

Emily Roxworthy

FRANKENMOM: THEATRE AS HISTORY IN DECONSTRUCTING AMERICAN CELEBRITY MOTHERHOOD

When *Paper* magazine attempted in 2014 to “break the Internet” (as its cover declared) by publishing French artist Jean-Paul Goude’s photos of reality star Kim Kardashian brazenly displaying her infamous derriere, the public reprimands to Kardashian from fellow celebrities quickly zeroed in on an even more essentializing aspect of her identity. As actress Naya Rivera posted, “You’re someone’s mother.” Singer Lorde articulated Kardashian’s transgression even more simply, retweeting the photos along with a single word that served as a hex: “mom.” The judgment of her female peers seemed to be that Kardashian, who gave birth to daughter North West in June 2013, should have known better than to flaunt her sexuality on the public stage now that she was a mother. Meanwhile, in a related realm, an American celebrity tabloid such as *Us Weekly* can generate annual advertising revenues of \$403 million (that magazine’s 2013 figure) with a profit model based on spectacularizing celebrity mothers and appraising their so-called “baby bumps.”¹ Former *US Weekly* editor-in-chief Janice Min coined the term “Frankenmom” in a now-notorious 2012 *New York Times* article about the pressure she felt to regain her pre-pregnancy body after the birth of her third child. In that article, she paid penance for “our ideal of this near-emaciated, sexy and well-dressed Frankenmom” that she had helped create through celebrity journalism.² (Kardashian’s decision to pose nude in *Paper* was later explained by celebrity outlet *TMZ* as a gesture “to show the world how she bounced back after giving birth to North West.”)³ Despite the personal

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pressure she experienced as a mother, Min boasted that because of her magazine's focus on maternal bodies during her time as editor (2003–9), American novelist "Tom Wolfe once remarked, 'the one thing that *Us Weekly* has done that's a great boost to the nation is, they've probably increased the birthrate.'"⁴

While Min's use of the term "Frankenmom" was imprecise and was mostly deployed for shock value, I would like to take this term seriously as more than just a facile marker of the extreme fixation on maternal bodies that drives women to manipulate their appearances in apparently monstrous ways. Just as "Frankenmom" makes oblique reference to the monster created by Dr. Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, today's popular media have created its maternal monster from a variety of sources steeped in history that present often contradictory expectations for mothers who venture outside the traditional private realm of domesticity and into the public sphere. While celebrity mothers such as Kim Kardashian appear on the public stage because being a public figure is their main source of income, most American women work for a living in less sensational occupations. But the insidiousness of the Frankenmom construction adheres to most mothers regardless of their interest in the spotlight.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, such profitable—and policed—public displays of maternal bodies have become so naturalized that it's easy to lose sight of the fact that these spectacular constructions of motherhood are descended from the theatre stages of earlier centuries. For evidence of how theatrical constructions of motherhood have seeped off the stage, look no further than Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic system for distinguishing good mothers from bad ones based on their relationship to a "complex" named after the ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* (ca. 426 BCE)⁵ or the Western fetishization of Asian mothers who sacrifice themselves, as Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904) character beautifully does, for the love of an undeserving white man and the son she bore him.⁶ These theatrical constructions of motherhood vary in their valences but not in the extremity of the expectations they place on the maternal body, and in this article I argue that today's Frankenmom is fabricated of parts from a wide variety of tragic onstage mothers from theatre history.

Western theatre has long served a modeling function for what Judith Butler might call the juridical construction of motherhood, and while the theatre has declined as a mainstream cultural apparatus in the United States, its power over how mothers are publicly displayed remains. In the United States, the government has almost entirely privatized maternity by refusing to provide state support for child-bearing in any manner comparable to its global peers,⁷ and the privatization of motherhood has spectacularly played out in the "fourth estate" of the news media. Indeed, as celebrity itself has become a seemingly profitable career path (as "reality stars" such as Kardashian seem to demonstrate), prominently displaying oneself for scrutiny on the public stage has become the most visible (if least realistic) career for working mothers, so much so that mediatized (mis)understandings of moms who work outside the home have begun to resemble yet another historic drama whose maternal modeling function has not been adequately understood: Bertolt Brecht's World War II masterpiece *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939). Kardashian and other (in)famous contemporary women—such

as singer Jessica Simpson and other celebrities whom an earlier *New York Times* feature accused of purposely procreating to profit from the attention garnered by giving birth and displaying one's children on the public stage—present a perverse twist on Mother Courage's ill-fated attempt to support her children amid the Thirty Years' War. In the words of the *Times*' Jacob Bernstein, "They have found, to be blunt, that motherhood pays."⁸

Although today's fixation on displaying the celebrity mother makes it hard to believe that, until fairly recently, the theatrical stage was the only place where Western mothers could be prominently represented in public, particularly since, by the late eighteenth century, real mothers had been driven into the private realm as caring for children became a "job" that was seen as "necessary to the development of a vibrant capitalist economy."⁹ Beth Osnes and Jennifer Popple rightly assert that "theatre is the oldest media [*sic*] through which the world has consistently witnessed portrayals of 'mother.'"¹⁰ Today, as the combined pressures of gender revolution and capitalist privatization have pushed more than 70 percent of US mothers out of the home and into the workforce,¹¹ these maternal representations have migrated off the theatrical stage and onto other public media stages. In this migration to the public realm, the theatrical/historical basis of maternal representations has been repressed, but it can be brought to the surface through a close reading of the classic plays and a reconnection to their contemporary ghostings.

While important studies such as E. Ann Kaplan's *Motherhood and Representation* (1992) and Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan's edited volume *Representations of Motherhood* (1994) have traced the literary and filmic influences on the perception of mothers in Western culture, it is the *live* embodiment of theatrical production that has proved crucial in modeling how motherhood is to be judged, because the visceral differentiation between the performing actress and the character performed has become key to judging the spectacle. As the theatricalized mothers in *Oedipus the King*, *Madame Butterfly*, and *Mother Courage and Her Children* will demonstrate, the actresses who are paid to present Jocasta, Cio-Cio-San,¹² and Mother Courage onstage must perform estrangement from their male-scripted maternal roles. In the dominant productions of all three tragedies, the lead actresses delivered for their audiences the spectacle of a female body that is judging rather than identifying with the mother she has been charged with playing, in part because the respective male authors (Sophocles, Puccini, and Brecht) constructed judgmental dramas in which the only "good" mother is the one who sacrifices herself. These thankless maternal roles required the actresses to embody the characters using a tactic I call "maternal drag" because they quoted highly gendered repertoires of traditional behavior while simultaneously distancing themselves from these repertoires. In today's mediatized spectacularization of motherhood that can be witnessed every time a celebrity debuts her baby bump or a public figure juggles mothering with professional duties, theatrical codes—not literary devices or filmic tropes—are being deployed in the collective judgment of these real women. The Frankenmom monster who roams our contemporary media landscape was created in the cultural imagination of previous centuries, brought to life with theatrical parts harvested from Jocasta (the dangerous, sexually desired mother), Cio-Cio-San (the fetishized,

self-effacing Asian mother), and Mother Courage (the destructive working mother).

