INTRODUCTION

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Who fed me from her gentle breast
And hush’d me in her arms to rest
And on my cheek sweet kisses prest?

—Ann Taylor Gilbert, “My Mother” (1805)

“Oh, Willie, my child dead, dead, dead! and he never knew me,
ever called me mother!” (Falls sobbing across the body . . . )

—T. A. Palmer, East Lynne (1874)

The phrase “other mothers” conjures up familiar images of transgression and despair: adulteresses who abandon their children, young girls seduced and forsaken, tragic figures that are the anathematized mirror of ideal motherhood. As the sanctification of motherhood gained its full ideological force in the nineteenth century, the successful or failed performance of maternity became the ubiquitous subject of social debate and textual representation. Our two epigraphs capture the fervor of mother-worship, one extolling the perfect responsiveness of maternal tenderness, the other dramatizing the pathos of maternal estrangement. Of course, no one could live up to perfect selflessness, purity, and love connoted by “mother”; in this sense, all mothers are other mothers. But this impossibility did not prevent the ideal from securing a highly visible place in Victorian culture.

In spite of its importance, however, maternity itself is one of the least-studied aspects of the Victorian era. It has been annexed to formulations of gender, the private sphere, and the consolidation of the bourgeois values. More recently, maternity has been implicated in the ideological structures of race and nation. Yet detailed explorations that range beyond these ideas are rare. Although maternity is routinely placed at the center of constructions of femininity and domesticity, it has received surprisingly little atten-
tion as a distinct conception or experience. Most often, it is collapsed into treatments of femininity and domesticity, mentioned and then subsumed into a more general analysis of gender roles. The idealization of motherhood was an unquestionable part of the Victorian landscape, even though, as we will argue, its precise meaning, reach, power, and use were far from uniform. As asserted in foundational works by Nancy Armstrong, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Martha Vicinus (Suffer), the Angel in the House symbolized cherished bourgeois values. She was an imaginative grounding point for femininity, just as femininity was a grounding point for domesticity. The virtues of the middle-class woman and of the home over which she was to preside emanated from an image of the mother as pure, self-sacrificing, and devoted, a spiritual influence and a moral instructress. Definitions of gender and of gender difference, particularly the reinvention of femininity as chaste, subordinate, and exempted from wage-earning labor, depended on this idealization, which in turn helped to justify the supremacy of the middle class. Similarly, as a repository of virtues and a conduit of values to the next generation, the mother functioned as both a fantasized origin and ideological touchstone for the racial and national superiority of the British nation as it extended its overseas empire. As Ann Laura Stoler asserts, “Child rearing . . . was hailed as a national, imperial, and racial duty” (72). Maternity was expected to anchor key cultural oppositions such as masculine versus feminine, bourgeois versus working class, British versus foreign, and white versus racially other, along with the more abstract oppositions underlying them: spiritual versus corporeal, pure versus impure, private versus public, and leisure versus labor.

Even as this model of the domestic ideal as the ground for an ideology of separate sphere was established, however, it was also being complicated, at times by the very same works that helped to establish it as a critical commonplace. Mary Poovey’s Uneven Developments (1988), in particular, at once argued for the social and culture centrality of the separate spheres ideology, exposed the contradictions at its center, and demonstrated the ways in which those contradictions destabilized the gendered oppositions of Victorian culture. Uneven Developments emerged at the beginning of an era of revisionist gender scholarship, most of it published in about a decade between the late 1980s through the 1990s, whose scope, richness, and sheer quantity is extraordinary.¹ One could consider this the golden age of Victorian gender studies, when basic paradigms were continually qualified,

¹ In spite of the length of this survey, it is not intended to be exhaustive but omits important and impressive books in the interests of (relative) brevity.
reexamined, and rethought. “The Angel in the House,” once shorthand for the stable constellation of qualities described above, became a complex, contradictory figure.

The titles of Elizabeth Langland’s Nobody’s Angels (1995) and Dorice Williams Elliott’s The Angel Out of the House (2002) declare the revisionist spirit of this criticism as it deconstructs the Angel in the House, separate spheres, and the idea of a single, coherent “female nature” as unquestioned ideological and empirical norms. Such works, also including Linda Peterson’s Family, Love, and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen (1989), Judith Walkowitz in City of Dreadful Delight (1992), Mary Jean Corbett’s Representing Femininity (1992), Deborah Nord in Walking the Victorian Streets (1995), Margaret Beetham’s A Magazine of Her Own (1996), and Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s The Spectacle of Intimacy (2000), insist that women regularly traversed the physical boundaries between domestic and public space, that they played active roles in the so-called public sphere, and that, even in the home, they participated directly and indirectly in economic life.

Private life was not so private after all, nor was the public world exclusively populated by men. Critics traced the instability of the private/public boundary, with the governess attracting special attention as a figure who condensed many resulting ambiguities. Resembling the members of the middle-class family she served, she nevertheless stood apart from it; exhibiting her education and female accomplishments, she did so for pay rather than from the heart; theoretically protected from the stresses of the marketplace, in practice she was compelled to earn a living.2 The scandal of her economic and social vulnerability not only questioned the patriarchal division of labor, it also called into question the nature of family responsibilities, which were both sanctified as the “natural” expression of womanhood and handed over to the help in the form of poorly remunerated labor. Once mined for their simplistic, binary definitions of femininity, conduct books became understood as sites of debates over the extent to which women should participate directly in their domestic role.3 Religiously inspired works might exhort women to eschew idleness and take responsibility for every aspect of their homes, but other texts argued that the daily frustrations of housework and child care might compromise women’s

2 Poovey again provides a foundational discussion of the governess in Uneven Development; see also Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros’s The Victorian Governess Novel (2001) and Kathryn Hughes’s The Victorian Governess (2003).

