

Victoria Browne

Oedipus interrupted: Introduction to a special cluster on 'Changing Models of Motherhood'

This special cluster on 'Changing Models of Motherhood' introduces two papers presented at a workshop hosted by the AHRC-funded 'Motherhood in Post-1968 European Literature Network'. The aim of the Network has been to enable cross-cultural, transnational, and interdisciplinary dialogue on motherhood, bringing together researchers and practitioners from the UK and Europe studying motherhood in contemporary European literatures, and across a broad range of disciplines and European cultures. In particular, the Network aims to raise the profile of literature in such conversations.

Whilst 'sisterhood' is the familial metaphor most often associated with feminist discourse, the use of maternal metaphors has become increasingly prevalent within Anglophone and European feminist discourse over the past forty years, alongside the study of mothering as a practice, and motherhood as an institution. Some critics have regarded this focus upon maternal relations and metaphors as an 'overmaternalization of feminism' (Henry 2004: 146), a form of 'Oedipality' or Oedipalisation which needs to be overcome. In an influential essay on 'Generational Difficulties' (1997), for example, Judith Roof presents a powerful polemic, claiming that propagating generational, maternal and matrilineal paradigms bespeaks a 'fear of a barren history': an unease about contingency and a fear that the next generation will refuse to follow in the footsteps of their foremothers, or that they will '[reject] their mother's model entirely and [commence] a new and different battle' (Roof 1997:70). The mother-daughter trope, in Roof's account, functions as a parental figure of control that 'prevents unruly "Others"' escaping the law of legacy and debt' (ibid: 75). From this perspective, the 'maternalization of feminism' can be read as a form of Oedipal inversion, of 'patriarchy with an "M"', an importation of the 'full force of Oedipal rivalry, recrimination, and debt' into feminist discourse and theory (ibid.).

Female-to-female inheritance, it is true, has always been problematic within patriarchal societies and cultures in which 'the legacy passed from male to male is understood as natural and of central importance' (Spencer 2004:10). As Irigaray has forcefully argued, mother-daughter relations in patriarchal or patrilineal societies are subordinate to relations between men, and as such, the 'between-men cultures' of patriarchy offer no suitable ways of symbolising and

Victoria Browne, *Oedipus Interrupted: Introduction to the special cluster on 'Changing Models of Motherhood'*

cultivating 'between-women' cultures, socialities and genealogies (1993a:16). Irigaray explains that Oedipus is the emblem of this genealogical and reproductive order because of its division of genealogy into 'one or two family triangles, all sired by the male' (1993b:3). Within this symbolic system, she claims, the female is reduced to the realm of raw 'nature' and 'uncultured' reproduction, and relations between women are stifled, even impossible, because its kinship structures separate women from one another and deny that there is a genealogy of women (ibid.). That is, according to Irigaray, there is no adequate cultural alternative to the patriarchal, hierarchical rules and meanings governing genealogical and inter-generational relations; thus to conduct themselves in social life, women are forced to mimic patriarchal kinship patterns and relationships modelled on genealogical descent, Oedipal rivalry and debt. Women ape these patterns and paradigms, Irigaray contends, because 'we lack values of our own' (ibid:4).

The Oedipal drama has been foundational to the conception of familial relations within western cultural theory, primarily due to the influence of Freud and Lacan, and structuralist anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss. On the one hand, these Oedipal theories and rubrics have been useful to theorists and scholars engaged in the study of motherhood, mothering or the maternal, in that they offer many useful insights into how Oedipal or patriarchal cultural logics and structures maintain and reproduce themselves. On the other hand, however, there has arguably been a tendency, at least within psychoanalytically-inspired feminist theory of recent years, to grant too much explanatory and imaginary power to Oedipal theories and imaginaries, allowing them to over-determine our analysis and block out instances of familial relations or familial tropes that do not conform to the Oedipal logic. Granted, the Oedipal myth is not simply a fantasy, but rather, it can be seen as a 'symptom', in that it has a 'symbolic logic that accounts for a real mode of functioning, a real structure of relations' (Felman 1987:151). Nevertheless, whilst Oedipal modes may well have dominated familial relationships under patriarchal conditions, their symbolic logic and mythic manifestations can be, at least in principle, interrupted and unsettled. As Irigaray memorably puts it: 'the Oedipal paradigm only seems like the only order possible because it refuses to regard itself as myth' (Irigaray 1993:23).

