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“Christen it with thy Dagger’s Point”: Maternal Mistreatment in Shakespeare’s Roman Plays

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The non-Roman women of Shakespeare’s Roman plays are set apart from the dominant culture not only by sex and gender, but also by culture and nationality and, in some cases, by race. More specifically, the non-Roman *mothers* in these plays—women who have borne children who are also, by birth, “other,” must deal not only with their own alienation but also with that of their children. The plight of women in the Roman plays, in which manly “virtue” is a keenly celebrated value, has been analyzed at some length. But the experience of mothers who are not of Roman origin in these plays—and the effect of their experience on the way they treat their children—has not been fully explored. The purpose of this essay, then, is to illuminate a pattern in the Roman plays whereby non-Roman mothers (in particular, Tamora, Cleopatra, and the Queen of *Cymbeline*) experience extreme marginalization—as women, as mothers, and as people whose culture is dominated by Rome—and consequently either neglect or abandon or seek to have their own children killed, as the women themselves seek survival in the untenably hostile environment in which they find themselves.

The world of Shakespeare’s Rome is one that prizes values associated with masculinity: courage, valor, self-control.¹ The men in these plays impose certain expectations on the women—expectations including chastity and nurture of children—in a way that betrays fear of the potential power the women might gain through their assigned roles. At the same time, however, the men undervalue these female roles in favor of their own masculine pursuits. Consequently, the men in these plays are in a state of constant tension with the women around them, especially with their mothers and the mothers of their children. Janet Adelman has demonstrated in her psychoanalytic exploration of Shakespeare’s later plays the male characters’ desire for simultaneous escape from and return to the maternal body—an impossible desire with

¹ For an exploration of these values in Shakespeare’s Roman plays see, for example, Hunter, “A Roman Thought,” and Chernaik, Introduction, 1-6.

often devastating consequences for the women in these plays (*Suffocating* 36). More specifically, in her feminist analysis of the Roman plays, Coppélia Kahn notes that the male characters seek to escape the feminine altogether, and strive to define themselves in relation to one another rather than in relation to (or even opposition from) the women around them (15). However, as Kahn notes, the men are ultimately unable to achieve absolute autonomy, to free themselves from what they perceive as the “stigma of the feminine” (168).

Tamora, Cleopatra, and Cymbeline’s Queen, then—all non-Roman mothers in Shakespeare’s Roman plays—find themselves in worlds in which women are both necessary and profoundly feared. Just as the men strive for autonomy from the very female agency that gives them life, even so, they fear the maternal agency that nurtures their children.² But it is not just the fact that these women are mothers that makes them so threatening to the men in the plays. Additionally, they are outsiders who have their own system of values—a system that does not include the embracing of chastity as a prime value for themselves as women.³ These women’s contrary system of values has, in each case, a very real, very concrete presence in the children they bring into the Roman world—children whose fathers are uniformly absent or illegitimate. These women’s status as independent mothers makes them particularly threatening, for they stand outside the patriarchal lineage of the Roman world of which they have become a part. As a result, they have a unique (and uniquely feared) independence in a world in which chastity is the chief virtue for women, and in which men strive to maintain complete autonomy from women. The absence of a legitimate father in these plays emphasizes the mother’s role, and at the same time heightens the stakes for other men who fear the inability to exert patriarchal control over the women and their children. The woman has freedom in these family situations, and in each case, she embraces her power as mother, and wields it in a way that disempowers the men around her.

² This fear registers an anxiety felt in early modern England—that is, the threat posed to the patriarchy by women’s ability to give birth, and then have a certain level of authority in the nurture and raising of their children. Naomi Miller also suggests that, “in a variety of early modern texts and images associated with female caregivers, mothers . . . offer the potential for both nurture and rejection, sustenance and destruction” (6). In her article on *Macbeth* titled “Fantacizing Infanticide,” Stephanie Chamberlain adds that “maternal agency could undermine the patrilineal process even as it appeared to support it” (74).

³ See, for example, Warren Chernaik’s *Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, p. 2, on the expectation of *pudicitia*, “chastity” for Roman women.

