilla “soothed” Rose “and kissed her, and took off her hat and shed her pretty curls off her forehead” (237). Performing the maternal duty of helping Rose understand how to make herself

⁵⁵ Although Lucilla is also motherless, she is less concerned about her own motherless state than about Barbara's, despite the fact that Barbara is two years older than Lucilla. Lucilla sees much of the difference between the two as being a result of Lucilla's superior education and strength of mind, but Lucilla also has a surrogate mother of her own where Barbara does not. When Lucilla defends Barbara to Mrs. Chiley, Lucilla's own childless surrogate mother, noting that Barbara should be forgiven for her indiscretions because she has no mother, Mrs. Chiley replies, “And neither have you, my poor dear” (110). Lucilla quickly dismisses this assertion, however, noting, with “artless gratitude,” “I have *you* . . . and then I am different” (110).

more attractive, Lucilla tells Rose “in her maternal way,” “You would look very nice if you would take a little pains . . . You must wear your hair just so on Thursday” (237). Lucilla even mothers Mr. Cavendish, for whom she has “a certain tenderness of compassion” in her “bosom” (285). She protects him when the Archdeacon, Mr. Beverly, threatens to reveal that Mr. Cavendish's heritage is not as high as he claims, so that Mr. Cavendish comes to feel that Lucilla is “his only remaining protector” (266). She even overcomes his disdain at her suggestion that he loves Barbara, shaking “her head in a maternal, semi-reproving way” and advising him to marry Barbara (321).

Perhaps the most noteworthy instances of Lucilla's surrogate motherhood, however, at least as they relate to her ability to upset norms, occur with the women who are supposed to act as surrogate mothers to Lucilla herself, specifically Lucilla's Aunt Jemima and Mrs. Mortimer. Aunt Jemima comes to Carlingford to stay with Lucilla and her father late in the novel, and although aunts were common surrogate mothers in both Victorian culture and literature, Lucilla mothers Aunt Jemima as much as the aunt mothers Lucilla. Because her aunt is an invalid, much like her mother had been, Lucilla “console[s] her suffering relative” (357). She cares for Aunt Jemima in her whims and weaknesses, even when Dr. Marjoribanks does not take the aunt's complaints seriously (357). There are times when Aunt Jemima acts, or at least attempts to perform the role of Lucilla's surrogate mother, especially following Dr. Marjoribanks's death, when Lucilla's aunt is still in her home. “Everybody said” that Aunt Jemima “was at this trying moment like a mother to Lucilla” (413), as she offers Lucilla a place to live in her home and calls her “my poor child” (405). Still, despite her aunt's efforts, Lucilla's decision to remain, on her limited income, in her father's house, under the care of no one other than herself, demonstrates Lucilla's unwillingness to be mothered or to relinquish her independence.

Lucilla again demonstrates her superior ability to mother her aunt when she becomes engaged to Jemima's son, Tom. At this moment, Aunt Jemima has the most reason to mother her new daughter-in-law-to-be, but Lucilla turns the tables to mother her aunt instead. When Tom learns of the death of Dr. Marjoribanks and of his financial ruin just before it, he tells his mother in a letter that he will rush home from India to propose to Lucilla. Aunt Jemima, however, withholds this information from Lucilla, and when Tom arrives in Carlingford, he interrupts Mr. Ashburton's proposal. After Lucilla accepts Tom, Aunt Jemima fears Lucilla will tell Tom of her betrayal, which risked Lucilla accepting Mr. Ashburton before Tom ever arrived to offer her his own hand. "You will make my boy happy, and never turn him against his mother," Aunt Jemima cries as a "repentant sinner" (478). Happily acquiescing to such an appeal and taking even the care of her own aunt into her hands, Lucilla kisses her aunt as "a vow of protection and guidance from the strong to the weak," iterating at the last that Lucilla is even a powerful surrogate mother over her own aunt and soon-to-be mother-in-law (478).