MOTHERING OEDIPUS

Literary scholar Peter Rudnytsky points out that Freud identified with the tragic character of Oedipus from the time of his adolescence in the 1870s, “long before the discovery of psychoanalysis or the Oedipus complex,” and indeed the heroic qualities of Sophocles’ protagonist (rather than the protagonist’s fate of killing his father and bedding his mother) interested Freud decades before he canonized the Oedipal drama in his 1899 *The Interpretation of Dreams*.¹³ Eventually, part of Freud’s interest in *Oedipus the King* would become the structural similarity between his own early childhood experience of having “two mothers”—an older Czech “Nannie” who left her employment when Freud was only two years old and his younger, more beautiful biological “*mater*,” whom he idealized—and Oedipus’ doubled relationship with the phallic maternal figure of the Sphinx and the seductive maternal presence of his incestuous wife, Jocasta, who hangs herself upon realizing that the prophecy has come to pass: her son has indeed killed his father and married his mother, herself.¹⁴ Miriam Leonard writes that Lacan took the psychoanalytic reading of Jocasta’s seductive threat even further, placing the “whole weight of the crime . . . on Jocasta’s shoulders” and misinterpreting Jocasta as “consciously act[ing] out her desire on an unsuspecting Oedipus,” despite the fact that, until the final moments of the play, Sophocles nowhere depicts either Oedipus or his mother as anything but ignorant of their incestuous actions.¹⁵ But to talk about a misreading of Sophocles’ play misses the heart of the matter: as classicist Richard H. Armstrong has shown, Freud did not begin to see Oedipus’ fate as a universal human condition until he considered the nineteenth-century public’s response to Sophocles’ play in performance at various major theatrical venues across Europe, most notably the 1881 Comédie-Française (Paris) production of *Oedipe-Roi* with Jean Mounet-Sully in the title role. This was a performance that Armstrong dubs “the definitive Oedipus of the 19th century.”¹⁶

As one of the *monstres sacrés* (superstars, lit.: “sacred monsters”) of the French stage, Mounet-Sully (1841–1916) succeeded as Oedipus because of “his desire to play the role with the full range of its psychological and emotional possibilities.” Mounet-Sully’s visceral identification with the tragic role was evident when he later told a reporter, “I will always remain the Oedipus which I’ve tried to show you.”¹⁷ By most historical accounts, the actor displayed an extreme degree of emotional investment that was unusual for performances of Greek tragedy and used this spectacular empathy to upstage every other aspect of the production. Indeed, theatre historian Fiona Macintosh calls it “hardly surprising that Mounet-Sully’s interpretation of the role made such an impact on [Freud].”¹⁸ Nearly two decades after Mounet-Sully began performing Oedipus, the public’s powerful impressions of the sacred monster were still fresh for Freud when he described how *Oedipus the King* “deeply moved” (*erschüttern*) spectators.¹⁹ Collectively experiencing the power of Sophocles’ play in performance, in the company of what Armstrong characterizes as “thousands of his contemporaries”

in the theatre,²⁰ served as “data” to support Freud’s contention that the necessary repudiation of an incestuous desire for one’s mother and a murderous envy toward one’s father—the Oedipus complex—was a universal set of neuroses that all humans experienced.²¹ As Armstrong points out, very little clinical evidence was used to support the universal validity of Freud’s contention; the theatrical apparatus instead served as his psychoanalytic laboratory.²² Armstrong has written elsewhere that “the institution of spectacle gives a specular unity to culture, and Freud uses the *theatrical* success of *Oedipus Tyrannus* to claim the universality of the eponymous complex.”²³

Though he notes the dangerous ground Freud established by universalizing the meaning of the audience’s fascination with *Oedipus the King*,²⁴ Armstrong does not seem to recognize that Freud’s collapsing of the space between ancient Greek performance and modern European performance also overlooks a major overhaul in the representation of the crucial mother figure Jocasta, a character who would seem to loom large for a psychological theory about the maternal function. A not-insignificant casting revolution had transpired on Western stages in the intervening millennia of theatre history: whereas a man would have played Jocasta on the classical stage, a woman played the pivotal wife-mother role for modern audiences. Freud does not articulate the audience’s reaction to Émilie Lerou, the actress who played Jocasta opposite Mounet-Sully’s famous Oedipus (indeed, Freud does not discuss any particulars of theatrical production in *The Interpretation of Dreams*). However, he does attribute the complex to one of her lines, calling it “the key to the tragedy”:

Jocasta comforts Oedipus—who is not yet enlightened, but is troubled by the recollection of the oracle—by an allusion to a dream which is often dreamed, though it cannot, in her opinion, mean anything:

For many a man hath seen himself in dream
His mother’s mate, but he who gives no heed
To suchlike matters bears the easier life.

The dream of having sexual intercourse with one’s mother was as common then as it is today with many people, who tell it with indignation and astonishment. As may well be imagined, it is the key to the tragedy and the complement to the dream of the death of the father.²⁵

“Jocasta comforts Oedipus.” How might the uncanniness of seeing a biological woman perform that scene—in this case, the actress Émilie Lerou (1855–1935), who was in her midtwenties when *Oedipe Roi* premiered, thus more than a decade younger than the actor cast as her son-husband—have altered the meaning from its original signification for ancient audiences? The ancients had instead apprehended Jocasta through a male actor who appeared during other scenes “with a different costume and mask to take the part of the Theban Shepherd.”²⁶ Might the visceral presence of the young, female body of Mlle Lerou and the other actresses who played Jocasta on the fin-de-siècle European stage have caused the modern

audience (or at least one of its observers, Dr. Freud) to collapse the distinction between a mythical representation onstage and the deepest psychological realities of the entire human species? Might the erotics of a young, attractive female body playing Jocasta have influenced Freud's theory about the young child's desire for his mother?

Although Émilie Lerou has been excised from many historical accounts of the landmark Comédie-Française production of *Oedipe Roi*, her presence onstage as "Jocaste" was by no means insignificant for contemporary audiences. One critic wrote that Lerou's "imposing stature and tragic mask [of facial expressions] were well suited" for the role of Oedipus' mother-cum-wife.²⁷ As a space of embodied, collective fantasy, theatrical mimesis produces an affective structure that is often misrecognized as evidence of human truths—in other words, a copy taken as the original—and the resultant "truths" are used to judge future experiences, much as, in the court of law, legal precedents pattern future juridical directions. Judith Butler encapsulates how Freud's misinterpretation of *Oedipus the King* provided this precedent when she writes that the Oedipal complex's "incest taboo is the juridical law that is said both to prohibit incestuous desires and to construct certain gendered subjectivities through the mechanism of compulsory identification."²⁸ Framing the performance of Jocasta as evidence of a universal human incest taboo has created a highly fantastical precedent for the construction of motherhood, one that demands that contemporary mothers be eternally attractive while simultaneously judging them for courting sexual desire (think of Lorde's hex upon Kardashian's exhibitionism: "mom.")

Although Freud identifies the Oedipus complex's key in the incestuous dream mentioned by Jocasta, he elsewhere has very little to say about the mother as subject, and this ironic silencing of the maternal voice has served as precedent for subsequent treatments of *Oedipus the King*. Film scholar E. Ann Kaplan remarks on the irony that "even though Freud does not directly address the mother, nor say much about female sexuality per se, his theories revolutionized nineteenth-century motherhood discourses"—despite the fact that Freud failed to "analyze the psychic consequences of mothering for the woman."²⁹ Amber Jacobs suggests that Freud also missed the matricidal impulse that motivates Oedipus, in part because Sophocles makes Jocasta's death such a sanitized, bloodless, and superficially voluntary affair. "While suicide rather than murder is represented as the process by which the dead mother is created within the oedipal narrative," Jacobs writes, "these suicides are precipitated directly by the confrontation between mother and son." Indeed, "the suicides of Jocasta and the Sphinx could convincingly be interpreted as belonging to a matricidal phantasy structure specific to the desire of Oedipus, the son."³⁰ Philosopher René Girard also takes issue with the psychological conclusions that Freud drew from Sophocles' play but nonetheless duplicates Freud's excision of Jocasta and motherhood from his theory of mimetic desire in *Violence and the Sacred*. As feminist literary critic Toril Moi writes in her essay "The Missing Mother," "Girard manages to lose the mother somewhere in his discussions of the Oedipal triangle."³¹

Although Moi persuasively argues that Girard *must* lose the mother in order to avoid investing the pre-Oedipal period of mother–infant bonding with overt

significance that would lead to a homoerotic reading of the Oedipus complex, Girard's editing of Jocasta out of Sophocles' plot serves an even simpler sort of intellectual expedience. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard wants to argue that the sacrificial impulse in all societies emits from what he calls "mimetic desire": desperately desiring what you see someone else desiring.³² The competition for this shared, desired object inevitably leads to community-rending violence unless a sacrificial victim from the margins of the community can be offered as a substitute for the antagonist in the mimetic cycle of desire. Girard claims that in many societies these sacrificial victims are animals, though where human sacrifice is sanctioned, the human sacrificial victims "are either outside or on the fringes of society: prisoners of war, slaves, *pharmakos*."³³ He reads the character of Oedipus as representing the ancient Greek use of a *pharmakos* (scapegoat) to cure the sacrificial crisis through the expulsion of an abject figure: "Like Oedipus, the victim is considered a polluted object, whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community of its ills."³⁴ As Moi points out, there are *many* problems with Girard's "proud, patriarchal and oppressively monolithic theory,"³⁵ but the problem most pertinent to his claim of Oedipus as *pharmakos* is that, of course, Oedipus is not killed at the end of the play, nor does he die. Instead, the tragic character blinds himself with his dead wife-mother's brooches and wanders off to self-banishment.

Referring precisely to Girard's "inability to account for women as agents," Moi quotes scholar Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo's diagnosis of the Western cultural tendency to cast women "merely as objects of the conflicting desires" and her ensuing question: "[I]s not legitimate to look at the story from the side of the women, as subjects who are the tragic victims?"³⁶ Foregrounding the virtual matricide of Jocasta opens up a channel for us to see a lineage of subsequent mothers—fictional, real, and fictionally real—who have been subjected to representational violence in order to shore up traditional ideals of motherhood. At the beginning of this lineage, we witness Oedipus' urge to destroy Jocasta because she has failed to embody the ideal of the good mother. Rudnytsky points out that once Oedipus realizes the full extent of his incestuous union with his mother, he rushes toward Jocasta's room in the palace, more upset by her failure to protect him as a child than by her sexual relationship with him in adulthood: "The decisive detail here is Oedipus' demand for a spear, for there can be no doubt that he wished to use it to *kill Jocasta*, in response to having learned that she sought to destroy him in infancy."³⁷ However, when he arrives in her bedchamber, Jocasta has already killed herself, so Oedipus removes the brooches from her hanging body and proceeds to *blind* himself—not kill himself. The mother dies; the son lives. One interpretation of Jocasta's suicide is certainly that she could not live with the knowledge of her actions, but the more important point is that had Oedipus found her alive, he planned to kill her. As Rudnytsky makes clear, Oedipus must destroy Jocasta because she has been a bad mother: "[A]s the sequence of searing revelations builds to its climax, Oedipus is felled by the Herdsman's disclosure that it was his *mother* who exposed him as an infant: 'My wife—*she* gave it to you?' (l. 1290)." Rudnytsky perceptively notes that in the dramatic text itself,

Freud's Oedipal dynamic plays out in reverse: "[I]n the course of the play [Oedipus] actually shows his *love for his father* and tries to *kill his mother*."³⁸

Likewise, theatre scholar Freddie Rokem detects in the play Sophocles' "deep fear" of his female characters and their voices' "actuality and overwhelming presence . . . ending with the suicidal screams of Iocasta." Rokem calls this silencing of women in the prototypical Oedipal drama "the Greek paradigm" that has provided the model for the modern theatre's reliance on female characters who can vocalize their subjectivity only through "a scream of protest or desperation."³⁹ He describes a methodology that listens for the voices of modern female characters that have been modeled after Queen Jocasta's offstage shrieks, first uttered by the bed where she now knows she copulated with her son and gave birth to his children, shrieks that the Second Messenger heard right before she hanged herself (1.1248–51).⁴⁰ Jocasta's voice "is literally not given room in the text," serving as precedent for the "gesture of silencing or muffling the female voice" in much of the Western theatre that followed.⁴¹ On a productive level, Rokem finds that these onstage maskings of the female voice can also illuminate the ideological dimensions and power structures of a Western theatrical apparatus (and the societies that patronize it) that forces actresses "to perform roles which are in fact both authored and directed by men."⁴²