3 See Beetham (162–64), Anderson (Powers of Distance 55), and Davidoff and Hall (335–42) for scholarly treatments of this debate, as well as Regaignon’s essay in this volume, “Infant Doping and Middle-Class Motherhood.”
ability to model the virtues of serenity and patience; still others urged women to exercise domestic dominion by controlling their servants, fulfilling their role as apparently private angels through economic authority. Alongside this revisionist scholarship, masculinity underwent an equally dramatic reassessment that further undermined the hegemonic power of separate spheres and heterosexuality in the construction of gender.\textsuperscript{4}

Further compromising the association of women with a tightly enclosed domestic sphere, philanthropy and nursing offered public outlets for qualities designated as feminine. Justified as a logical extension of their domestic mandate, this public femininity raised questions about women’s social destiny. Studies of women such as Josephine Butler, Florence Nightingale, and Queen Victoria—that most public of feminine women—emphasized the satisfaction found in work apart from the family, sometimes revealing deep frustration with the constraints of bourgeois womanhood.\textsuperscript{5} In doing so, they drove a wedge between “domesticity” and “femininity,” uncovering Victorian critiques of the bourgeois home while performing highly valued “woman’s work” outside its walls. Alison Booth’s \textit{How to Make It as a Woman} (2004) unfolds the extraordinary variety of women offered as models to Victorian female readers, from predictable choices such as Queen Victoria to eye-opening subversives such as Charlotte Corday, assassin of Jacques-Louis Marat during the French Revolution. Similarly, critics have discovered resources for self-assertion as well as service in the rhetoric of domesticity. In her analysis of Florence Nightingale, Poovey discloses the “aggressive component” of home management that underwrote Nightin-

\textsuperscript{4} Masculinity studies such as James Eli Adams’s \textit{Dandies and Desert Saints} (1995), Joseph Kestner’s \textit{Masculinity in Victorian Painting} (1995), and Herbert Sussman’s \textit{Victorian Masculinities} (1995) insist on the performative nature of masculinity along with the anxieties that clustered around its multiple, socially constructed, and therefore unstable forms. In John Tosh’s \textit{A Man’s Place} (1999), men cross the imaginary boundary between private and public as they struggle to fulfill a domestic role. Works on muscular Christianity, such as Donald Hall’s collection \textit{Muscular Christianity} (1994), consider the tensions between the physical dimensions of masculinity and its moral imperatives, which were frequently coded feminine. Perhaps most dramatically, scholarship has situated homoeroticism and homosexuality at the center of Victorian masculinity. Linda Dowling’s \textit{Hellenism and Homosexuality} (1994) and Christopher Lane’s \textit{The Burdens of Intimacy} (1999) are only two examples of the substantial body of work untangling the complex prohibitions, evasions, and enticements structuring a continuum of same-sex bonds. Wide-ranging books and essay collections, such as William Cohen’s \textit{Sexual Scandal} (1996) and Richard Dellamora’s \textit{Victorian Sexual Dissidence} (1999), have continued to problematize gender categories, their interrelationships, and their relationships to categories of sexuality.

\textsuperscript{5} Adrienne Munich’s \textit{Queen Victoria’s Secrets} (1996) and Munich and Margaret Homans’s collection \textit{Remaking Queen Victoria} (1997) consider the ideological contradictions of Victoria as private woman but public monarch.
gale's ruthless professionalism (“Uneven Developments” 170). Women’s authority, resistance, and self-assertion both inside and outside the home now compel our attention. The subject of women’s power—its nature, meaning, and extent in specific settings—has now become so thoroughly a part of our understanding that it is generating its own controversies, as in Amanda Anderson’s recent critique of what she calls the “aggrandized agency” Poovey and Langland attribute to particular Victorian women.\(^6\) Thanks to this revisionist scholarship, issues raised by public work and domestic power structures are now central problematics in the study of Victorian women and gender ideology.

Questions of agency and power have also made female display, especially in the form of sexuality, a privileged site of investigation.\(^7\) A significant body of work has complicated the binary of purity and transgression, as women’s bodies have become visible in contexts beyond traditional erotic plots and the heterosexual dyad. Representative of this scholarship is the multifaceted collection *Sexualities in Victorian Britain* (1996), whose title indicates the range of its investigations and conclusions, from the construction of the sexually pure, imputedly “classless” woman who erases the process of class formation, to the demonization of female pleasure in medical science, to the dependence of masculinity on the apparently passive Angel in the House, to a sexually and economically motivated case of cross-dressing. Dispensing with an overarching theory of female sexuality, this collection suggests the multiple contexts and aims that proliferated incompatible versions of female sexuality. Martha Vicinus uncovers a rich tradition of same-sex attachment in *Independent Women* (1985) and *Intimate Friends* (2004), while Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women* (2007) charts a subtle field of female affiliations that resists the familiar binaries of homosexual/heterosexual and submissive/transgressive. Related scholarship, such as Dorothy Mermin’s *Godiva’s Ride* (1993), has been particularly attentive to the liminal figure of the woman writer, who, like the governess, occupied a space at once public and private. Delineating human emotions and relationships (and able to work at home, unlike other employed women), she also circulated her name in public, a form of visibility that could also be pathologized as indecent, akin to the physical display of

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\(^7\) Other works developing this theme of display include Tracy Davis’s *Actresses and Working Women* (1991), along with treatments of the significant trials of Caroline Norton by Poovey and of Queen Caroline by Anna Clark, whose book *The Struggle for Breeches* (1995) pays special attention to the unlikely convergence of class and gender agendas in the heroizing of Caroline.
actresses and prostitutes. As with agency, its close relation, female embodiment has taken on multiple, complex-specific meanings that complicate the imputed hegemony of male gaze, masculine sexual privilege, and patriarchal control.