The most detailed account we see of Lucilla as a surrogate mother to someone originally meant to mother her, however, is described through her relationship with Mrs. Mortimer. The Rector, Mr. Bury, brings the widowed Mrs. Mortimer to see Lucilla, recommending Mrs. Mortimer as a companion to provide Lucilla with "a mother's care" and to fill her mother's "place" (64). When Mrs. Mortimer nearly faints in Lucilla's presence, however, Lucilla not only thwarts Mr. Bury's efforts, but she turns the tables entirely by performing caretaking acts as a surrogate mother to Mrs. Mortimer. Lucilla performs gestures that are still well within her role as a well-to-do young lady, but which also mimic maternal gestures. Lucilla nurses Mrs. Mortimer when she nearly faints, sees her safely home, and then arranges a comfortable living by establishing a school for her to run. "In the intervals of her legislative cares Lucilla had run

about all over Carlingford searching for pupils, and at the same moment had cut and stitched and arranged, and papered the walls, and planted flower-beds, for the feeble creature thus thrown upon her” (197). Through such domestic details as sewing—as a mother would sew her children's clothes—and arranging—as she would arrange for her children's well-being—Lucilla provides a life for Mrs. Mortimer of “comparative comfort and tranquility” to that which she had before meeting her new “protector” (196, 205). Notably, what Lucilla provides Mrs. Mortimer is the chance to be a surrogate mother to the children of Carlingford as the teacher of the school, and Lucilla's oversight of this “educational department” again mimics the expected role of a mother, who was responsible for educating her children, especially young girls (195).⁵⁶

Mrs. Mortimer quickly comes to rely on Lucilla as her surrogate mother, and Lucilla, as always, answers the call with full enthusiasm. After Mrs. Mortimer reunites with Mr. Beverly, a former lover from whom she had separated because of an argument they could not overcome, she turns to Lucilla for advice. Because “she was not strong-minded,” all Mrs. Mortimer “could do was to consult Lucilla . . . When a poor creature is helpless and weak, and has but one friend in the world who is strong, what can she do but apply to her sustainer and guardian?” (205). Lucilla, of course, responds appropriately, acting as, “if not a ministering angel, at least a substantial prop and support to the lonely woman who trusted in her” (207). The narrator is clear not only about Lucilla's ability to perform such a surrogate maternal role, but about how naturally the role comes to her, explaining, “If there was one thing in the world more than another which contented Lucilla, it was to be appealed to and called upon for active service. It

⁵⁶ Again, Lucilla's actions are similar to those of Dorothea Brooke, who also establishes a school in *Middlemarch*. Her care for Mrs. Mortimer, and by extension of the children Mrs. Mortimer nurtures, is also reminiscent of Aurora Leigh, who mothers Marian Erle and her baby boy.

did her heart good to take the management of incapable people, and arrange all their affairs for them, and solve all their difficulties” (207). Lucilla does exactly this, devising a plan to smooth over affairs with Mr. Beverly and to secure his proposal to Mrs. Mortimer. Thus, she provides a life of comparative ease for Mrs. Mortimer, and it is this same plan that also saves Mr. Cavendish from the Archdeacon exposing him.

As she prepares to implement her plan, Lucilla performs additional maternal duties, calling Mrs. Mortimer “dear” and kissing her (288), while also providing health advice, suggesting Mrs. Mortimer “take a walk every day” (287). Lucilla even advises Mrs. Mortimer on how to dress for the one Thursday evening the widow attends, during which Lucilla executes her plan to engage Mrs. Mortimer to the Archdeacon while making him agree not to expose Mr. Cavendish. Like a mother would help style her daughter for a ball, Lucilla tells Mrs. Mortimer to wear a black silk dress with lace “at the back of your head,” in a manner Lucilla knows will remind the Archdeacon of Mrs. Mortimer's maiden days (287). This is the first effort in Lucilla’s successful campaign to lead the Archdeacon to forgive past disputes and propose marriage to Mrs. Mortimer. Lucilla even oversees the wedding when it takes place, taking “charge of everything” and “presid[ing] over the ceremony as if she had been Mrs. Mortimer's mother” (313).

By acting as a surrogate mother to Mrs. Mortimer, as well as to her aunt, Lucilla demonstrates, similarly to Olive Rothery and Molly Gibson, her power to upset conventional structures and to perform a role not traditionally marked for herself. The power Lucilla creates, however, is arguably greater than that engendered by either Olive or Molly, as it is the most public power any of these heroines experiences. Although Molly does venture into the public sphere when she meets Mr. Preston, and although she is ultimately triumphant, her character

briefly comes under public scrutiny, and the scene in which she wields such power is only one in the entire novel. Olive demonstrates her surrogate maternal power over her mother, as well as her power to make a place for herself in society, but her society is more limited, remaining mainly in her own home or the small sphere of the countryside where she lives. Lucilla's power, however, is more public, and thus most clearly creates a new social space for young women to take on powerful roles as non-biological mothers. She “unquestionably took the lead in society” (339). Further, she demonstrates her social power by managing Mr. Ashburton's political campaign, suggesting that he run for Parliament, determining his position, and forwarding what would eventually be his success to such a point that he calls her “his fair advisor” (341). Recognizing her power, intelligence, and social prowess, Mr. Ashburton even tells Lucilla, “If I could ask you to be on my committee, that would be the first thing to be done,” a suggestion that demonstrates ever clearly how Lucilla subverts traditional gender norms (339).