With regard to this figurative masking or muffling that theatre often imposes on actresses, it is perhaps revealing to mention the 1908 autobiography of Émilie Lerou, whose modern performances as Jocasta have largely been silenced from the historical record opposite the larger-than-life Oedipal performance of Jean Mounet-Sully. Lerou's autobiography is titled *Sous le masque* (Under the Mask; 1908), as if only in a nontheatrical medium such as the memoir could an actress of this time be liberated from the layers of artifice worn to produce heteronormative fantasies such as the Oedipal one. Such metaphorical masking continues to inform the pervasive public consumption of female celebrities today, which scholars often compare to the age-old practice of gossip, in part because the public talks about the private lives of famous women (particularly actresses) as if they knew these women personally.⁴³ However, the folkloric medium of gossip is far less applicable to the consumption of female celebrities than is the theatrical model of Jocasta (and Émilie Lerou's disappearance behind Jocasta's mask), a model that replays in the contemporary spectacularization of female celebrities, especially when they come into the gravitational pull of motherhood discourses that inevitably lead them back to the Oedipus complex.

Whenever a celebrity mother is scrutinized and sexualized during her pregnancy and then leeringly objectified after the birth as a "M.I.L.F." (the profane American term) or a "yummy mummy" (the slightly more polite British term that conveys a desire to consume the maternal object), the Jocasta precedent reminds the public of the irresistible danger of a mother who entertains sexual desire. Kaplan points out how cleverly North American culture has adapted "the theory of the child's 'good' and 'bad' mothers developed by analysts following Freud, to construct representations whose purpose is to manipulate women in, or out of, the work-force, in accordance with capitalism's needs."⁴⁴ But more specifically, Jocasta's motherly statement about the meaninglessness of incestuous dreams—

Jocasta comforts Oedipus—finds echoes whenever Kardashian or other celebrity mothers unconvincingly insist that their meaning as publicly consumed women pales in comparison to their “most important role”: private motherhood.⁴⁵ In today’s highly mediated tragic theatre, individual members of the public may root for these women’s private success, but the collective affective structure of this celebrity worship is encapsulated in the German loanword *schadenfreude*: waiting with great anticipation for her spectacularly (and inevitably) to fail and taking pleasure in the misery of her fall. If she doesn’t fail soon enough, another celebrity mother surely will—or else a less-celebrated public woman on the media fringe, such as Iraqi-American Nadya Suleman (more derisively known as “Octomom” for giving birth to octuplets in 2009 following in vitro fertilization and accepting a television company’s offer to pay her “a quarter-million dollars for the exclusive rights to film her family for 11 days”), will be ritualistically dehumanized, spectacularly elected as a maternal failure, and find herself inundated with death threats.⁴⁶ Much as Sophocles bloodlessly killed Jocasta in order to let Oedipus live, two millennia later these hypersexualized celebrity mothers appear on the secularized modern public stage to be nominated for a mediated matricide that will allow societal norms to live on long past their usefulness.

BUTTERFLY’S “PURE SACRIFICE”

Unlike Jocasta’s silent offstage death in *Oedipus the King*, Giacomo Puccini stages Cio-Cio-San’s bloody death as an operatic spectacle for the audience to consume aurally and visually: the satisfying culmination of Madame Butterfly’s “pure sacrifice”⁴⁷ of herself for her child and his caddish father’s happiness. If Sophocles was afraid of his female characters’ voices, Puccini seemed to relish Cio-Cio-San’s beautiful sounds of death, having the soprano who plays Butterfly sing the show-stopping aria “Con onor muore” (“To Die with Honor”), then blindfold her son and proceed to stab herself to death behind a screen, only to emerge, stumbling from her wounds, to embrace her child one last time before dying center stage. In the opera’s logic, the Japanese Butterfly kills herself because the American man (Pinkerton) whom she considered to be her husband and the father of her child (aptly named Trouble [Dolore]) has returned to Nagasaki with an American bride (Kate), and the heartbroken Butterfly believes that her Amerasian child—whose non-Japanese blood is betokened by blonde hair and blue eyes—will be better raised in the United States with white American parents. As Joshua Mostow puts it, “Cio-Cio-San represents the extreme of self-sacrifice.”⁴⁸ This extreme maternal behavior has taunted real-life mothers with its unattainable expectations ever since. Puccini based his 1904 opera on the 1900 American stage play *Madame Butterfly* by David Belasco, which was in turn based on a 1898 short story by John Luther Long. Susan Koshy points out that “Long’s depiction of Pinkerton’s wife, Adelaide, is clearly unsympathetic and shows her as condescending toward Cho-Cho-San and unquestioning about enforcing Pinkerton’s claim on the child if it looks white.”⁴⁹ Arguably, then, the white wife (whom Puccini renamed Kate but made no less repugnant) is posed as the selfish bad mother, whereas the

Japanese “wife” is posed as the selfless good mother. As Seung Ah Oh shows, *Butterfly*’s literal self-sacrifice to give her son a better life emulates Puritan ideals of American women as “Eve” figures who would found the nation through “selfless” dedication to their families.⁵⁰ But Sandra Kumamoto Stanley is one of the few scholars to address *Butterfly*’s maternity and her biracial child directly, noting that in each version of the narrative, the “characters emphasize the Caucasian features of the child, as though the ‘white-washing’ of the child is required for acceptable immigrant status.”⁵¹

In the opera, Pinkerton’s plan to take his biracial child back to America with him is understood as emotionally generous or as imperialist—depending on your ideological vantage point—but not as the outgrowth of his felt responsibilities as the child’s biological father. These custodial assumptions are key, because, as US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg pointed out more than a century after *Butterfly* premiered, women are still being “held back by a way of looking at the world in which a man who wasn’t married simply was not responsible” for his offspring.⁵² Whereas Freud extrapolated a universal complex from audiences’ deeply felt recognition of Sophocles’ play, Justice Ginsburg attributes contemporary America’s exculpation of unmarried fathers to audiences’ misapprehension that a trope passed down through Puccini’s opera was evidence of universal human experience. In an interview with the journalist Emily Bazelon, Ginsburg discussed how the precedent set by the *Butterfly* character may have persuaded her Court to side against a child’s right to acquire US citizenship from its unwed father in the 2001 federal case *Nguyen v. INS*. She told Bazelon, “There must have been so many repetitions of *Madame Butterfly* in World War II. And for Justice Stevens [who voted with the majority], *that was part of his experience*. I think that’s going to be over in the next generation, these kinds of rulings.”⁵³

