The American humorist Fanny Fern quipped in 1867, “A woman who wrote used to be considered a sort of monster” (371). By “monster” Fern referenced a widely held belief that women of intellect and public fame had unsexed themselves, becoming “three-quarters men” due to their turn toward professional careers and their ostensible turn away from families. Fern’s characterization drew on widely held Victorian investments in sex and gender ideologies on both sides of the Atlantic. The prevailing prescriptive code dictated that sex and gender were synonymous and that men, masculinity, and maleness existed separate from and situated against women, femininity, and femaleness. Both the imagined conflation of sex/gender and the rigid polarization of male/female signaled what Cynthia Eagle Russett has called a “near-total absence of information in the field of sex differences” (183). Yet the prescriptive solidity of the sex/gender ideology did not translate easily into everyday lives. Particularly at century’s end, the charge that educated and New Women had become “unsexed” and the consequent efforts to police and punish disruptions of conventional sex/gender categories indicate fault lines in the prevailing social codes.

Because women’s engagement in professional authorship threatened investments in gendered and sexed behaviors, the woman writer and her...
text are rich sites for analysis. As the nineteenth century waned and more women claimed identities as professional (and public) authors, the writer and her work were often vilified through a public smear campaign that denigrated them both as trash. Women writers responded to this coercion in multiple ways—some acquiesced to traditional values, continuing to write but undermining the power of female characters; some rebelled and were branded bluestockings and New Women; some played a bit of both games, seeming to adhere to the dominant ideology but offering opportunities for subversion within their texts. It is this third category that interests me in this essay, for the professional writer was at once able to offer the patriarchal culture a “docile body,” as Foucault terms it, perfectly in keeping with the cultural imperatives of feminine appropriateness, while also depicting a discursive “deviant body,” which was too fluid, too plural, too different to be fully restrained by patriarchal representation.

In such a deterministic order where intellectual work stems from male faculties, a biological woman who crosses into masculinist behavior violates ideological symmetry, interrupting social prescriptions by announcing a third man-woman category. This third category is logically invalid in a binaried order. Indeed, as both Judith Lorber and Anne Fausto-Sterling note through the figure of Herculine Barbin, a French hermaphrodite whose life ended in suicide, the nineteenth century provided limited possibility “of living socially as both a woman and a man even if it is physiologically possible” (Lorber 80). The distinction between male and female presumed that biology ordered social arrangements, a logic evident, in particular, through the cult of motherhood. The mother, already a figure of some mythic proportion, became the critical signifier of sex/gender appropriateness, a sign that read as domestic, nurturing, and other-oriented. These markings were important, since at century’s end, as Bram Dijkstra notes, the Victorian male establishment had become “obsessed” with women’s degeneration, which it attributed to excessive stimulation, both sexual and intellectual. The corrective was clear: “Only complete absorption in the practice of motherhood was considered a fit activity for women” (74).

This indexical link between sex/gender and motherhood came with its own dilemmas. Obviously, not all women were mothers, some by choice and others by circumstance. For professional women, motherhood was often not an option sought or desired, and their very resistance to “maternal instinct” unsexed them. The sort of semiotic power afforded to women through the trope of the mother was, consequently, not equally available to all women. In this essay, I examine how three professional women writers turned what might have been a symbolic deficit to their advantage. They did this by creating women writer characters who conceived, birthed, and
nurtured a textual child. In so doing, they were able to fuse idealized conceptualizations of Victorian womanhood (expressed through the trope of the mother) to the fin-de-siècle woman writer, thus expanding sex/gender categories and subversively appropriating monologic logics to support pluralistic outcomes.

In the small but insistent body of Victorian literature in which women writers created characters who were also women writers, the cultural mandate that good women be good mothers underwent multiple displacements and relocations. As with most abstractions, the mothering metaphor was slippery, particularly since the textual progeny were viewed by the larger culture as not only a writer’s child, but often as a societal pollutant requiring regulation and elimination. Looking specifically at three texts authored in the 1890s—Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage*¹ (1899), Rhoda Broughton’s *A Beginner* (1894), and Elizabeth Robins’s *George Mandeville’s Husband* (1894)—I demonstrate how these writers imbued their author characters with the signifiers of motherhood as a way to bolster cultural legitimacy.² Rather than seeing the insistent mothering metaphors as only salutary, I suggest that the text-as-child metaphor functioned as a complicated disciplinary trope to pull women more tightly into hegemonically sanctioned roles. Since, as Russett notes, Victorian women were never “permitted to forget that their essence was reproductive,” the text-as-child metaphor participated in a critical form of didactic instruction (43). Rhetoric about the natural obligation of the woman’s womb placed Victorian women writers in a discursive straitjacket, disciplining the possibilities of the mind by restricting the representations of the physical body.

