

The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction

Rewriting the Patriarchal Family

Barbara Z. Thaden



Literature and Society in Victorian Britain

THE MATERNAL VOICE
IN VICTORIAN FICTION

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Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	3
Chapter 1 The Dead Mother	17
Chapter 2 God the Mother	51
Chapter 3 The Maternal Circle	75
Chapter 4 <i>Der Familienroman der Mutter:</i> Husbands, Wives, Children and Nannies	111
Conclusion	141
Notes	145
Works Cited	149
Index	161

Preface

Near the interstices of cultures we perceive the shadows of the seams. This is not a theoretical book, but certain ideological premises, gleaned from Lacan and Jameson and Derrida and Kristeva and many other critical theorists, underlie its arguments. The first is that history is never directly accessible except as text, the second is that language and narrative constitute our consciousness and our “selves,” and the third is that narrative itself is a historical product. I agree with Derrida that there is no origin: if narrative is all we know of history and of ourselves, and if narrative is itself the product as well as the producer of history and of ourselves, we can never get to the bottom of things. We can only compare versions of reality and consciousness, and make new narratives about what we have found on the interstices. This narrative explores ideologies of motherhood engendered from a variety of sources: Freud and psychoanalytical theory, Marxist and materialistic theories of culture, twentieth-century histories of the family, and psychobiological theories of mammalian mothering. Through these prismatic lenses I examine the representation of motherhood in fictional narratives by four Victorian authors who were also biological mothers—Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, Ellen Price (Mrs. Henry) Wood, and Caroline Norton—and compare their representations to those by well-known male and female Victorian novelists who were not biological mothers, with special emphasis on Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, but including Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, and others.

This is not an essentialist argument. I do not believe that the mental processes of biological mothers are quantitatively different from those of childless women, fathers, or men. I do argue, however, that being a Victorian mother positioned one in a different relationship to society, to history, to culture, and to narrative, making it more likely that a mother/author would, even if in a preconscious way, be aware of the contradictions facing nineteenth-century mothers: the conflicting duties of a good wife and a good mother; the way a mother’s de-

sire for ownership of the child was directly countermanded by common and statutory law; the way the great moral and spiritual purpose assigned to Victorian mothers was directly undermined by the legal and social position of wife/mother as minor/child herself; and even the contradictory messages from Queen Victoria, a woman worshipped as first and best mother who lamented the gross animality of childbirth and the base, instinctual tug of the nursery.

These contradictions in ideology cause cracks in consciousness, widening gulfs between what we think we are and what we think we should be. We weave dreams and narratives in attempts to leap these crevices out of desire for the unobtainable ideal. The fictional narratives I examine reveal, through their conventionalized failures as well as through their heartbreaking successes, the dimensions of maternal desire which resulted from nineteenth-century ideologies of motherhood. The gulf between the real and ideal has shifted radically in our century. We do not stare over the same precipice as did Gaskell and Oliphant, Norton and Wood, and therefore their imaginary solutions to real contradictions are no solutions for us and our predicaments as late twentieth-century mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. However, I argue that their narratives helped to shape the new and different ideology of motherhood in which we today create our identities and experience our conflicts. How we got here is the plot of this book. The plot will reach some climaxes but no resolutions. History keeps sprinkling sand on the scales, forcing us always to adjust the balance of power, rights, and responsibilities between mothers and fathers, men and women. This narrative hopes only to illuminate how that balancing act is affected by fictional narratives as well as by historical, legal, and sociological texts.

I am grateful for the support of all my mothers and friends, for my husband David's unfailing kindness, and for the love and inspiration of my children. Many thanks are due to my professors and colleagues, especially Bev Taylor, John McGowan, and James Thompson, who have offered much help and advice through numerous stages of this project; and to the editor of this series, Sally Mitchell, who has been a wonderful editor, advisor and friend, and almost an e-mail mother to me.

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THE MATERNAL VOICE
IN VICTORIAN FICTION

Introduction

Is there such a thing as the writing mother's fantasy? And if so, what transformations does the fantasy undergo in the process of its fictionalization? (Susan Suleiman 372)

Whether or not, as Edward Shorter claims, good mothering is an invention of modern culture,¹ surely the urge to dictate new and better methods of taking care of children is a recent obsession. The disintegration of traditional familial and communal lifestyles wrought by industrialization had led to great instability and insecurity about child-raising practices in the industrialized world. Every generation of twentieth-century mothers has been handed professional advice, child-rearing manuals, and new, scientifically-authorized child development theories. According to Jessie Bernard, modern middle-class motherhood, which assigns "sole responsibility for child care to the mother" and attributes the social, moral, physical, and spiritual development, positive or negative, of the child almost exclusively to the quality of the mother-child relationship, is "new and unique" to our century. This image of the ideal, ever-present, ever-loving, all-responsible mother was, according to Bernard, "a nineteenth-century Victorian creation" (cited Helterline 590-591). An examination of the ways in which British Victorian novelists who were mothers themselves contributed to this new idealization of motherhood can help us to understand not only how a functional model of motherhood was created and came to be accepted in our century but also how our mid- and late-twentieth-century ideology of motherhood has affected how we interpret Victorian representations of motherhood.

The British under Queen Victoria's reign are often thought of as exalting motherhood. The queen herself was saluted as "Mother, Wife, and Queen" after fifty years of rule by crowds who seemed to agree that the queen's position as supreme mother and wife elevated her even more than her position as political head of her country (Honig 11). Every mother was a queen. Elaine Showalter writes that a proper mother was "a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home" (*Literature of Their Own* 14). Nina Auerbach writes that childless women in the nineteenth century were "struggling against

the universal approval of large families and paeans to the holiness of motherhood," for "motherhood was not merely a biological fact, but a spiritual essence inseparable from pure womanhood" (174).

But despite this apparent emphasis on pure and self-sacrificing mothers within the dominant cultural ideology, 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. For example, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Lucy Snowe are both motherless, and the former suffers from persecution by an evil mother-substitute. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the mothers of Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton die without affecting the action in any way, and Heathcliff is a foundling. Eliot presents ineffective or pernicious mothers for many of her main characters, including Maggie Tulliver, Daniel Deronda, Gwendolen Harleth, and Felix Holt. Many of her other main characters have dead mothers, including Dorothea Brooke and Dinah Morris. Among the male writers most read today, Dickens presents few portraits of good mothers, and Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, actually mocks the stereotype of the good mother in his portrait of Amelia Osborne. Trollope comes closest to portraying the stereotypical good mother with his portrait of Mrs. Bold in *Barchester Towers*, but this is a briefly sketched characterization.

Many reasons for the absence of the ideal mother as a character in fiction have been proffered. It may be, as psychoanalytical theory claims, that a good mother simply has little place in the stories we tell ourselves because psychological maturing involves separating ourselves from our mothers. It may be simply that an ideal mother does not make an interesting fictional character. A dead, absent, or distant mother may also be necessary to allow the main character, especially if she is a young woman, greater scope for action, as mothers are often conservative forces in life and literature, and novels depend on plot. The adventures of the orphan thrown upon the world can often provide more colorful plot twists than can the adventures of the drawing room, and the parentless hero or heroine is a literary convention older than the novel itself.

Perhaps, however, we find few mothers as main characters in Victorian fiction, and few representations of good mothers, because the Victorian novelists most studied today were not mothers themselves and were not usually interested in exploring this ideological territory. Of the major novelists, only Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, compares two mothers and makes pointed comments about the stereotypes dominating the public mind concerning motherhood. As Merryn Williams points out, "it is significant that the four really great women novelists of the nineteenth century—Jane Austen, the two Brontës, and George Eliot—were all childless and married late or not at all" (*Women and the English Novel* 15). Perhaps, however, the significance of this statement lies in our own twentieth-century tastes, prejudices, and aversions, since many popular nineteenth-century British novelists, including Frances Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell, Marga-

ret Oliphant, Ellen Price Wood, Caroline Norton, Anne Marsh, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, were the mothers of legitimate or illegitimate children.

Whether or not these mother/authors offer a different perspective on Victorian motherhood precisely because they were biological mothers is a politically charged question. While Marjorie McCormick claims that "there is no question mothers experience the world somewhat differently from any other group" precisely because of their reproductive function (xiii), most feminists struggle to discount sex-based differences as *significant*.² However, while not claiming that the mother/authors experience life differently for biological reasons, I do claim that the social and legal position of mothers, married and unmarried, can best be understood and appreciated by an author who is in the position of being defined, by her society, as a mother. Ideological constructions of reality obviously change, and the way these changes occur is in part the subject of this book. Mother/authors, whether consciously or unconsciously, were aware of problems in their society's construction of the ideal mother. Their fiction does in fact offer more varied representations of motherhood than the fiction of the more canonized authors. Their non-stereotypical, highly subversive, and controversial representations may have remained unacknowledged for so long because they did not easily fit into the world view of male academics or that of the first waves of feminist academics who began to recover and revive Victorian women's fiction. The fiction of Gaskell, Oliphant, Norton, and Wood sheds new light on the personal, social, and legal conflicts Victorian mothers faced, but it is only now, in the late twentieth century, that we are prepared to interpret their idealized representations of motherhood as subversive and not complicit to the dominant ideology.

How much did the Victorian idealization of motherhood influence the representation of mothers in fiction? Some feminist literary critics start with the assumption that the ideology which surrounded women and mothers had a greater influence on the representation of female characters in fiction than had the actual experiences of the authors, not only because of the pervasive effect of the cultural ideal but also because Victorian authors were anxious to ensure the acceptance of publishers and lending libraries, both of which exercised a conservative influence. Françoise Basch, for example, found that representations of women in Victorian fiction are almost without exception more stereotyped, more conventional, and less shockingly sordid than reports from commissions and other nonfiction writing, including the biographies and letters of eminent and less than eminent ladies. Basch feels that novelists celebrated the role of wife-mother, while the real wife-mother, "far from celebrating her role . . . often seemed to suffer in it" (269). Mother/authors often do depict good, self-sacrificing, devoted mothers, even though more recent critics such as Marianne Hirsch, Susan Peck McDonald, and Marjorie McCormick have noted the lack of good living mother/characters, not their idealization, in the best-known novels written before the twentieth century.

Whether through her presence or her absence, the ideal mother had a place of her own in Victorian fiction which, if not filled, implied a great void. Nancy Armstrong believes that the family unit as we know it today, in which children are socialized by their mothers, "existed mainly as a fiction" before it existed as a fact: "through fiction . . . this kind of household first acquired its power to reproduce a particular form of social relations rooted in gender" (217). Many historians who employ what Anderson calls the "sentiments" approach to history argue that the concept of mother as we know it today was in fact created during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Laurence Stone, for example, speculates that maternal breast-feeding, which had long been out of style and only became popular again in the eighteenth century, led mothers to love their children in a more "exclusive, monopolistic" way (*Family*, 112), which in turn led to a more child-centered society (431). He believes that "natural maternal instincts were allowed to develop" only if mothers breast-fed and had daily physical contact with their infants and children (*Family*, 114), implying that the quality of maternal attachment must have been different if not altogether lacking in those pre-eighteenth-century mothers who sent their children out to wet nurse for a year or two and then left them to be brought up by members of their household staff, sent them to boarding schools, or sent them to live with relatives. Like Stone, Monique Plaza claims that our present day functional definition of a mother as the one who provides "material and affective attendance on the children in the heart of the family" (78), a definition which implies the mother's almost constant "material proximity with the child," was created during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (79). However, Marilyn Helterline and others remind us that middle-class Victorian mothers were not expected to physically care for their children: while this "functional" definition of motherhood was being created during the nineteenth century, it was not accepted as natural—that is, did not become the dominant ideology—until the mid-twentieth century.

Philosophers, doctors, political pamphleteers, and authors of moral, religious, and general advice manuals had been barraging women with propaganda urging them to stay home and take care of their children since the beginning of the eighteenth century. A long aristocratic tradition (more prevalent on the continent than in England, but still well represented even in nineteenth-century British novels) which held that children were "an inconvenience that should be kept from interfering with the pleasures and intrigues of their mothers" (Robertson 11) was under attack on all fronts. Nineteenth-century wives were often advised to devote themselves exclusively to their husband, home, and children, perhaps as a reaction to the growing feminist movement. Since being a wife and mother, as shown by Barbara Leavy's analysis of *The British Mother's Magazine*, was beginning to be considered not only a full-time job in itself but a sacred profession, Victorian men and women often believed that writing novels interfered with that duty: "women who wrote did so within a framework of dominant cultural myths in which writing contradicts mothering" (Homans 22). Showalter

and Homans believe that women authors were often led to assume male pseudonyms during this period because writing as a vocation was "in direct conflict with their status as women" (*Literature of Their Own* 22).

While it may be true that some women writers such as the Brontës and George Eliot chose to write under a male pseudonym because "their feeling that to write is necessarily to be, or to impersonate, a man" (Homans 22), this is not true of most of the mother/authors of the period, the very authors whose two full-time professions could most obviously be seen to interfere with each other. These authors often chose to publish under their own name or anonymously (without a male pseudonym) and thus, I believe, were writing with another audience and another tradition in mind than those female authors who felt the need to disguise their sex. A male *nom de plume* did not generate a wider reading audience—only, perhaps, greater critical attention. When Gaskell was trying to think of a pseudonym under which to publish her first novel, William Howitt, who was negotiating her contract with Chapman and Hall, suggested a lady's name in order to make the book more popular, which suggests that those female authors who chose a male pseudonym did not do so to increase the *sale* of their novels.

Even though most of the mother/authors did not disguise their identity or their sex, they did not usually represent the conflict generated by their dual and culturally incompatible roles; for example, no novels by Gaskell or Oliphant have a mother/author as a main character, although both have working mothers as main characters. The primary conflicts these authors chose to represent were not those between working and motherhood, but those which would plague any nineteenth-century middle-class mother, conflicts created by the family structure, by the duties and responsibilities of a bourgeois wife, and by the legal status of married women, all of which made it impossible for a bourgeois woman to realize anything approaching the idealized role she was expected to play within her household. She had no legal say over the education of her children or over any other matter pertaining to their upbringing; her social and legal status made her role as moral arbiter questionable if not ludicrous to anyone over the age of six, while the educational system from cradle to college ensured the ever-widening gulf between male and female spheres of employment, interests, and empathies, ensuring that a mother's sons would become strangers and her daughters victims. Both Gaskell and Oliphant oppose these tendencies by writing novels which stress the importance of good mothering because only a revolution in the way mothering was regarded could contribute to the social and legal emancipation of mothers.

Even though Gaskell remained married throughout her adulthood, apparently happily, to a Unitarian minister, several of her novels subvert the ideals of patriarchal marriage through heroines who insist on raising their children outside of the marriage bond. Although Gaskell's life centered on her own role as wife and mother, her fiction as well as her letters and a diary written during the early years of her daughter Marianne's life reveal the perhaps unconscious desires and frus-

trations of married motherhood. Like Gaskell, Oliphant, the author of more than 90 novels, often portrays female protagonists who undermine what we consider to be her age's assumptions about marriage and motherhood. Some of her novels offer the most penetrating and startling representations of maternal desire and its fulfillment available in Victorian fiction.

Victorian mother/authors remind us that while nineteenth-century mothers were expected to make a great emotional investment in every child, social and legal conventions made it very unlikely that they themselves would gain any *return* on their investment. One of the painful contradictions facing married mothers was the way a patriarchal society which propagandized the importance of breast-feeding and maternal care at the same time forced women to privilege the wifely role over the maternal role and forced them to break their primary libidinal bonds with their infants. Stone reminds us that even parents of the classes most likely to exhibit child-centered behavior "did not personally attend to the day-to-day needs of their children, who were looked after by nurses, maids, governesses and tutors" (*Family* 449). The diaries and letters left by both Gaskell and Oliphant testify that these two authors were indeed extremely child centered, believing that their maternal duties were far more important than their professional work. Yet both authors had several servants as part of their middle-class households, and both had nurses for their children. Something as seemingly innocuous as a nurse can interfere with the primary libidinal bond between even a breast-feeding mother and her child, and Gaskell's diary of the first years of her daughter Marianne testifies to the types of emotional conflicts which often resulted from live-in childcare arrangements.

These conflicts were not the same mother-child conflicts which we so often read about today, which are generated in the nuclear family and represented as being the result of too much, too close, and too "fusional" mothering. We must constantly remember that the bourgeois Victorian household was very different from most modern-day British or American middle-class homes, and that although many historians and literary critics claim that the mid-Victorian period was the time when mothers were most idealized, the type of idealization to which they were subject was very different from that inflicted upon twentieth-century mothers. Although nineteenth-century married women became more confined to the home because not actively involved in their husband's businesses, they were not confined to the home *in the same way* that mothers were confined to the home after World War II in Britain or after both world wars in America, when they were *literally* unable to leave their homes during the day, confined by small children, no household help, and the uniquely twentieth-century concept that a mother should be always in close physical proximity to her child.

Ann Dally shows how the idealization of the mother which followed World War II in Britain, when government-established day nurseries were closed and women were no longer needed in the workplace, was supported by the seminal studies of John Bowlby on maternal deprivation, conducted for the World Health

Organization following World War II. Bowlby's studies of war orphans and other institutionalized children seemed to show that maternal deprivation had devastating effects on intellectual and social development. He claimed that children could develop healthy egos only if they had love and "constant attention day and night, seven days a week and 365 in the year" from their mother or permanent mother-substitute (Bowlby 67) and recommended, among other things, that day care be replaced by subsidies for single mothers of young children who could not support themselves. His findings, which have resulted in a half century of follow-up studies, contributed to a whole generation of British mothers staying home and taking care of their young children. The significant factor here is that this was the first generation of middle-class mothers in Britain who had ever had primary and sole responsibility for their own children. Before World War II in England, labor-saving devices had been few and labor cheap. A household would not be considered middle class unless it had at least one servant, and if small children were at home, a nurse or nanny was always employed, no matter what the family's other economic constraints. Of course the upper classes had an entire array of servants. In post-World War II Britain, however, servants became almost impossible to hire because full employment and the new perception that private service was demeaning allowed the former servant class to obtain different types of work.

This new total confinement to the home, unique to the twentieth century, which required mothers to have full responsibility for all household tasks and all childcare, may have been so radically oppressing that we are still today in the process of attempting to challenge or overturn the assumptions which led to this state of affairs (Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Badinter, Chodorow, and Dinnerstein seem especially relevant here). It is easy to see how Bowlby's views, which became the culture's accepted standards, affected authors such as Shorter and Badinter in their interpretation of French mothering—especially in Shorter, we can almost feel the dismay and horror at practices which he equates literally with murder. It is also apparent, in my opinion, that the backlash against such idealization of the mother has influenced many histories of Victorian literature written since 1950. The idea that women of the mid-nineteenth century were prisoners in their husbands' or fathers' homes permeates so many historical and critical studies of the nineteenth century that we must become suspicious that this historical interpretation may be biased by the experiences of twentieth-century women. Biographies of nineteenth-century middle-class mothers show that they may in fact have been more free to travel for extended periods without husband and/or children and to work at home, because of the availability of inexpensive household help and because they were not expected to stay with their children twenty-four hours a day.

Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge helps explain the cultural relativism involved in any act of historical criticism. He writes that when the analyst seeks to examine historical epochs which have "fundamentally divergent

thought-systems and . . . widely differing modes of experience and interpretation," he needs to have "the courage to subject not just the adversary's point of view but all points of view, including his own, to the ideological analysis" (Mannheim 51, 69). We need to examine how the Victorian experience of motherhood differed from the post-World War II British and American middle-class experience of motherhood and how those differences affected the types of desires and frustrations mothers experienced. We must remember that the ideology of motherhood generated by the research of John Bowlby and the string of psychoanalysts, psychologists, and scientists, from Winnicott to Harlow, who attempted to validate his basic premise that a mother and her infant should never be separated for the first years of the latter's life, had yet to be *created* during the nineteenth century. I would like to argue that mother/authors such as Oliphant and Gaskell were instrumental in the creation of this very ideology, one which has profoundly affected the life of almost every woman in this century (whether positively or negatively is, of course, a matter of opinion), because they depicted in their fiction the mother's so often repressed desire for ownership of the child during a historical period in which children born in wedlock were the inalienable property of their fathers, to do with and dispose of as they saw fit. A wife's bondage to home and hearth in nineteenth-century Britain was in most cases not so much physical as psychological, the result of the legal status of married women which gave almost total control of their bodies, their assets, and their children to their husbands.

While Stone claims that by the 1750's the sentimental child-centered family with breast-feeding mother sensually attached to her infant was well established in England, he also claims that the Victorian period "was marked by a strong revival of moral reform, paternal authority and sexual repression" (*Family* 666). Nowhere was this trend more evident than in child custody decisions. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Court of King's Bench began to refuse to place children into the custody of abusive fathers, and this "discretion" of the court became the basis of child custody decisions in many countries, including America, during the nineteenth century—except, ironically, in England, which in 1802 reverted completely to upholding the inalienability of a father's right to his children, to such an extent that "it had the effect of creating new paternal rights, the existence of which had only been vaguely hinted at" in the eighteenth century (Zainaldin 1063 n. 97).

Children born in wedlock had always, under common law, been the legal property of their fathers in England, and child custody remained a problematic issue and a key target of feminist reform efforts throughout the nineteenth century. While a private separation agreement might give the wife custody, especially of girls and babies, these separation agreements did not hold up in court. An 1820 court decision denied "the legal validity of conceding custody to a wife" and "declared that the inherent power of a father over his children could not be abrogated by any private agreement he might enter into" (Stone, *Road*