

## A Privileged Site of Investigation

### Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal

Edited by Ellen Bayuk Rosenman and Claudia C. Klaver.  
Ohio State University Press, 2008. 348 pages.  
3 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$50.91.

Review by Joanna Thaler.

*Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal* brings together fifteen separate essays that explore social, cultural, and literary assumptions about nineteenth-century mothers and motherhood, connecting a varied set of inquiries through common dissatisfaction with idealized images of the Victorian mother. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman and Claudia C. Klaver claim investigative inspiration from Eve Sedgwick's *Touching/Feeling* (2003), which advocates a "specific and plural" exploration of ignorance. Rosenman and Klaver assert that they "have not sought even local conclusions within these groupings" of essays, hoping simply to follow Sedgwick's advice and provide "multiple, unpredictable ways in which motherhood was experienced and imagined in this formative historical period," and move "beyond the maternal ideal."

The contributors examine personal letters, court records, autobiographies, and Victorian fiction authored by well-known writers such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Charlotte Brontë, and also lesser known writers like Hesba Stretton, Mary Seacole, and Lady Duff Gordon. Such variety of genres complements the collection's aim to expand the definition of the Victorian mother. Although the essays range in specific focus, all return to tackling assumptions about the Victorian maternal ideal. Attempting to "achieve

some kind of coherence," Rosenman and Klaver separate the essays into four sections. Part I, "Beyond the Maternal Ideal," looks at the idealization of the Victorian Angel in the House in Deidre D'Albertis' "How to Be a Domestic Goddess' Redux," Laura Green's "Long, Long Disappointment': Maternal Failure and Masculine Exhaustion in Margaret Oliphant's *Autobiography*," Heather Milton's "Bland, Adoring, and Gently Tearful Women': Debunking the Maternal Ideal in George Eliot's *Felix Holt*," and Teresa Mangum's "Elderly Mothers and Middle-Aged Daughters in Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son*." These essays ultimately argue that not only is the Victorian maternal ideal impossible, but it also inherently destroys mothers and their children.

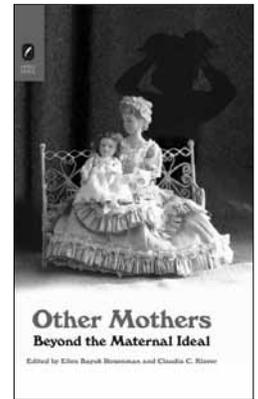
The second section of essays, "Bad Mothers": Caretaking, Class, and Maternal Violence," debunks Victorian idealizations about motherhood based mostly on a woman's social class. The mothers in this section "present spectacular departures from the ideal of maternal nurturance." More focused on the local pub and social engagements than their children, essays by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Dara Rossman Regaignon reveal mothers who are not only alcoholic but neglectful, leaving the upbringing of their children to other people. Expanding this neglect to the extreme, Ginger Frost and Lucy Sussex explore the popular speculation that lower-class mothers were intrinsically awful mothers and predetermined to commit violence because of the strains that their class forced on them.

The third section of essays, "Maternity and Difference: Nation, Race, and Empire," departs from the shores of England and explores Victorian motherhood in colonial spaces. In Deirdre H. McMahon's "My Own Dear Sons': Discursive Maternity and Proper British Bodies in *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*," Deirdre Osborne's "Conceiving the Nation: Visions and Versions of Colonial Prenatality," Mary Jean Corbett's

"Orphan Stories and Maternal Legacies in Charlotte Brontë," and Cara Murray's "Distance Mothering and the 'Cradle Lands': Imperial Motherhood and Lady Duff Gordon's *Letters from Egypt*," motherhood in other countries is compared to motherhood in England, often resulting in the conclusion that English motherhood is found wanting, and that the colonial "other" spaces frequently allow for a more successful mothering experience.

Finally, the collection returns to England and focuses on the Victorian mother's physical body in Part IV, "The Maternal Body." Brenda R. Weber investigates the challenges facing three author-mothers, one of whom is also an actual mother, and all of whom consider their written work as extensions of themselves, as textual children. Lillian E. Craton argues against the popular conception of the Victorian mother as frail and slender, pointing out that popular writers like Charles Dickens advocated for the more full-figured examples of motherly sacrifice. Finally, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman concludes the collection with an historical look at the implications of Simcox's sexual obsession with George Eliot, which she defined in terms of motherhood and maternity.

This collection favors readers who are both new to the Victorian period and are hoping to find a fresh perspective on a literary and historical period they know well. The seeming disconnects between Victorian motherhood and mothers in fact provide compelling inquisitive bonds between the collections' essays. Rosenman and Klaver succeed in avoiding any one conclusion regarding Victorian mothers, except perhaps that their study remains inconclusive, effectively making Victorian motherhood "a privileged site of investigation."



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