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 Excerpt
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Introduction
Naturally bad or dangerously good:
Romantic-period mothers “on trial”

[I]n the case of our children we are responsible for the exercise of acknowledged power: a power wide in its extent, indefinite in its effects, and inestimable in its importance.

Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*¹

Nature has given women so much power, that law has wisely given them little.

Samuel Johnson, “Letter to Dr. Taylor” (18 August 1763)²

This book deals with the trials and errors of Romantic-period mothers, the politicizing of maternal bodies and the maternalizing of political bodies, and the authoring of mothers and the mothering of texts. In the chapters to follow, I identify abstract theories and material practices associated with motherhood during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and consider especially ways these were negotiated discursively by writers attempting to make legible the seemingly self-disclosing, but often highly mysterious maternal body. My primary concern is to trace ways that writers deployed representations of mother–child bonds as a means to naturalize various constructions of interpersonal and intercultural relations, but I also want to consider some of the fault lines between writing motherhood and reading the bodies of mothers, between books about birth and the birthing of books. I view Romantic writers’ treatments of motherhood and maternal bodies especially through the lens of the legal, medical, educational, and socioeconomic debates about motherhood so popular during the period, discussions that rendered the physical processes associated with mothering matters of national importance. Widespread interest in the workings of the maternal body tended to make public the privately shared space signified by the womb or the maternal breast, both of which evidenced for writers of the period the radical exposure of mother and child to one another – for both good and ill. It is not my intention, then, to lay claim to any definition of motherhood or to suggest that

Romantic writers tapped into any kind of authentic maternal experience, but rather to argue that representations of maternity during the Romantic period were thoroughly implicated in broader politicized discourses that specifically constructed and evaluated maternal subjects in terms of their relation to a child who was figured explicitly as both self and Other and represented the interests of the child as radically distinct but also absolutely inseparable from those of the mother.

Because this book foregrounds the writing and reading of motherhood and maternal bodies, I begin with the assumption that readers of texts often function as jurors of sorts who bear witness to, and are called to deliberate on the evidence presented in specific “cases.” I borrow this analogy in part from Ian Watt, who, in *The Rise of the Novel*, compares the epistemological rules governing formal realism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the procedures in a court of law, likening novel readers to the members of a jury: “[B]oth want to know all the particulars of a given case – the time and place of the occurrence; both must be satisfied as to the identities of the parties concerned.”³ James Chandler’s recent reflections on the distinctly Romantic “case form” in *England in 1819*, moreover, provide me with an analogy geared even more precisely toward the historical focus of this book. Following Andre Jolles’s 1930 analysis of the case form, Chandler argues that “Romanticism is itself describable in terms of a massive altering of ‘the case.’” In so far as Romantic texts record both a break from and a grappling with the inheritance of Enlightenment thought, Chandler stresses that the Romantic “case” is not an “instantiation of a general scheme or normative system; nor is it just the form in which that instantiation occurs.” Rather, it “is the very form of ‘deliberation.’ It is always calling for judgement, and it is by virtue of judgement that it offers formal mediation between the particular and the general, between instance and rule, between circumstance and principle.” Ultimately the case form does not provide pronouncements of truth, but an occasion for the kind of vacillating deliberation that Romantic-period texts invite.⁴

This study takes its cue from Watt’s and Chandler’s legal analogies, focusing specifically on the trials of mothers in texts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and considering especially the ways in which the case of Romantic motherhood intersects with broader debates concerning the construction of civil society, the legitimacy of nationalist loyalties, and the union of national bodies. Not all of the texts examined here conform to the conventions of formal realism as these are defined by Watt, though most, to some extent, position the reader as a juror – in most cases as a carefully selected juror. Some of these trials are explicitly judicial, as for

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Maria Venables in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798), Effie Deans in Walter Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (1819), and Beatrice Cenci in Percy Shelley’s *The Cenci* (1819). In other instances, the defendants are not fictionalized characters; the very real trials of Marie Antoinette; Mary, Queen of Scots; Charlotte Smith; and Alice Clifton are part of the historical record. But I have also in some instances invoked the term “trial” more loosely, to designate broader processes whereby late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century mothers were scrutinized, interrogated, and more often than not found guilty for crimes against nature, the state, or both natural and political orders. In this sense, motherhood itself constituted a “case,” in the sense in which Chandler uses this term. As my focus lies chiefly with Romantic-era negotiations of maternal responsibilities and culpabilities, the motif of the mother on trial proves a particularly useful lens through which to consider the ways in which constructions of motherhood would be enforced, transgressed, contested, and reconfigured during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Representations of mothers before the bar reveal acutely the period’s divisive attitudes toward motherhood and betray some of the difficulties authors faced in attempting to establish the “identities of the parties concerned.”

