

THE MONSTROUS MOTHER IN LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

This monographic issue of *Esferas Literarias* explores the theme of the monstrous mother in literature through narratives and traditions that range from classical Greek mythology to 21st century novels. The main characteristic that defines the mothers represented in these texts is that they challenge the expected patriarchal definition of what a ‘good’ mother should be. These figures may be identified with a care-taking position who shows ambivalence towards their child and may prove unfit for mothering, that is, «those who would not or could not protect their children from harm», «those who did not live in a “traditional” nuclear family», and also «those whose children went wrong» (Taylor & Umansky, 1998: 3). In her most extreme forms, a monstrous mother defies the very definition of ‘human’ and of ‘woman’ and there may not be an easier way to describe this specific type of individual other than by the effect of encountering her, as she forces us to «experience a different kind of horror when a mother breaks the metaphorical fourth wall of mothering» (Palko & O’Reilly, 2021: 11). Deviant mothers have in fact fascinated readers for long in «a long tradition of bad mothers that shapes contemporary mothering practices» (Palko & O’Reilly, 2021: 9). These literary depictions have helped to define not only the exemplary mothering norms, but also the harmful behaviours that reflect the patriarchal anxiety about the inherently unpredictable nature of mothering and difference (Palko & O’Reilly, 2021: 10). Any woman who proves to be excessive for the boundaries of the expected behaviour of mothering then «risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, [...] or Gorgon» (Cohen, 1996: 9).

As a sense of home, a mother’s body constitutes an entity that engulfs us throughout our lives, either in a positive or negative way. It is therefore the «place where each one of us lived once upon a time» (Freud, 1919: 77) and as such, it holds enormous power over us. At the same time, a mother’s body is also the most foreign, unknowable space in human nature, because it creates a relation of energy and origin «between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other» (Rich, 1976: 225-226).

Nevertheless, ‘mother’ is more than just an organic vessel for new life or a biological relation, and her role has always been subordinated to the cultural and social realms. In fact, motherhood is an institution ruled by patriarchal power structures (Rich, 1976: 13) that transform, survey, define and redefine the role of «the potential maternal body almost invariably the object, either of too much attention or not enough» (Rose, 2018: 9). As soon as her reproductive potential is materialised and she becomes a mother, a woman’s individuality disappears into the collective, «she is no longer expected to dream herself beyond her scheduled vanishing point, that time and that place where “Mother” emerges and woman recedes» (Henry, 2015: n.p.).

Societies have construed motherhood and deployed it for significant cultural work to both safeguard and perpetuate the cultural norms and values that have been forced on the maternal body (Palko & O'Reilly, 2021: 10). Altogether, mothers' presence and actions have been identified with 'feminine' traits of tenderness, need to nurture, instinctive sensitivity and compassion that constructed an ideal portrait of bourgeois motherhood in industrialized patriarchal society in the Western world, since the eighteenth-century (Francus, 2012).

Moreover, maternal love has also been mythically imagined as the ultimate goal of unconditional love and personal fulfilment for the mother (Henry, 2015: 18). However, it is a love where «the beloved is not a peer, unlike most other forms of personal love; [it is] directed toward an unchosen object of love» (Protasi, 2019) and, remarkably, it can be differentiated from the duties of nourishment and caring. By instilling in their daughters the same stifling values and narratives they received about motherhood and maternal love, mothers may also act within the patriarchal values and be enforced cooperators of the same system that constricts them in their role and cuts their possibilities; thus, «the anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed “mothering”, even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive» (Rich, 1976: 250).

The studies of monstrous women developed progressively alongside the application of feminism and gender studies to the analysis of the role of women in society and the fascination with the figure of the monster as underdog. By taking first into account the reassessment of woman's role in society and then the inclusion of awareness of gender diversity, alterity, queerness and cultural unrest, the monster in any of its possible forms was studied as the locus where the anxiety about the instability of gender roles crystallized, together with sexual desire, liminality and excessive resistance. As Jerome Cohen analysed in the seminal study about monsters in culture (Cohen, 1996: 9), these same aspects that make any individual susceptible to *monsterization* were also key when analysing the position of women. Moreover, it was also revealed that the maternal body has been rigorously scorned as abject and impure in *Leviticus* 12:2 due to its association with menstrual blood and body waste (Kristeva, 1982: 101), as a source of monstrous aberrations and the cause of immeasurable psychological horror (Creed, 2020: 221).

'Mother' is then a contradiction of both love and repulsion, comfort and anxiety, life, and death and, as a powerfully ambivalent figure, she can be readily linked with monstrosity. The female monster in all its possible forms then amalgamates the greatest potential for disrupting the patriarchal and symbolic order. In order to interrogate this monstrous position in the narratives, studies have incorporated theories on male gaze, female gaze, psychoanalysis, abjection, and horror studies. This has propitiated a reassessment of the meaning of mothering and the ways it is proved to be a socially constructed relationship (Glenn, 2016: 1), defined by culturally based constructs and beliefs that depend on cultures and ages (Bornstein & Lansford, 2009). Any deviance in motherly behaviour from these culturally based beliefs in a particular culture and age may then produce a monstrous mother.