Inevitably, deconstructing the Angel in the House and the ideology of separate spheres revealed their class-specific nature, urging the articulation of class as an analytical category and the study of lower-class women. Studies of urban journalism, philanthropy, and industrial reform revealed different “images of women” that challenged simple formulations of sexual difference. While Victorian commentators condemned working-class women who failed to enact middle-class models, they also acknowledged the obvious fact that physical labor and economic exigency played a more insistent role in working women’s lives. While not unknown to representations of middle-class life, violence, aggression, and extreme economic vulnerability became part of the vocabulary of Victorian gender studies. Moreover, even though bourgeois ideals might condemn the poor, they could also invoke melodramatic narratives of female victimhood, granting impoverished women some limited purchase in the legal and economic system. Françoise Barret-Ducrocq’s controversial Love in the Time of Victoria (1991) and Ginger Frost’s Promises Broken (1995) demonstrate the power of this discourse in the settings of the foundling hospital and the courtroom. Images of working-class women’s bodies further denaturalized the bourgeois ideal of femininity. Particularly as photography became recognized as an essential tool for constructing and manipulating identities, meanings of “the female body” multiplied. The relationship between the gentleman Arthur Munby and the maid-of-all-work Hannah Cullwick, culminating in a secret marriage, emerged as a fertile case study in these dynamics in Anne McClintock’s Imperial Leather (1995) and Carol Mavor’s Pleasures Taken (1995). Cullwick appears as a sturdy scullery maid, an attractive lady, a man, and, in blackface, as a slave. As this last incarnation makes literal, scholarship also reckoned with the semiotic importance of race as a marker of identity in the study of working-class women.

Similarly, as Victorian studies has embraced postcolonial theory, the

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8 For example, see Seth Koven’s Slumming (2004), especially chapter 4, “The Politics and Erotics of Dirt: Cross Class Sisterhood in the Slums” (183–227).

foreign spaces of empire divulge further complexities and ambiguities, particularly with regard to race. Imperial conquest invoked an idealized white, middle-class femininity to justify imperial missions. White middle-class women were sanctified as the source of racial purity (a claim with obvious implications for motherhood), while their imputed vulnerability authorized British violence against native men. McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* and Jennifer Brody’s *Impossible Purities* (1998) have shown that, as whiteness emerged as a crucial category defining Britishness and metropolitan superiority, imperialism used racial categories to stabilize the unpredictability of cross-cultural encounters. Metonymically associated with foreign landscapes, nonwhite women’s bodies invited male penetration, while fantasies about native women’s sexuality authorized white male predation. Within these imperialistic paradigms, however, white British and colonial women found new possibilities. Colonial settings, different cultural contexts, and varied geographies attenuated the hold of the metropolitan center, sometimes imposing greater hardships, sometimes permitting greater freedoms. Emphasizing the significance of sexual relations as part of an overarching European imperialist project, Ann Laura Stoler, in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002), also urged critics to pay detailed attention to the particularities of local contexts, which forcefully inflect the workings of gender, race, and class.

In spite of their diversity, several themes and insights emerge from these studies. One theme is a focus on female subjectivity, agency, mobility, and authority as they are authorized by precisely those formulations that were originally understood to contain them. “Victorian femininity” has become an open category, generating contradictions, possibilities, and life paths in many different directions. Particularly as masculinity and heterosexuality have been displaced from their normative status, femininity is no longer locked in a simple relational dyad with masculinity. We now recognize its mutual constitution with many identities, in shifting and context-specific forms. Scholarship on class and imperialism has articulated gender in terms of class and race, charting not simply intersections—as if in other contexts women might not be classed or raced—but the inseparability of these identity categories. The interrelationship between gender and other categories further detaches femininity from the home, masculinity, and the private sphere. As we have recognized this complexity, we have also come to see femininity as a symbolic space in which a wide range of cultural anxieties can be projected, represented, and displaced. Emerging in many different cultural sites, it can be appropriated to symbolize a variety of emotionally charged values in public discourse and can anchor a variety of choices and experiences in individual lives.
This fertile period has produced a handful of outstanding works that are important exceptions to the scholarly silence around Victorian motherhood. Most prominently, in *Death and the Mother from Freud to Dickens* (1998), Carolyn Dever has theorized the significance of maternal absence and death in the works of both Freud and canonical Victorian novelists. Dever links the emergence of psychoanalytic theory’s preoccupation with the mother with the Victorian novel, arguing that the maternal void poses fundamental questions about origin and the development of individual identity. Dever’s text provides a compelling account of cultural preoccupations with the dead mother, though its treatment of the situation, roles, representations, and experiences of mothers is necessarily limited.