Irigaray is one of several post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theorists in recent years who has sought to overturn and challenge the dominance of Oedipal accounts within western cultural theory. In the Lacanian system, 'Oedipalisation' is cast as *the* inaugural structure of language and subjectivity, whereby the Law and the Name of the Father intervenes in the mother-child 'fusion'

Victoria Browne, Oedipus Interrupted: Introduction to the special cluster on 'Changing Models of Motherhood'

to mark the child's entry into the realm of the Symbolic. If we accept this theory, then Oedipus becomes the very mark and normative condition of culture itself (Butler 2002:34). Irigaray and others, however, have refused to accept this originary matricide or 'erasure of the maternal', and have used psychoanalytic concepts and methods to try and find a place for maternal genealogy or the 'law of the mother' within psychoanalytic accounts of intersubjectivity, individuation and enculturation. Interventions such as this begin to open up alternative psychoanalytic models that do not depend upon a transcendence of the maternal, but rather, affirm the maternal contribution to subjectivity. The guiding idea behind the psychoanalytic approach is that if social relations are to improve, we must look at psychic determinations of the social (Irigaray 1993:10-11).

Another field which has been vital in generating 'post-Oedipal' models of familial and maternal relations is contemporary anthropology, wherein the likes of Marilyn Strathern and David Schneider have challenged the universalism of Lacanian and Lévi-Straussian structuralism, and brought to light kinship systems and familial relations that do not conform to the Oedipal model. The key theoretical idea behind such studies is that kinship is a kind of *doing*, which does not reflect a prior structure but can only be understood as an enacted practice (Schneider 1984). As Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon explain, from this perspective, kinship is no longer theorized or conceptualized as being grounded in a singular and fixed idea of a 'natural' relation (Franklin and McKinnon 2000: 278). Instead, they argue, kinship enacts a specific assemblage of significations as it takes place; it is a 'mobile classificatory technology', which is generative of, and responsive to, 'the kinds of material, relational, and cultural worlds that are possible or livable, and for whom' (ibid.). Ultimately, then, 'post-kinship' theorists, as Judith Butler describes them, relax the distinction between the symbolic and the social. They assume that social relations and practices have the power to undermine and transform the symbolic order of 'rules' governing those social relations. Thus, 'the symbolic does not precede the social and... has no independence from it' (Butler 2002: 38). In contrast to the 'quasi-timeless' character of the Lévi-Straussian or Lacanian structuralist notion of the symbolic order as a hypostatized, reified structure of relations that underwrites and 'lurks behind any actual social arrangement'(ibid.), symbolic orders are understood to fluctuate and mutate due to changing sociocultural and economic formations and phenomena, including, in our present times, transnational migration, transnational adoption and IVF, as well as legal battles around gay marriage and civil partnership.

Victoria Browne, Oedipus Interrupted: Introduction to the special cluster on 'Changing Models of Motherhood'

This implies that kin terms are in fact irreducible to natural or biological relations, as they frequently extend to non-biological and non-familial relations, including community members, friends, lovers, ex-lovers, and ‘other-mothers’. Rather than taking psychoanalytic models as a starting point or basis for rethinking maternal or familial models and relations, the anthropological approach reverses the emphasis, and explored the determinative role of the sociocultural environment upon the interpsychic.

