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MATERNITY AND ABSENCE IN SHAKESPEAREAN ROMANCE

Abstract

The equivocation of the private life of Elizabethan and Jacobean subjects with the public life of monarchy and state endowed mothers with an import, and therefore a power, not previously acknowledged. These changes provoked a fear of female disruption to patriarchal structures which found its way onto Shakespeare's stage by the representation of mothers as 'unnatural' agents of chaos, associated with witchcraft, murder, dangerous ambition, and infidelity; if not by complete absence, which "posits the sacrifice of the mother's desire as the basis of the ideal society" (Rose, 1991: 313). I suggest that in the late romances, specifically *The Winter's* Tale and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare found a form that could demonstrate the complexity of the mother's position, while still resolving the action with a satisfactory ending that presented a stable continuation of patriarchal lineage. The fathers rely on a fantasy of parthenogenesis to relocate the role of the mother in themselves, ensuring the children are free from her corruptive influence and the bloodlines are safe. However, as all themes return to maternity – chastity, fertility, lineage for example – the fantasy of eradicating the mother is shown to be limited even in the artificial realm of the romance.

Keywords: Shakespeare, romance, gender, maternity, patriarchy, parthenogenesis, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*.

According to Carol Thomas Neely (1985: 171), there are many and varied reasons for the absence of mothers in Shakespeare's plays:

> [t]he rarity of mothers may reflect or confirm demographic data showing that Renaissance women frequently died in childbirth. It may embody the social reality that patriarchal culture vested all authority in the main parent, making it both logical and fitting that he [the father] alone should represent that authority in the drama. It may derive, on the other hand, from generic conventions: the uncommonness of mature women in the genres of comedy, history plays and tragedy. Or it may result from a scarcity of boy actors capable of playing mature women in Shakespeare's company.

While the issues Neely raises serve to make it less remarkable that there are so few mothers in Shakespeare's plays, there is not a single convincing reason listed among them. In fact, as Mary Beth Rose (1991: 292) asserts, those who reference "the limiting conditions of theatrical production" actually "provoke awareness of motherhood as a special status" as it does not preclude the many other female roles that are represented in the works of Shakespeare. In this study I contend that motherhood

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does, indeed, carry a special status, because it becomes an obvious absence as soon as one considers the intense focus on the family that is expressed in the work. Rose explains that such focus is inevitable as:

> during the period of extraordinary political, social, and economic transformations that characterized the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the family gradually changed from an institution that emphasized arranged marriages as property-based alliances between kin groups to one that, in contrast, emphasized the conjugal couple and the isolated nuclear family. (296)

In response to these transformations, Shakespeare created so many fathers planning profitable but loveless matches for their children, while the rebellious offspring plan their own marriages based upon mutual love. These plays generally end with a textual endorsement of the love-match, balanced with an indication that, once the marriage is consecrated, the daughter-wife re-assumes her position of subordination within the patriarchal hierarchy. Thus, "contradictory (often hierarchical) distinctions between gender and power [generated] conceptions of familial authority that are permeated with an ambivalence that lends itself to the dramatic representation of conflict" (Rose, 298). The elevation of the nuclear family, Felicity Dunworth explains, was a phenomenon that developed from the Act of Supremacy of 1534, as it was necessary to restructure "a sense of national unity which had been fragmented by conflict and speedy and radical change" (2012: 28). Consequently, it became an institution that was analogous to the structure of the state: Mary I declared herself mother to her people, thereby emphasizing her authority "while at the same time taking advantage of her gender to assert an emotional relationship between the queen and her subjects", and in doing so "deftly placed herself within a familiar liturgy and iconographic tradition which described an allegorical relationship between the figure of the mother and the imagination of those power structures that were most dominant: the church and the state" (Dunworth, 34). Mary's successor, Elizabeth I furthered the notion of the analogy between family and state to the point that her propaganda asserted that to rebel against the Queen was to rebel against one's biological parents, and to disinherit one's children (Dunworth, 41); James I altered the ideology once again, attempting to undo the power of the mother by promoting the absolute power of the patriarch, insisting that "it is not feeling for the mother which should determine civic identity, but duty to the father – not love, but law" (McEachern: 1996, 208). However, it is not so easy to downplay the power of the mother, as will be discussed in the context of the comparable attempts to do so that are made by the male protagonists in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. The comparison of the family with the church and the state was an attempt "to equate spiritual, public, and private realms by analogizing the husband to God and the king, the wife to church and kingdom" (Rose, 297), therefore making the monarch's authority as *natural* as the authority of God, and insisting that obedience to God requires obedience to the monarch, which in turn requires obedience to the patriarch of each individual family. However, as this model equates those realms, it unavoidably endows the private realm of the mother with a significance not previously acknowledged. The mother is suddenly understood to possess a great purpose, and hence a power within the hierarchies of patriarchy: if the private family is a microcosm of the state, then both must rely on the chastity of its mothers to ensure that patriarchal bloodlines are legitimate. Traub explains how crucial this was to Renaissance culture:

> It is now a commonplace that Shakespeare was preoccupied with the uncontrollability of women's sexuality; witness the many plots concerning the need to prove female chastity, the threat of adultery, and, even when female fidelity is not a major theme of the play, the many references to cuckoldry (1995: 121).

The power and threat of the mother lies in the *naturalness* of her role. Nature is uncontrollable by any human structure, and in a period of such great "demographic, economic, political, and cultural chang[e]", the realization of the critical reliance on maternity will have exacerbated social "anxiety about loss and loss of control" Thus, "[t]his attached itself to gender and stories about gender" (Stimpson, 1991: xii). Empowerment of women inferred a disempowerment of

men and made it vital that the machinations of patriarchy contained the feminine in order to protect and preserve masculine power. Thus, Shakespearean maternity could be imagined solely in terms of "the private realm of early love and nurture" (Rose, 313) and, "within the structural limits of the dramatic and sexual discourses" of the period, could be "represented visibly (corporeally) only as dangerous, subordinate, or peripheral in relation to public, adult life" (Rose, 307). Both *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* attempt to make maternity peripheral, even as they vilify and, in turn, sanctify the mothers that form part of the action. Hermione, in *The Winter's Tale*, is exposed as a potential threat to the purity of her husband -the king's - bloodline, and is promptly removed from the action only to return, exonerated, sixteen years older and, crucially, past childbearing age. Stepping down from the plinth she has been placed on to allow her friends and husband to revere her as an unparalleled "perfect woman" (5.1.15–16), the contrast with the audience's first sighting of her is marked as the aged, silent, serious figure first appeared onstage in 1.2 heavily pregnant and vociferous in her appeal to her husband's friend to extend his stay in Sicily. Hermione's embodiment of the threat to the king's bloodline is overdetermined in these opening scenes, as her heavily pregnant body acts "as a signifier of the sins of Eve, a reminder of the conventional fallibilities of women – vanity, garrulousness, lasciviousness, deceit" (Dunworth, 89). In this sense, her entrance figures the entrance of the corrupting force of femininity to Eden, as the action so swiftly descends from there being "not in the world either malice or matter to alter" the friendship between Leontes and Polixenes, (1.1.31-32), and the latter's idyllic reminiscences of them as "twinned lambs" (1.2.66):

> Pol: what we changed
> Was innocence for innocence – we knew not
> The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed
> That any did. Had we pursued that life,
> And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared
> With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven
> Boldly, 'not guilty', the imposition cleared
> Hereditary ours. (1.2.67–74)

Consequently, the kings surmise that had they not been tempted to the "stronger blood" of lust by their wives, their only sin would have been the inherited original sin. As Hermione's maternal body corrupts the purity of the kings' masculine world, the charge of the fall of mankind, and of sexuality itself, falls once more on the head of the woman. Leontes's later cry of "Alack for lesser knowledge" (2.1.38) further declares his wish for a return to the ignorant bliss of childhood following the realization of his dependence upon his wife's chastity.

The play turns at the point at which Hermione successfully persuades Polixenes to extend his stay in Sicilia, following Leontes's failure to do so. The exchange between Hermione and Polixenes is playful and lengthy, at over fifty lines, and is abruptly brought to an end by Leontes's interjection "Is he won yet?". His rude interruption is followed by brooding doubt after Hermione's response in the affirmative: "At my request he would not./ Hermione, my dearest, thou never spok'st/ To better purpose." (1.2.85, 86–88). When he concedes that she has spoken well twice, she argues that "I have spoke to th' purpose twice./ The one forever earned a royal husband,/ Th'other, for some while a friend." (1.2.105–107). In this manner, her two *purposes* are equated: the moment of confirming her sexual alliance with Leontes, with her affirmation of friendship with Polixenes. The use of the identical word "purpose" makes all her linguistic power sexual and leads Leontes to complain in an aside "Too hot, too hot!/ To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods." (1.2.107–108), implying sexual intercourse (Orgel, text notes, 1986: 100). Thus, the transgression Hermione comes to be accused of, and which gives the play its tragic leanings, is that of her mastery of language, a transgression that gives her apparent mastery of men. Howard Felperin argues that the loss of innocence depicted in this scene is also that of verbal innocence, as the double entendres such as 'satisfy' imply a "discovery of ubiquitous verbal duplicity permeat[ing] the linguistic texture of the opening act" (1999: 196). As a result of seeing and listening to his wife's deft utilization of the ultimate patriarchal structure, that is, language, Leontes finds that he can no longer rely on the world he thought he knew. Therefore the 'dreams' of wrong doing which he and Polixenes had denied as children become his reality.