Yet this imperative connection between a woman’s reproductive body and her imaginative offspring when portrayed in fiction could be conveyed with great complexity (and ambiguity). In Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage*, for example, Hester Gresley’s text is embodied as the “child of her brain,” which is then “murdered” at the hands of her poor-reading brother. In Rhoda Broughton’s *A Beginner*, if the text is child, we can see the novel authorizing nothing short of infanticide. In Elizabeth Robins’s

¹ Cholmondeley’s title is an allusion to the biblical tale of Esau, who sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for a meal of bread and pottage of lentils (Genesis 25:30–34). In Cholmondeley’s hands, the allusion refers to one of her emasculated characters, Hugh Scarlett, whose disregard for his own birthright and consequent infatuation with a married woman leads to his eventual downfall.

² The text-as-child trope is not by any means exclusive to these three texts or to the fin de siècle, nor is it a metaphor employed only by or about women. Indeed, it was quite common for Romantic and Transcendentalist poets, in particular, to talk of their fathering vis-à-vis the text, a move that allowed them to placate “womb envy” and to claim roles as both creators and procreators.
George Mandeville’s Husband, tropes of the mother’s body and her “natural” responsibilities to both daughter and text are interrupted by a volley of referents that refute the naturalness of sex/gender categories, coding male bodies feminine and female bodies masculine, while leaving pubescent bodies dead in a pool of their own (menstrual?) blood. In these books, the representation of mothering allows for significant alteration of the overriding sense of what mothering might mean, and, hence, of a woman’s “natural” role in late-nineteenth-century Britain. As such, these books perform an important countercultural work in their articulation and circulation of crucial debates about women’s participation in a public commercial sphere. They do so in a way markedly different from most New Women texts in that they seemingly underscore dominant values while also necessitating a discursive realignment of the woman writer’s role and thus a shift in the prevailing ideology. This authorizes, as Wendy Parkins notes, “new forms of knowledge and new subject positions for women” (48). My examination seeks to reveal the ways in which Cholmondeley, Broughton, and Robins were both confined by the cultural straitjacket and able to wiggle free of it.

Pregnant with Meaning: Issues of Sex and Gender in Birthing the Text

Before thinking specifically about each of the novels I consider, it’s important to map out a brief usage of the text-as-child metaphor. One example can be seen in Charles Dickens, who begins David Copperfield with an image that illuminates the debate about sex/gender and writing. “I was,” he says, “born with a caul, which was advertised for sale, in the newspapers, at the low price of fifteen guineas” (9–10). A caul is the fetal membrane that most typically covers the head of the infant at birth. It is offered for sale in young Davy’s case for its ability to guard against death by drowning. With no suitable bidders, the caul is stored away until ten years later it is “put up in a raffle.” Copperfield recalls, “I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way” (10).

3 A more standard trope for narratives about women writers was failure. In her introductory essay to Red Pottage, Elaine Showalter argues, “It took a great deal of self-esteem to allow one’s writer-heroine to succeed in the 1890s, and Cholmondeley could not quite bring herself to be so optimistic” (xiii), so that represented failure is the result of lack of self-esteem and of pessimism. Penny Boumelha, by contrast, strikes a more optimistic interpretive note, arguing that to make the woman writer fail is the only way to assert her artistry. See Pykett and Ardis for additional discussion on this issue.
It is not too great of an interpretive leap to connect the fetal membrane wrapped around the author’s infant skull and later offered for sale with the text itself, the issue of his brain, packaged and sent into the world in exchange for money. Though David refers to the caul as “a part of myself,” it is more accurately a part of his mother. By itself, the caul symbolizes female procreative power, specifically the woman’s ability to produce within herself the fluids, membranes, and nutrients necessary to sustain life. Wrapped around the head of the author, the caul signifies his creative power, for it allows the male author to appropriate the womb by draping it around, and thus conflating it with, his mind. He is at once creator and procreator. The membrane lends him female generative powers that he can confer on his male womb, the brain, yet it underscores his own absence, or lack, of the biological apparatus for creation. Dickens’s metaphor indicates that the penis may be the male organ of procreation, but the brain is his womb for creation, and any concretizing of the metaphor necessitates the displacement of mother’s membrane onto son’s mind. This underscores the rightness of ontological separation—of women being linked to the body and to nature, of men being linked to the mind and to culture. It also reifies a perceived rightness of sex/gender sameness since it is impossible for male/masculinity to enact female/femininity except through appropriation and performance.

Such a division has implications for women’s authorship, for as Gaye Tuchman observes, the “authority of the woman [as author] is based on her feelings, her intuitions, her connection with the earth and nature, in short, on her reproductive body; the authority of man is based on his will, his reason, his name which both identifies him with the patriarchal good and distinguishes him from other men in short, his productive mind” (25). So, though David Copperfield can here claim access to the procreative powers of the female womb, he does not disturb his male/intellectual situatedness, thus erasing his connection to “lack” through privileged right of entry to both metaphors.