Alongside innovative studies in psychoanalytic theory and anthropology, we can also look to literature and literary analysis as a field that can open up our understandings of kinship and the maternal. However, whilst literature scholars frequently draw upon theoretical models or concepts from disciplines such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology or politics, these disciplines tend to draw less frequently upon literature or literary analysis in return. To try and rectify this situation, the AHRC-funded ‘Motherhood in post-1968 European Literature’ Network—led by Professor Gill Rye, and based at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women’s Writing, Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London—was launched in March 2012. As mentioned, it aimed in particular to raise the profile of literature, highlighting its contribution to Maternal Studies. The guiding hypothesis is that literary texts and analysis have much to offer different disciplinary studies of motherhood, in terms of their capacity to capture the complexities of maternal discourses and experiences, and thus to resist or complicate the schematic, normative models that continue to dominate our contemporary understandings of motherhood, mothering and the maternal. Over a period of twenty-one months, the Network has organised a series of workshops that focused on a range of themes, including employment, migration, and religions, and a major international three-day conference which was held in October 2013 at Senate House in London. The following two articles—by Katarina Carlshamre and Abigail Lee Six—originated from papers presented at the third workshop hosted by the Network, held on 18th January 2013. The workshop was entitled ‘Changing Models of Motherhood’, and it assembled a wide range of researchers to discuss shifting perceptions of mothers who are often marginalised or demonised in relation to normative discourses on motherhood and family, and to explore alternative ways of theorising, figuring and expressing kinship relations.

The papers in the first plenary panel of the day, ‘Changing Concepts and Practices of Motherhood’, were all concerned with highlighting alternative kinship formations articulated in

Victoria Browne, *Oedipus Interrupted*: Introduction to the special cluster on ‘Changing Models of Motherhood’

both theory and literature, and each offered a contribution to what we might term the ‘post-Oedipal’ landscape in contemporary scholarship. Each paper pointed to studies or texts which are beginning to interrupt the pervasiveness of Oedipus as an analytic and mythic formulation, and to open up more nuanced and historically and contextually sensitive approaches. Such examples demonstrate, in the first instance, the *variability* of maternal and familial relations, and in the second instance, the *contingency* of Oedipal modes.

For example, the paper written for the workshop by Signe Howell introduced her concept of the ‘kinning’ process within adoption, and her study of changes in the meanings of family, motherhood, fatherhood and childhood over the past hundred years in Norway, which in turn have had a significant impact upon the psychological experiences and expectations of those involved in adoption (for more on this, see Howell 2006). What made this panel particularly interesting was the interdisciplinary encounter between the anthropological approach undertaken by Howell, and the literary one taken by Katarina Carlshamre in her exploration of the image of the father in four recent Swedish contemporary mother narrative novels. Carlshamre’s paper, (upon which her article in this edition of *Studies in the Maternal* is based), begins by assessing the role of the father within French fictional ‘mother-narratives’, where he is typically excluded from the mother-child dyad, and when he is present, fulfils a traditional image of the father as breadwinner, law-keeper and/or representative of the ‘public’ sphere. Thus, in the French novels that she examines, Carlshamre finds that the image of the father coheres with the stereotypical twentieth-century image of the father in western European culture. In contrast, in the Swedish novels that she examines, the father emerges as a ‘caring bodily presence’: an image which offers a different model for familial and parental roles in twenty-first century Europe, and reflects the particular sociocultural context of Sweden as a society where a large proportion of fathers are directly involved in the care for their small children, and where the combination of active parenting and professional life is a real option for a large majority of parents, mothers and fathers alike. At the same time, Carlshamre discerns another common image in the novels—that of the mother’s unhappiness and the father’s indifference—which she argues can be understood as an articulation of the tension between norm and reality concerning gender equality in present day Sweden. Carlshamre’s paper thus shows how fictional narratives and literary texts, as well as social scientific and anthropological studies, can raise a plethora of significant themes and issues in relation to changing family patterns, demonstrating how intimately maternal discourses are

Victoria Browne, *Oedipus Interrupted: Introduction to the special cluster on ‘Changing Models of Motherhood’*

tied to, and tied up in, specific social and political realities as well as psychological and biological structures.