Along with Dever’s work, two areas of scholarship have developed important critical and historical insights into Victorian mothers and motherhood. In the field of literary and cultural studies, Jill Matus, Mary Poovey, and Sally Shuttleworth have all examined overlapping connections between maternity and sexuality. All three scholars draw upon Victorian medical discourses about the sexed female body to demonstrate Victorian anxieties about the proximity between woman’s maternal role and her sexuality. Matus’s examination of imbrication of Victorian motherhood with concerns about female sexuality is the most extensive of these studies. In *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (1995), she charts the articulation of both “moral” motherhood and maternal deviance in relation to sexed female body, though not always to sexuality per se. Examining cultural concerns about working-class motherhood, wet-nursing and infanticide, maternal instinct, and insanity, she develops readings of maternal characters in a range of novels, providing wide-ranging representations of embodied mothers and types of maternal failure or deviance. Matus’s study participates in the broader project of Victorian gender and queer studies by moving beyond conventional understandings of nineteenth-century discourses of gender and sexuality. Her goal is to

10 It is worth repeating that, even in this explosion of gender scholarship, treatments of maternity are rare. Langland’s *Nobody’s Angels* and Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) do not even index motherhood or maternity. Of the many works in Victorian gender/literary studies cited here, only Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* (1988) and Margaret Homans’s *Bearing the Word* (1986) treat maternity in an extended way. More recently, Monica Cohen’s *Professional Domesticity* (1998) does not address motherhood at all. In the area of race, nation, and empire, Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* (1995), Catherine Hall’s collection *Civilizing Subjects* (2002), Anita Levy’s *Other Women* (1991), Jennifer Brody’s *Impossible Purities* (1998), and Laura Ann Stoler’s *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002) do not offer substantive discussions. Treatments of class such as Regenia Gagnier’s *Subjectivities* (1991) and Hall’s *Defining the Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (2000) are also silent.
demonstrate that sexual difference was not fixed in a rigid binary either in Victorian biomedical discourse or in the novel, but was rather characterized by slippage and approximation. Fraught sites of instability, these maternal aberrations generate both anxieties and discursive possibility.

Where Matus identifies the slippages and instabilities that challenge hierarchical gendered power structures, Sally Shuttleworth and Mary Poovey identify such challenges in the operation of ideological contradiction. As Shuttleworth writes in “Demonic Mothers” (1992):

[...]he very ideological centrality of these [sacred maternal ideals] ensured that motherhood was not the still point around which other contradictions might turn, but rather a field of potent conflict in itself. Far from guaranteeing, by its seemingly unchallengeable status, areas of agreement over ideological conflict, it acted as a focal point for many of the most problematic areas of Victorian ideology. (31)

Thus the image of the idealized mother was continually threatened and displaced by that of the demonic mother. As in Matus’s study, Shuttleworth’s examination of ideology centers on constructions of the female body. Looking at advice books, medical texts, and novels, she demonstrates the multiple ways in which the maternal body is also always a sexual body. Even apparently nonsexual concerns such as maternal health and breastfeeding are informed by concerns about self-regulation, indulgence, and excess that have dense sexual connotations. Mary Poovey’s chapter “Scenes of an Indelicate Character: The Medical Treatment of Victorian Women” in Uneven Developments, while much narrower in its focus, also locates the disruption of rigid binaries of gender and the images of maternity in ideological contradictions. Poovey’s chapter examines the medical debate about the use of anesthesia in childbirth, as well as the competition between medical and religious accounts of childbirth. In particular, she discusses how women’s apparent sexual excitation while under anesthesia during childbirth exposed conflicting definitions of women as at once fundamentally maternal, and hence necessarily embodied, and essentially moral and asexual.

Matus, Shuttleworth, and Poovey all show that the popular image of the ideal mother was not a simple orthodoxy. Their research into medical and advice literature also makes visible the many aspects of motherhood that concerned the Victorian public, not just caregiving, but also breastfeeding, the question of maternal instinct, heredity legacies, and the very act of giving birth. This scholarship has provided an important resource for other critics, ensuring that motherhood is not defined solely in terms
of the idealized images and prescriptions made famous by such texts as Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House,” Sarah Ellis’s *Mothers of England*, and John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*. The concentration of this scholarship around medical texts, including medical advice books and articles, charts a specific archive addressing a particular range of issues that, focusing on the maternal body, inevitably ties motherhood to issues associated with sexuality. Such focused investigations encourage scholars to seek out other sources to extend our understanding of motherhood as a multifaceted phenomenon in which the broad category of “sexuality” can be developed in many directions. In *Between Women* (2007), for instance, Sharon Marcus examines the mother/daughter relationship in her treatments of fashion magazines and doll stories, which provide surprising representations of desire and aggression that elude conventional categories. Marcus argues forcefully that maternal relations need to be understood in relation to broad definitions of eroticism that range beyond the familiar theme of sexual transgression.