4 In this particular instance, the image of the caul also allows the abandoned David Copperfield a form of symbiosis with his idealized, though incompetent, mother, Clara. As critics of the novel have noted, a central preoccupation of the text is its working through of mother issues. Mary Poovey notes that the idealized mother figure “takes the form of a series of substitutions that exposes and punishes the mother’s guilt without jeopardizing the idealized woman she retrospectively becomes” (Uneven 92).
5 The notion of the brain as the male womb is, of course, nicely reinforced through the myth of Zeus bringing forth a fully formed Athena from his head.
6 The idea that men can access women’s generative power by appropriating female reproductive organs offers a nice corollary to the “pen as penis” metaphor considered particularly by Gilbert and Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic.
As this suggests, the “creation as birth” metaphor is rife with hermeneutic complexity. Many literary-historical scholars have engaged with and critiqued the metaphor, suggesting that it can be both elucidating (for the discursive empowerment it allows) and essentialist (for the way it forever links the woman to the procreative body). It is a metaphor deeply vexed, internally incoherent, occasionally essentialist, and potentially empowering. In short, a metaphor of considerable richness and complexity. In particular reference to the sex/gender overlap in the construction of the late-Victorian woman writer, the metaphor evokes other questions. These include: Does the body function as a reliable source of self-knowledge? Does female sexuality exist prior to social construction? Do women experience their bodies outside of acculturation?

My particular task is not to reconcile the debate about whether it is appropriate to invoke the body and mothering as metaphors for describing the writing process, nor is it necessarily to sort out how fully these images presuppose a biological essence. As a trope about Victorian literary production, the metaphor functions as a political concept that shapes cultural norms. The use of the childbirth metaphor compels imaginative coherence to an economy of sameness that represents all women as heterosexual, able-bodied, and premenopausal. It is hegemonic in that it appears to command consent “naturally.” In short, it normalizes the body and the sexuality of a woman so that she is in all circumstances able and willing to function as a mother, and the metaphor pushes to the margins the “odd women” who risk “physical and emotional” disease and a “shorter life-span,” not to mention social ostracism, by refusing the natural call of their maternal “destiny” (Smith-Rosenberg 336).

The gendered and sexed implications for writing are profound. Given the prevailing Victorian stance that artistry is largely male and masculine, we see a cultural imperative for the male writer to appropriate (female) procreative powers, while the woman who writes must appropriate (male) intellectual ability. Though, as we see illustrated in the case of Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, it is possible for the man to wrap the procreative membranes of the woman’s body around his brain without compromising his gendered and sexed identity, a similar reversal is not allowed the woman. The woman who writes is “unsexed”; she is “three-quarters male” as a character in Robins’s *George Mandeville’s Husband* says about George Eliot. To perpetuate her gendered identity, the woman who writes must undergo several contortions in order to reconcile her behavior with her body. Like a woman pretending to be a transvestite, she must be a woman acting like a

7 See Susan Stanford Friedman, Margaret Wise Petrochenkov, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Nina Auerbach, Elaine Showalter (*A Literature*), and Margaret Homans.
man, borrowing from a woman—all of which underscores larger cultural ideologies that imagine sexed binaries as normative even as they expose the fluidity of gendered experience in everyday lives.8

When sex identity exists in such simultaneous overlap and contradiction to gender roles—in this case, when behavior (artistic creation) is taken to be identical with biology (physical procreation)—the enforcement of both concepts is potentially at risk. We can see some evidence of that imbalance in the cultural anxiety operative at the end of the nineteenth century as demonstrated through Cholmondeley, Broughton, and Robins.

Red Pottage:
The Author as (Masculinized) Mother

Mary Cholmondeley’s representation of the woman writer in Hester Gresley codes her in cultural signifiers (such as thinness, frailty, and obedience) that underscore her conventional femininity. At the level of the body, she is most pointedly not a threat. Yet Hester possesses access to “imagination” and thus to an artistry that borders on the spiritual sublime, and this marks her as deviant for the way she embodies masculine expression in a female body. Hester’s first book, An Idyll of East London, is moderately well received but, to many characters in the book, troubling for its commentary on poverty and urbanization. As Cholmondeley depicts it, the manner in which Hester tackles pressing social issues devolves for those who discuss her work into tedious debates of autobiography versus imagination, a larger cultural criticism lobbed at other Victorian woman writers, in particular the Brontë sisters. Essentially, the question is: how can a “protected” woman possibly imagine degradation? The answer suggests that any woman capable of imagining vice is no (true) woman at all.

Cholmondeley deploys Hester’s body as a sort of corrective, her frailness standing in feminine compensation for the masculine aggression of her mind. The novel’s early pages work to emphasize Hester’s diminutive stature. Contrasting Hester with the novel’s other heroine, Rachel Ward,9 Chomondeley writes, “Rachel was physically strong. Hester was

8 Robins’s “Woman’s Secret” (1913) makes evident the self-aware gender play necessary to appease expectations about masculine writerly output. She writes: “Contrary to popular impression, to say in print what she thinks is the last thing the woman-novelist ... is commonly so rash as to attempt. In print, even more than elsewhere (unless she is reckless), she must wear the aspect that shall have the best chance of pleasing her brothers” (5). This includes, Robins notes, “doing her level best to play the man’s game, and seeing how nearly like him she can do it” (6).

9 I am not able to do full justice to the complexity of this novel here, but it is important to note, even if briefly, that the trope of dual heroines, who support and complement one
weak. The one was calm, patient, practical, equable, the other imaginative, unbalanced, excitable” (36). Subsequent scenes reinforce Hester’s slight body and impetuous nature, by calling the reader’s critical gaze to Hester’s “white exhausted face” (36); her “small slight figure” (52); her “innocent, childlike face” (77); her “slight graceful figure” (155); her “thin hands” (320), all of which, in terms of artistic output, follow the dictates of “blind instinct” (335). The narrator notes, “Her irregular profile, her delicate pointed speech and fingers, her manner of picking up her slender feet as she walked, her quick alert movements, everything about her was neat, adjusted, perfect in its way” (54).

This sense of Hester’s “perfection” (or rather, her perfect alignment with white, heterosexual, upper-class femininity) makes of Hester a multiple signifier of idealized femininity. The hyperarticulation of her femininity is particularly pronounced in the novel’s mothering tropes. Though Hester challenges convention by being unmarried and not a biological mother, she is given the primary maternal role in the novel as articulated through her status as the mother of books. When her brother James discovers, surreptitiously reads, and then destroys the manuscript for her second novel, *Husks*, Hester responds with what seems obviously intended as a mother’s fury. When her nephew, Regie, was ill, she tells her brother, “I did not let your child die. Why have you killed mine?” (276). The young Regie immediately enters this scene of confrontation, carrying a potato he has baked in the dying embers of the bonfire made of her manuscript, and Hester “turn[s] on him like some blinded infuriated animal at bay, and thrust[s] him violently from her” (277). Her capitulation to a more bestial form is justified, we are led to believe, by the murder of her own child. She later tells the bishop:

“If I had a child . . . and it died, I might have ten more, beautiful and clever and affectionate, but they would not replace the one I had lost. Only if it were a child,” a little tremor broke the dead level of the passionless voice, “I should meet it again in heaven. There is the resurrection of the body for the children of the body, but there is no resurrection that I ever heard of for the children of the brain.” (344)

Here Cholmondeley turns the text-as-child metaphor so that the textual child possesses greater value than a biological son or daughter. The loss of the issue of the brain is represented here as irreparable, beyond a mother’s
grieving. Hester has been told that the “pang of motherhood is that even your children don’t seem your very own. . . . [But] spiritual children, the books, are really ours” (334–35). Because Hester has gone a step further than the mother ideology allows, because she has claimed and sustained a belief that the text is her “very own” (and autogenously conceived) child, Cholmondeley’s characterization of Hester pushes against a dominant and limiting trope, reconfiguring the value conferred on women through motherhood. As a consequence, not only has the author Hester the right to wear the mantle of mother, it is creation rather than procreation that makes her worthy of that honor.

Even so, Hester’s relationship to her art plays out largely according to the terms of Victorian motherhood, for she sacrifices her well-being, her presence of mind, and her good health so that the textual more-than-child might prosper. She says of her text:

“I loved it for itself, not for anything it was to bring me. . . . It was part of myself. But it was the better part. The side of me which loves success. . . . had no hand in it. My one prayer was that I might be worthy to write it, that it might not suffer by contact with me. I spent myself upon it.” Hester’s voice sank. “I knew what I was doing. I joyfully spent my health, my eyesight, my very life upon it. I was impelled to do it by what you perhaps call a blind instinct, what I, poor simpleton and dupe, believed at the time to be nothing less than the will of God.” (335)

In language that mirrors the cult of motherhood, Hester suggests that her call to artistry supersedes all. This is an interesting use of the self-sacrificing ideology, for it displaces the body of the child with the body of the text, yet it underscores the same values—womanly sacrifice to a duty that is greater than oneself.

Cholmondeley’s (per)version of the mother ideology allows for alteration and difference. In this case, the written work moves to center stage in a woman’s motherly responsibility. Hester is allowed to fulfill the dictates of a culture hungry for motherly devotion, but she does so by spending her fragile body so that her writing might live. Her frail, delicate, and slender body—all of which underscore her situatedness in patriarchal codes—refuses the signifying system it is placed within. Giving birth to a text rather than to a child, Hester alters the code of expectation, so that professional determination overrides biological determinism. This model, in which (woman’s) will exerts more power than genetics, is an important reorganization of the prevailing phallocratic order, allowing possibilities for change in both ideology and social arrangements. By contrast, Rhoda
Broughton’s *A Beginner*, though constructing its writer heroine in much the same way as Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage*, offers curtailed possibilities for change.

