

2016

An Impossible Ideal: Motherhood in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Jessica Hanselman Gray

University of California, Davis, jhgray@ucdavis.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Hanselman Gray, Jessica (2016) "An Impossible Ideal: Motherhood in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Criticism*: Vol. 58 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol58/iss3/7>

AN IMPOSSIBLE
IDEAL:
MOTHERHOOD
IN EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY BRITAIN
Jessica Hanselman Gray

Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity by Marilyn Francus. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. 297. \$58.00 cloth.

In *Monstrous Motherhood*, Marilyn Francus explores the anxieties about mothers and motherhood that lurk within portrayals of mothers in eighteenth-century British culture. A static vision of ideal femininity and the related ideal of domesticity had considerable purchase in the eighteenth century, and, accordingly, an ideal of virtuous motherhood was well established. In *Monstrous Motherhood*, Francus endeavors to account for why, in a period where such prescriptions were ubiquitous, mothers who enact the ideal are so conspicuously absent from literary texts. Much of her discussion is devoted to analysis of the many representations of openly deviant mothers in eighteenth-century literature: mothers depicted as monstrous, violent, negligent, or even infanticidal. She also examines at length the many literary narratives in which absent, silenced, marginalized, and spectral mothers haunt the spaces in texts where “good” mothers should be. As Francus develops her study, a picture emerges of a cultural ideal of motherhood that can be neither embodied nor represented.

Although Francus foregrounds her argument about eighteenth-century representations of motherhood with a look at maternal archetypes in classical literature, biblical narratives, and early modern works, she avoids forcing her findings into a chronological genealogy from that point forward.

Rather than a linear trajectory over time, *Monstrous Motherhood* develops more as an exploration of maternal narratives and perceptions from most intrusive (monstrous) to least substantial (spectral) mothers. In so doing, Francus identifies a number of distinct patterns among the diffuse and diverse depictions of maternity and maternal relationships in the eighteenth-century literary corpus, and she organizes her study so as to illuminate how each of these trends exposes a persistent cultural anxiety over very inconsistent and permeable ideologies of domesticity and motherhood.

In her introduction, Francus establishes the terms of her discussion of “good” and “bad” mothers, offers historical and literary context for the constructions of motherhood she examines, and summarizes the evolution of the discourses that inform her study. In particular, she discusses the ideology of separate public and private spheres and the way that ideology foregrounds the period’s discourses of gender, femininity, domesticity, and maternity. Francus then clearly establishes her central concern with narratives of motherhood in eighteenth-century literature. These, she finds, fail to reflect or embody those discourses or their ideologies. Hardly an ideal mother is anywhere to be found. By establishing that British literature presents narratives of motherhood that focus on “maternal deviance and absence” (10)

rather than the prescribed ideal of domesticity, Francus seeks to account for the observation that such an ideal is unrepresented and apparently unrepresentable in eighteenth-century culture. This “disjunction between ideology and representation” (9) guides *Monstrous Motherhood*’s inquiries.

In her first chapter, Francus discusses the literary history of the fecund female’s representation as monstrous and repulsive, both excessively consumptive and excessively productive, her uncontained power a source of terror and disgust. Moving from Charybdis and Scylla to Spenser’s *Errour*, Milton’s *Sin*, Swift’s *Criticism*, and Pope’s *Dulness*, Francus discusses the way that anxiety surrounding women’s—and especially mothers’—sexuality is reflected in literature. She explores the literary demonization of the fertile female and authors’ attempts to “justify female containment as a social and moral imperative by depicting the catastrophic results of maternal agency and reproduction that await otherwise” (26). She reads these allegories of fecundity and reproduction (both physical and literary) against historical conceptions of female sexuality and fertility. In doing so, Francus identifies a persistent cultural fear of the maternal power and authority that inhere in reproduction and mothering. She revisits this fear and the resulting demonization of the

autonomous mother in the second chapter, which examines the life of Hester Thrale Piozzi by way of Thrale's construction—in diaries and letters—of her own narrative of maternity, as well as extensive reconstruction of Thrale's reputation among her friends, family, and correspondents. Francus grounds her observations about the eighteenth century's impossible ideal of motherhood with a concrete example, offering a thorough analysis of Thrale's account of her experiences as a mother of twelve.

In the following two chapters, Francus turns her attention to narratives of infanticide found in literature and in the public record, respectively. In deploying the term “infanticidal,” she includes narratives that feature a number of related behaviors that allude to literal child murder even as they (usually) do not represent it directly. In this way, abandonment, gross negligence, and intending to commit infanticide but failing to do so are all encompassed within the category of “infanticidal” activities, behaviors that betoken literal infanticide in that they similarly function to sever the maternal-child relationship and disrupt the mother's identification as a mother. She uncovers the extent to which socioeconomic factors outside a woman's control—and unaccounted for in cultural expectations—compromise her ability to perform ideal motherhood. Francus's

analysis of infanticidal mothers represented in literature focuses primarily on Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), while also pointing out a number of parallels in other texts both canonical and noncanonical.

Significantly, she rounds this out with a chapter devoted to infanticidal narratives found in the historical record of the period. A careful analysis of court documents reveals uncomfortable legal and socioeconomic contexts surrounding infanticide, and Francus manages to present and interpret these findings coherently without reducing their implied narratives into a generalized conclusion. Rather, she identifies a pattern that accounts for the divergent experiences of these real women while revealing a cohesive picture of the historical conditions under which their stories occurred. She finds that literary and historical examples of infanticidal mothers reveal “ideological fault lines of infanticide” (81), exposing the ungrounded assumptions about women's socioeconomic empowerment and “natural” inclination to nurture that complicate the maternal ideal.

Francus repeats her strategy of balancing fictional and historical narratives of motherhood over the next two chapters, which engage with representations of stepmothers. In this section, she “move[s] beyond the flat reading of the literary stepmother as always and

inevitably evil, a monstrous parody of the good mother” (125) in order to formulate a theory of the stepmother narrative that considers some previously neglected functions and characteristics of the literary stepmother. Examining remarriage alongside other examples of insufficient mothering by older women, Francus locates the stepmother within the larger category of maternal surrogacy. She highlights crucial differences between the monstrous stepmother and the monstrous biological mother in terms of the ideologies of family and domesticity, and she acknowledges the existence of narratives involving benevolent, if ineffectual, stepmothers. In analyzing the parallels and contrasts between the threatening stepmother and the marginalized, impotent stepmother, Francus uncovers the extent to which their representation depends upon their position in relation to patriarchal power. Here again she bolsters her reading of literary mother figures with a companion chapter that treats historical narratives, this time turning her focus onto the Burney family to identify the mechanisms by which Elizabeth Allen Burney is marginalized in the family narrative by her stepchildren. The extent to which Francus must step outside the texts in order to reconstruct this stepmother’s story anticipates the next and final phase of her study, which examines a

trajectory from maternal presence to maternal absence.

In her final chapter, she turns her attention to the “spectral” mother, arguably the most complex and multifaceted of the categories Francus proposes. A paradoxically absent maternal presence, the spectral mother “seemingly achieves the internalization of maternal policing” in that “in her physical absence the anxieties attendant upon the maternal body and sexuality evaporate” (171). Achieving erasure of her sexuality through the absence of her problematic maternal body, the spectral mother becomes “the ironic fulfillment of the domestic ideal” (196). Francus argues that the cultural preference in the eighteenth century for the spectral (absent, surveilling, or dead) mother can be accounted for by those internal inconsistencies within the period’s prescriptive ideals of motherhood and domesticity that make them impossible to cohesively enact. Francus’s look at the way the literature of the period “refuse[s] to represent the domestic mother” but rather “valorize[s] her implicitly by condemning her alters or sentimentalizing her absence” (9) uncovers the nature of ideal motherhood as something that, within an ideology that entails conflicting imperatives, must always be desired, called for, and misremembered, but never enacted.

Francus's book is an engaging, well-grounded study of eighteenth-century representations of motherhood. She effectively reveals the mechanisms by which the eighteenth-century ideology of domestic motherhood, unrepresented and unrepresentable, ultimately fails to be fully realized. The treatment of both literary and nonliterary sources makes her textual analysis well rounded and complete. Francus's astute literary analyses are bolstered by thorough research and

compelling interpretations of narratives found in biographical and historical records. An artful balance of theoretical and historicist work, *Monstrous Motherhood* succeeds in the creation of an expanded and illuminated picture of eighteenth-century motherhood.

Jessica Hanselman Gray is a doctoral student in English at the University of California, Davis. She completed her MA in literature at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Her work explores metaphors of maternity in early modern literature and scientific discourse.