COMPETITION
A Feminist Taboo?

Edited by Valerie Miner and Helen E. Longino

Foreword by Nell Irvin Painter

Erika Duncan's latest novel, *Those Giants: Let Them Rise*, published by Schocken Books in February 1986, is the story of a woman's search for her own largeness among the "giants" of her present and her past. Her other two books are *A Wreath of Pale Roses* (1977) and *Unless Soul Clap Its Hands: Portraits and Passages* (1985). She was co-founder of the Woman's Salon, is a contributing editor for *Book Forum*, and teaches fiction writing in her home while working on a writing-teaching project at New York University which ranges into connections with mathematics and philosophy.

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Mothers and Daughters

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There is a figure who is strangely missing from our literature and myth. It is the evil, murderous usurper daughter. Although there are treacherous women galore, who lead men of all ages to their doom, there are no female Raskolnikovs who, in irrational rage, kill or undo an older woman. Although there are evil sisters galore (usually older), obsessed with undoing "good" sisters, and galleries of shriveled witches, jealous of the life-filled young, there are no female murderers of queens in Shakespeare, who pursue their ruthless goals in order to themselves rise to the top. Alas, even Lady Macbeth takes up a sword only to kill a king. She stains her snow-white hands only to make another king; no woman dies to make her queen! There are no women waiting in line to cut the golden bough by murdering the aging matriarch, to take in turn their own ritually designated positions. Why should this be?

Looking for images of competition in the mother/daughter relationship, I recently reread *The Lost Tradition*, a study of mothers and daughters in literature spanning 40 centuries.[1] The collection had come out in 1981, announcing by its very presence, an absence. Indeed, despite my attraction to this massive act of reclamation, boasting chapter titles like "Reentering Paradise: Cather, Colette, Woolf and Their Mothers," "How to Light a Lighthouse for Today's Women," and "'Don't forget the bridge that you crossed over on,'" I was struck most forcibly

This piece is dedicated to my daughters, and to Linda Hogan, whose poems in *Daughters I love you* will live forever in my mind. And it is dedicated to my mother, Florence Volkman Pincus, who has struggled through to the other side of this with me, who—even as this goes to press—has recentered my life, changing again the ever-growing and unfinished tale this tells.

by the headings denoting absence: "Jane Austen and the Tradition of the Absent Mother," "Unmothered Daughter and Radical Reformer: Harriet Martineau's Career," and "The Great Unwritten Story: Mothers and Daughters in Shakespeare."

"The absence of mothers," wrote Susan Peck MacDonald in her study of Victorian women writers,

> seems to me to derive not from the impotence or unimportance of mothers, but from the almost excessive power of motherhood; the good supportive mother is potentially so powerful a figure as to prevent her daughter's trials from occurring, to shield her from the process of maturation, and to disrupt the focus and equilibrium of the novel. But if she is dead or absent, the good mother can remain an ideal.[2]

MacDonald went on to observe that "if the mother is to be present during her daughter's maturation, the mother must be flawed in some way, so that instead of preventing her daughter's trials, she contributes to them."[3] But even this becomes a drama more dependent on the mother's influence than on the daughter's independent activity. And even this becomes a story rarely told, a drama rarely worked through in the larger-than-life medium of art.

I reread an article by Myra Glazer Sholtz that mourned the absence of the great mother-daughter cathexis in Shakespearean drama.[4] I had spent the summer of 1985 rereading Shakespeare, and I too felt that absence, bridged only so briefly in the ending of *The Winter's Tale*, and then so quickly lost. I felt the sadness of that absence, not only in Shakespeare—who, after all, missed much that could have been in Cleopatra's character as well—but in almost all art by men and women throughout the centuries.

It is not that the mother-daughter theme has not been touched. Increasingly women today are trying to explore it. However, I believe that there is a level of taboo about it that accounts for its previous absence, and that the deepest area of that taboo emerges not around the mother's jealousy, or even her devouring rage, but around the daughter's own competitive feelings. In trying to understand the depth of our own fears of wishing to outdistance our mothers, I think it is useful to look for a moment at the nearly total absence of competitive daughters in our literature.