**A Beginner: Cautionary Tale**

*to the Lady Novelist and Would-be Mothers*

Emma Jocelyn is *A Beginner’s* literary protagonist, and the title of Broughton’s novel points to both Emma’s status and identity, for she is a beginner when it comes to textual production and she adopts the name “a beginner” as the nom de plume of her book *Miching Mallecho*. Like Hester in *Red Pottage*, Emma’s body bears the signs of upper-class white heterosexual femininity. Emma is described as a “charming white nymph, who looks at once so fresh and so high bred” (69); characters are continually asked, “Why can’t you sit and stand and walk as Miss Jocelyn does?” (58); her physical form, her “bow and gait,” unlike her literary offspring, are beyond criticism (255). Though Broughton offers unfailing praise of Emma’s physically feminine and whitened features, particularly those parts of Emma’s body responsible for touching the text—her “affectionate white hand” (120), her “pink palm” (63), her “long white hands like lilies” (243)—Broughton is relentless in demonstrating the utter uselessness of Emma’s book, the “offspring of her brain” (122). *Miching Mallecho* may well be the child of Emma’s white, delicate, and upper-class body as fashioned by her lily-like hands, and she may indeed watch over that “beloved offspring” with “gnawing anxiety” (20), but Broughton makes clear that Emma’s ambition is misplaced and her book is ill-developed and irrelevant, or, as a particularly sadistic London review echoing Samuel Johnson notes, her book is “ill-fed, ill-killed, ill-kept, ill-dressed, and ill-carved” (126). Already we can see the body metaphors piling up, as the text becomes both child of the lady novelist’s mind and animal for slaughter and consumption.

Emma seeks to defend her child/text throughout the course of Broughton’s novel, arguing that she writes in order to be a “teacher and a benefactor to her kind!” (79). Yet the stronger evidence of the novel’s content comes through the response of its greatest advocate, Lesbia Heathcote, a second cousin to Emma. Lesbia finds the novel enchanting, and when reading, she becomes so absorbed that she is “unconscious of [her children’s] clamour or even of their presence” (105). Further, Lesbia uses the novel to justify dalliances in extramarital romantic adventures. So we see that Emma’s efforts to “benefit her kind” actually encourage her cousin to abandon her joint roles of mother and wife, a consequence completely unintended by the naive author. “How frightfully you have misunderstood me!” Emma says
to Lesbia (112). Indeed, though Emma’s novel is defended throughout the course of Broughton’s novel, it is never quoted. Readers never gain access to (or are corrupted by) Emma’s ideas; the ray of light never shines upon our brains. Instead, the novel receives the response it purportedly merits: it is ridiculed and castigated, tossed on the floor, figuratively killed (the critic’s hand is “red with her infant’s blood” [166]), pulled from circulation, and ultimately destroyed.

Through it all, Emma is both conflated with and distanced from the text. As “mother” of the novel, it is an extension of her body. And though “perfect prosperity” is written on “every detail of her appearance” (252), Emma’s own body cannot be separated from the public scorn accorded to her text. When Lesbia’s husband throws Emma’s book to the floor in disgust, for instance, Emma feels as if “some degrading physical indignity had been inflicted on herself” (114). Though the text makes insistent references to Miching Mallecho as the “offspring of her brain” (122), Emma’s “beloved offspring” (20), her “literary infant” (122), it so castigates novel writing for unfeminizing Victorian women, for making a “good, if rather foolish, woman neglect her duties to God and man” (115), that the A Beginner ends with Emma becoming persuaded of her textual child’s dangers and mournfully agreeing to burn the entire printing, save five copies lost in the circulating libraries.

Lest we think that the metaphor of child has receded at this point, Broughton depicts Emma as in “tragic dejection as she stands motionless” (390) and watches as the “whole little family” (391) is dumped upon the bonfire. The fire then “assert[s] its supremacy, and is licking and shrinking and crackling the gaily coloured boards, and tossing up the exultant brutality of its flames above their crumbling paper and vanishing type” (390–91). As a final act of “expiation,” Emma steps forward with her original manuscript in hand, “the beloved, the much-treasured, the sole” (391).

10 This, in fact, was one of the criticisms raised by an 1894 Anthenaeum review: “We are told little about the volume (Miching Mallecho) except that it is concerned with ‘passion.' Yet it is the principal feature of ‘A Beginner’” (574).

11 There is some poetic justice in the fact that though the fictional text-child Miching Mallecho is destroyed, its material counterpart, A Beginner, survives intact.

12 Pamela Gilbert and I disagree somewhat on just what body Miching Mallecho occupies. While I have argued here for it being a textual child, she sees Emma Jocelyn’s novel as “the woman’s body entering the realm of exchange—although ‘innocent’ and ‘virginal’ in its purposes, to the extent it succeeds in the market, it becomes dangerous, contagious, and seductive” (114). In both cases Broughton incorporates the text as an extension of the female body that must be contained through a figurative death by fire. Mary Poovey offers a compelling reading of a different infanticide metaphor in her contention that mid-Victorian rationales for colonization and capitalism are expressed in Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend as the narrator’s “offspring” that must be killed or sacrificed for the good of materials exchange (Making 163–64).
and she “tosses” this as well into the “funeral pyre.” The act is occasioned with much sadness on Emma’s part, and as she walks away from the burning mass of her literary children, Lesbia endeavors to cheer her up: “Do not cry,” says Lesbia soothingly. ‘At least, cry as much as you please, for there is no one near—no one, that is, except George!” (393).

