Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare's Plays, HAMLET to THE TEMPEST*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992. pp. 379.

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Janet Adelman begins her Acknowledgment by writing, "This book has been a long time in the making." The result is well worth the wait, for **Suffocating Mothers** exemplifies the finest work currently being done in psychoanalytic criticism.

In **Suffocating Mothers**, Adelman explores the primal psychic ooze of nascent selfhood, particularly of the origins of masculinity embedded in the maternal body as represented in the plays from **Hamlet** to **The Tempest**. Adelman points out that there are a few powerful mothers in Shakespeare's earliest plays but that these mothers virtually disappear until **Hamlet**. In the plays before **Hamlet**, "masculine identity is constructed in and through the absence of the maternal"; in them, Shakespeare splits his psychic and dramatic world in two (into heterosexual bonds and father-son bonds), isolating its elements "from each other and from the maternal body that would be toxic to both." However, the occluded mother of these plays returns with a vengeance in **Hamlet**, and Adelman argues that the plays from **Hamlet** on "all follow from her return." The tragic burden of Hamlet and the men who come after him resides "in selfhood grounded in paternal absence and in the fantasy of overwhelming contamination at the site of origin." This burden is not borne alone; "again and again, it is passed on to the women, who must pay the price for the fantasies of maternal power invested in them." *Suffocating Mothers *explores these fantasies and their cost.

According to Adelman, the return of the mother in **Hamlet** "causes the collapse of the fragile compact that had allowed Shakespeare to explore familial and sexual relationships in the histories and romantic comedies without devastating conflict; this collapse is the point of origin of the great tragic period." **Hamlet** is, then, "a kind of watershed, subjecting to maternal presence the relationships previously exempted from that presence." Female sexuality in the person of Gertrude undoes the strategy by which sexual relations in the romantic comedies and **Romeo and Juliet** and father-son relations in the history plays and **Julius Caesar** are protected, infecting both kinds of relationships. Adelman contends that the sexualized maternal body unleashes for Shakespeare and his male characters' fantasies of maternal malevolence and contamination, reiterating infantile fears and desires, leading those males to equate morality with being tainted in the mother's womb. Adelman sees **Hamlet** and the plays that follow it as "marked by the struggle to escape from condition, to free masculine identity of both father and son from its origin in the contaminated maternal body."

Adelman maintains that "*Hamlet* initiates the period of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies because it in effect rewrites the story of Cain and Abel as the story of Adam and Eve, relocating masculine identity in the presence of the adulterating female." From **Hamlet** on, the mother becomes the site for infantile fantasies of maternal power: "Despite Shakespeare's sometimes astonishing moments of sympathetic engagement with his female characters, his ability to see the world from their point of view, his women will tend to be like Gertrude, more significant as screens for male fantasy than as independent characters making their own claim to dramatic reality; as they become fused

with the mother of infantile need, even their fantasized gestures of independence will be read as the signs of adulterate betrayal." Shakespeare's women pay heavily for the fantasies invested in them. Even though the female sexual body is dangerous to the males, "the problematic maternal body can never quite be occluded or transformed: made into a monster or a saint, killed off or banished from the stage, it remains at the center of masculine subjectivity, marking its unstable origin. For the contaminated flesh of the maternal body is also home; the home Shakespeare's protagonists long to return to, the home they can never quite escape."

Troilus and Cressida and **Othello** investigate the deeply ambivalent desire for sexual union and the recoil from that desire: both Troilus and Othello recover their manhood "by taking a terrible vengeance on the woman in whom it is represented." Adelman contends that both plays "enact the contamination of a maternal figure through sexuality; both are versions of the morning-after fantasy in which the madonna is transformed into the whore." However, while in **Troilus and Cressida** the source of corruption is located in the unstable female body, in **Othello** it is situated in the diseased male imagination. To Adelman, this relocation reveals "the extent to which Shakespeare's revision of **Troilus and Cressida** in **Othello** was an attempt to dissociate himself from the fantasies that motivate Cressida's betrayal."

All's Well That Ends Well and **Measure for Measure** play out the extraordinarily desperate remedies through which sexual union might be made safe. Bertram's and Angelo's virginal sexual experiences also fall into the pattern of the morning-after fantasy; however, Shakespeare, to enable marriage again, enshrines the morning-after fantasy in the plots of these two plays. Nevertheless, the marriages at the ends of these two plays "fail to satisfy the desires of either the characters or the audience"; and their failure "marks the extent to which comedy is no longer a viable genre for Shakespeare."

Despite its absence of literal mothers, **King Lear** records the horrific discovery of the suffocating mother at the center of masculine authority and the terrible vengeance taken upon her. Lear's confrontation with his daughters "leads him to the mother ostensibly occluded by the play: in recognizing his daughters as part of himself he will be led to recognize not only his terrifying dependence on female forces outside himself but also an equally terrifying femaleness within himself—a femaleness that he will come to call 'mother' (2.4.56)." Lear's "naked vulnerability" can only be expressed by simultaneously allowing "the self-preserving and self-enclosing male rage that provokes it." According to Adelman, Lear's vulnerability to Cordelia leads "toward **Antony and Cleopatra** and the great reunions of the romances," while the enactment of Cordelia's death leads "toward **Macbeth**, **Coriolanus**, and* Timon of Athens*: toward the excision of the dangerous female presences—the mothers within and without—that threaten to overwhelm male authority and selfhood."