Other sources, generated by historians, engage issues besides sexuality by examining maternity in specific periods and geographical settings. Ellen Ross’s *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (1993) emphasizes the stresses of working-class motherhood, paying detailed attention to the remunerative and domestic labor that played a vital role in the family’s economic survival, and to the economic hardship that infiltrated the family’s affective life. In her account, the experiences and expectations of motherhood are emphatically class specific, with little reference to the separate spheres or delicacy of womanhood. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (1987), which focuses on Birmingham and the rural counties of Essex and Suffolk, has provided a crucial resource for Victorian scholars seeking to understand the way gender structured virtually all aspects of belief and everyday life for provincial bourgeois Evangelicals in the late eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. Davidoff and Hall’s treatment of motherhood itself is relatively condensed, but does cover important issues such as childbearing patterns, domestic management, children’s illnesses and mortality, surrogate mothering of nieces, and aging. These works by Ross and Davidoff and Hall make an invaluable contribution to our understanding of Victorian motherhood by examining the material realities of specific groups of mothers in particular contexts and will continue to serve as resources for Victorian scholars. At the same time, however, their focus on specific populations should encourage detailed exploration of other groups and locations in order to extend our understanding of the diversity and range of maternal experience and
representation in the nineteenth century. These three areas of scholarship—on maternal absence, on maternity and sexuality, and on specific historical and geographical sites—have each examined Victorian motherhood as involved in a specific set of concerns, rather than as coextensive with bourgeois femininity and domesticity.

This revisionist scholarship on both maternity and the construction of gender has accumulated to the point where the field as a whole seems poised for reorientation. In a recent article, Caroline Levine asserts, “We are at a turning point, it seems, when it comes to thinking about nineteenth century gender norms” (627). The idea of a hegemonic ideology or discourse seems increasingly reductive, even unproductive. Scholars have identified so many contradictions and transgressions that we cannot help but question the extent to which the familiar ideal of the female domestic angel constituted an article of faith, whether empirical or ideological. Further, we have enumerated so many different kinds of transgressions that they cannot be traced to a small constellation of values. We need to return to the very idea of Victorian norms and question the extent to which recurring declarations about women’s roles constituted a discursive regime or hegemonic ideology that controlled the social and cultural field. As the trend of this revisionist scholarship implies, such assumptions can oversimplify the complexity of power as well as the diversity and uneven texture of human social and subjective experience. To draw again on Levine’s analysis, “crude, binary ideologies—such as separate spheres—can dominate the social, cultural, and economic world at some moments, while at others, pressed by alternative and competing . . . imperatives, they also falter, are transformed, or even temporarily disappear” (629). Whether destabilized by internal inconsistencies or challenged by external resistance, the domestic femininity of the Angel in the House cannot serve as an unquestioned heuristic for scholarship.

This reorientation of the field has created a propitious moment to dislodge maternity from its imbrication in conventional formulations of domestic femininity. If scholarship no longer conceives of the domestic ideal as the linchpin of Victorian culture and society, then motherhood, too, can—and needs to—be reconceptualized.11 This is the aim of our

11 Indeed, two recent essays demonstrate the possibilities for such a reconceptualization. In “‘Their Calling Me “Mother” Was Not, I Think, Altogether Unmeaning’: Mary Seacole’s Maternal Personae,” Nicole Fluhr examines the way Mary Seacole’s autobiographical narrative constructs narrative personae out of a range of seemingly incompatible maternal ideals—middle and working class, black, mixed race, and white. Not only do the terms of Seacole’s maternal personae seem to be at odds, but there is also a tension between that textual personae and extratextual references to Seacole’s own biological daughter, about
collection: to open a conversation about Victorian motherhood in its diverse enactments and representations. The Victorian maternal ideal was at once more complex, less stable, less coherent, and less universal than the iconic simplicity it connoted. Although it has compelled attention because it has been presumed to have a regulative force, we see now that it did not play such a coercive cultural role. Certainly it was articulated often and in many forms, both directly and indirectly. But this widespread articulation does not automatically denote its hegemony. Nor does it limit alternatives to a systematic set of transgressions performed by a conventional cast of sinners. The essays in this collection ask what specific articulations of this ideal mean and how they function. Although it could operate powerfully in local and strategic ways, supplying an influential rhetoric or making available a compelling persona, the maternal ideal did not exhaust the possibilities of motherhood. In dialogue with a range of experiences and expectations, it is repeatedly revised when it came into contact with competing claims, such as the recognition that concrete economic exigencies, rather than or in addition to biological and spiritual ones, shape maternal behavior, or when individual mothers consciously fashioned alternative relationships with their children. Moreover, when understood as part of a complex field of experiences, beliefs, and identity categories, it is clear that the very force of the ideal provided metaphorical material that could be loosened from its intended aims and directed to other ends, generating new cultural and erotic forms.

In short, no single assertion can accommodate these highly variegated effects. Although we have attempted to achieve some coherence in this collection by using thematic rubrics to suggest shared concerns, we have not sought even local conclusions within these groupings. In *Touching/Feeling* (2003), Eve Sedgwick urges scholars to “specify and pluralize” our ignorance, recognizing how much we do not know and approaching these gaps with detailed local investigations that may well resist overarching generalizations (25). She playfully figures this diversity as siblings sharing a bed, an experience that may involve warmth, attachment, antagonism, incompatibility, thrashing, comfort—almost any possible relationship (8). whom Seacole herself remains completely silent. Another recent essay, Andrea Bobotis’s “Rival Maternities: Maud Gonne, Queen Victoria, and the Reign of the Political Mother,” “argues that Gonne both petitioned for Irish mothers’ involvement in nationalist politics and sustained her own elite class position by challenging Victoria’s embodiment of maternal sovereignty. Through her literary and dramatic personifications of Cathleen ni Houlihan and Mother Ireland, Gonne crafted a model of nationalist motherhood that, when placed alongside the Queen’s representations of imperial maternity, worked to promote Ireland’s divestiture of English governance” (63).
The range of our essays, along with the format of an essay collection itself, attempts to put this model into practice. Historically, the essays span Victoria’s range from the 1840s to the early twentieth century; geographically, they consider Australia and Egypt as well as Britain; in terms of genre, they engage an array of texts ranging from court reports and temperance tracts to autobiographies and novels. They examine maternal figures of diverse races, classes, ages, and even genders, in contexts that range from the frontlines of war and the scaffold to the domestic interiors of provincial England. These varied accounts take the collection “beyond the maternal ideal” to consider the multiple, unpredictable ways in which motherhood was experienced and imagined in this formative historical period.