And who, pray tell, is George? None other than a tertiary character who, we are told in the afterword, emerges to marry Emma. This is an important development, as it must surely be deduced that one of the problems inherent in positing the text as child and the lady novelist as its mother is the absence of the father. Without a “father” to assist in the creation of the baby/text, that offspring is illegitimate and must be discarded to protect reputations. The textual baby is even more troubling than would be an actual “bastard child,” moreover, because no man, whether husband or lover, is needed for its conception. The textual baby, then, is not only illegitimate, it is somehow monstrous, the offspring of a woman who can reproduce without a man. The comparisons to Christian lore cannot be overlooked, since the concept of a child without a father (and so conceived without sex) is akin to the virgin birth. The woman writer’s progeny, however, is nowhere close to a conception without intercourse, for it is the woman’s unsexed position, her crossing over from feminine practices to masculine behaviors that “fertilizes” the seed that will become her book. As such, the woman writer can impregnate herself: she is not a virgin, waiting for divine seed, but a monster, simultaneously man and woman, able to displace and replace both the phallus and the penis. She does not blur categorical boundaries but refutes the categories altogether.

What we see in A Beginner, then, is a story of a woman writer, depicted as physically delicate and intellectually naive, unable to control the destructive power of her own creation repetitively referred to as her monstrous child (an interesting echo of Mary Shelley’s claim that Frankenstein, like Victor Frankenstein’s monster itself, is her “hideous progeny”). In A Beginner, the text functions as an elaborate testing ground for the woman writer’s product, and it eventually depicts her as saddened, humiliated, and recommitted to the values of middle-class Victorian culture through the contract of marriage and the promise of “real” (legitimate) rather than textual (illegitimate) children.

**George Mandeville’s Husband:**
**Refusing the Mother, Refusing to Mother**

In Elizabeth Robins’s George Mandeville’s Husband, we are presented with a startling departure from the delicate and chastened author characters
constructed by Cholmondeley and Broughton. According to her effemi-
nate husband, for whom the novel is named and through whom most
perspective is focalized, George Mandeville is vulgar and unwomanly, her
body is overlarge and unappealing, and her novelistic output (perhaps as
a consequence of her physical excesses) is meaningless tripe (to clarify this
characters’ shifting-identities mechanism, “George” is the author-charac-
ter’s celebrity persona, “Lois” is the author-character, and “George/Lois”
is the inevitable collapsing between the two). In this sense, Elizabeth Rob-
ins’s George Mandeville is no true woman at all, her deviance announced
by a body completely opposite Hester’s and Emma’s. Scene after scene por-
trays Lois Wilbraham—to the public, George Mandeville—increasingly
obsessed with her persona as author. Gorged on food and flattery, George
Mandeville becomes a spectacle of excess, not even the death of her daugh-
ter calling her to her womanly duties.

Plumpness may well be an articulation of maternal characteristics—
an accentuation of breasts, hips, and the body fat needed to sustain preg-
nancy—but on the body of George Mandeville, plumpness turns to obesity,
maternal ability to dysfunction, ambition to aggression. Thus Robins’s rep-
resentation here is in stark contrast to the positive relation between mater-
nity and fatness discussed by Lilian Craton. As such, Robins effectively
converts what might be read as feminine and maternal into that which is
masculine, monstrous, and terrifying. George/Lois is further “de-sexed” in
that her maternal obligation is expressed in only the remotest forms of dis-
tracted interest. Though she is the only “real” mother of the three author
characters considered here, Robins makes clear that her protagonist is a
bad mother whose child has “few illusions as to her place in her mother’s
life” (8).

George/Lois’s life is consumed not with the nurturing of children but
with the production of text—hack novels and bad plays. What little mater-
nal investment she possesses takes the form of talking to her slender, doc-
ile, and fragile daughter, Rosina, about “sordid” topics such as (we can only
assume) menstruation and coming womanhood. This topic between Rosina
and her mother, which is both addressed and not addressed, is precisely

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13 See Craton in this volume.

14 I borrow this concept from Catherine Wiley, who notes Robins’s refusal of representa-
tion in her 1893 play Alan’s Wife (cowritten with Florence Bell, though produced and
published anonymously). Indeed, across the Robins canon, it is a common device to refuse
to represent a controversial topic or theme, even as she insists that the reader acknowledge
its presence. In Robins’s 1894 unpublished play The Mirkwater, for instance, Robins leads
us to believe that Felicia Vincent may well be responsible for her never-represented sister’s
disappearance, but ultimately, though obliquely, we learn that the sister weighted herself
with stones and threw herself into a river when she discovered she had breast cancer. We see
this same technique at work in The Convert (1907), Robins’s novelized version of the stage
Rosina’s maturation into puberty, a fact that biologically links Rosina’s girl’s body to the woman’s body of the mother. Rosina is deeply insulted that her mother takes great liberties by asking her invasive questions about her health. She complains, “It might do if you’ve always told your mother every blessed thing from the time you were a baby. But if she’s left you to yourself till you’re fourteen, she can’t suddenly—suddenly—tell you things—without a girl’s feeling like murdering her” (138). These “things” her mother tells her are “facts of existence” that Rosina finds “so ugly, so ugly” (136). In Rosina’s repulsion of her mother (and the coming womanhood of her own body), we see the results of her gender-skewed parenting, for the brusque and disinterested (masculinized) mother frightens the child away from a body that the overly fastidious (effeminate) father cannot fathom.