In presenting the case of Romantic motherhood, I want to expand upon the arguments of a number of recent feminist theorists as well as highlight the affinities between contemporary debates about motherhood and those which marked texts produced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While motherhood has become a fairly trendy topic among Romantic-period scholars, few acknowledge fully the extent to which the category of maternity has proven to be a source of great contention among feminist scholars. Whereas many early Anglo-American feminist critics looked to motherhood as a distinctly female experience and hence as a point of feminist consolidation,⁵ many second-generation feminists (in the vein of Judith Butler, for example), have tended to focus on the discursive, hence cultural production of the “natural” so as to destabilize those experiences which authorize themselves via appeals to the body.⁶ Continental feminist critics like H  l  ne Cixous have often worked from a somewhat different direction, stressing, for example, the ways in which women’s biological experiences inform their writing practices (i.e. women, “never far from ‘mother,’” write “in white ink”).⁷ Others, like Susan Stanford Friedman, have countered that this “biologic poetic” theoretically “privileges motherhood as the basis of all creativity, a position that symbolically excludes women without children and all men.”⁸ Emmanuel Levinas describes the conditions of one’s always already presupposed “responsibility to the

other” as a “gestation of the other in the same” and admits up front to the “evocation of maternity” in his analogy,⁹ while Sara Ruddick suggests that mothers are not marked by their capacity for sympathy and alterity but by the suppression of the impulse for violence.¹⁰ Maternal bodies and temperaments are rendered within this context both simplistically self-evident and hopelessly obscure and, in this sense, I want to argue, contemporary theoretical debates about maternity are thoroughly Romantic. Writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries similarly appealed to and disputed the workings of reproductive bodies and the role of mothers in society in ways which strongly resemble recent debates about the nature of maternal nature.

In both contexts, for example, theories about maternity have garnered authority from rapidly shifting medical technologies. Advances in genetic engineering now explicitly challenge even the apparent biological self-evidence of maternity. Is a mother one who carries and bears a child, one who raises him/her, or one who merely provides an egg? Within this climate, as for Romantic writers, the reproductive body becomes as much a site wherein the category of the “natural” can be disputed and reworked as it does a stable referent of experience. Recent critical forays into the theoretic of motherhood also necessarily spur broader questions about who controls the means of reproduction in modern societies, whose reproductive choices will be sanctioned in the future, and to what extent it is the state’s responsibility to decide. Again, these concerns were of paramount importance for Romantic-period writers, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* being perhaps the most obvious testament to what I will argue here were widespread anxieties concerning reproductive technologies and the state’s interest in reproductive power.¹¹ Mary O’Brien argued over a decade ago (and her words take on increasing resonance),

Men have always defined the social parameter of the forms of reproductive relations. They have also controlled technological development. It is this old male control of production combined with newer control of reproduction which makes the development of reproductive technology a political question, a historical event of a momentous kind and a renewed struggle for reproductive power . . . There is no issue which throws down the challenge to women to seize control of their usurped reproductive power in the way that this issue does. There is no issue in which the holding in balance of the laws of the natural world and the law of the historical world offers us radical choices and possible transformations of such a fundamental kind.¹²

To this end, the task of historicizing maternal subject positions in ways which do not produce idealist categories or enshrine specific maternal experiences as either available to all mothers or as definitive of “femininity”

seems more crucial than ever. This book constitutes an attempt to demonstrate the centrality of the case of the Romantic mother to the evolution of this conversation.

