

Florian Neunstöcklin

## Mothers and Daughters

Gender and Genre in Shakespeare's Plays

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Where are the mothers in Shakespeare?” – This is the title of an article in which Mary Beth Rose explores the rather atypical family constellations in Shakespeare’s plays in order to analyze “the ways in which motherhood is represented (or pointedly *not* represented)” (Rose 1991: 291). Rose observes that the relationships between fathers and daughters or between fathers and their sons are highly complex, whereas the relationships between mothers and their children are far less developed; and in most tragedies and comedies “no mothers appear at all” (ibid.: 292). The article focuses on the relatively few examples of motherhood in Shakespeare, but Rose does not mention, for instance, that the relationships between mothers and their sons is much more intensely explored in Shakespeare’s plays than the relationships between mothers and daughters. In particular, the great tragedies *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus* – plays which have dominated performance and criticism alike – are largely based on the (dysfunctional) relationship between a dominant mother and a struggling son. The relationships between mothers and daughters, however, are generally marginalized in the plays. In only six of the thirty-nine plays that are fully attributed to Shakespeare today do both a mother and her (biological) daughter play an active role. This is the case for the Bard’s earlier Elizabethan plays *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *All’s Well That Ends Well*, and for his late tragicomedies *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale*. These few plays that include a mother-daughter relationship are clearly outnumbered by the nine comedies and six tragedies that stage a motherless daughter. In these plays, such as the comedies *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* and the tragedies *Hamlet* and *Othello*, the plot features the family constellation of a ruling father, his obedient daughter, and an absent – and in most cases even unmentioned – mother.

The relationship between a mother and her daughter may be seen as one of the most intense and intimate relationships that can exist between two human-beings. Motherhood in the Western world is usually associated with highly positive qualities, such as selflessness and unconditional love (Dunworth 2012: 1-2). Moreover, the relationships between mothers and daughters are fundamental for stable patriarchal societies: “Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself” (Chodorow 1978: 7).<sup>1</sup> This shows that the terms ‘mother’ and ‘motherhood’ cannot be limited to the biological function of childbirth alone. Mothers, stepmothers or foster mothers have always played an important role in the upbringing and education of children, which is why the term ‘mother’ has to be equally understood as a social and cul-

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1 In her deconstructive analysis *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Nancy Chodorow systematically explores Freudian psychoanalysis from a sociological, socio-historical and biological-evolutionary point of view in order to explain motherhood as a decidedly cultural phenomenon. It is Chodorow’s main intention to show how women as mothers are reproduced from one generation to another (Chodorow 1978: 7).

tural category.<sup>2</sup> These ideas are confirmed by Marianne Hirsch in her article on “Mothers and Daughters”:

There can be no systematic and theoretical study of women in patriarchal culture, there can be no theory of women’s oppression, that does not take into account woman’s role as a mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers, [...] and that does not study that relationship in the wider context in which it takes place: the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structures of family and society. (Hirsch 1981: 202)

The marginalization and ambivalent depiction of mother-daughter relationships in literary fiction is not limited to Shakespeare, and recent feminist scholarship has pointed towards “the complex process of identification and dis-identification” that can be traced in the literature exploring the issue of mothers and daughters (Hirsch 1989: 16).<sup>3</sup> In consideration of the intertwining socio-cultural, political, and family structures of the early modern period, the following analysis of mothers and daughters in Shakespeare’s plays intends to show to what extent this family relationship helps to construct a certain image or – to use Hirsch’s terminology – ‘identification’ of femininity in the plays. Conversely, it is my aim to show that the relationship between mothers and daughters is orchestrated differently in each period of Shakespeare’s career as a playwright and to show that as a result of this orchestration, the gender-based issue of mothers and daughters has strong repercussions on the evolution of theatrical genres.

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- 2 Chodorow, for example, argues that being a mother “is not only bearing a child – it is being a person who socializes and nurtures. It is being a primary parent or caretaker. So we can ask, why are mothers women? Why is the person who routinely does all those activities that go into parenting not a man? The question is important. [...] Women’s maternal role has profound effects on women’s lives, on ideology about women, on the reproduction of masculinity and sexual inequality, and on the reproduction of particular forms of labor power” (Chodorow 1978: 11).
  - 3 In general, the importance of a systematic analysis of mother-daughter narratives has been accepted within literary studies, and most such analyses tend to employ psychoanalytical, linguistic-narratological, and cultural paradigms. Marianne Hirsch’s book *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989) was the first influential account which focuses on the marginalization of mother-daughter relationships in western literature. Hirsch follows the French school of *écriture féminine*, and she focuses on female authors and the way they deal with the mother-daughter bond. By employing Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the manual shows “how this repressed relationship gradually gains visibility in women’s writing” in different “modes of its representation” (Giorgio 2002a: 1-2). Thus, Hirsch also claims for a combination of psychoanalytical approaches on the one hand, and socio-cultural and historical explanations on the other to explore the meaning and significance of the mother-daughter relationship in fictional texts (Hirsch 1989: 198-199). Other examples that show the recent interest in mother-daughter relationships in literature are Elizabeth Brown-Guillory’s *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th-Century Literature* (1996) and Heather Ingman’s *Mothers and Daughters in the Twentieth Century* (1999).