Part of the reason that this trope of the self-sacrificing Japanese mother and the blameless white father has held sway for so long—not just in the United States but in other nations as well—is because the nation-state of Japan circulated this image at a time when it dovetailed with its imperialist ambitions. Several scholars have noted the impact Japanese performers had on Puccini, suggesting that he recycled the *Butterfly* trope not only from Long and Belasco but also from what he erroneously believed were authentic performances of Japanese femininity and motherhood. In a series of influential articles, Arthur Groos has shown that the “self-styled” Imperial Japanese Theatrical Company’s second European tour (1901–2) had an enormous impact on the composition of *Madama Butterfly*, particularly because these performances starring a Japanese woman named Sadayakko comprised Puccini’s “first direct contact with Japanese musical theater.”⁵⁴ The troupe, led by Sadayakko’s husband, Kawakami Otojiro, was not classically trained, yet Western audiences assumed they were presenting an accurate glimpse into traditional Japanese theatre, especially *kabuki*. Since audiences could not understand the Japanese language, Kawakami’s troupe reduced their plays to what one Italian publication dubbed “rapid and violent pantomimes,” staging mostly wordless spectacles that left Westerners, including Puccini, with the impression that Japanese culture leads “ineluctably to the inevitable resolution in death, especially by ritual suicide,” which Sadayakko repeatedly and memorably

performed.⁵⁵ Groos argues that Puccini mimicked this seemingly Japanese narrative structure by stripping the opera's plot of any action that didn't lead inevitably to Cio-Cio-San's self-sacrifice.⁵⁶

While Kawakami and Sadayakko may have been pursuing economic gain rather than presenting nationalist tropes, the Japanese nation has since laid claim to Butterfly's authenticity, canonizing the operatic performance of the most famous Japanese diva who played Cio-Cio-San, Miura Tamaka (1884–1946), whose performance Puccini heard and praised. Tamaka performed *Madama Butterfly* close to two thousand times in Europe before returning to Japan in the mid-1930s.⁵⁷ Statues of Puccini and the diva Miura were installed in Glover Garden in Nagasaki, near where the real Japanese woman who inspired all these fictional versions once purportedly lived. Jan van Rij describes the scene that greets tourists to this spot: "The statue [of Miura] shows Cho-Cho-san with her son, Trouble; she is pointing to the bay where one fine day Pinkerton might reappear. Hidden loudspeakers reproduce the aria 'Un bel di vedremo' ('One Fine Day') and the 'Humming Chorus.' A marble bust of Puccini looks down at the scene."⁵⁸ Mostow adds that the "accompanying plaque states that Miura, in singing this role, devoted her life to acquainting the world with the virtues of Japanese womanhood."⁵⁹

Justice Ginsburg's certainty that the juridical power of the Butterfly stereotype will fade as opera fans and survivors of the US war with Japan pass on may be overstated. The idealized image of the self-sacrificing Japanese wife-mother has been circulated in a vast array of ways, and the trope has expanded its global power through the mechanisms of the economic rise of the East and myth of the model minority. Western anxiety about the economic ascendance of Japan in the postwar period and of mainland China today often fixates on questions of how these two Asian nations have come to best the West at its own late-capitalist game. These questions often lead to a fascination with the stereotyped figure of the Asian mother who is completely devoted to cultivating her offspring's competitive edge. Sociologist Keiko Hirao refers to the caricatured Japanese "image of *kyoiku mama* (education mom) who devotes her entire life to her child's educational credential-gathering, seeking a vicarious sense of achievement through her child," noting that this image has recently "been depicted as dysfunctional" in Japan, particularly as young Japanese women enter the work force in great numbers.⁶⁰ But the "devaluation of 'self-sacrificing mothering'" in twenty-first-century Japan⁶¹ has not undercut the salience of this ideal image as an exotic site of emulation in the West. Likewise, in the People's Republic of China, women's vigorous participation in the labor force has nonetheless left one aspect of feminine domesticity intact: "While [Chinese mothers today] do few heavy tasks, the crucial area of mothering is educating their children to perform well in the demanding school system."⁶²

The imagined centrality of the Asian "education mom" to the child's success as a citizen-subject is prefigured by Butterfly's maternal labor in the Puccini opera. Cio-Cio-San painstakingly models American assimilation for her son while his father is away, refusing to speak anything but (pidgin) English to teach him to succeed as a citizen-subject when they emigrate to the United States. Somewhat comically, in the John Luther Long original, Butterfly yells at the infant Trouble

when he says “Goo-goo”: “You making that non-*senze* with your parent? Now what is that you speaking with me? Jap’nese? . . . Listen! *No* one shall speak anything but United States’ language in these house!”⁶³ Cio-Cio-San is represented as single-minded in her devotion to bettering her child, but her competitive threat to the Western audience is diminished because she is also shown as childlike and frivolous in her broken English and her naïveté. In the end of all three versions of the narrative, Butterfly takes her maternal role of educating Trouble to what her male authors came to see as its logical conclusion when she sacrifices herself to ensure that her son will receive every competitive advantage in a globalizing world. Puccini instructs that as she prepares to commit suicide, “Butterfly takes the child, sets him on a stool with his face turned to the left, puts the American flag and a doll in his hands and motions him to play with them, while she gently bandages his eyes. Then she seizes a dagger, and her eyes still fixed on the child, goes behind the screen.”⁶⁴ As Yoko Kawaguchi puts it, “Cio-Cio-San is sacrificed so that Pinkerton and his wife can get on with their lives—and so that the audience can go home to theirs.”⁶⁵

Not surprisingly, the non-Japanese actresses who brought Butterfly to life for these audiences identified more firmly with white subjectivity than the Asian abjection their role contained. Cio-Cio-San’s bloody self-sacrifice was embodied on the Western theatrical and operatic stage by white actresses who were far removed from the traditional Asian maternity imagined by *Madame Butterfly*. As cultural historian Mari Yoshihara has argued about the play and opera,

It was not incidental that these Orientalist performances by white women took place at the same time that many white women were becoming New Women of the twentieth century, who challenged Victorian gender norms and the ideology of the separate spheres by participating in the women’s suffrage movement, demanding birth control, engaging in socialism, expressing themselves in arts and letters, seeking “free love,” cutting their hair and smoking cigarettes. The construction of such a new gender identity was closely linked to, and was articulated through, enacting roles and identities other than their own. The performance of Asian femininity thus provided an effective tool for white women’s empowerment.⁶⁶

Yoshihara demonstrates how the white American actress Blanche Bates and the white American soprano Geraldine Farrar each succeeded in impersonating Butterfly onstage through the direct imitation of Japanese American women in their employment while never letting the audience lose sight of the fact that they were playing a role that was radically different from their identities offstage. In Bates’s case, her theatrical model for the “absolute self-effacement” she thought characteristic of Japanese womanhood (and which she understood to be in diametric opposition to white American womanhood) was a domestic servant she employed named Suki, whom Bates referred to as “the original” of her Butterfly.⁶⁷ Bates wrote in her autobiography of the “anguishing touch” that she appropriated from Suki’s real life for the fiction of Butterfly’s self-sacrifice: “I will never forget [Suki’s] show of deep emotion and anguish when she received a letter from her

brother telling of the torture to death of her lover in far-away Japan on the eve of his departure to join her in San Francisco. . . . Later, in *Madame Butterfly*, in the scene where poor little Butterfly kills herself, I tried my best to be poor Suki over again when she received that letter.”⁶⁸ In a strikingly similar ethnic appropriation, Farrar’s operatic model for Butterfly was a Japanese actress named Fujiko (her last name has been lost to history) whom Farrar worked with daily to perfect what Yoshihara calls her performance of “alternative femininity.” Fujiko’s contribution to the opera’s success in the United States has been mostly excised from the historical record.⁶⁹

Through these Japanese models and the fictional precedents created by their white appropriators, *Madame Butterfly* became such a salient image of Asian motherhood that the self-sacrificing “education mom” still endures as a competing ideal in the American imagination today. One need look no further than the best-selling status of Yale law professor Amy Chua’s 2011 memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which promotes “Chinese parenting” for readers of any race, nationality, and gender, an intensely devoted maternal mode marked by a neoliberal ideology and constant self-effacement. (Throughout the book, Chua takes pains to downplay the amount of energy she spent advancing her own career, making the labor of being an Ivy League scholar seem like a minor distraction from her real job of cultivating the talents of her teenage daughters.)⁷⁰ *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* has been translated into thirty languages but has also garnered Chua (who is Chinese American) death threats and media infamy. Much as American actresses Bates and Farrar enacted ethnic drag by appropriating from ethnic Japanese women in their employment what they perceived as an alternative mode of femininity, Chua can be seen enacting what we might call maternal drag by appropriating the fantasy of Butterfly’s sacrifice and the Asian education mom’s competitive advantage in order both to sell her memoir and to efface the gender threat she posed as a highly educated, high-powered professional mother in the West. In all of these cases, the roles must be estranged from the actresses in order for the actresses to gain the gender advantage. Yet if impersonating passive, self-sacrificing Butterflies evinced the fin-de-siècle New Woman’s freedom to enact “new, constructed identities for women,”⁷¹ the globalized flows of bodies and cultures in the so-called postfeminist era of the early twenty-first century means that the original and the copy may be embodied in the selfsame person, and when it comes to judging motherhood, many women find themselves repeatedly imitating each other in a perpetual cycle of maternal drag.

MOTHER COURAGE AS PHARMAKON

Arguably the most famous antiwar play of all time, Bertolt Brecht’s masterpiece *Mother Courage and Her Children* has rarely been approached as a theatrical *pharmakon*. Jacques Derrida deconstructs the appearance of the word *pharmakon*—which in the ancient sense means both “remedy” and “poison,” much like “drug” might today—in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, arguing that modern readings of the Platonic dialogue have translated the text’s use of *pharmakon* (which the ancient philosopher extended to characterize the invention of writing) as either humanity’s

curse or its cure rather than the ambivalent both/and. In his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida describes the problematics of the word in theatrical terms: “The textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison*.”⁷² Derrida’s spatialization of the ambivalence of the term *pharmakon* on a theatrical stage—one meaning is set “center-stage” and an apparently opposed meaning is set on a “different level of the stage”—resonates with productions of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, whose title character takes center stage as one of what Sara Lennox calls Brecht’s many female “demonstration objects.”⁷³ The nickname of “Mother Courage” is the backhanded compliment bestowed on working-class single mother Anna Fierling because, as she tells one character at the beginning of the play, “I was scared of financial ruin, Sergeant, so I drove my wagon straight through the cannon fire at Riga, with fifty loaves of bread turning mouldy—I didn’t see that I had a choice.”⁷⁴ Traveling with her three grown children in a wagon loaded with her wares, Courage ambitiously sells supplies to both sides of a military conflict (the European Thirty Years’ War of 1618–48) as the only means of supporting her family. Presented through this set of desperate maternal practices (a traveling saleswoman with her children in tow), Brecht offers Mother Courage as a demonstration object to serve as a Marxist remedy that will alert global audiences to the ills of capitalism. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks describe Courage as “simultaneously a businesswoman and a mother; arguably, a businesswoman because she is a mother,” noting that she shares this “ambivalent relationship to moneymaking” with other Brechtian mothers, including Shen Te in *The Good Person of Szechuan*.⁷⁵

Brecht intended for Mother Courage’s tragic flaw to be located in her parochial maternalism: the audience sees that she repeatedly fails to understand that doing whatever it takes to financially support her own children while facilitating the death of other mothers’ children by aiding soldiers will only bring her to disaster. She not only fails to realize this contradiction but seems energized and excited by the work that eventually leads her family to destruction. In Brecht’s revolutionary temporality, Mother Courage is what scholar Elizabeth Freeman might call a “cultural dinosaur”:⁷⁶ the character embodies a maternal mode the playwright considered obsolete in the age of advanced capitalism and global war. Throughout the play, Courage’s degradation is located in her privatization as she embraces the nuclear scale of Freud’s Oedipal family (though she fills the mother and father role in the absence of a proper biologically paternal figure) and rejects every opportunity for collective action that comes her way. Theatre scholar Iris Smith explains how the Nazis’ fetishization of the good German (Aryan) mother made Brecht look askance at “conventional images of motherhood,” and how Brecht set out, through his dramatization of maternal figures in *Good Person*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *Mother Courage* to show his audiences that motherhood “is embedded in economics; it comes easier to the *bourgeoise* who can afford it.”⁷⁷ Indeed, the bourgeois realist theatre against which Brecht was reacting repeatedly valorized the traditional femininity that culminates in ideal motherhood by dramatizing the fallen woman’s “hysteria.” One has only to think of realist playwright Henrik Ibsen’s heroines Nora (*A Doll’s House*) and