Like the women whose worlds have been dominated by Rome, Volumnia of *Coriolanus* also is profoundly affected by the Roman celebration of hyper-masculinity, but she is herself a Roman woman who, in her own search for power, has raised her son to be the epitome of Roman masculine violence. Volumnia has taken the expected role of nurturer in her raising of Coriolanus, but she has raised him to be a violent man of war, a role that can only lead to his demise. Thus, through her very attention to raising her son, she subverts that “nurturing” nature. In addition, because she sees herself as responsible for the man he has become, she also claims ownership over his actions, and over his very person, as she pulls him closer to herself in the course of the play. Through his actions at Corioli she sees “inherited my very wishes / And the buildings of my fancy” (2.1.199-200). Her nurturing of Coriolanus is ultimately a nurturing of herself and her hopes—a gradual rejection of her son, who is merely a vehicle to carry out her desires. Volumnia’s maternal investment in Coriolanus’s martial success is destructive for her son, yet because she is Roman, that impulse is commended. As Adelman suggests, in the world of this play, “maternal power ... is triumphant in Rome” (*Suffocating* 162).

Volumnia takes pride in having given birth to her son, nursed him, and educated him as a Roman warrior, and she employs increasingly intimate imagery in the course of the play to emphasize her role in the creation of the man he has become. She initially celebrates the fact that she has educated him by letting him “seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him” (1.3.13-15). As she later urges him to beg the consulship from the people, she reminds him—in imagery that shifts the focus back in time to the role of nursing—that his “valiantness was mine, thou suck’st it from me” (3.2.128). And finally, when he threatens to destroy Rome on behalf of the Volsciens, she reminds him that she is the ultimate source of his life, that he would be treading on his “mother’s womb / That brought thee to this world” (5.3.123-24) if he were to follow through on the assault on Rome.

Yet in each of these professed roles in relation to Coriolanus—educator, nurturer, womb—Volumnia perpetrates a form of violence on her son. The fact that she has educated him to go to war results in his wounding and potential death. We see her glorying in the wounds he receives in the battle that opens this play as she asserts to Menenius, “O,

he is wounded, I thank the gods for't" (2.1.121). Furthermore, her mention of his "sucking" his valiantness from her calls to mind her earlier description of "The breasts of Hecuba, / When she did suckle Hector" (1.3.40-41)—an image that she considers "not lovelier/ Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood/ At Grecian sword, [contemning]" (1.3.40-44). For Volumnia, the natural outcome of a mother breastfeeding her son is blood spilling from his wounds in battle. To nurture with milk is to create a bleeding warrior.⁴ And finally, when Volumnia reminds Coriolanus that her womb is the source of his life, it is to urge him to spare Rome—an act that she knows will destroy him. She pulls him as close as she can through the image of the womb, and then claims, as she turns away, that "This fellow had a Volscian to his mother" (5.3.178). Through this denial, she not only rejects Coriolanus as the child she has educated and nursed,⁵ she also essentially disowns her role in his creation as she symbolically tears him from her womb.

Unlike the non-Roman mothers, who neglect or perpetrate violence on their children in an effort to gain power against the Romans seeking to subdue them, Volumnia "nurtures" and thereby perpetrates violence on her son in a way that supports Rome throughout: she educates him to be a valiant fighter and she nourishes him to survive, then usurps the benefits of his valor and employs it for her own ends. And finally, when he turns on Rome, she recontains the violent potential by first reminding him that he is a part of her—that without her he would not exist—and then by tearing him from her in a way that leaves her intact, and leaves him without source, without grounding, without origin. Volumnia may indeed be grief-stricken in the end, but she is also a survivor, one who has successfully contained, dismantled, and claimed the benefits of the force she unleashed.

But Tamora, Cleopatra, and Cymbeline's Queen do not survive their plays, for in each case, Roman rule is restored, and the figure of the non-Roman mother is eliminated. These three women resist empire

⁴ When Janet Adelman deals with this moment in her article "Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*," she observes that "It does not bode well for Coriolanus that the heroic Hector doesn't stand a chance in Volumnia's imagination: he is transformed immediately from infantile feeding mouth to bleeding wound" (110). In addition, she notes that, even as the wound spitting blood seems to be a sign of vulnerability, it can also be viewed as "an instrument of attack" (110).