Macbeth and **Coriolanus** record the attempt to create an autonomous masculinity to ward off vulnerability to the mother. Virulent maternal power unleashed at the beginning of **Macbeth** is contained in the end by eliminating the female; "mothers no longer threaten because they no longer exist." However, "this solution is inherently unstable." **Coriolanus**, on the other hand, undoes the ending of **Macbeth** by bringing the powerful mother back and by brutally displaying the failure of attempting to sever the maternal connection. With these two plays, "Shakespeare's tragic art seems to have come to an impasse."

In **Timon of Athens**, Shakespeare exposes autonomous masculinity in its most naked form; in **Antony and Cleopatra** he attempts to move beyond it, re-imagining both sexual union and masculine identity in a new relation to the maternal. **Timon of Athens** represents Shakespeare's most extreme vision of the fantasy of male bounty replacing unreliable female otherness. *Antony and Cleopatra* seems to answer **Timon** by locating Antony's selfhood and bounty within Cleopatra's vision of him, returning masculinity to its point of origin in the maternal body. By realigning masculinity with the maternal, "Shakespeare is able to see his way beyond the either/or of **Macbeth** and **Coriolanus**, and beyond the end-stopped genre of tragedy."

The romances, to Adelman, represent Shakespeare's final attempt to repair the damage of the legacy of **Hamlet**, in which "the mother's sexual body is itself poisonous to the father on whom the son would base his identity." Still, the romances continue to bear the signs of Shakespeare's ongoing ambivalence toward the maternal body: "The repeated cycle of doing and undoing--*Pericles* to **Cymbeline**, **The Winter's Tale** to *The Tempest*--suggests the deep divisions in Shakespeare's psychic world: even at the end, he cannot fully join together what he put asunder in **Hamlet**."

Suffocating Mothers is the product of twenty years of thinking, teaching, reading, studying, and writing. The effort has coalesced into a major work of scholarship: a third of its 379 pages are notes, several in the 1000 word range. Adelman gives us a formidable and coherent psychoanalytical reading of Shakespeare's work from **Hamlet** on. I found the chapters on **Hamlet**, **Lear**, and **Antony and Cleopatra** the most impressive. Throughout the study one also discovers gems of individual insights into such issues as Cressida's inconstancy, Bertram's flight, Coriolanus's relation with Aufidius, and Leontes's jealousy.

In **Suffocating Mothers**, Adelman compels us to look into the psychic recesses of Shakespeare's characters, of Shakespeare himself as far as his personality can be recover through his works, and of ourselves. Adelman herself is not exempted from this internal reflection as the following passage from her chapter on *Lear* that deserves to be quoted in its entirety reveals:

> Insofar as the Cordelia of 1.1 is silenced, insofar as we feel the Cordelia who returns more as an iconic presence answering Lear's terrible need than as a separate character with her own needs, Shakespeare is complicit in Lear's fantasy, rewarding him for his suffering by remaking for him the Cordelia he had wanted all along; Shakespeare too requires the sacrifice of her autonomy. This is a very painful recognition for a feminist critic, for any reader who reads as a daughter. As feminist critics, we may once again note wryly that this sacrifice is regularly required of Shakespeare's tragic women, and perhaps of women *per se*; and yet the cases of Cressida and Desdemona are not comparable. For how can we experience this play and not want Cordelia to return to Lear? And yet how can we want what Lear--what Shakespeare--does to her? It is easy enough simply to dissociate ourselves from Lear's need, to gender it male and thus escape its traces in ourselves; it is easy enough to mobilize anger against both the fathers--literal and literary--that require Cordelia's sacrifice. And yet, if we allow the anger we mobilize to cut us off from the heart of longing embedded in Lear's suffering, do we not replicate Lear's own attempt to mobilize anger against vulnerability (2.4.278-80)--this time our own? For the fantasies that determine the shape of Cordelia's return are, I think, only in part gendered; in part they spring from the ground of an infantile experience prior to gender.
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> When Cordelia insists that she cannot love her father all, she creates a rage in Lear that we might agree to call oedipal, and to gender male, insofar as it seems to have its roots in the son's frustrated desire for the mother's exclusive sexual attention; this is, I think, the stratum of desire played out, for example, in Goneril's and Regan's voracious sexuality, especially insofar as that sexuality is triangulated, adulterous. But this (gendered) rage at female sexuality in part figures and in part covers over and defends against the more primitive pain of preoedipal betrayal, the betrayal inherent in individuation itself; and though the expression of this pain will be inflected by gender, we cannot ultimately distance ourselves from it by gendering it male. For the fantasies enacted in Cordelia's loss and return--in Lear's terrible hunger and isolation, in the blissful fusion of his walled prison--derive from the very beginnings of nascent

> selfhood, before consciousness of the gender divide. Even while I understand the urgency of Cordelia's refusal to be all to her father, I share with Lear--and with Shakespeare--the stratum of desire that brings her back all his; and to the extent that I share in their desire, I cannot shelter in the anger that would allow me to make their need alien, gendering it male. For I too inhabit the terror of finitude and the desire for merger with the infinitely kind nursery that can undo the pain of separation; I too long for her return. And if so, then I participate with them in the destruction of Cordelia's selfhood; daughters as well as sons require this sacrifice from those we make our mothers.

Although this excursion into the personal is not a characteristic of the work as a whole, it does, I believe, represent what goes on as one reads this compelling psychoanalytic investigation. We are forced as readers to confront Shakespeare's, his characters', and our own infantile fantasies, fears and desires. In **Suffocating Mothers**, Adelman takes us on a journey into the deepest regions of consciousness, and what a journey it is.

Reviewed by Hardy M. Cook, *The Shakespeare Newsletter* 42.2 (no. 213, Summer 1992): 29-30.