We have organized these essays into four categories to provide a shorthand of the volume’s range and to suggest ways in which individual essays might be read in relation to each other. It will be obvious, however, that some threads, such as social class, cut across these divisions and that other organizational rubrics would create different interconnections. The ones we have chosen, however, highlight the most important relationships among the essays. Our organization places individual essays within the framework of current issues in Victorian studies, foregrounding the familiar categories of race, class, and gender, while individual essays and the divergent conclusions within each grouping demonstrate how complex such formations remained even in the historical moment when they were allegedly being consolidated.

The collection’s first group of essays, which we have titled “Beyond the Maternal Ideal,” addresses the discursive construction and playing out of the ideal itself, as attempts to fulfill that ideal reveal its impossibility, its unforeseen implications, or its destructiveness for mothers and children. The essays in this section take as their starting point the cultural importance of this idea, but then demonstrate the complexity of its functions in the texts and experiences of a broad range of Victorian, and even contemporary, writers. In “‘How to Be a Domestic Goddess’ Redux,” Deirdre d’Albertis looks at one way in which the internal logic of the ideal is played out in fiction to produce a version of maternity that seems fundamentally at odds with its hegemonic image. In particular, she compares the way in which seeming and feeling like a good mother substitute for “being” one (possessing some maternal essence) in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and Allison Pearson’s contemporary novel *I Don’t Know How She Does It*.

The essays by Laura Green and Heather Milton, in contrast, explore the ideal in terms of maternal potency. In “‘Long, Long Disappointment’: Maternal Failure and Masculine Exhaustion in Margaret Oliphant’s *Autobiography,*” Laura Green finds in Oliphant a figure who combines the
public and the maternal in complicated ways. Writing to support her family, Oliphant does not feel the conventional conflict about neglecting her children for her career, but rather regrets the toll economic pressure takes on her art and shakes off guilt when confronting her sons’ disappointing lives, diluting the notion of all-powerful maternal influence. Heather Milton turns to Eliot’s novel *Felix Holt* to expose maternal influence as a profoundly negative rather than a positive force. In “‘Bland, Adoring, and Gently Tearful Women’: Debunking the Maternal Ideal in George Eliot’s *Felix Holt*,” Milton measures the costs of “successful” maternity, as the self-sacrificing mother both frustrates herself and damages her son by raising him to perpetuate the destructive operations of male privilege. Together, the essays of Green and Milton call into question both the influence and the value of the maternal ideal.

In “Elderly Mothers and Middle-Aged Daughters in Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*,” Teresa Mangum approaches the maternal ideal through the relationship between aging mothers and middle-aged daughters, showing how the mothering failures of the paired characters “Cleopatra” and “Good Mrs. Brown” actually provide their adult daughters with crucial opportunities for human development. The very failure of these mothers to dispense unselfish love creates the narrative space for Edith Dombey and Alice Brown to move beyond their own narrowly self-centered emotional paradigms. Thus while Milton’s reading of *Felix Holt* reveals the destructiveness of the “ideal,” selfless mother, Mangum’s reading of *Dombey and Son* reveals the narrative and moral potentialities of maternal failures.

The collection’s second section—“‘Bad Mothers’: Caretaking, Class, and Maternal Violence”—takes destructive motherhood itself as its focus, concentrating specifically on literary and historical examples of maternal failure. The four essays in this section present spectacular departures from the ideal of maternal nurturance, exploring transgressions that do not involve the familiar theme of deviant sexuality. Presenting caretaking in concrete contexts rather than relying on abstract claims about mothers as spiritual guides, these essays reveal a surprising range of cultural attitudes toward failed mothers. Analyzing the portrayal of maternal alcoholism in religious fiction in “Unforgiven: Drunken Mothers in Hesba Stretton’s Religious Tract Society and Scottish Temperance League Fiction,” Deborah Denenholtz Morse traces the bourgeois narrative conventions that consign working-class mothers to death while granting middle-class mothers a second chance at maternity. In “Infant Doping and Middle-Class Motherhood: Opium Warnings and Charlotte Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain*,” Dara Rossman Regaignon uncovers a complex, perhaps unconscious ambivalence about middle-class mothers’ actual duties in the home. Focusing on the mediation of the working-class nurse’s paid daily care, Regaignon demonstrates
the novel’s unexpected if unstated conclusion that the middle-class mother is toxic to her children, both physically and psychologically.