I work primarily from the position of Michel Foucault and others in his wake, who hold that sexualities are produced in specific historical contexts and that gender is a contested social category that is imposed on, or (as Judith Butler holds) performed by a sexed body. Although Foucault does not provide us with extensive reflections on maternal bodies per se, his groundbreaking work on political "anatomies" (which transverses both the terrain of the state as a "body" and of the body and its surroundings in terms of a "small state") serves as a useful point of departure for this study. His understanding of the body politic as "a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes, and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge" provides me with a framework for considering the intersections and divergences between theories of motherhood and material practices associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing – between the general case of the Romantic mother, and specific cases involving Romantic-period mothers.¹³ Indeed, like Watt and Chandler, Foucault invites this legal analogy, directing our attention to the ways that the individual (as opposed to the species) enters into the field of knowledge toward the end of the eighteenth century, most specifically as a "case": "a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power." The individual, he stresses, is "described, judged, measured, compared with others in his [*sic*] very individuality," but also has to be "trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc." through reference to the group. Integral to this process is the "turning of real lives into writing," a procedure which for Foucault involves both "objectification and subjection."¹⁴ The case of the Romantic-period mother offers us particularly fruitful ground for examining some of the discursive procedures at issue for Foucault (in medical manuals, conduct literatures, housekeeping guides and cookbooks, works produced by social theorists and political economists, as well as literary texts), particularly in so far as these operate along gender lines and participate in a disciplinary framework that moves individuals toward cultural consensus as well as operating through more overt methods of social, moral, and legal coercion.

I find especially useful Joan Scott's two-pronged definition of gender as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" and as "a primary way of signifying relationships of

power.”¹⁵ Motherhood proves (to borrow Scott’s terms) a useful category for the historical analysis of Romantic-period texts, particularly in so far as writers of the period appealed to the mother–child bond as a means of naturalizing other forms of social interaction, maintaining and sometimes challenging dominant relationships of power. I examine ways in which normative gender categories were produced and maintained via discursive attempts to repress or override alternative possibilities. But behind my argument lies the further assumption that this process involves that which Foucault has identified as the “formation of a certain mode of relation to the self in the experience of the flesh”¹⁶ – in this case a relation to the physical self as “non-self.” Many women writers of the Romantic period in fact described the experience of motherhood in precisely this way. Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s poem “To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible” provides a case in point.¹⁷ The poem accentuates the alienation from self which a mother feels when inhabited by that “stranger guest” (line 23) who is both “[p]art herself, yet to herself unknown” (line 22). Even while celebrating the anticipated arrival of the “little captive,” the speaker realizes that this “[g]erm of life” has strange “powers” which also hold *her* prisoner (lines 1, 5). She characterizes the womb itself as a “living tomb,” and a “prison” (lines 20, 29), but this poem’s tension springs from the fact that the womb not only keeps the child captive, but also that it so captivates (in *both* positive and negative senses of the word) the mother herself. Recognizing that the moment of birth will bring release, she is also aware that she must endure in the process “nature’s sharpest pangs” (line 19) and that she must pass through “life’s mysterious gate” (line 4) in order to “lay her burden down, / That her glad arms that burden may resume” (lines 17–18). Given the high mortality rates associated with pregnancy and childbirth during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this mysterious passage in point of fact constituted for many women of the period a one-way trip.¹⁸

The sense of physical dispossession expressed in Barbauld’s poem is more than a fear of death, however. This speaker is not overtly anxious for her life; the tone of the poem is, for the most part, one of celebratory anticipation. Yet the speaker describes a radical shift in her experience of self and it is this sense of physical and mental dislocation which most concerns me. She has become something other than that which she had been prior to her pregnancy, and this transformation of self resists any easy slippage into categories traditionally associated with the role of “mother.” She is Other, rather than mother, or more precisely, the poem records her recognition of the otherness that is at once within herself. To be sure, her captivity/captivation

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is apparently willed; the pregnancy itself seems to be desired. And yet the entire poem constitutes an appeal to be released: "Haste, infant bud of being, haste to blow!" (line 12). The sense of urgency which these repetitive imperatives reinforce suggests more than a fond parent's longing – "On thy soft cheek a mother's kiss to lay" (line 16); this woman wants to possess, *rather than be possessed* by her child. She stresses that her child's powers now "lie folded in thy curios frame, / Senses from objects locked, and mind from thought!" (lines 5–6), yet the infant's dormant subjectivity clearly serves as a mirror of the mother's own state of consciousness. She, too, is "folded within"; her child's life has been "fed with her [own] life" (line 24), that "self" that can only be reclaimed by the expulsion of the child.¹⁹