⁵ In *Suffocating Mothers*, Adelman argues that, in the end, Coriolanus sees his son as the embodiment of himself as a child, and therefore sees himself again as a child to his mother in their final moments together (161).

partly by rejecting or denying Roman expectations of maternal nurture—by taking control of their progeny in unexpected ways—as they strive for the power that has been denied them. In one sense, this impulse—to deny Rome by denying their non-Roman children—appears to be an emulation of precisely what the Roman men undertake as they strive to define their masculinity through attempts at autonomy from the female. Yet these women's acts of subversion serve to unsettle the seeming impermeability of the Roman agenda, and contribute to the erosion of Roman hegemony in the world of their plays.

Tamora initially exhibits the care for her children that it seems Rome would require of her. Her pleas for Alarbus in the first act are based on her maternal relationship with him; she begs Titus to “rue the tears I shed, / A mother's tears in passion for her son” (1.1.105-6), and she urges him to think on his feelings for his own sons. Yet Titus insists on Alarbus' death, and Lucius ensures that “Alarbus' limbs are lopp'd, / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire” (1.1.143-44). The Romans—who expect chastity and “natural” nurture of Roman women—show no mercy to a Goth woman pleading for the life of her son. Indeed, they dismember and burn him in a way that suggest an attempt to destroy and eradicate his very existence from their world. Tamora is thereby forced to observe that Roman “civilized” behavior might involve the “cruel, irreligious piety” of the sacrifice of a mother's son (1.1.130), or even the cold-blooded killing of one's own son, as Titus kills Mutius for defending Bassianus (1.1.292).

Having lost a son, Tamora shifts her focus from her remaining children to her relationships with other men, and to revenge—foci that work toward the detriment of her children and ultimately of herself.⁶ She “adopts” a new “son” in Saturninus, whom she promises to serve as “a handmaid . . . to his desires, / A loving nurse, a mother to his youth” (1.1.331-32). She re-embraces the maternal role in her acceptance of Saturninus' proposal, but that role now includes for her a violent, vindictive element, a relationship that embodies and at the same time shrouds a desire for revenge against Titus and his family. Her turning over of Lavinia to her surviving sons is decidedly an attack on Titus to whom, she reminds her sons, “I pour'd forth tears in vain/ To save your brother from the sacrifice, / But fierce Andronicus would not relent”

⁶ As Dorothea Kehler notes, “in a world given over to war, where ‘civilized’ victors practice human sacrifice, a woman might well fear to invest in maternity as a vital source of happiness. Tamora has reason to elevate sex over motherhood” (326).

(2.3.163-65). Although Lavinia appeals to Tamora's maternal nature and "woman's pity" in an attempt to save herself (2.3.163), Tamora's maternal feelings have been redirected at this point, channeled fully into violence and revenge in a way that can only be harmful—not only to Lavinia, but also to her own surviving (and her yet-unborn) sons. Indeed, her request that her sons rape and kill Lavinia—that they "use her as you will; / The worse to her, the better lov'd of me" (2.3.166-67)—is a command that will destroy not only Lavinia, but also Chiron and Demetrius themselves. Tamora turns children against children (her own against Titus') in a gesture that will result in the destruction of the young—as well as of herself.

Tamora also defies the Roman code of chastity by engaging in a relationship with Aaron—a relationship whose subversive nature, given Aaron's race and the fact that she is married to another man, enables her to employ him in her revenge scheme and also to resist Roman expectations of both chastity and maternal behavior. For we see Tamora's violent rejection of motherhood most fully in a scene from which she is absent: her nurse's bringing of her newborn son by Aaron to have it killed by its father. Through attempting to have her youngest child killed, Tamora strives to maintain the power she has gained within the Roman world by hiding the fact of her adultery with Aaron. Her earlier attempts to save her oldest child have failed; her initial maternal investment has proven not only pointless, but also extremely painful. As a result, she recuperates that space—the maternal space, which she alone inhabits—and attempts to reclaim it through violence rather than nurture. Although Tamora is absent from this scene, we gather from the comments of others what the discovery of this child would mean for her: She would be "sham'd" (4.2.112); despised by Rome for her "foul escape," her adultery with Aaron (113); marred by "ignomy" (115); even doomed to death by the Emperor "in his rage" (113-14). Tamora's choice is between her survival and that of the child—and we know that she has made the former choice for, as the nurse reports to Aaron, "The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal, / And bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point" (4.2.69-70).