The second plenary panel of the workshop focused on a particular theme: motherhood and child disability. Where the papers in the first panel sought to highlight how models of motherhood and kinship are variable, shifting and contingent, the papers in this panel focused instead upon how stubbornly persistent the dominant perceptions, traditions and norms can be. Abigail Lee Six's paper, (upon which her article below is based), examines the Spanish novel, *Esas mujeres rubias* (2010) [*Those Blonde Women*] by Ana García-Siñeriz, which is presented as a mother's first-person account of her life to date, including losing her only daughter at the age of fourteen due to a rare genetic anomaly. Various scholars in the field of feminist disability studies have focused their analyses upon present day conditions, arguing that scientific advances and consumer culture have together increased mothers' sense of blame when they have a disabled child. What Lee Six seeks to do instead is demonstrate that this sense of blame has a longer history, positing that the religious discourse which the scientific one has replaced in secular society has resulted in an analogous and equally pernicious basis for mother-blame, and she demonstrates that this is vividly illustrated in *Esas mujeres rubias*. Once again, the paper shows us how fictional narratives and literary texts engage with sociohistorical realities and discourses in ways which can enliven and sharpen our understandings and analyses of motherhood. This was all the more thought-provoking when set against the other paper in the panel by Chrissie Rogers, which also drew upon 'maternal narratives', but in this instance upon narratives drawn from sociological interviews with mothers of disabled children (for more on this, see Rogers 2013a and 2013b). Ultimately the workshop participants were left questioning the traditional boundaries between fact and fiction, scientific and imaginative discourse, as we were presented with different textual genres and methodologies in the course of our explorations into changing (and persisting) maternal models and practices. As such, the workshop highlighted many of the challenges of interdisciplinary collaborative work, and as one participant commented on our blog, the workshop perhaps raised more questions than answers. Yet, the search was not for one new all-encompassing model, and the papers and discussions showed how vital it is to examine different perspectives or routes into a problem, to continually interrogate our own interpretative frameworks and concepts, and to seek out ways of engaging with others who can help us to see or think about motherhood or the maternal differently.

Victoria Browne, Oedipus Interrupted: Introduction to the special cluster on 'Changing Models of Motherhood'

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

Further information on the Network and podcasts from the workshops and conference can be found at <http://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/research-fellowships/ahrc-post-1968-motherhood-european-literature-network>. This work was supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council Networking Grant, ref. AH/J000744/1.

References

- Butler, J. 2002. Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual? *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Vol. 13(1), 14 - 44.
- Felman, S. 1987. *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Franklin, S. and MacKinnon, S. 2000. New Directions in Kinship Study: a Core Concept Revisited. *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 41(2), 275 – 279.
- Henry, A. 2004. *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Howell, S. L. 2006. *The Kinning of Foreigners: Transnational Adoption in a Global Perspective*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Irigaray, L. 1993a. *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. Trans. Alison Martin. New York and London: Routledge.
- Irigaray, L. 1993b. *Sexes and Genealogies*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rogers, C. 2013a. 'Intellectual Disability and Mothering: an Engagement with Ethics of Care and Emotional Work'. *Critical Approaches to Care: Understanding Caring Relations, Identities and Cultures*. Ed. C. Rogers and S. Weller. London: Routledge
- Rogers, C. 2013b. Mothering for Life? Fractured Maternal Narratives, Care and Intellectual Disability. In: *Mothers of Adult Children*. Ed. M. Bouvard. New York: Lexington Press.
- Roof, J. 1997. Generational Difficulties, or The Fear of a Barren History. In: *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*. Ed. Devoney Looser and Ann E. Kaplan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Schneider, D. 1984. *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Spencer, J. 2004. Introduction: Genealogies. In: *Third Wave Feminism: a Critical Exploration*. Ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Victoria Browne, Oedipus Interrupted: Introduction to the special cluster on 'Changing Models of Motherhood'

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk