

BOOK REVIEW

Plotting Motherhood in Medieval, Early Modern, and Modern Literature. Mary Beth Rose. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. ix+192.

In Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* (1180 or 1190), Gornemant de Gohort advises the young and inquisitive Perceval not to listen to his mother's advice any longer, thus dismissing inferior maternal authority in order to initiate the hero into the masculine chivalric order. Nevertheless, Perceval's mother figures prominently throughout the romance, first in the flesh and later, after her death, as a touchstone for Perceval's guilt. This medieval romance would fit well into the schema of the living mother plot and the dead mother plot delineated in Mary Beth Rose's *Plotting Motherhood in Medieval, Early Modern, and Modern Literature* that discusses this issue from Augustine to *Angels in America* (1995). Positioning maternal authority as one of "origins and knowledge" (2), Rose studies this biological and social paradigm to unearth "obscured forms of gendered meaning making" (2) by combining "maternal authority with aesthetic requirements of plot in order to assess the changing social and political meanings that this conjunction yields" (3). The investigative poles are the dead mother plot, "in which the mother is dying or dead," and the living mother plot, "in which the mother is alive" (3) and influences the plot heavily—but not always for the better.

Chapter 2 discusses in great detail the role of Augustine's mother, Monica, in his physical and spiritual progression. Augustine's *Confessions* (397–401) contain a dead mother plot, as Monica's death coincides with the narrative where Augustine strikes out into his new life in Africa. Just like Perceval, he starts his true journey to God without the now superseded maternal body. True union with the divine, as I have argued in my book on *The History of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages* (1998), means

Modern Philology, volume 116, number 3. Published online September 20, 2018
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that the feminine has to be removed for males to have full communion with the divine. Overall, the chapter is too much about Augustine and not enough about Monica.

Chapter 3 presents a highly useful comparative study of the vexed Griselda tale on the hitherto neglected aspect of Griselda's troubling motherhood. Boccaccio's, Petrarch's, and Chaucer's version of the tale get yoked to Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611) as a type of post-Reformation rendering of the story. From this living mother plot that makes "visible the vulnerabilities of patriarchal authority" (73), Rose cogently teases out that, in the medieval versions, Griselda expresses her desire three times on maternal love and authority. *The Winter's Tale's* connections to the medieval examples seem forced, not the least because of an overreliance on this Laura Gowing assertion: "In the early modern centuries the idea that female sexual pleasure is necessary for conception, giv[es] a woman potentially uncontrollable power over her baby" (*Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003], 65), in contrast to the Aristotelian paradigm that the sperm rules supreme. The problem here is that this is not an early modern idea but a Galenic one (2nd c.) and also heavily discussed and theorized by both physicians and philosopher theologians in the Middle Ages. *The Winter's Tale* discussion, however, does function as a useful transition to the next chapter.

Chapter 4, encompassing both living and dead mother plots in early modern drama, is ambitious and not always successful. The longest of all the chapters in the book, it crams in too much and could have used subheadings to keep the various dramas straight. This chapter historicizes the maternal vis-à-vis the ideologies produced by the Protestant Reformation. Absent mothers abound in Shakespeare's romantic comedies. Rose argues, "If, in comedy, the maternal role remains invisible, unproblematized, in tragedy it becomes visible, dramatized, problematized" (80), and then illustrates this with Gertrude in *Hamlet*. The analysis of plays by John Webster, Thomas Kyd, John Ford, and Elizabeth Cary—the last one a nice counterpoint to all the male authors—seems somewhat tacked on, and the chapter does not feature a summative or linking conclusion.

Chapter 5, "Milton and Maternal Authority," puts into conversation Milton's removal of Samson's mother from *Samson Agonistes* (1671) and his addition of the Virgin Mary at the end of *Paradise Regained* (1671). More tightly focused and convincing, this chapter claims that, while Milton echoes standard Protestant thinking on the Virgin Mary in his prose writings, his inclusion of her in *Paradise Regained* reflects early modern debates on the problematic status of maternity in family contexts. According to Rose, analyzing Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), while mothers "have the immense authority of knowledge and origins, that authority re-

mains only indirectly, often obscurely, connected to public cultural forms” (115–16).

The last two chapters on Oscar Wilde and Tony Kushner are well argued. Chapter 6 outlines how Wilde, unlike Shakespeare, seems to be adding and foregrounding living mother figures in his romantic comedies. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), he doubles “down on the efficacy of the dead mother plot” (126), while in *A Woman of No Importance* (1892), the “dead mother plot implodes” (126) through a living mother. Finally, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), the mother is a dominant “definer and guarantor of social legitimacy” (126). The final chapter on Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1995) transforms the maternal plot and thus the family by providing his Mormon mother character Hannah with stable motherhood that allows the formation of new community, thus mitigating the negative or ambivalent mother plots in earlier chapters.

Transhistorical volumes like this one can be both a bane and a boon. While the book contains a number of unnecessary throat-clearing phrases—such as “In what follows,” “I will demonstrate,” “I am interested in”—that are more the hallmark of oral delivery, it draws a thought-provoking, progressive arc on the issue of motherhood over almost two millenia. With one notable exception, all the authors discussed all male, and one wonders why more women authors were not included, at least within the last hundred years. Nevertheless, there is much to learn from this volume for the specialist and nonspecialist audience alike in almost all eras of literary study.

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