This is also the devastating moment when the King realizes the crucial dilemma in patriarchal society, namely that in order for the male bloodline to be perpetuated, and for patriarchy itself to be legitimate, it must rely on the chastity and truthfulness of the women it insists are unimportant. Janet Adelman explains that such themes express the underlying concern that man's "identity is radically contingent upon [women's] sexuality" (1999: 110); that not only does his wife have the power to define him as 'cuckold', but his mother has the power to define him 'bastard', and to falsify – or "counterfeit" – his understanding of who he is. Adelman continues to explain that:

> bastardy is the sign of the mother's presence in the child: only the pure lineage of the father, uncontaminated by the mother, would guarantee legitimacy. The rational concern with patriarchal lineage thus covers a fantasy in which maternal sexuality *per se* is always infidelity, always displacement of the father and a corresponding contamination of the son (120).

Therefore, to be a bastard is to be purely a 'mother's son', Adelman argues: "as with Shakespeare's other mother's sons – the rapists Charon and Demetrius at the beginning of his career, the would-be rapist Caliban at the end […] violent sexuality is construed as derivative from the woman's part, an extension of [the mother's] will in him" (124). It is in this way that the importance of maternal chastity is amplified from its basic concern regarding patriarchal property and heredity, to the somewhat fantastical concern that illegitimate children, seen as inherent sexual deviants, represent the threat of 'contamination' to legitimate bloodlines, and thus the corruption of the state by a feminine usurpation of masculine power. Hence Leontes figures the idea of Hermione's adultery as an infection, as he raves: "Physic for't there's none […] many thousand on's / Have the disease and feel't not" (1.2.198, 203), and "Were my wife's liver / Infected as her life she would not live / The running of one glass" (1.2.301–3). Hermione's declaration that from her son she is "barred like one infectious" (3.2.97) indicates the idea that the unchaste woman contaminates legitimate bloodlines, but also signifies the threat that she poses to the identity of her son, Mamillius. Early on in the play Camillo states that Mamillius "physics the subject" (1.1.36), as a healthy heir to the throne is reassuring for the people and a sign of a healthy state; however, despite being barred from contact with Hermione, he dies as a result of the accusation against her:

> Cam: To see his nobleness
> Conceiving the dishonour of his mother!
> He straight declined, drooped, took it deeply,
> Fastened and fixed the shame on't himself,
> Threw off his spirit, his appetite, his sleep,
> And downright languished. (2.3.12-17)

As Leonard Tennenhouse explains, "at stake in Mamillius's death is not the inversion of a family relationship but the disruption of political order – the survival of the state itself […] provides the means by which the play engages a larger political argument" (1999: 48). Mamillius dies due to the couched threat to his own identity as legitimate and because of Leontes's declaration that Hermione has "too much blood in him" (2.1.58). Thus he is contaminated, and from that moment he is perceived as a threat to the kingdom's patriarchal order.

Just as Hermione's true crime is that of having too much authority over the patriarchal principle of language, and thus of the King himself, it is clear that any mother who displayed ambition, or exaggerated autonomy, was constructed as an example of "the bad woman whose sexual and maternal tendencies are misdirected in the service of her own desires" (Dunworth, 97). In Shakespeare, such perversions of maternity often pre-empt, and perhaps cause, the death of the woman's child, as seen in *Hamlet, Coriolanus*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Cymbeline,* and in a different sense, in *The Winter's Tale*. Thus, the "bad" mother is often conceived in terms of her failure to submit her own desires to those of her husband. Rose explains that the "basic structural principle underlying Shakespeare's comic interpretation of marriage and the family" is that "the harmonious, stable, wished-for society is based upon the sacrifice of the mother's desire" (303), a notion I contend goes well beyond the comedies, as evidenced in the present article, and one which ensures that all