While the image of the destroyer prince, out to usurp his father's power, has grown up side by side with images of evil giants—the mythic forms becoming humanized as our drama, poetry, and fiction become more rooted in echoing temporal life—no image of the destroyer princess has come into being, in either myth or literature. While hungry witches did and do continue to proliferate, daughters don't tend to seek what their mothers have; they don't seek to build kingdoms of their own out of their mothers' flesh. Although fairy-tale daughters can and do kill mothers, they do so only in self-defense, when their own lives are threatened and they are *forced* to choose. Unlike the male heroes who provoke the giants, deliberately designing to usurp the giants' property, female heroes come to witches only when they are hungry or lost without housing. It is hardly coincidental that Gretel

is caught in the act of eating the candy shingles that constitute the roof of the witch's counterfeit shelter; it is hardly coincidental that, in order to save their own lives, she and her brother must put the witch into her own wrongly used cooking oven, smothering her in her own rejecting womb.

Finally, in the fairy tales, the females who kill evil female power figures are always children. Grown women—women who have reached the age of sexual desire—do not kill bad queens and jealous witches by themselves. Rather, they are rescued by sexually potent princes whose love automatically undoes the power of the older, evil queen.

How does this pattern translate into the more self-conscious literary forms? It doesn't. Because poetry, fiction, and drama depend so heavily upon the "adult" voice, the figure of the killer daughter cannot be directly drawn; if ever it appears at all, it is only a ghostly shadow from a realm of rarely penetrated, distant memory. While centuries of elaboration have honed and refined the depiction of the usurper son, the daughter's battle to live beyond the life her mother lived is rarely played out with a real and living mother. Indeed, that very vulnerability that makes us so afraid to let our fictional daughters overpower their mothers directly on stage turns in upon itself, and causes us, the writers, to pre-kill the mothers long before our fictional daughters can wreak their fury on them, long before they and their fictional daughters can interact. Even the Electra story, frequently presented as the paler parallel of the Oedipal myth, deals with revenge for the death of the father and not with any autonomous desire to possess what the mother possesses. And even in a context where her own mother can kill (a man), Electra does not directly shed the maternal blood. As in the case of princesses in the fairy tales, here too the male must effect the grown woman's matricide. While the child Gretel can join Hansel in killing the witch, in the adult context Orestes must take over the matricide for both siblings.

What is it that differentiates the mother-daughter drama from that of the father-son? It is my belief that the difference is complicated and deep-rooted; while the father-son drama takes place around temporal gain, the mother-daughter drama is a struggle over essence far more fraught with danger and taboo.

On one level, as the dictator of essence, as the one whose giant presence gives the child of the same sex its form, the mother is so powerful that as long as she stays on the scene, the daughter may not act separately. On another level, however, as a being separated from the act of mothering, she is completely insignificant. Thus she simultaneously provides far too much and far too little to usurp. The child, who is the product of her mother's mothering, cannot outstrip that mothering without in some way invalidating what the mother has created: her own self. Whatever the daughter's choices in the realm of mothering will be, whether she will choose to have ten children or none, whether she will be an excellent mother according to popular imagination, or a terrible one, she will be unable to outdistance her mother without also outdistancing herself. Thus, while the son outdoes the father openly, the daughter turns all of her equally powerful competitive feelings inward, upon herself.

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"O that this too, too solid flesh would melt," says Hamlet, who must bear his father's flesh mixed with his mother's in his own. As he hesitates to take on the expected male role of avenging his father's death, it is the flesh itself he turns on, in his hatred of action, his hatred of the living breath.