Tamora's language is notably subversive—not only in the sense that she is turning over her newborn child to be killed, but also in that she depicts that murder through imagery that inverts the Christian sacrament of baptism. The child's "stamp" and "seal" are those of Aaron—partly of

course because the child resembles Aaron in appearance, as he himself notes (4.2.127)—but also, the imagery suggests, because the “stamp” and “seal” are not those of God. For, as the subsequent line suggests, the “christening” of the child is meant to be not its baptism, but rather its murder. The imagery seems somewhat out of place in this play full of allusions to Roman mythology and the Roman gods, but it is relevant to Tamora’s mindset, for she deliberately scripts the child’s murder as an unwriting of traditional expectations for sanctioning a child’s entry into the world. The child is not merely to be murdered; it is to be killed in a way that “sticks it” to the Romans and their system of values.

The indirect consequence of Tamora’s attitude toward her own maternity becomes symbolically, ironically, and even more horrifyingly clear when, in the final scene, Titus cooks and then serves the ground bones of her sons Chiron and Demetrius to her in the form of pies, such that she literally consumes them, even as she had attempted to “consume” the child she has by Aaron. She lives long enough to hear Titus tell her that Chiron and Demetrius are “both baked in this pie; / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred” (60-62). Tamora literally consumes the flesh that had been bred in and emerged from her. Her turning on her own children—literally and figurative—as she has sought to resist Rome, eventually results in her own death at the hands of Titus. Her refusal to invest in maternal nurture (a refusal initiated when the Romans deprive her of her first son) is punished when the Romans deprive her of her other sons, as well. It is Rome that teaches her to deny maternal care, and it is Rome that punishes her for doing precisely what it has taught her to do.

Unlike the cases of Volumnia and Tamora, whose maternal roles lie at the heart of their actions in their respective plays, Cleopatra’s role as mother is rarely commented on, for her children never appear on stage, and indeed, are scarcely mentioned. Janet Adelman suggests that Cleopatra’s dreaming “her Emperor Antony, reconstructing him as the colossus of her abundant imagination” in the final act, is “the great generative act of the play”—the moment that “realigns the masculine with the maternal” in this play, and arguably, according to Adelman, in most of Shakespeare’s later plays (*Suffocating* 183, 191). As obviously important as Antony is to this play, however, I would argue rather that Cleopatra’s choice with regard to her own children—not her imagined magnification

of her symbolic son Antony—is her most significant act as a maternal figure. Thus from this perspective, I would suggest that Cleopatra rather reclaims maternal agency in a way that allows her to define her own pathway in the Roman world.

Like Tamora, Cleopatra refuses to abide by Roman expectations of chastity, but unlike the Goth queen, she is not afraid to put her beauty, her allure, or her abundant fertility, on display. We know from Enobarbus' famous description that she appears in a barge surrounded by "pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids," just before her first encounter with Antony; that, according to, Enobarbus she makes "defect perfection" when she pants, "breathless," after hopping in the "public street" (229-31); and that, as Agrippa reminds us, "She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed; / He ploughed her, and she cropp'd" (226-27). Later, Octavius Caesar describes another moment of Cleopatra's self-assertion, when she displays herself and her children, alongside Antony, in the show-place in Alexandria (3.6). In this moment, in which Cleopatra appears dressed "in th' abiliments of the goddess Isis," the Egyptian queen carefully constructs her image in a way that emphasizes her royalty, her power, and her fertility (3.6.17). Through this deliberate staging, Cleopatra resists her own domestication—indulges in her own independence—even as she employs her children as part of her dramatic and regal image. Cleopatra represents all that Octavius Caesar, in his cold Roman restraint, stands against; yet she is unabashed in displaying both her allure and her illegitimate children for all to see.