Barbauld's poem, which seems on the surface a rather standard celebration of the joys of motherhood, actually radically challenges simplistic readings of the maternal body, especially in so far as she represents the body not as a static thing but as a "situation," in the sense in which Simone de Beauvoir uses this term.²⁰ This is to say that Barbauld's mother is a subject who experiences her body in a radically temporal way, as a dynamic, ongoing process – as well as one who experiences the particulars of her actual situation (her placement in time, her actual physical locatedness). This type of deployment of pregnancy (as an experience of being inhabited by another) allows that one woman might occupy differing bodies variously at any given point in time; to describe the body in this way is to remove it from the essentialist framework advocated by numerous writers of the period, thwarting any understanding of women's nature as simplistically "legible."²¹ While Barbauld's poem thus works against the grain of standard theories of the Enlightenment period, which sought to decode and demystify the body as a way to substantiate broader arguments about the nature of female nature, she also highlights here the sense of self-alienation that marks many women writers' accounts of the experience of motherhood during the Romantic period.

I stress in the chapters to follow that historical circumstances were helping to generate an atmosphere in which the type of maternal ambivalence and self-division evident in Barbauld's poem could flourish. The broad-based medical reassessment of the conditions in which women gestated and gave birth to their children – which coincided neatly with a political reevaluation of the environment in which they reared them and from which they subsequently "delivered" them into society – distinguished the second half of the eighteenth century from historical periods that had preceded it. Physicians and educators scrutinizing the daily business of mothering found numerous targets for their censure and, while some invoked examples of

“unnatural” maternal behavior so as to promote the need to monitor and regulate the relationship between mother and child, others appealed to the sympathies of their readers in representing the “natural” constrictions imposed on, and trials experienced by mothers.

I want to note at the outset that I am less interested in an analysis of the oppression of mothers than the title of this introductory chapter might suggest. Indeed, many of the mothers on trial that I engage in this book are oppressors rather than (or as well as) victims. Nor am I interested solely in an analysis of the ways in which modes of economic production interact with or determine processes of reproduction, in the vein of critics like O’Brien, though I do begin this study with a sustained look at shifting attitudes toward reproductive labor and the transformation of childbirth technologies during the eighteenth century. Yet I am more concerned with the ways in which revolutions in the childbirth industry were negotiated discursively than in substantiating the claims of critics like O’Brien and Shulamith Firestone that reproductive labor becomes a bitter trap for women.²² Clearly economic interests underwrite medical debates about pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing practices (then as now); clearly motherhood has imprisoned women historically in restrictive roles and delimited their political agency and opportunities. Yet to assume women’s economic and political victimization as mothers is to tell only part of the story. Accounts like Firestone’s reveal little about the ways in which ideological structures are internalized by individuals, about the lived experiences and desires of women who bear and/or raise children, about the empowering dimensions of motherhood and the complex psychic repercussions of enacting this role.

Psychoanalytic theory offers a route into this terrain, and, while this book is not informed explicitly by psychoanalytic methodologies, I was heavily influenced by the work of continental feminists like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray in conceptualizing this project. I would agree with most post-Lacanian theorists that subjects, including maternal subjects, are not determined a priori by sexed bodies, but rather negotiate constant and unstable processes of differentiation and distinction, the repression and acceptance of subconscious and conscious drives and desires. I largely view the maternal body as a discursive construct, and motherhood as a cultural performance, an effect of systems of power that variously create and regulate the desire for maternity. Yet I am more concerned in this book with tracing the construction of gendered subjectivities in political and historical contexts than in legitimizing or debunking myths of motherhood. I am especially concerned with the reproduction of mothers’ tales at a broader ideological level, and in the role that disciplines like psychology may play

in this process.²³ Psychoanalytic approaches to the experience of motherhood, for example, more often than not operate from the viewpoint of the child and so tend to focus on the body of the mother as an object rather than a source of desire, revealing little about the consciousness of mothers (mothers “feed, but do not speak,” Luce Irigaray notes²⁴), while frequently describing mother–child relations in ways that may prove proscriptive and delimiting. I find that the most intriguing work offered by poststructuralist feminists rather posits an historical trajectory of maternal consciousness that studies such as this might help trace. My aim, in some respects, is thus to historicize poststructuralist psychoanalytic narratives of maternal subjects, rather than to endorse or revise them.