The essays in this section also demonstrate the ways in which class identities placed the maternal ideal in dialogue with other claims and narratives. In this vein, Frost’s and Sussex’s essays restore an economic dimension to motherhood. In “Motherhood on Trial: Violence and Unwed Mothers in Victorian England,” Ginger Frost examines trials involving violence and unwed mothers, both as victims and perpetrators, finding that working-class status and an idealized conception of maternal instinct actually worked together to aid women on trial, even those accused of infanticide. Similarly, Lucy Sussex’s essay, “A Murdering Mother: Frances Knorr” examines the issue of infanticide through the trial of a working-class woman executed in Australia. Although the trial itself indicted her as a failed mother, the public sympathized with her extreme emotional and economic distress. Taken together, these essays demonstrate that class does not operate consistently across narratives, contexts, and settings, but takes on different meanings and leads to different outcomes. The familiar opposition between the good middle-class mother and the bad working-class one is upheld in Morse’s essay, challenged in the sympathetic reception of Frost’s and Sussex’s violent working-class mothers, and overturned in *The Daisy Chain*, in which the working-class nurse actually provides superior care.

In the collection’s third section, “Maternity and Difference: Nation, Race, and Empire,” foreign places and other races refigure maternity, while maternity alters expected power structures on a small scale, complicating hierarchical relations between individuals of different races and rewriting the authority of the English narrator in travel narratives. In “‘My Own Dear Sons’: Discursive Maternity and Proper British Bodies in Wonderf ul Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands,” Deirdre H. McMahon analyzes the representation of Mother Seacole, a black, childless woman who practiced a version of the public mothering of nurses and philanthropists in her support of Crimean troops. McMahon considers both the challenge Mother Seacole poses to the ideal’s biological and racial origin and the consolidation of the ideal as Seacole’s symbolic maternity masks the privations of actual women and children on the front. Similarly, in “Conceiving the Nation: Visions and Versions of Colonial Prenatality,” Deirdre Osborne examines short stories by white Australian authors to argue that colonial women’s displacement from the British imperial center allows them to revise representations of gender, racial, and class identities.

The remaining two essays in this section examine models of motherhood in which the bonds between mother and child are nonbiological and emphatically marked by racial difference. In “Orphan Stories and
Maternal Legacies in Charlotte Brontë,” Mary Jean Corbett looks at the difference race makes in Brontë’s adult fiction and juvenilia, exploring the role of the elusive, imagined birth mother in ambivalent representations of adoption as rescue, transformation, and colonization. Race and maternity are also imbricated with Britain’s colonial project in Cara Murray’s essay, “Distance Mothering and the ‘Cradle Lands’: Imperial Motherhood and Lady Duff Gordon’s Letters from Egypt.” Through an examination of Duff’s published letters, Murray explores the paradoxical experience of the mother who leaves her children in England to mother and be mothered by a racial other in a foreign setting. In these essays, the power of whiteness is apparent, though in different ways. As in part 2, this grouping both reflects familiar maternal oppositions, now extended to the categories of race and empire, and shows how their apparent fixity was reworked in specific contexts. Identity and power do not line up neatly and predictably within these dyads—white versus black, British versus non-British. Rather, power operates in complex ways and subjective categories are revealed as plastic, as black and colonial women in McMahon’s and Osborne’s essays both fulfill and revise the maternal ideal, and as the unseating of biological maternity as the privileged form of motherhood ruptures the racial boundaries of the family in essays by Corbett and Murray.

The final section of the collection focuses on the maternal body. The maternal body is a critical point of intervention, because it is the site that at once naturalizes maternity, identifying it with biological femininity, and challenges the spiritual essence of maternity. These essays reimagine the angelic, ethereal mother as an embodied presence, exploring the material, erotic, and figurative possibilities of the maternal body. In “The Text as Child: Gender/Sex and Metaphors of Maternity at the Fin de Siècle,” Brenda R. Weber returns the collection to the role of the woman writer, exploring attempts to unify maternity and artistic ambition. Examining the use of gestation and childbirth as metaphors for the creative process in the novels of three late-century women authors—Elizabeth Robins, Mary Cholmondeley, and Rhoda Broughton—Weber concludes that this rhetoric both normalized and limited their artistic ambitions, disciplining the possibilities of the mind by restricting the representations of the physical body. While Weber explores the complicated metaphoricity of female creativity, Lillian E. Craton and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman read the maternal body as an enticing physical presence. In “The Widest Lap: Fatness, Fasting, and Nurturance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” Craton analyzes literary celebrations of ample maternal figures, generally of the working class, as a critique of the bourgeois emphasis on self-denial, discovering a tacit argument connecting literal self-nourishment with the ability to care
emotionally for others. Rosenman examines a different form of embodied maternal desire in her essay, “Mother Love: Edith Simcox, Maternity, and Lesbian Erotics,” which takes up the subject of same-sex eroticism. Detaching maternity from heterosexuality, Simcox’s *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker* and *Episodes in the Lives of Men, Women, and Lovers* use mother-worship to both mask and authorize lesbian desire, altering the conventions of Victorian life writing in the process.

The wide-ranging scope of these essays, along with the shifting theoretical underpinnings of this collection as a whole, precludes the emergence of any single conclusion about Victorian motherhood. Paradoxically, this lack of a conclusion is perhaps the most important contribution of the collection. We hope it will encourage scholars to consider motherhood a “live” issue, posing a surprising range of questions and challenges in its many incarnations. As even these brief summaries should suggest, motherhood cannot be understood apart from its emergence through and with other categories, particularly race, class, and national/geographical setting. It takes on distinct meanings in specific contexts that this collection can only begin to explore.