behaviour is sanctioned by the authority of the patriarch, safeguarding against the threat of usurpation of power or "mastery over the male" (Bevington, 1996: 51). The threat of the mother was rooted in the belief that her maternal body could provoke confusion in the man that could lead to emasculation and infantilization (Dunworth, 98); when figured within a royal relationship onstage, this idea is exaggerated to make all modes of female power a danger to the state. As Kristin M. Smith states, Shakespearean drama shows that it is ineffective masculinity that permits women to assume power, and this power represents a gender transgression which threatens the 'natural' order of things and is therefore evil. In this way subversive feminine power becomes associated with witchcraft (2007: 144). According to Catherine Belsey, "[t]he English witchcraze, the demonization of women who were seen as voluble, unwomanly and possessed of an unauthorized power, is coterminous with the crisis in the definition of women and the meaning of the family" (1985: 185) and, as Penuel argues, "motherhood and its accompanying rhetoric of embodiment overlapped with the discourse of witchcraft" (2007: 117). Hence, as *Titus Andronicus*'s Tamora, a mother who appears in a revenge tragedy written in the early years of the playwright's career, possesses "an overabundant and aggressive maternity" which figures as excess (Traub, 123), I would argue that the figure of the dangerously excessive mother was carried well beyond the revenge tragedies (of which excess was a key characteristic). The threat of the unrestrained mother appears throughout the Shakespeare canon: through the excessively political Queen Margaret in the Histories of the early 1590's, along with Tamora in *Titus* around the same time. Around a decade later appeared the excessively sexual Gertrude in *Hamlet*, and in another decade or so the excessively ambitious Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, preceding the excessively loquacious Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, followed closely by the murderous Queen of *Cymbeline*, and finally the excessively powerful Sycorax in *The Tempest* within a few short years. Thus, Shakespeare's monstrous mothers – that is, the mothers who are not "subordinate" or "peripheral" (Rose, 307) – are an enduring embodiment of patriarchal fears, an exaggerated uncanny projection of the familiar that is designed to horrify, thereby using fear to maintain patriarchal control.

The Tempest figures a righting of patriarchal power as Prospero justifies his rule over the island by insisting that the previous ruler – the afore-mentioned Sycorax – was a witch, and her son a bastard. Accordingly, the feminine threat is addressed through the strategy of containment by absence and dichotomy, as the audience is instructed to accept that Miranda's mother "was a piece of virtue" (I.II.56) and that Caliban's mother was a "foul witch" (I.II.258). Both characters have died before the action of the play begins, but the 'witch' Sycorax dies before Prospero and Miranda land on the island. This means that the interpretation of her as evil is based solely on the account of Prospero's servant, the spirit Ariel, that she confined him within a tree for not obeying her evil commands, and on the fact that her son has not been "honour'd with / Human shape" (I.II.283–4), which leads to Prospero's assumption that he must have been "got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam!" (I.II.321–2). Thus, the female power over the identity of the male is inverted as Prospero exacts his linguistic power and takes advantage of the mother's absence to brand the two women to suit his purposes. Miranda's mother is constructed in terms of her virtue, which ensures Miranda can be described, later, in similar terms: "O you, / So perfect and so peerless, are created / Of every creature's best!" (III.I.46–8), a necessary condition to enable the marriage plot. By the same device, Sycorax is constructed in terms of her subversive power: "His mother was a witch; and one so strong / That could control the moon" (V.I.268-269). Her power as ruler over the island, prior to her death, must be understood to be illegitimate in order to sanction Prospero's claim to rule over Caliban's, when he argues: "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me" (I.II.332–3). That she is a witch is emphasized every time she is mentioned: "This damn'd witch Sycorax" (I.II.263), "This blue-ey'd hag" (I.II.269) and this serves to deny her claim, and that of Caliban by association, as he is constructed by Prospero as "A freckled whelp hag-born" (I.II.283), "Hag-seed" (I.II.267), and "demi-devil / For he's a bastard one" (V.I.272-273). By emphasizing Caliban's status as illegitimate he is demonstrated to be unsuitable for rule in manifold ways. Adelman's concern about the uninhibited – through lack of masculine authority – deviancy of the bastard comes to the fore. This is demonstrated by Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda, which would have corrupted the purity of Prospero's bloodline and usurped patriarchal heredity. Like Mamillius, the slur against his mother's chastity renders him an outsider to the patriarchal line of power, and therefore a threat to it. As Hermione's heavily pregnant body serves the association of witchcraft with pregnancy through the notion of embodiment, as stated by Penuel (117), and as pregnancy is a natural process that from the