In his description of this public appearance, Shakespeare's Octavius expresses his expectations of female chastity and betrays his anxiety about uncontained maternity. In contrast with Shakespeare's text, in Shakespeare's source for *Antony and Cleopatra* (North's *Life of Marcus Antonius*, a translation of Plutarch), the episode is told from the narrator's perspective (not that of Octavius himself), and in general avoids condemnation of Antony and Cleopatra. Plutarch's narrator describes Caesarion as "supposed to be the son of Julius Caesar" (242). In addition, the setting is merely the show-place "where young men do exercise themselves" (242), and the children are simply "the sons he [Antony] had by her [Cleopatra]" (242). In Shakespeare's text, Octavius describes these events in a way that highlights his fear of association with female excess, and his concern about his inability to control Cleopatra's

resistance to Roman norms. When Octavius says of Caesarion that “they call [him] my father’s son” (3.6.6), he displays disdain not only for the fact that the child is illegitimate, but also for the possibility that the child is his brother, and, additionally, the fact that the child is the subject of gossip, the “they” who ascribe his parentage to Julius Caesar. We see Octavius’ disgust for the public display of unfettered female freedom to the common ear or eye again when he emphasizes the fact that the family had appeared publicly in “the common show-place,” after Maecenas has asked if they were in “the public eye” (3.6.16-17). Caesar also speaks of Cleopatra’s children with Antony not just as “sons,” but as “the unlawful issue that their lust/ Since then hath made between them” (3.6.7-8). In a way that suggests his own attraction and fear, Octavius frames the tableau as unsavory, immoral, and lacking virtue. He simultaneously rejects Cleopatra’s “lustful” behavior, questions the legitimacy of her children, and rejects her claims to power.

Although Octavius disdains Cleopatra’s “excessive” behavior, he assumes that she will ultimately choose the Roman model of maternal “nurture” by seeking to spare the life of her children, even if that means her being taken captive by Rome. In his final threat to her, Octavius claims that if Cleopatra commits suicide, she “shall bereave yourself / Of my good purposes, and put your children / To that destruction which I’ll guard them from” if she abstains from killing herself (5.2.131-33). Yet in the final scene, Cleopatra applies the asp to her arm and her breast, thereby avoiding for herself the humiliation of being paraded through Rome, but exposing her children to precisely that fate, and even to the possibility of being put to death. Perhaps she believes (with good reason) that Caesar would not spare them regardless—many motives are left uncertain in this play—but some facts about this episode remain clear. The first is that Caesar sees the destruction of Cleopatra’s children as his most powerful threat, the one he first mentions and then leaves open when he walks away with his train; as a Roman, he believes that her maternal impulses will—or at least should—guide her decisions. Secondly, Cleopatra resists this Roman construction of her “natural” behavior; she subverts Caesar’s expectations by choosing to apply the asp rather than prolong her survival in an effort to spare her children. Her ability to deny the expectations of maternal sacrifice that the Romans assume drive her

is, I would suggest, her most potent means of resistance to the entire system of values the Romans seek to impose on her and her world.

Cleopatra is perhaps the most blameless of the mothers discussed in this essay, for she does not maliciously seek the death of others, her kingdom is under attack, and the choice she is given regarding Caesar's saving or killing her children is hardly an easy one. North's Plutarch notes that Cleopatra "had sent [Caesarion] unto the Indians through Ethiopia, with a great sum of money" in an attempt to save him (285)—but this is a detail not included in Shakespeare's play. Indeed, Shakespeare does not deal with the fate of her children in his play: his interest is in the fate of Cleopatra, and with her death, the play ends. But historians have traced the children's fate, and we know that Caesarion was lured back to Egypt and killed at Octavius's command just eleven days after Cleopatra's death (Schiff 312). Cleopatra's other children (Alexander Helios, Cleopatra Selene, and Ptolemy Philadelphus) were taken to Rome, where they were paraded in Octavian's triumph, and then given to Caesar's sister Octavia to be raised (Schiff 312). The fate that Cleopatra feared—being "performed" by boy actors in Rome—in fact was realized (at least historically) for her children, who were the unfortunate actors of their own parts.