In the end, through this social power, the blurring of gender norms, and the regular performance of surrogate maternal gestures, Lucilla publicly creates the new space that Molly and Olive only establish in more limited ways. At the very end of the novel, when she prepares to go into the village of Marchbank and act as a surrogate mother to the poor, rearranging their lives and homes for their comfort and improvement, Oliphant demonstrates how Lucilla literally takes the place of her own mother. She “can now suffer no change of name,” only becoming Mrs. Marjoribanks (496). Lucilla's authority is, of course, contrasted to the uselessness of her mother; Mrs. Marjoribanks has a much greater impact as a surrogate mother than as a biological one. Additionally, Oliphant suggests the importance of the social aspect of Lucilla's role by likening Lucilla to Florence Nightingale, iterating the social and national importance of the surrogate maternity Lucilla performs. “As she was in the first freshness of her youthful daring,

when she rose like the sun upon the chaos of society in Carlingford,” the narrator explains, “so is she now as she goes forth into the County to carry the light and progress there” (496-97). The invocation of the ideas of “light” and “progress” draws a comparison between Lucilla and Nightingale. As Dever explains, “Lucilla is another lady with a lamp, her visions oriented outward, her proper sphere of influence quite clearly the sociopolitical as well as the domestic” (Dever 34). In fact, Oliphant is clear about Lucilla's sphere, as well, noting that “Lucilla had the comfort of feeling that [her life's] course had been full of benefit to her fellow-creatures; and now a larger sphere opened before her feet” (495).

In a discussion of Butler's theory of performativity, Lois McNay explains that “the cultural necessity for a performative reiteration” of different “symbolic norms highlights the extent to which they are not natural or inevitable and are, therefore, potentially open to change” (177). Such an observation is especially pertinent when considering heroines like Molly, Olive, and Lucilla, as they, like others who perform surrogate maternity, capitalize upon the instability of the Victorian maternal ideal and perform gestures to help reconstitute it. By demonstrating the domestic, social, and national stability that proper surrogate maternity can create, such heroines, especially Lucilla, wield a unique social power. Further, they demonstrate the need for female and maternal expectations to be more expansive, for family structures to encompass surrogate mothers, and for middle-class women to be able to participate in maternal and family structures without having children of their own.

6 CONCLUSION

During the mid-Victorian period, a number of ideological assumptions restricted the social and familial roles available to middle-class women. We saw earlier in this dissertation that motherhood was imagined as the only appropriate occupation for middle-class women in the

early years of Queen Victoria's reign. When women adhered to this expectation and became mothers, they were subjected to a number of additional expectations and pressures that made their roles difficult to perform, and it was almost impossible to achieve the high standard. Such norms also complicated life, however, for women who did not have children, and especially for middle-class women who remained unmarried. Some remained under the protection of their families, but the ever-present theme of financial ruin that arises in novels suggests that many middle-class families experienced financial trouble. Without financial provisions from their families, unmarried middle-class women faced difficult situations, as very few occupations were considered suitable to their circumstances.

Many fictional Victorian heroines demonstrate this occupational problem, navigating the complicated terrain of earning a living as a middle-class woman by becoming a governess, a surrogate maternal profession. The Brontë's sisters are especially concerned with the plight of the governess; we see through characters like Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe (*Villette*), and Agnes Grey what Deborah Gorham has called "the plight of the middle-class girl or woman who had to support herself" (28). The original publication dates of these novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* in 1847 and *Villette* in 1853, demonstrate the mid-Victorian literary interest in the issue of middle-class female occupation, which echoed the social discourse that had recently emerged on the same subject.⁵⁷ Social commentators were concerned with what they called the "distressed gentlewoman," and "by the 1850s, an organized movement to improve employment opportunities for middle-class girls and women was underway" (Gorham 28).

⁵⁷ From an autobiographical standpoint, the Brontë sisters had the personal experience to warrant their interest in the plight of the governess.

Another concern emerged regarding the future of middle-class British women at this time, most commonly known as the “surplus woman” problem. In 1851, census data suggested that there were many more unmarried women in England than there were men available to marry them. A social controversy ensued in which commentators debated the best way to handle what was seen as a crisis for British family structures (Levitan 359). William Rathbone Greg perhaps best represents one side of the “surplus woman” debate. He published “Why are Women Redundant?” in *The National Review* in 1862, which recommended the mass transportation of half a million unmarried women to British colonies. Commentators from the opposing side recommended a much different, and in a way more radical, suggestion later that year, when Frances Power Cobbe published “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” in *Fraser’s Magazine*. Her essay argued that, rather than be expected to marry or be transported, England should enlarge educational and occupational opportunities for unmarried middle-class women, allowing them to earn their own livings.

Such debates about “surplus” or “redundant” women and “distressed gentlewomen” continued for the rest of the nineteenth century, and literature that depicted surrogate motherhood subtly engaged with such conversations. By demonstrating that childless women could mother as effectively, and sometimes more effectively, than biological mothers, novelists not only helped expand understandings of the maternal role, but also of the female one. Between the effects of literary representations, the arguments of social commentators, and the influence of women like Mary Seacole and Florence Nightingale, occupational possibilities began to emerge for middle-class women that were socially acceptable because they mimicked surrogate motherhood.

Nightingale had perhaps the most notable impact. As a young woman from a respectable, wealthy family, she was imagined as undertaking the surrogate maternal occupation of nursing for the selfless (and thus maternal) sake of helping her fellow creatures, rather than for monetary gain. As Mary Poovey has demonstrated in *Uneven Developments*, the way prominent social writers like Harriet Martineau depicted Nightingale established a rhetoric that lauded her as a mother figure, much like the representations of Queen Victoria produced by the periodical press. Martineau, for instance, tells the story of Nightingale nursing a Russian prisoner, whom Martineau infantilizes by calling him a “poor boy who could not speak or be spoken to till she had taken him in, and taught him, and made him useful” (qtd. in Poovey 165). In this depiction, Nightingale is likened to a mother who cares for and educates a child, only on the front lines, rather than at home. Martineau further establishes a connection between Nightingale and ideal domesticity within the private sphere, likening her to an angel and, by extension, an angel of the house. “When asked if he knew where he would go when he was dead,” Martineau explains, the boy “confidently said ‘I shall go to Miss Nightingale’” (qtd. in Poovey 165).⁵⁸

The result of work like Nightingale’s, social debates, and literary representations of surrogate mothers, was a shift in Victorian understandings of acceptable middle-class occupations and of definitions of motherhood. Although mothers and surrogate mothers were still held to high standards, and although female occupations were still limited, effective surrogate mothers helped demonstrate the utility of expanding norms and expectations, of

⁵⁸ These excerpts are taken from Florence Nightingale’s obituary, published in part in *The Daily News* in 1910, but originally written when Nightingale was believed to be dying at the end of the Crimean War, probably in 1856. I was unable to access the original source, the full manuscript of which is available at the Fawcett Library in London.

recognizing all women as productive, not redundant. As Gorham has noted, “By the 1870s, the employment patterns of middle-class girls and women had, indeed, widened,” including such surrogate maternal occupations as nursing and teaching. Hannah Smith’s 1896 book on maternal education demonstrates this shift, as she explains:

I want it understood that when I say mothers I do not mean only those women who have actually borne children, but I mean all women who have in any way the care of the young, whether nurses, governesses, teachers, mistresses, forewomen in shops, or any women who are in a place of authority over others. 'Professional' mothers, we might call them, to distinguish them from natural mothers; but they are none the less mothers. (10-11)

While this dissertation has enhanced the work of previous critics in outlining the rise of Victorian maternal expectations and demonstrating the effect of those expectations on literary mothers, its most important work has been revealing the impact of literary surrogate mothers on social ideology. It has also, of course, raised a number of new questions. First, the narrow focus on wet nurses and stepmothers leaves a gap in considering other types of surrogate mothers, especially governesses, teachers, dry nurses, and aunts. Although a brief consideration of aunts as surrogate mothers appears in the section on stepmothers in chapter 3, a more thorough investigation is needed on the different surrogate maternal roles aunts play in fiction and society. Next, although the conclusion suggests the effect of the literary representations discussed in chapters 2-4 on larger social discourse, a study that highlights a direct connection throughout would enhance our understanding of the dialectical relationship between literature and society.

In a future book project, I plan to make such connections. I will decrease the introductory information on maternal expectations in Victorian England, as well as on fictional Victorian

mothers, because other critics have demonstrated many similar points. The new ideas that currently encompass my first two chapters will simply be introductory material in that project, making new space available in which I can study different types of surrogate mothers in more detail. Because I will have more room to consider each type of literary surrogate mother individually, I will be able to make more direct comparisons between literary surrogates and their real-life counterparts, clearly investigating the dialectical connection between Victorian fiction and social discourse.

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