moment of conception cannot be controlled by men, pregnancy itself becomes a subversive female power: when outside of patriarchally approved marriage, it is no longer merely associated with witchcraft, but is a branch of it. Therefore Caliban is evil because his mother was a witch, and she is a witch because he is a bastard; the same applies to Hermione and Mamillius for as long as Hermione is believed to be guilty of adultery. In this way witchcraft and bastardy are inseparable as media of the patriarchal mission to manage the threat of the mother, and in *The Tempest* the association doubles the means of negating Caliban's claim in Prospero's representation of him.

However, if we understand that "in its very nature as representation, as figurative language, the literary text is never really 'there' or fully present, and the actions and transactions it generates are always mediated actions, action estranged by the linguistic medium in which it has its existence" (Felperin, 201), the fact that Shakespeare's characters are constructed irrevocably within the patriarchal structure of language, within which women are invisible, the absence of the woman beneath the words written for and of her is manifold. Correspondingly, Dympna Callaghan explains that:

> on Shakespeare's stage, as a result of both all-male mimesis and the production of racialized others in racially homogenous acting companies, the problem of representation in general – that it necessarily represents what is not actually there – becomes exacerbated in historically specific relation to femininity and racial difference (2000: 7).

Thus Caliban and the women onstage necessarily figure as absence, as their mode of representation only recognises them within its own terms. In other words, they are displaced not only by being staged simulations, but because the words that brought them to (simulated) life belong to patriarchy, and therefore cannot belong to them, or accurately represent them. Caliban affirms this as he tells Prospero and Miranda: "You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (I.II.365–7). As Prospero immediately replies "Hag-seed, hence!" (I.II.367), it is evidenced that "your" – meaning Prospero's – language has taught him that he is only a "hag-seed", and that this is in effect a usurpation of his true self by patriarchy. It is in the same manner that Hermione is also shown as a cipher on her return into her family. In her absence, she becomes to Leontes and Paulina a "sainted spirit" (5.1.57), and she appears as a mounted statue. She has become a representation of a representation of a woman that has been imagined by a man and created within a linguistic structure that ascribes the meaning of "saintly" to her body. Her long absence has allowed this meaning of her to be, as it were, set in stone, as signified by the statue, and this as well as her age (past childbearing, hence not threatening) is what mitigates her return. In this sense, it can be argued that Hermione's statue signifies all Shakespeare's women, as works of art that exist purely as projections of patriarchal concerns.

While the women as individuals are evidently absent even in corporeality, both plays discussed here use maternal imagery to configure the 'conception', 'growth', 'birth' and 'issue' of evil plots and misdeeds. In *The Winter's Tale*, Camillo explains that Leontes's deadly jealousy is so firmly held that it:

> *Cam*: will continue
> The standing of his body.
> *Pol*: How should this grow?
> *Cam*: I know not; but am sure 'tis safer to
> Avoid what's grown than question how 'tis born.
> If therefore you dare trust my honesty
> That lies enclosed in this trunk, which you
> Shall bear along impawned, away tonight.
> (1.2.425–31)

Thus Leontes's jealousy and insecurity is figured as a monstrous birth, with an ominous outcome, in contrast with Camillo's, who is 'pregnant' only with honesty. When Leontes announces his death-sentence on baby Perdita, one of his lords begs him to "change this purpose, / Which being so horrible, so bloody, must / Lead to some foul issue" (2.3.150–2). As issue means progeny, and "foul" issue figures as a result of the gender transgression of the mother, Leontes's crime is shown to

be one of failed masculinity, as the means by which feminine power is achieved. Likewise, when *The Tempest*'s Sebastian and Antonio plot to murder Alonso to take his crown, the plan is "a birth, indeed" (II.I.225), and the only possible impediment to it, the next in line, is so far away in Tunis that correspondence would not be received "till new-born chins / Be rough and razorable" (II.I.244–5). In this way, the plan is figured as the issue of a monstrous birth, the child of which would be an adult before the threat of discovery.