Though it is surely not unusual to make the rites of menstruation so secretive that they become taboo, Robins points to the presence of Rosina’s blood, and her telling death marked by a large hemorrhage that stains her white sheets “bright with new-spilt blood” (211), through euphemisms that point to nothing at all. This functions as an effective sleight of hand that compels the reader to fill in the gap. In this case Robins points to the fissure between ideology and practice. George Mandeville is physiologically capable of having a child, but she does not possess maternal instinct, a contradiction that erodes an ideological belief connecting female bodies and motherly love. Likewise, her more tractable and seemingly “natural” daughter, who should theoretically flourish due to her congruence with the dominant bodily ideal, ultimately recoils at the realities of her own body and dies. The gap suggests, then, that biological sexed capacity does not necessarily determine embodied gendered behavior.

This disconnect between sex and gender is announced most pointedly in the figure of Ralph Wilbraham, Rosina’s father and Lois’s husband, a male character who is decidedly unmasculine. One significant result of depicting George Mandeville in such graphic and extreme terms is that the mother’s excessiveness cements the “dysfunctional” bond between father and daughter. Rosina goes to Ralph for comfort, compassion, and commiseration. She turns to her father for a mother’s support. If this were merely a novel of role reversal, Rosina would find succor in the mothering she receives from her father. Yet the kind of haven Ralph offers Rosina is rife with peril, precisely due to Ralph’s entrenchment in and commitment

play Votes for Women (1907). In both, Vida Levering crusades for suffrage, but only after Robins has made clear that she carries some mysterious secret from the past. We discover in elliptical references that she was seduced, impregnated, and lost the child, whether through miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion we don’t know.
to gendered ideologies that suggest men work and have public identities while women sacrifice themselves to families.

Rosina’s anxiety about what she shall “do” manifests itself repeatedly through the latter half of the novel. “‘Suppose, father,’ she asks, ‘nobody ever loved me but you, and suppose I lived the longest—I might, you know—and suppose I was very poor—what then?’” (85). With this Rosina asks Wilbraham the question of the age: If a woman does not or cannot compete in the marriage market, and if she is not trained or prepared to earn a living for herself, and if her father is not in a position to support her, what kinds of options are open to her? Ralph assures her that “a dozen womanly things” await her, like tending to small children or keeping house or sewing, but he is adamant that she shall never be an artist or a writer. As she approaches death, Rosina hits on a vocation that will support her. She tells her father, “There’s something I could do for my living, that even you would say was quite ‘seemly’—that is, of course, if I live to be very old and very poor, and you aren’t here to take care of me” (196). Her brainstorm? “[M]ending’s my great accomplishment” (201). It’s a rather pitiful prospect, even to Ralph.

We see here the consequences that result when a young girl is disallowed autonomy by the patriarchal structure that governs her: with professions that feed her creativity barred to her and virtually no other viable path open, she literally undergoes a transformation from embodied character to idealized image, dying upon her invalid’s couch in a death scene worthy of any consumptive heroine. Consider the language Robins uses to describe Rosina on her deathbed: “What tiny little hands she had! Her face, with the small, regular features, was even unusually pretty to-day. Her creamy skin had that look common to her type, as though a soft light shone behind it—that pale, luminous quality which is the peculiar compensation of complexions that are very fine, and yet not fair or ruddy. No one ever saw that light in a face of ‘lilies and roses,’ but these for whom it shines are not bereft of beauty” (196). The resulting death scene is the quintessence of high-Victorian sensibility, yet it is also the most subversive moment in Robins’s novel, for she turns the code of the passive consumptive askew so that it registers less as a moment of peaceful apotheosis and more as proof of the failure of ideology.

This repetition of a literary trope in a way that refuses to conform to familiar ideological registers is a discursive process Nancy Cervetti has identified in numerous literary texts. Drawing on Judith Butler’s idea of “subversive repetition,” Cervetti gives a more specific sense of its relevance to literature. She notes that similarity offers a form of cultural legibility; at the same time “a subversive repetition disrupts old ways through
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differences in tone, in recontextualization and location, and in deviant endings. A repetition with a difference displaces the old through ambiguity, irony, hyperbole, parody, and dissonance” (4). Robins’s ending to George Mandeville’s Husband operates in just this manner.

I’ve already noted that Rosina dies in a pool of blood, and given the undercurrent of whispered conversations, the scarlet stain on Rosina’s white bed sheets resonates with sexual meaning. It is not particularly innovative to imbue a death scene with sexual implications, particularly to the Victorians. It is innovative, however, to undercut the erotics of such a scene by averting the reader’s gaze from the death itself. When Rosina dies, both Ralph and the reader are in George Mandeville’s parlor, entertaining her “insufferable” literary throng. Rosina’s death is told, then, not by the sometimes-present narrator or through the more common focalization of Ralph, but by the great lady of popular rubbish herself, George Mandeville.