I remember once sitting in the lamplight, looking at my feet. I had never looked at them carefully before, but my toes were stiff, and I needed to unlock them. I was suddenly seized with the horrifying realization that they were my mother's feet. Then I looked at my hands. They were much thinner than my mother's, but they *were* my mother's hands. I changed their position. They were still my mother's hands. Perhaps there was something about the particular quality of the lamplight on that winter afternoon that rendered them so familiar. Perhaps I had once looked at my mother's hands and feet in such a light. I went into the bedroom to look at myself in the mirror. I did not look at all like my mother. But inadvertently, as I drew a breath, my shoulders widened until they looked increasingly like hers. No wonder that I had refused to take the art of breathing seriously. (Indeed, even when my lack of ability to draw a deep breath was declared medically dangerous, it was many months before I could learn how to let air pass unobstructed, in and out of my lungs.)

It was right after I betrayed my mother by deciding that I hated her that I embarked on having daughters of my own. I was 19 years old. I would experience the perfect love she could not have. I chose a man whose energy came from a pure and passional place, unmarred by the intellectual distraction that I had, in my youth, blamed for the deadening of passion in my parents.

What did I take from my mother when I left her? Why did I have to leave her so early and so completely? Long hours I spent wandering through art galleries and the dim chambers of dark churches, looking at images of madonnas and children, beatific and serene. I was trying to be a visual artist then, so I drew many mothers and children, in playgrounds and on subway trains. Then suddenly I found myself longing for a baby. Although I was scarcely more than a child myself, I became obsessed with the wish to have a child to take care of, to nurture and to love. Out of my newfound sexual love, I'd do the thing my mother could not do: I'd make the perfect mother-child relationship.

I remember vividly the winter of my first pregnancy. I reached my twentieth year when I was in my seventh month. As I grew big with the new being turning and turning inside me, I felt a wholeness and a beauty I had never felt before. No more could the old women in my daytime painting class hurt me by judging me, by thinking me awkward and strange. I carried a man's seed; I was a maker of life. I carried the fruits of sexuality and passion in my body, visibly. I was a woman, more fully a woman than the shriveled older ones who taunted me and claimed my marriage wouldn't last, because, they said, marriages between people so young rarely survive. All loneliness left me as I took my husband's wonderfully solid head to my naked belly, so he could listen to our baby's heartbeat and its hiccoughing. I had

surpassed my mother and I hated her for having tortured me so long, reminding me of my own weakness.

When Rachel was first born, she was the perfect baby of my fantasies. But she had not yet come awake. My husband took many beautiful pictures of her nursing at my breast, pictures that had that familiar contented aura of the madonnas that I loved so. I held my breath, feeling that at last I had conquered the downward rush of my destiny. I would not inherit my mother's anxiety or pain. Though I was very young and inexperienced, a spirit of love dwelled in me that would save me. Although I had always been an atheist, I was quite sure that I was blessed.

I remember one time when I was nursing Rachel and my mother came to visit me. She started to cry, at the beauty of it, she said. She had wanted so badly to nurse me, I knew, but she had had no milk. In an era in which bottle feeding had been the vogue, she had bravely defied the decrees against breast feeding, choosing the warmer, more vulnerable human form. I remembered vividly her tales of the other women in the hospital, whose bound breasts dripped with the milk they would not give, while her proffered breast remained empty, and I, unable to appreciate the largeness of the offering, cried with starvation.

Now Rachel is going away to M.I.T. For days she has been washing her clothing, packing it into boxes and taping them shut. The boxes are piled high next to the exit door, blocking the comings and goings of the family that will be left behind. It seems that she is taking everything she owns, as if she will never come back. She is going to be a scientist; she will never do what I did, subjecting herself and others to the starving artist's life. She will never get married to a man she cannot love forever. She does not believe in divorce. She will not have children until she has money and wisdom enough to care for them. She is a staunch believer in taking responsibility for one's own actions. "You blame your mother too much for the way that you turned out," she often says to me. She is going to take full responsibility for herself. Quietly she has worked toward this moment. She earned the grades and scholarships that made it possible, shutting her door, mentally blocking the sounds of the mice running through their squeaky homemade ferris wheels that came from her middle sister's balcony built in tier fashion just above her own, those animal sounds that were all too soon replaced by the thumping of raucous rock-and-roll, blocking out her younger sister's quarrels with me. "It's much too late to change our family," she'd say to me from time to time. "You had already messed it up, and anyway I will be leaving soon. I'll never do the things that you have done."

I was her age when I married her father. My parents had not found real love with each other, but I would. I was a year older than Rachel, feeling confused, empty, and lonely. I began to wander through playgrounds looking at mothers, wanting her, wanting the happiness my mother had once dreamed with me, that then we could not keep.

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Soon after my mother came to watch me feeding Rachel, crying at the beauty of it all, Rachel began to cry at feeding time. Something had happened to my body. Every muscle in it was tense and drawn. Every time that Rachel's big blue eyes would wander up toward mine, I felt an anxiousness that must have frightened her. I imagined myself as a demon very terrible, to scare a baby so. Gone was the beauty I had worn in pregnancy, and the illusion that I could defy my mother's destiny. And yet I continued to have daughters, looking, looking for something that was lost.

As I watch Rachel pack for college, a strange envy creeps up in me for all that she will know, and that I lost long ago by marrying so young. Is she eager to enter the new life that I look at with such longing? It is hard to tell. She talks only about wanting to get away from all of us, for in a deep way we all have disappointed her. Day after day, envelopes come in the mail for Rachel. She gets her voter's registration card and notification of the date for her driving test. She takes care of all of her packing and all of her business by herself. She never once admits vulnerability or fear. Then one day she mentions that she wants a teddy bear to take to college. She is very businesslike even about this. She doesn't want it to be a gift, she says. She goes to the bank with her card to take out money to buy it. She goes with her best friend to pick it out.

After the first disappointment about perfect breast feeding, I stopped trying to replicate the closeness with my children that my mother claimed to have had with me. I held them facing outward so that they could see the world instead of me. Gently, half hiding myself, I tried to help them make their way into the world. I never dared try to be too close to them yet, strangely, over the years a closeness grew.

I remember once, long ago, reading Bettelheim's *Children of the Dream*. It must have been when the children were quite young. The details of the book are hazy to me now, but I still see clearly in my mind a chapter heading that read: "They were too big and we are too little." I must have stared at that chapter heading for a long, long time, taking it in. I remember that the mothers in Bettelheim's study had relinquished their roles because they felt smothered by the grandeur of their own mothers. They preferred to have their children reared by the community, rather than subject them to the intensive imprints of individual and monolithic mothering.

But now I am reading Virginia Woolf, exalted images of the everyday. Into my head come rather simple pictures: my mother's kitchen, a certain ambience of comfort that I knew in her house. How fully I fled from that comfort out of fear of her. I am tired suddenly of the ladders that my artist husband built, the money worries and awkwardly reached sleeping balconies that he left to me. I want to talk to my mother about kitchens and coffee tables, serving things. I want to watch her cook a thousand dinners till I learn to prepare food easily and gracefully. "I left too soon," I want to say. But years of mutual meanness swell like swords.

Shyly, timidly, I explain to my three daughters that I am writing an essay on competition. May I write about them? May I use their stories? I know that they

are not completely comfortable with the tale-telling part of my writer's personality, the lack of privacy about my writer's life. To my amazement, Rachel and Gwynne give an immediate yes. Jane, who has a bit of a legal bent, tells me that there is a small chance she might agree to allow me to include material about her if I decide it is worthwhile to do the hard work of writing those sections on speculation. I am moved and surprised at their willingness, at the trust that has been so long in coming and so difficult to finally let in.

"Don't forget to tell the kitchen story in the essay," Gwynne says. Aptly, one day, she points out to me that I will never work in the kitchen unless one of the children keeps me company. "You must have had happy memories of working in the kitchen with your mother," she suggests. "They must have been your only happy memories. But if I help you, I prefer to work alone." She is the child who gave her father her own quilt when I asked him to move away. Coming from a broken home, and seeing so many broken homes all around her, she is very worried about her own future happiness. She is a year and a half younger than Rachel, and has never learned to shut out the unhappiness of others, even though, more and more lately, she shuts her door. She is the artist of the children, and wants to have children of her own. She is quite sure of that. But she wants to escape the suffering. She has a tendency to take too much responsibility for others, draining herself, leaving too little for herself. Unlike Rachel, she is very concerned that the family "heal" before she leaves it. The other day she handed me my wedding ring. She had been saving it for years, she said, because she was worried that I would lose it. Now she thinks I am ready to take good care of it. She tells me that she also has our marriage license, which she found pressed in a book of *Gauguin* prints. Over and over, she asks me to talk about the good things about the marriage, the good things about her father. In love, at last, with another man, I am finally ready to do so. As a child, I was told too many tales. Perhaps, I worry, I have told too few.

I remember the time that Gwynne came to me, explaining that she no longer wanted to share her secrets with me. She must have been about 11. "I always felt I had to share my secrets with my mother," I said to her. "I think it is probably healthier that you move away." When she was very small, she was extremely close to me. But then for years she idolized her father, hardly allowing me to touch her, keeping me away. Now as her image of her father's absolute perfection shatters, she comes to me to share her pain. She complains to me that she worships me almost too much. And I cry: Don't! From time to time she talks to me about my wisdom, about my courage. And suddenly I am afraid—afraid of this late-found affection, afraid of surpassing my own mother in my mothering. What if I find a way to keep my daughters, when my mother could not find a way of keeping me?

My mind is wandering. Piled high upon my desk are the loose pages of Phyllis Chesler's forthcoming book: *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody.*[5] are more than a thousand pages filled with passionate case histories of women who lose children through being judged "not good enough." "This book is about what it means to be a 'good enough' mother," the preface begins. It is a massive study

of the ways in which the expectation of maternal perfection sabotages women in the battle to maintain child custody. "Mothers have always been custodially endangered," the opening chapter reads. "Black slave mothers; impoverished, racially despised, 'immoral' or unwed mothers; white married 'ladies'; Princesses and Queens; women of independent means; and women of creative genius; were all custodially challenged and victimized by their husbands or the state." Did the daughters grieve for their lost, maligned mothers? Or did they collaborate in attacking their mothers, demanding of them a perfection that no human being could meet, denying their sense of loss while taking into their own beings the attacks? And when in turn the daughters became mothers, inevitably flawed, did they allow the world to flagellate them, as once it had flagellated their mothers, now that they realized that they too were participants in that inexorable maternal legacy of falling short?

I return to Virginia Woolf, to Mrs. Ramsey who is looking for a picture of something sharp with jagged edges for her son to cut out from his catalogue. She knows the son feels furious at his father, and she is looking for something with complicated blades to distract him. Later, after Mrs. Ramsey has died, her son will imagine piercing his father through the heart. But the mother has been killed by natural forces, not by her daughters. In that famous passage in which time itself becomes a whirlwind, obliterating its own traces, she is killed invisibly, offstage. It is not coincidental that later one of her daughters also dies, in childbirth.

I remember that day looking at my hands and feet, hearing a quality in my voice that reminded me of my mother, and realizing that I would always bear her deep within me. It was then that the suicidal sense completely went away, as a knowledge of its origin suddenly came upon me—a knowledge of the depth of my desire to kill the thing that was my mother in me, to melt, in melting my own flesh, all that was left of her in me. It was a violence that had had no place, so it turned inward, daggerlike, on me.

They say that at about the age of 40 a strange letting-go occurs. I have another year or two to go, but already I can begin to feel a softening, a muting of the harsh demands I used to place upon myself. I remember my mother at forty. She still had my father then. She still had me. "Do not be afraid," I want to say to Gwynne, "to do what I can't do." I am doing fairly well now, but for many years after her father left, I was not a very good mother. Beginning to read Phyllis Chesler's manuscript, I realize belatedly that it is not actual custody I have been fighting for, but custody of my children's affection. I was so afraid that I would lose them to their father as my mother once lost me. For years I wore myself to a frazzle, trying to be perfect against every odd and feeling always that I was failing, failing miserably.

As I try to collect my thoughts, Jane comes into the room. So often, it seems, she is in mortal competition with me for the possession of my own mental space. So often, it seems, we war about who lives in whom, and who dictates the movements of the other in and out. And yet there is a richness in that war, a compassion and closeness.