Notwithstanding the possible inhuman qualities of the monster, it is then no longer possible to ignore or to gloss easily over the evidence about the monster's procreative power as it had been done traditionally. The monstrous mother's position must be reassessed in the text and mothering should be a focus of the analysis whatever its form. Critics have therefore been compelled to explore this presence and absence of the monstrous mother, and the ways in which these mothers have to operate within the field of social expectations and norms of motherhood and femininity projected on them. This «helps us understand the pressures under which all mothers mother» (Palko & O'Reilly,

2021: 12). In order to assess the specific anxieties these monstrous figures introduce, previous analyses have also involved the domestic and public spaces where women dwell in order to see how motherhood is constructed by patriarchy and to probe the texts for what is at work behind maternal absence and marginalization in the narratives (Francus, 2012).

In this volume, contributors examine a wide variety of mothering experiences and practices found in narratives from different literary genres, chronologies, and cultural contexts. The main objective for such an enterprise is to offer a more nuanced understanding of the monstrous mothers, their associated aspects and the very practices of mothering that are operating in their definition as part of the institution of motherhood. In «Archaic, Phallic, and Castrated: Revisiting Stephen King's *The Shining* through the Trope of the Monstrous Mother and its Manifestations» Marta Miquel-Baldellou analyses the dark monstrous mother as a menacing presence in King's *The Shining* (1977), in the haunting monstrous maternal presences in both space and characters. Miquel-Baldellou focuses her analysis on how the disembodied presence of the monstrous mother challenges male influence, by projecting an archaic form of paralysing terror on the individual's psyche. This threat of undifferentiation dramatically disrupts any possible relationship in the familiar context.

Elena Recio Ruiz's «A Limping Mother and a Witch-whore: Monstrous Maternities in Elena Ferrante's *The Neapolitan Quartet*» analyses the complexity of the daughter-mother relationship and its evolution, in Ferrante's saga *The Neapolitan Quartet*, in the decades after post-World War II, in Italy. The narrative follows the lives of Elena and Lina and their friendship while navigating complex experiences of motherhood. Lina is portrayed as a young woman of uncanny intelligence and strong-willed character who struggles against submitting to her violent husband and societal constraints that want her to become a mother. Motherhood for her is a repulsive disease that only leads to trauma, entrapment and eventual loss. In the case of Elena, she becomes a disenchanted and disidentified daughter who struggles with a powerful sense of matrophobia as a response to her unsupportive mother. Given the mother's alignment with patriarchal discourse and social expectations, female experience proves to be an added difficulty while also navigating the complex changing political, societal, and religious background.

The overdependence on the mother is at the core, in a more distressing way, of Marilyn Mannino's analysis in «Smothering Mothers and Corpse-like Sons: T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, Freud, and Queer Coding». This overdependence on the dyad of child-mother in Arthurian legend is detrimental to Mordred's wellbeing and personality formation, as he is fused into Morgause's wishes and personality. The mother's overbearing presence is therefore a hindrance towards independence, as the adult cannot function independently from the mother.

The experience of pregnancy and birth may well activate latent destructive mental issues and prompt the new mother to become also the tomb for her offspring. As Araceli Toledo Olivar argues in her analysis of Katixa Agirre's narrative in her contribution «La Madre Deméter Letal en *Las Madres No* de Katixa Agirre», a mother may be overwhelmed by the dark mother archetype and find it impossible to reconcile the overwhelming task of mothering a new life with the maternal body that existed before birth. She is possessed by anger and frustration, and she ends up committing the ultimate crime against her own procreative endeavour, in an act society cannot make sense of, that of mothering as death.

Gulcan Irmak Aslanoglu, in «Thetis: Beyond Maternal Norms. Understanding the Concept of Motherhood through Representations of Thetis», analyses contemporary

literary reinterpretations of the *Iliad* like Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) to explore the resentment Thetis feels towards her only child. Thetis' evident aversion to mortals and ambivalence towards her son are justified by her trauma and reminiscence of enforced sexual abuse, which led to her pregnancy. It is thus revealed that, in the male epic narrative, male violence and sexual trauma are the possible sources of the complexities behind motherhood.

In the two last sections of this monographic issue, Rachel Yoder's novel *Nightbitch* (2021), which portrays the animal transformation of a new mother, is analysed in a double way. This shows how the monstrous mother engages readers at diverse levels when it comes to the disruption motherhood causes in the feminine identity.

Paula Serrano Elena's «Monstrosity as Rescue: Challenging the Institution of Motherhood in Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch*» investigates how the animal transformation into a howling monster at night saves the lonely and miserable stay-at-home mother from a mental breakdown. This shapeshifting also helps her rediscover and regain her creativity and individuality, proving that the animal transformation, in her own experience of individuality, is then an attempt at disengaging herself from patriarchal power and social expectations.

Laura Álvarez Trigo's «Feeding Anxieties and the Identity of the Artist: The Monstrous Mother in Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch*» focuses on the role that food and art play in the narrative, analysing the significant role a mother has in feeding and socialising with her child through play. The animal transformation in the novel is seen as a response to the mother's hunger and relation to food, and as a way to break with the mandates of social norms that determine how mothering should look like and what norms should pass on to the next generation.

These articles offer a brief but wide overview of the fascinating presence of the monstrous mother in literature as a prevailing figure where cultural anxieties are reflected. In the twenty-first century, her presence has proved highly influential as it has expanded into other types of media that participate of this tradition, always a focal point of how inherently unpredictable mothering can be.

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