Hedda (*Hedda Gabler*) to conjure up vividly what Elin Diamond calls one of stage realism's "richest and, ideologically, one of its most satisfying plots."⁷⁸

Brecht and many of his colleagues, including Walter Benjamin, shared the view of traditional individualistic motherhood as hopelessly outdated. In a chapter on Brecht's 1931 play *The Mother*, Benjamin proclaims that as the "childbearer" charged with producing a society's next generation of workers, the mother (both Brecht's eponymous character and the historical subject) is "doubly exploited." Indeed, so historically backward are these childbearers that, as Benjamin puts it, "if the mothers are revolutionized, there is nothing left to revolutionize."⁷⁹ For Benjamin, as for Brecht, the "eternal mother creature"⁸⁰ is "praxis incarnate": helpful, certainly, but only "in an animal sense,"⁸¹ because the mother creature is unable to appreciate the social dimensions of human suffering beyond the domestic scope of her own family and is unable to see herself as part of a collective. Although Brecht founded his epic theatre to reconfigure the representational apparatus of theatrical realism, his representation of this animalistic trope of the unreformed mother shares much with what Elin Diamond describes as realism's fixation on the spectacle of hysteria as "the eruption of the lower, *the animal*."⁸²

While Ibsenite realism staged women as hysterical animals if they defied traditional feminine roles, perhaps despite itself, Brechtian theatre often staged women as hysterical animals *because* their Oedipal maternal roles defied socialist solidarity. As Susan Cannon Harris points out about the playwright-director's entire oeuvre, Brecht "uses mothers to stage the conflict capitalism creates between humans' commitments to each other and their individual struggles for survival. . . . It is precisely because the mother is presumed to put the needs of her own children first that she is so easily portrayed in left theatre as a threat to solidarity."⁸³ Arguably, Brecht constructs analogies whereby many of his maternal characters become animals. One of the most memorable instances is in scene 7 of *Good Person*, in which Shen Te's mothering is described as "protecting her child 'as a tiger does its young' ('Zu dir / Will ich gut sein und Tiger und wildes Tier / Zu allen andern')."⁸⁴ But *Mother Courage's* dehumanization transcends mere analogies.

Brecht famously has the unsympathetic Chaplain call Courage a hyena in scene 8, which forms such an indelible image that the cover to the recent Methuen edition of Tony Kushner's *Mother Courage* translation centers on a stock photo of a roaming hyena. The original dialogue is worth quoting at length:

- THE CHAPLAIN: The way you talk about peace, Courage, it's a sin. You're a hyena of the battlefields. . . . When I see you picking up peace disdainfully betwixt your thumb and forefinger as if it were a, a, a snot-rag, *my humanity's affronted*. I see you as you are, a woman who hates peace and loves war, as long as you can make money off it. . . .
- MOTHER COURAGE: I didn't ask the war to linger and it didn't linger any longer than it wanted to. And anybody calls me a hyena is looking for a divorce.⁸⁵

Courage's refusal to honor "humans' commitments to each other," including her refusal to take either the Chaplain or the Cook as her husband, renders her an animal and an affront to humanity. Brecht may have intended to critique the bestialization of Courage by those who seek to exploit her (such as the Chaplain), but the sheer repetition of the imagery becomes indelibly linked to the mother's character.

Theatre scholar Sarah Bryant-Bertail argues that animal imagery in *Mother Courage* is an "important sign system that constitutes Brecht's powerful analogy between war and butchery." She documents that "[m]ore than twenty different species of animals appear in the dialogue, most of them in the form of imagery."⁸⁶ Brecht uses animal analogies throughout his play to show how war brutalizes human relationships, and Courage gives as good as she gets, for example repeatedly calling soldiers "pigs" and "swine."⁸⁷ But in Courage's characterization, the animal imagery is literalized as the revelation of Courage's unreformed nature as a mother, not only in terms of the image of the hyena but also in terms of the established repertoire for portraying Courage onstage. When Meryl Streep, arguably the first lady of American cinema, took on the title role in the Public Theater's 2006 Central Park production of *Mother Courage*, directed by George C. Wolfe, one reviewer wrote that "Streep's performance as the iconic 'battlefield hyena' (as *Mother Courage* is called) is gutsy, but a bit of a letdown. . . . [S]he punctuates her sentences with a machine-gun burst of laughter, seemingly taking that 'hyena' description to heart."⁸⁸

Many of the very mixed reviews of the 2006 production opined that Streep's being a "refined" actress made Courage a real stretch for her to play.⁸⁹ Streep has long been revered in the celebrity press as a working mother of four who always puts her children first (having, she claims, sacrificed a theatre career for twenty years while her children were young; apparently being an Academy Award-winning Hollywood lead was merely the hobby Streep pursued while raising children). Streep's reputation as "Mother Meryl" (as one *Sunday Mail* headline described her) was earned through celebrity performances such as her statement during the following interview:

Oh I've been very tempted to do a play. . . . But, you know, because of my children—I have so many thousands of children—I can't really be gone at night and all weekend because they're in school. This is a sacrifice that I have made for my children, that they don't acknowledge or appreciate or anything. They go, "Oh, the theater—so who cares?" But I really love it, and I've always loved it and I miss it like an old friend that I haven't seen in years.⁹⁰

After this hiatus from the theatre necessitated by the intensive mothering of her four children, Streep returned to the New York stage in August 2001, when she starred as the aging actress Arkadina in the Public's production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park. In the idyllic summer days that preceded America's loss of national innocence and subsequent launch into a perpetual "War on Terror" on 9/11, Streep came home to the theatre company where her celebrated career had begun and eased her transition back from Hollywood productions by choosing a role whose Chekhovian realism

bore some resemblance to the naturalism of the mainstream filmic acting that has garnered her so many accolades in recent decades. Moreover, as one critic described Streep's smoothing of the disjuncture between being the perfect mother and being the perfect actress, "just as she's seamlessly vanished into countless memorable roles over the past 20 years, Streep likes to disappear into motherhood as well."⁹¹ In his review of Streep's 2001 *Arkadina*, *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley suggests that this highly decorated performer tries to be the perfect actress, just as she worked to be the perfect mother. Much as Streep mock-complains that her four children fail to appreciate the sacrifices she has made to raise them, Brantley noted that Streep's fellow cast members don't appreciate the help that she offers them as an actor. "She gives expansively to her fellow cast members," Brantley writes, "feeding them emotional cues that they mostly fail to pick up on."⁹²