A staunch sense of proximity to her own truth has kept her from developing that "tollkeeper" that so often protects us and others around us from our most primal and frightening thoughts. "I wish you would commit suicide," she has cried out from time to time, when she has felt my presence most threatening to her own essence. More violent and graphic than the standard "I wish you were dead," her cry becomes a terrifying and yet moving plea, asking me to obliterate that larger-than-life essence of myself that roots inside her very flesh, that *me* in her that smothers her own sense of separateness.

Though my daughters are leaving me physically, I feel them coming closer with the passing years. Even with Jane, my youngest, as she enters adolescence, there is a breaking of a certain warfare wherein lay a certain kind of bond. Though still, occasionally, I feel that she is in competition with me for my time, demanding that we both be there for her, doing whatever *she* must do, demanding that I look at her and listen to her totally, leaving my own thoughts, my own work and dreams, more and more often now she runs away, into her own room toward the telephone and her own friends. She looks so lithe and lovely now. She is not quite as tall as I am, but I know that in another year she will be taller, as her sisters are. Already she is starting to outgrow my shoes. She used to wear my curvature upon her spine, but it has been surgically corrected. For a while she was furiously angry at me, for the inherited deformity. But hers is fixed now. Mine, a milder form, remains, a visible reminder. Sometimes she turns on it—on me—with hate. But gradually even that anger fades. She cares well for her beautiful body, her beautiful face. Will I be big enough to rejoice in all my daughters have that I was unable to have, that I may never have? Will I be big enough to let them grow bigger than I can ever be?

And yet, as I look at the literature, as I look at my own feelings—playing over and over again my own earliest memories, through teaching and through mothering and making art—as my own mother at last shrinks to become only another uncertain human, making all too human errors in her attempts to give and receive nurture, I wonder whether most of the competitive feelings do come from the demonized, larger-than-life-sized mothers, or whether this image is merely a manifestation of the daughter's great, somewhat inexplicable, discomfort with her own competitive feelings, with her own desire to be the unmentionable usurper princess of our darkest dreams. I wonder what might happen in a world where all people shared equally the joys and burdens of the competitive feelings now relegated to men, the important mandates of compassion and nonviolence which are now only women's legacy. I wonder what new loves might be unleashed, if only we might dare to touch the other images of our own violent fantasies against our makers in ways destined to unleash movement and gentleness, new hope.

For a long time after I rejected my husband, I didn't dare to love another man. My mother didn't have a man. I left my mother early, right after my father left her. Long years it took before I felt the punishment for that early betrayal come down on me full force. Now, as I reach toward loves that will be possible again, I

feel the loss of many, many years. "And yet," my lover says, "you made three books during those years; you made three babies. Your time wasn't really lost."

My babies are becoming women now. I worry about how I might have hurt them, how I might have damaged them. The books, out in the world in ways I never can take back, are full of evil mothers and hurt daughters looking for a rescuer, disappointed daughters turning on themselves.

I see my three daughters standing together. Gradually, after long years of rivalry, they are starting to grow fond of one another. I am quite glad of this, though I feel a bit wistful for the time when I was their center. And yet, I do not want to be the center of their wheel, as my mother once was for me. "Hate me, when you want to; run from me, when you have to. Do not try to make me perfect. Do not worship me," I want to cry out, so they take in instantly all that I struggled for so long to know.

"Hate me from time to time, when you have to. Don't be afraid to outdistance me. Disparage what you don't want to inherit. Be brave. Be beautiful. Don't worry if it will be hard for me.

"I love you."

NOTES

1. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, eds., *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1980).

2. Susan Peck MacDonald, "Jane Austen and the Tradition of the Absent Mother," in *The Lost Tradition*, ed. Davidson and Broner, 58.

3. Ibid., 59.

4. Myra Glazer Sholtz, "The Great Unwritten Story: Mothers and Daughters in Shakespeare," in *The Lost Tradition*, ed. Davidson and Broner.

5. Phyllis Chesler, *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).