Unlike Cleopatra, who inhabits a potentially comic world gradually overcome by tragedy, Cymbeline's queen—another non-Roman mother in a land subject to Rome—inhabits the world of romance, in which the impossible is made possible, and in which potential tragedy is contained in comedic form. But it is also, as Miola and Kahn have noted, a world related to that of Shakespeare's other Roman plays, for it echoes themes and engages values of those plays.⁷ While—like the Roman tragedies—*Cymbeline* prizes masculine valor over feminine nurture, even more misogyny saturates the ancient Britain of this romance than permeates the other Roman plays. Embedded in this world, Cymbeline's queen directs most of her malice against her stepdaughter rather than her own son Cloten, but like Volumnia, this queen also drives her own son down a destructive path. Like Cleopatra and Tamora, Cymbeline's queen reigns in a world that is part of Rome or the Roman empire—in her case, ancient

⁷ See Robert S. Miola, who explores *Cymbeline's* celebration of Rome even as, says Miola, the play suggests that Britain has superseded Rome (207). And Coppélia Kahn also argues that *Cymbeline* is "as much Roman as romance" (160).

Britain. And like Tamora, especially, this queen is malevolent, but even more one-dimensionally so than Tamora.

The Queen knows that she should serve as a nurturer in this world in which she is both a mother (to Cloten, the illegitimate son she has brought into her marriage with Cymbeline) and stepmother (to Imogen), and she strives to project a sympathetic image of herself. In the opening scenes, she pretends to support the marriage between Imogen and Posthumus, and to be on Imogen's side against Cymbeline. She claims that she will not be an "Evil-ey'd" stepmother to Imogen. She even claims that she pities "the pangs of barred affection" between Posthumus and Imogen (1.1.72, 82), and pretends to beg the king's "patience" regarding Imogen's speaking with Posthumus (153). All of these assertions are, as Imogen knows, the "Dissembling courtesy" of a "tyrant" who "Can tickle where she wounds" (84-85). The Queen's false displays all serve, ultimately, to further her own aims of power and control—and all feed into the attempted or accomplished destruction of the children around her. Yet in an attempt to go undetected in her evil schemes, the stepmother initially feigns concern for the wellbeing of the younger generation.

Furthermore, she coddles her illegitimate son Cloten both privately and publicly, but the seemingly benevolent treatment she extends to him (that is, working to place him on the throne) in fact sends him down a destructive path that results in his inevitable death. Though the Queen does not suggest that Cloten violently rape and kill Imogen (in the way that Tamora urges her sons to destroy Lavinia), she does encourage him to "make denials/ Increase your services" (48-49). And he does precisely what she suggests, refusing to take "no" for an answer, dressing in Posthumus' clothes, and venturing into the pastoral countryside with the intent of killing Posthumus and raping Imogen over his dead body (4.1). Indeed, Cloten believes that if he does this, "my mother, having power of his [Cymbeline's] testiness, shall turn all into my commendations" (4.1.20-22). Like Chiron and Demetrius, Cloten believes that raping the woman he "loves" will bring his mother pleasure. Thus this belief, this violent extension of her commands to him, results in his own death (and the literal loss of his head) as he proves grossly unfit for survival in the world beyond court.

The Queen's destructive treatment of Imogen is even clearer: she seeks to poison her stepdaughter with a potion disguised as a restorative (1.5). The "nurture" she should be providing the children in her care becomes a poison, the antithesis of maternal sustenance. Later, on her deathbed, the Queen admits her motives and her actions, confessing that she intended to kill Imogen—"a scorpion to her sight"—with poison, and then, after killing the king with a "mortal mineral," "to work / Her son into th' adoption of the crown" (5.5.45, 50, 55-56). While on the one hand these actions might suggest that the Queen is a mere stock figure of the evil queen and stepmother, on the other, the Queen—who asserts her power against rather than through the role of the nurturer—might also be seen, as James Stone suggests, as a scapegoat who symbolizes the resistance to the patriarchal expectations of the Rome-dominated world she inhabits.⁸ And from this perspective, the Queen's maternal role aligns with that of Tamora who seeks to have her baby killed, or Cleopatra who leaves her children behind through her act of suicide.