The description of Antonio's original successful usurpation plot, that of Prospero, is also figured as a maternal aberration; Prospero explains that his distraction "in my false brother / Awak'd an evil nature; and my trust, / Like a good parent, did beget of him / A falsehood in its contrary" (I.II.92–5). In this case, Prospero's inattentiveness and misplaced trust is the feminine corruption to the masculinity of his rule of Milan, which "begets" the monstrous birth of his brother's treachery. Furthermore, the usurpation is put into terms of nature as an insidious force which will overcome all restraints if left unchecked: "he was / The ivy which hid my princely trunk, / And suck'd my verdure out" (I.II.85–7). As Rose explains, because maternity was constructed in terms of the private domain, it was associated "with what is natural (biological) and inevitable as opposed to what is humanly constructed and subject to social change" (299); the imagery of the uncontrolled creeping plant that sucks away power is surely analogous with the idea of maternity as a threat to the rule and rigours of patriarchy.

It is in these ways that maternal imagery is employed to insist that maternity is a dangerous force of nature that must be controlled, thus justifying the restrictions and conditions placed by patriarchy upon women, wives and mothers, and ultimately justifying patriarchal rule itself. However, as Polixenes fears "what may chance / Or breed upon our absence" (*The Winter's Tale,* 1.2.11–12) just as his friend Leontes allows a monstrous jealousy to breed within himself and end the life of his legitimately bred son, the fine line between the patriarchal need to tame maternity and the devastating effect of inadvertently destroying it is made evident. Correspondingly, these plays display the conflict inherent in patriarchy as it places the highest possible value on female chastity, while making explicit the fact that the purpose of chastity is to ensure the purity of the patrilineal bloodline the woman is expected to produce via procreation. This conflict is demonstrated as Prospero gives Miranda to Ferdinand:

> Prospero: as my gift, and thine own acquisition
> Worthily purchas'd, take my daughter: but
> If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
> All sanctimonious ceremonies may
> With full and holy rite be minister'd,
> No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
> To make this contract grow; but barren hate,
> Sour-ey'd disdain and discord shall bestrew
> The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
> That you shall hate it both: therefore take heed
> (IV.I.13-22).

The father's giving away speech emphasises that all future happiness depends upon the couple's children being legitimate, and as the union is expressed in terms of a transaction of money or power (from owner father to owner-to-be-groom), it is patent that such pre-marital chastity is of value to the patriarchal structure of the world of power and business. Miranda's personal and financial value – thus inseparable – as a mate and a daughter within the patriarchal hierarchy is allied with her chastity as she promises herself to Ferdinand "by [her] modesty, / The jewel in [her] dower" (III.I.53–4). Hence, as Helen Wilcox explains, the romances – *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* being cases in point – figure chastity as "a prerequisite for acceptable motherhood, rather than a virtue which was an end in itself", and after all "the idea of maternity is […] not so far removed from chastity; in addition to the obvious example of the Virgin Mary, contemporary with Shakespeare was a virgin queen who, according to her own rhetoric, was married to the state and mother to her people" (1994: 131).

Thus *The Tempest* is a play that acts "on the one hand, to deny the importance – and even in some cases the presence – of female characters, but [on the other hand] simultaneously attributes

enormous power to female chastity and fertility" (Thompson, 1995: 173). The focus on chastity coupled with the negation of motherhood is evident in the majority of Shakespeare's plays, but subversive maternal power in *The Tempest* is made 'safe' and legitimate by it being reassigned to Prospero. Susanne Penuel explains that:

> [t]he absence of Miranda's mother and the defeat and death of Sycorax initially seem both an occlusion of maternity and a blow to witchcraft. But in Prospero's triumph over the witch, he replaces her: parent figure to Caliban, inheritor of Ariel and supernatural ruler of the island, Prospero functions as Sycorax's analogue, not her opposite (122).

This analogue connection between Prospero and Sycorax is evident also in the manner of his arrival on the island. Cast out by their communities, both arrive 'with' child, Miranda at less than three years old (I.II.41) and Caliban not yet born (I.II.282). Prospero furthers this resemblance between the two in his description of himself and the ship itself: "When I have deck'd the sea with drops full salt, / Under my burthen groan'd; which raised in me / An undergoing stomach, to bear up / Against what should ensue" (I.ii.155–8). While "groan'd" evokes the noises of the ship, it also describes a labouring woman; similarly, the "undergoing stomach" refers to the shape of the hull as much as to the "burthen" of a pregnant belly. In other words, the ship is a vessel like a mother which carries a new life to be birthed onto land, and Prospero, at the mast of that ship, appropriates the life-giving properties of the maternal to create a new life for himself and for Miranda without the sexual taint of the mother, or the maternal corruptions figured in Antonio's usurpation.

Prospero's appropriation of the maternal engenders Miranda's "purified female sexuality" (Kahn, 1980: 219), which ensures that the threat of "false generations" envisaged by Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* (2.1.148) is conquered, as it is in that play, too: Perdita is saved from death by the Old Shepherd and she is brought up by him without any maternal influence. As Donna C. Woodford (2007: 192) asserts, Perdita and Florizel represent:

> two children who have been raised exclusively by men without the tainting influence of their mothers or other women. The heirs of the two kingdoms are copies of their fathers, untainted by their mother's milk, while Mamillius, the child in whom Hermione had "too much blood", is effectively sacrificed for not being an uncorrupted copy of his father.

Thus they, as well as Miranda and the apparently motherless Ferdinand, are perfect specimens for the safe continuation of patriarchal bloodlines. The circumstances of the young peoples' upbringing and the implications thus placed upon their purity act as the fulfilment of a fantasy of parthenogenesis which "seeks to rob women of their fearful sexuality by imagining sexual generation without mothers" (Adelman, 111). In this sense, *The Winter's Tale* "provides a fantasy of male control over reproduction and nurture without the painful, permanent loss of wife and child" (Woodford, 188) and *The Tempest* offers "a fantasy of male fecundity" (Thompson, 173), as Prospero "presents himself as incorporating the wife, acting as both father and mother to Miranda" (Orgel, 54). This fantasy reflects King James I's attempts to diminish the power of his predecessor as a beloved and missed mother to her people, and as Carol Thomas Neely explains, "the belief that the death is actual enhances the sanctification of Hermione as ideal wife and mother, enabling her to acquire near mythic status" (175). This draws comparisons with the idea of the Virgin Mary, particularly as Hermione's statue is revered, and gestures back to, as Dunworth asserts, Queen Elizabeth I, "who [having] presented herself as mother to the nation for half a century was the subject of an enduring veneration which had been carefully cultivated through skilful public relations" (Dunworth, 129). Hermione is associated with the Queen in several ways: in her deft command of language to achieve her purposes; for the continued glorification of her after death (or supposed death in the case of Hermione); and for her transformation from mother to saint, which echoed Elizabeth's transformation from 'mother of her people' to 'Virgin Queen' in her later – non-fertile – years. In this way the play harnesses the paradoxical nature of patriarchal treatment of maternity by evoking the Virgin Mary as the embodiment of virginity and motherhood. Elizabeth's rewriting of the cult of the Virgin Mary achieved its political aims, as Dunworth maintains that positive dramatic representations of motherhood in this period reveal a "sense of loss, at least in some quarters, for the maternal tenor of

the previous reign" (208) and in terms of the association between Elizabeth and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, "Hermione's statue […] offer[s] the consoling fantasy of motherhood as transcendent, as defiant, as eternal; of the mother who never really leaves" (216). However, it is clear that even as Shakespeare attempts to venerate the symbolic mother of her people, he is conscious of the threat she represents to the new King's paternalistic ideology: Shakespeare mothers are contained and controlled by the strictures of patriarchy, which act to diminish their "ability to articulate and demonstrate the effects of political evil in terms of personal pain and loss" (Dunworth, 28).

However, as Helen Hackett points out, "even plays where mothers are physically absent share with all the late plays a persistent invocation of mothers, both in person and through imagery" (1999: 25). Even in Prospero's appropriation of the maternal role and the mother's linguistic power to determine the identity of the island's 'children', Miranda and Caliban's identities are still shown to be entirely contingent on what their mothers were: Caliban is "Hag-seed" because his mother was a witch, and Prospero tells Miranda that she is legitimate as "Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter" (I.II.55, 56–7). Stephen Orgel maintains that this implies that as "were it not for her word, Miranda's legitimacy would be in doubt […] that word is all that is required from her in the play" (5). This reliance on the word of the mother betrays all of the attempts to subsume and appropriate the power of maternity made in these plays, and reminds one of precisely why it is deemed a threat. Richard Wilson argues that "the last plays' emphasis on maternity foregrounds the dependence of identification of the father upon women's unverifiable reports, and coincides with movements to take midwifery out of the realm of women and folklore and into the realm of men and empirical science" (121). This indicates the extent and range of the efforts to master maternity employed by a Jacobean masculinity that "saw women as intrinsically biologically inferior and yet who relied on unknowable processes of the female body for both physical and social reproduction" (Penuel, 116). Such an attempt to incorporate midwifery "into the realm of men" is suggestive of the attempts of Prospero and Leontes to appropriate and control maternity. As I have argued above, *The Tempest* "resuscitates the discourse of the mother within the figure of the father, and […] it does so in part through a redistribution of the moral value between the witch and the magician" (Penuel, 116). However, the key to the ambiguity demonstrated within the romance plays lies with Penuel's choice of the word "resuscitates", rather than 'assumes' or 'adopts'. This implies that the mother still holds her power within the hierarchy of patriarchy, as her words remain hers from their first utterance, and that her presence cannot ever be entirely obliterated by masculine discourse. To appropriate the mother's words, as Prospero does, and her function, as both he and Leontes do, the true sense of her is "resuscitated" within the plays, evoking her special power to bring life and endow identity, even when the structures of patriarchy combine to repudiate her.