Moreover, while our groupings suggest obvious contributions to familiar areas of study, demonstrating the multiple articulations of motherhood in relation to the crucial categories of class, race, and the body, it should also be obvious that these essays also connect along other axes. These alternative connections underscore and extend the manifold and context-specific nature of Victorian motherhood. Readers might consider the relationships among essays that deal with adoptive, constructed, or symbolic families, for example. Such familial ties cross not only class lines, as Mangum and Craton show in their readings of Dickens’s novels, but also racial boundaries, as demonstrated in McMahon’s analysis of Mary Seacole’s memoir, Corbett’s reading of Brontë’s adoption fictions, and Murray’s account of Lady Duff Gordon’s letters. Also represented in these essays are a few of the many examples of gender-crossing motherhood—the many male figures who stand in for absent or delinquent biological mothers to provide maternal nurture and domestic security for needy children. Morse’s readings of Hesba Stretton’s fictions reveal several such male mothers, as does Mangum’s portrait of Captain Cuttle and Sol Gills. The families created through these crossings are bound together by interest, emotion, shared experience, and the imaginations of the authors who describe them. When biological motherhood fails or loses its hold, other forms of maternity, other motherlike forms of nurturance, and other definitions of “family” come into being. Concomitantly, these new formations wash back onto biological maternity, questioning its emotional claims and cultural cogency.
Alternatively, readers might explore the diverse representations and self-representations of women writers to move beyond the simple, uniform tension between “mother” and “writer.” Perhaps surprisingly, Oliphant, often associated with mid-Victorian culture, found little gender dissonance in her professional identity, while Weber’s fin-de-siècle authors worked strenuously to recuperate their writing as a form of motherhood. Writing from unconventional subject positions, lesbian Edith Simcox and the Australian authors of Osborne’s essay remake narrative conventions as they consciously rethink gender roles, departing from the traditions of realism, the erotic plot, the family romance, and the female bildungsroman, while Duff Gordon’s maternal perspective alters the conventions of travel writing. Their artistic experiments point to the active relationship between literary forms and cultural values, expanding the category of “Victorian literature” in terms of both subject matter and literary technique.

Essays by d’Albertis, Regaignon, and Craton can be read together as investigations of the relationship between maternity as a cultural ideal and mothering as a set of physical practices. While d’Albertis untangles the ways in which the actual work of mothering can be refigured as “mere” appearance, Regaignon and Craton uncover a thread of doubt about the ways in which bourgeois womanhood—apparently the model for ideal maternity—might in fact be entirely unsuited for the job because of the very characteristics that underlie its idealization. One might also include Rosenman’s essay, which argues that physical acts of mothering made the mother’s body erotically available for distinctly unconventional uses. These essays also intersect with those of McMahon and Murray, in which actual caretaking is successfully carried out by a woman who is not the actual mother of her charges. While Regaignon’s and Craton’s texts imply that mothering is best performed by working-class surrogates, who have the bodily strength and the knowledge to discharge it more successfully than actual middle-class mothers, McMahon’s and Murray’s essays present the unexpected successes of voluntary and symbolic mothers who, unlike domestic employees, found forms of agency in these roles.

While attention to the dynamic interplay of identities yields new insights into even the best-known canonical novels, as Mangum and Corbett show us, this collection also benefits from the recovery of unfamiliar texts and sources. Moving beyond the canon, which by now includes familiar social historical sources such as Sarah Stickney Ellis’s conduct books and John Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies, our authors canvas new cultural spaces, revealing heterogeneous fields of thought and practice. By rethinking the colonies as distinctive environments rather than as subordinate extensions of the British imperial center, several essays analyze the ways in which
different colonial and national settings changed the experience of motherhood. In others, the courtroom and the scaffold reveal sympathetic recognitions of the stresses and responsibilities of the lived experience of motherhood. We seek to open up new textual spaces as well. Forgotten novels and short stories, letters and diaries, claim authority alongside more familiar texts. In spite of decades of Victorian studies, in which literary and cultural sources have been read in tandem, an enormous amount of material awaits serious investigation.

For some, the work of recovery driven by questions of female agency and transgression might seem to have run its course. Mary Poovey, for instance, has recently parodied her own earlier work in the mock recovery of the writer Ellen Pickering. According to Poovey, while Pickering’s forgotten novels can be shown to demonstrate the requisite mix of convention and subversion to attract critical attention, they are uninteresting and derivative because of their very display of these overly familiar themes. While, like Poovey, we wish to avoid recycling predictable stories, our collection attests to the value of recovery work. Alison Booth’s *How to Make It as a Woman* and Sally Mitchell’s *Frances Power Cobb: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer* (2004) represent only two examples of recent scholarship whose recovery of lesser-known women has expanded our sense of Victorian norms. It is hard to underestimate the importance of archival research in providing a full, complex understanding of the nineteenth century. Poovey’s characterization of Pickering’s lack of originality points, paradoxically, to the need for such work. To underscore the predictability of the submission/transgression binary, Poovey uses the trope of maternity: Pickering the good mother-author supports conventional female characters and the happy ending of the marriage plot, while Pickering “the bad mother” is also drawn to rebellious characters and stories (447). As Poovey recognizes, maternity has automatically invoked—and quintessentially expressed—simple binaries of femininity. We hope that *Other Mothers* will begin to undo this apparent inevitable association, defamiliarizing maternity to invite new investigations into its uncharted complexities.

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12 See also “Gender Studies in the Twenty-First Century: An Interview with Christopher Lane and Alison Booth,” in which Lane and Booth acknowledge and dispute the idea that the recovery of lesser-known women writers is outmoded.
Works Cited


Fluhr, Nicole. “‘Their Calling Me “Mother” Was Not, I Think, Altogether Unmeaning’;