Like the Queen, other British mothers in *Cymbeline* also either deny or are deprived of their nurturing role, such that any potentially dangerous power they might assert through childbearing and childrearing is contained. When Posthumus "meets" his family in his vision when he is imprisoned in the British camp, his mother's account of his birth is one that distances him from her; she was not lent aid by Lucina, she says, such that Posthumus was "ripp'd" from her when she was "taken" in the throes of childbirth (5.4.45). Like Macduff, Posthumus seems not "of woman born" (*Macbeth* 4.1.80); his earlier stated wish that women need not be "half workers" in conception seems to have been fulfilled here by his mother's own account (2.5.2). True to romance conventions, Posthumus is reunited with his family in spectacular form, but that reunion is at the same time a distancing—one that suggests a unique and womanless birth, that emphasizes the death of his family even as it suggests a dream resurrection, and that allows Jupiter to step in as the ultimate father figure to provide the "truth" of the future. The legitimate sons of Cymbeline, also, are motherless. They have been "lopp'd" from the family line in their kidnapping, and have been shamefully and

⁸ James Stone argues that both the Queen and Cloten are conveniently scapegoated as "personifications of evil and treason—defined as deferral, as resistance to and difference from male royal authority" in the play (125-26). Janet Adelman had earlier argued that the Queen "becomes the scapegoat for Cymbeline's misjudgment and tyranny" (*Suffocating* 202).

neglectfully unsought and unrecovered by the king (5.4.141; 1.1.63-64). All that is left of their birth mother is a “curious mantle, wrought” by her hand (5.5.361). Even Belarius’ wife Euriphile, their former nurse and would-be caretaker in their exile, has died, leaving them—like Posthumus and Imogen—without the figure of a nurturing mother (4.2).

The Queen’s subversive potential—like the subversive potential of all of the women in the play—is absorbed back into the patriarchal world in decisive ways. The Queen and Cloten are dead by the end of the play. Imogen is asked by Posthumus to “Hang [on him] ... like fruit” (5.5.264)—she is repossessed as inanimate ornamentation by her husband. Subsequently, she is reclaimed by Cymbeline as “my flesh? My child?” (5.5.264)—in essence made a part of his body, his being, again. Indeed, Cymbeline portrays himself as the “uncontaminated mother” of the three children he reclaims in the final scene of the play: “O what am I? / A mother to the birth of three? Ne’er mother/ Rejoic’d deliverance more,” he asserts (5.5.369-71). The effect, suggests Stone, is that this romance “eliminates the adulterous woman and then takes one step further in eliminating women altogether from familial and national genealogies” (127). This Roman romance does precisely what Kahn suggests the Roman heroes of Shakespeare’s plays strive for: it comes as close as any of Shakespeare’s plays to writing out the female altogether, to voicing male autonomy in the creation of a family line.

In *Cymbeline*, then, as in *Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, children are threatened or die, the mother is eradicated, and Roman order is restored. In all of these plays, mothers threaten or neglect or drive their children down destructive paths, and not only the children, but also the mothers, suffer as a result. Even in the romance world, in which families typically come together, the Queen and her family are scapegoated and then ejected so that Cymbeline and his patriarchal agenda can survive as he seeks reunion with Rome. Only in *Coriolanus*, where the mother’s sacrifice of her son serves the Roman agenda, does she survive, even as she ensures the survival of Rome. The mothers may seem less than “maternal”—and yet, the treatment they received, the oppression they experienced, and the behaviors they were taught by the patriarchal Roman world all preclude our looking at these women as monstrous, for the choices they face are complex, even brutal.

And in the end, despite the mothers' deaths, a child survives in each case: Tamora's baby is saved by Aaron and Lucius swears to spare him; Imogen, though recontained in marriage, survives; and three of Cleopatra's children—though absorbed by Rome—live on after her death. Successful Roman attempts to destroy the mother—and even mothers' attempts to wield power by neglecting or destroying their progeny—are ultimately undercut. Whereas the Roman mother Volumnia survives in the place of her son, the non-Roman mothers die, yet leave traces of themselves not only through the actions they have taken while alive, but also in their surviving children or stepchildren. In the end, the presence of the escaped child prevents the complete erasure of the displaced woman's resistance and struggle for power, even in a world dominated by Rome.

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