Texts examined here which suggest that pregnancy might be experienced as an invasion of physical/psychic space (as in Barbauld’s poem) for instance, reflect the development of a late eighteenth-century maternal consciousness that would be inherited and explored subsequently in the twentieth century by a wave of poststructuralist feminists offering critiques of Freudian theory. In appealing frequently to the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding – which seemingly materialized (and therefore legitimated) Enlightenment theories of sympathetic intersubjective relations – numerous Romantic writers linked the extra-ordinary subject position of the mother not only to a condition of Levinasian alterity but to the experience of abjection, in the sense in which Julia Kristeva deploys this term in *Powers of Horror*.²⁵ While Kristeva indeed sees pregnancy as “extract[ing] woman out of her oneness and giv[ing] her the possibility – but not the certainty – of reaching out to the other,” she also stresses that during childbirth,

there is this other abyss that opens up between the body and what had been its inside: there is the abyss between the mother and the child. What connection is there between myself, or even more unassumingly between my body and this internal graft and fold, which, once the umbilical cord had been severed, is an inaccessible other? My body and . . . him. No connection. Nothing to do with it.

This divided (or doubled) response to the other (and to the otherness of the self) is not, despite its biological underpinnings, to be understood as essential or transhistorical for Kristeva, who rather invites an analysis of the ways in which seemingly self-evident maternal experiences are socially constructed, as well as a consideration of the functions they serve in specific historic contexts. She stresses, for example, the “corporeal and psychological suffering of childbirth and especially the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on the social norm . . . without

which society will not reproduce and will not maintain a constancy of standardized household.” If pregnancy and childbirth trigger the experience of abjection, in other words, while maternity itself may be lived out as “psychosis,”²⁶ Kristeva allows that this experience has been naturalized through the institutionalization of specific material practices that facilitate the transmission and reproduction of patriarchal lines of power – in the process alienating women from the products of their physical labor and their own bodies.

In the forthcoming chapters, I consider ways in which shifting attitudes about maternal nature helped naturalize the seemingly self-referential experience of maternal psychosis to which Kristeva refers. Moreover, I argue that for many writers of the period, transforming ideas about the dynamics of motherhood carried nationalist inflections. This book therefore also serves as a gloss on Luce Irigaray’s observation that “The relationship with the mother is a mad desire, because it is the ‘dark continent’ par excellence.”²⁷ Irigaray here points to ways in which the mother–child bond is often figured as savage, primal, unenlightened – all of which tropes were standard fare for Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment writers, particularly those employing maternal metaphors as a means to explore questions concerning legitimate and illegitimate national bonds and loyalties. Thus Walter Scott, for example, likens the mother–child bond to those fierce local attachments and clan loyalties prevalent in Scotland prior to the 1745 rebellion – a point which marks for Scott a turn toward Enlightenment progress, even if at the expense of native Scottish identity.

Yet I want to stress, too, that maternal metaphors were employed very differently by writers working within other genres and politicized contexts, in ways which prefigure alternative poststructuralist descriptions of the mother–child bond. In a more recent interview with H  l  ne Rouch, for example, Irigaray argues that the placenta is an organ which mediates continuously between the bodies of mother and child, *maintaining* rather than collapsing difference.²⁸ A number of Romantic-period writings posited similar arguments and deployed maternal imagery as a way to reconfigure the “true” nature of romantic love: not as a form of sympathy which depends upon the colonization of the other or reflects a narcissistic desire to obliterate difference, but as mutuality, exchange, a kind of interactive independence. The politics informing the deployment of this type of maternal imagery resembles that of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism; mother–child bonds may function in this context as part of a broader critique of Romantic nationalism rather than serving to exemplify a totalizing connection between individual and motherland. Julia Kristeva has described Enlightenment