In her hands, Rosina becomes nothing other than representation, her image adjusted to fit her novelist mother’s purposes. In essence, Rosina transforms from biological child to textual child, a move depicted in the novel as unjust and dehumanizing. The novelist’s idealized stories erase the conflicted relationship between Lois and Rosina and create, instead, an account of perfect love between mother and daughter (as well as a daughter whose unruly brown hair has suddenly become flaxen and ringletted). Though this whitewashing through memory is surely common as human experience, Robins emphasizes that George Mandeville’s fictionalization of her daughter tragically erases the “real” Rosina. Unlike a character in a book who can live in “a thousand homes” where there is “still some sign of them” in the material reality of the book itself, Robins notes, Rosina is truly gone in both body and memory, particularly since George Mandeville’s evocation of Rosina is discursive and never fixed in a published characterization (219).

In these final images, Robins offers a different, and more insidious, version of the death of the innocent, for this girl’s end figures as a tragic waste, built upon the sandy foundation of vanity and weakness. Her legacy in memory is not stable, and her life is overshadowed by her mother’s textual children. We also see a different orientation of the text as child than that suggested by Cholmondeley or Broughton. Whereas Hester and Emma consider the “child of the brain” more real (and thus more tragically dead) than a child of the body might be, Robins suggests that the dead child of the body experiences a finality in mortality that a textual character, who can live on in the material reality of books, never quite possesses.¹⁵

¹⁵ The obvious irony: Rosina is also a fictional character, so though she dies, she can be resurrected simply by rereading the novel.
Rosina’s complete erasure—both in being misunderstood during life and in her reappropriation as a heroine after death—is her true tragedy. It’s a tragedy made all the more poignant by the self-awareness, the ability to read her own suffocation, that Rosina possesses. To finally die not because she is too sweet, good, and pure for this world—the standard fate of the Victorian heroine—but because she has been ill-prepared and disallowed from any kind of meaningful activity, must strike the reader as an injustice most foul.

So not only does Robins engage in subversive repetition through this death of the consumptive, which works against Victorian idealizations of illness, she participates in a subversive repetition by seeming to revere motherhood, only to finally undercut it. We see the character of George Mandeville/Lois Wilbraham failing as both artist and mother, and we also witness her daughter failing to mature into adolescence. In effect, by refusing her mother, Rosina refuses to mother, and her impending puberty—signified by the menstrual blood that marks her as ready to uphold the symbolic weight of a fecund female body—gives way to physical collapse and a final hemorrhage into death. Though it is significant that Robins both points to and effaces Rosina’s development into a body capable of bearing children, it is, ultimately, more significant that, in killing the character, Robins refuses to represent Rosina’s life. She kills her off rather than let her be co-opted by Ralph Wilbraham’s symbolic order, which disallows meaningful work for women, or a larger social order that idealizes and disempowers women, in effect, depriving them of personhood and turning them into text.

**Conclusion**

The novels I examine here suggest a range of representation laying out who the professional woman writer is, what she looks like, and how her work should be valued, all conveyed through the “cult of motherhood.” As I have noted, each novel differently imagines author-characters who conceive and birth their child-texts, only to see those children die (whether through murder, neglect, or outright infanticide). For *Red Pottage*’s Hester the author is represented as physically feminine but intellectually masculine. Her textual child is misunderstood and ultimately murdered, leaving the author/mother shaken and mourning, consolable only by same-sex friendship. For *A Beginner*’s Emma, her own body is refined, whitened, and elite, but her textual baby is hideous. Emma must be coerced into offering her deformed baby to a funeral pyre in a public rite of symbolic
cleansing. Her “reward” for doing so is realignment with heteronormative
codes through promises of a “real” husband and “real” children. In George
Mandeville’s Husband the characterization of George/Lois heightens the
tension between author and mother roles. She is the only biological mother
of the three characters considered here, yet she is also the least sympathetic
character. Her yellowed fingers, her over-large body, her loudness and
indiscrete behavior all signify excess. Her appropriation of a male pseud
onym, primary role as breadwinner, and consequent emasculization of her
husband equally suggest a freakish “unnaturalness,” underscored by her
complete lack of what all women are supposed to instinctively know: how
to mother. The author’s self-absorption leads to her biological daughter’s
death, a death she exploits by turning her daughter’s memory into ideal-
ized fiction.

Given this range in which none of the author characters here ulti-
mately comes off well or produces literary or biological children that are
allowed to remain alive, how can I argue that these representations are
ultimately salutary? I do so because whether the author/mother characters
be murderess, monster, or naïf, the sheer range of possibility problematizes
a seemingly monologic construct. The representations here redefine both
motherhood and womanhood, two roles intertwined at this time, two roles
that are supposedly so natural that no clear articulation of their meaning
is necessary. In so doing, these representations interrogate unmarked cat-
egories, ultimately giving the power for definition to the author behind the
author, to Cholmondley, Broughton, and Robins.

In these novels, the representation of mothering alters who mothers
are, what they look like, and what they do. This necessarily influences pre-
scriptive ideologies about woman’s “natural” role in late nineteenth century
Britain. As such, these books perform an important countercultural work
through a subversive repetition that expands sex/gender categories. These
outcomes are not actualized in the conclusions of the texts themselves but,
I believe, in the minds of the readers who are invited to interrupt “natural-
ized” presumptions about gender and sex differences as guided by a new
multivalent form of “natural woman,” the writer.

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