As "motherhood and birth can connote not only joy and hope but also possible mortality and tragedy" (Hackett, 26), the tragic-comic blend of the Shakespearean romance would appear to be the perfect vehicle for such a subject, and Helen Wilcox asserts that in terms of their structure, these plays "[labour] in near tragedy but eventually and with difficulty [give] birth to a life-affirming conclusion" (136). In doing so, they suggest the tragic ends found in plays such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, but they use their unique flexibilities to steer the action towards a happy ending instead. Time is used in *The Winter's Tale* to permit Leontes to judge the error of his jealousy so his family can reunite; Prospero is granted magical powers to bring his usurping brother to his island to exact reconciliation. The hybridity of the form can be viewed as a natural progression: the tragedies depict failed masculinity and the desire of the mother (perceived as unrestrained by the male members of the family) causing or contributing to death and destruction within family and state; the comedies frequently erase the mother entirely to ensure that the happy ending corresponds with the dictates of patriarchal hierarchies in marriage; as a consequence, the romance becomes the framework within which it is possible to articulate the troubling status of the mother in Jacobean society, and of negotiating an ending that would allow the continuation of patrilineal bloodlines without the absence of the central force of the family, or the annihilation of it.

Both *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* figure the removal of the mother and the successful upbringing of children that will engender healthy heredity as a result of this. This fantasy of parthenogenesis attempts to subdue the mother in the manner of the classical myth of heroic birth, which imagines her as merely a receptacle and incubator, "living only long enough to receive her husband's seed and bring her son to term" (Park, 2006: 154). However, the plays "dramatize [the]

inadequacy" of the fantasy even as they represent it, as they are essentially unable to escape "the physical, moral, and emotional importance of maternity to the construction of the successful family and by analogy, a robust state" (Dunworth, 205). Both plays attempt to find a solution to the wish for a healthy family and state that can include the mother, rather than erasing her as too much of a complication to the patriarchal cause. The happy ending is made possible by the hybrid form of the romance, which permits fantastic and fairy tale elements as plot enablers, but it is possible only under certain conditions. The mother must not be present to influence the child during its formative years; the father (or a male substitute) must impart all language and knowledge; and the women must all be idealised to the point that they are mere repositories for patriarchal ideas of gender, constructed within the exclusive patriarchal structure of linguistics, without any substance or resemblance to real women. In this way the romances negotiate the inclusion of the mother within the idealised patriarchal family by rendering her a visual absence. As Helen Wilcox explains:

> Motherhood in early modern England consisted of many paradoxes, relating to chastity and fertility, absence and presence, life-threatening, and life-giving qualities. Thus it is entirely apt that maternity should epitomize the paradoxical complexity of the tragic/comic mix in these plays, and exemplify a genre which brings both death and new life into its cycle of action (137).

While Suzanne Penuel contends that the late romances "participate in a conservative reestablishment of the father as the lynchpin of society, burying the mother and validating patriarchy" (115), I would argue that the absence of the mother in Shakespeare's romance is meaningful precisely because it reveals the power of maternity in its insistence that it must be repressed. The plays attempt to create a fantastical world where men do not need to rely on women to procreate in order to enact the ultimate denial of her importance. However, the plays betray themselves in the flagrant artificiality of both the form and the construction of the mothers represented on or offstage, as well as in the persistent reliance on the mother's word as guarantor of identity and legitimacy. As these plays were first performed during the reign of a king who relied on the word of his predecessor – the 'mother to her people' – to name him her legitimate heir, the significance of the mother's word to a king would not have been misunderstood (Orgel, 59), nor the difficulty of dissolving the power of that word.

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