Of course, Streep's self-effacing qualities as a mother and as an actress have often strained credulity (as self-effacement that attracts such adulation surely must), and this very way of approaching her roles has at times prompted critics to label her an imposter and a mimic. As *Los Angeles Times* theatre critic Charles McNulty put in, on the eve of her third Oscar win (for playing Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*), "It may be hard to recall, now that Streep has become our thespian in chief, that her acting hasn't always been universally acclaimed. One famous detractor, *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael, found Streep's studied perfection bloodless."⁹³ And although Streep and her husband, sculptor Don Gummer, famously eschewed publicity for most of their marriage, instead decamping Hollywood for an eighty-nine-acre estate in rural Connecticut, the multimillionaire has never been shy about using the seemingly unglamorous profile of a very hands-on mother as part of her actorly persona. She has told countless media outlets about her painstakingly private family life, "far removed from premieres, parties and the public eye," claiming that she fills her many days off set with the domestic practices of being a stay-at-home wife and mother: "[S]he cooks dinner, picks the kids up after school, goes to PTA meetings and shares with Gummer all the endless tasks that come with the 24-hour-a-day job of being a parent."⁹⁴

But the acting role that really forced into visibility the unseemly seams between being the perfect actress and being the perfect mother was also the one that forced Streep to leave the homey comforts of realism for the alienating challenges of theatricality: playing Mother Courage. Using a new translation by playwright Tony Kushner, director George C. Wolfe approached Brecht's 1941 antiwar masterpiece as a scenario whose reenactment during the Global War on Terrorism (including Israel's July 2006 invasion of Lebanon, which the United States supported) could somehow speak to the feelings of helpless rage felt by many members of the American public who opposed the wars being fought in their name. The casting of Streep—the superstar who had sacrificed for her children—allowed New York audiences to consume the spectacle of a contemporary celebrity mom holding at arm's length the monstrous historical mother who would sacrifice her children for a capitalist war.

Streep's brand of acting as impersonation may seem at odds with Brecht's ideal of acting as alienation—where the actor stands next to her character—but

Streep's offstage persona functions much the same way, such that Streep the good traditional mother judges Courage the bad working mother. This interpretation of the title character is clear in statements the production team made during John Walter's 2008 documentary film about the production, titled *Theater of War*. For instance, the Public's artistic director, Oskar Eustis, characterized the play's most heart-wrenching scene—when Courage has to deny recognizing the murdered body of her son Swiss Cheese—as “devastating because it's a mother who by bargaining has killed her son but on the other hand it's clear [she had no other choice].” The most operative dialectic in this case is not so much between maternal care and capitalist war as between “Mother Meryl” (who makes offstage motherhood her most important role) and the string of monstrous mothers she has played onscreen, garnering a slew of Academy Awards nods—including *Sophie's Choice* (for which she won the 1982 Best Actress Oscar), *Postcards from the Edge* (1990 Best Actress Oscar nomination), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006 Best Actress Oscar nomination), and *August: Osage County* (2013 Best Actress Oscar nomination). Mother Meryl's twenty-first-century return to the stage as Arkadina and Mother Courage merely presents live enactments of a theme she has been perfecting for three decades.

Other twenty-first-century celebrity moms are less able to open this degree of distance between their private experience of mothering and the public displays of maternal role-playing that made them famous. Celebrity mothers who appear to flaunt their children in the public spotlight and who wear their ambitions more openly find themselves monsterized in the media. For instance, when “Grizzly Mama” Sarah Palin was announced as the Republican vice-presidential nominee in 2008, her appearances on the national stage seemed to reenact key elements of Brecht's play. Against a backdrop of perpetual war in Afghanistan and Iraq and on behalf of a political platform that promised a hawklike commitment to continuing these military conflicts, Palin appeared as a mocked and reviled contemporary Mother Courage on one campaign stage after another, often with at least one of her five children in tow. Critics accused Palin of using her children as theatrical props: sacrificing them to the media spotlight in order to maintain her tenuous grasp on a political career she had lucked into through John McCain's “maverick” desperation.

As a public figure, Palin lived and continues to live off the war (she rose to power in the Republican Party by hawking hawkish policies) and puts her private motherhood to work (showcasing her five children as political “credentials, not liabilities” in the words of feminist critic Rebecca Traister).⁹⁵ Audiences for the global media spectacle that surrounded Palin judged her either as a dangerously bad mother who was sacrificing her children for her own ambition or as a sympathetically good working mother who went in over her head, so to speak, in pursuing a position of power.⁹⁶ Ironically, Palin has framed her political aspirations as the natural outgrowth of her domestic life as a “hockey mom,” promising in stump speeches “to guard the interests of this great state [Alaska] as a mother naturally guards her own—like a southeast eagle and her eaglet, or [. . .] like a nanook defending her cub.”⁹⁷ Echoing Brecht's animalistic depiction of his maternal characters (particularly Mother Courage herself) as tigers, hyenas, and other nonhuman

species—minus the *pharmakon*'s element of critique or cure—the media framed Palin as the leader of a pack of female Republican politicians who self-identified as “Mama Grizzlies.” Although Palin proclaimed herself a “feminist” at a May 2010 speech for the anti-abortion-rights group Susan B. Anthony List, the more appropriate ideological label for the Frankenmom phenomenon that she embodies is “postfeminist.”

THE VIOLENCE OF THE POSTFEMINIST FRANKENMOM

Postfeminism proffers the idea that women have achieved all the equality they really need and that embracing traditionally feminine gender roles constitutes a “choice” that is just as empowered as any other. Deconstructing this celebratory discourse (which goes hand in hand with the deceptive claims of “postracialism”), British scholar Angela McRobbie describes postfeminism as women’s internalization of patriarchal ideals. McRobbie claims that young women in particular function as “exemplary subjects” under neoliberalism, insofar as they submit to “the self-punishing regime of the fashion and beauty industry, which has the added value of promoting the idea that women self-police and have become their own toughest judges.”⁹⁸ Postfeminism further emphasizes the spectacle of motherhood as a highly managed set of images, instead of a set of practices in need of material support, at precisely the same time that women’s economic and political power have reached an apparent high, as a way of managing the threat this apparent power poses.

McRobbie and other critics argue that women participate in a mimetic cycle that imitates the ideals of redomesticated femininity, competing to achieve often-unrealistic standards of youth and beauty, orienting their lives toward procreation and domesticity, and disavowing feminist activism because society tells them these ideals are what they should desire. But more than that, as the historically disempowered gender, females are punished for acting on their desire (however externally imposed these desires might be) and are constantly scrutinized for signs that they have violated their roles. Such punitive consequences compel women to participate in this mimetic cycle of imitating mainstream gender models, if only to avoid the judgment of ever-present monitors. This cycle reaches back to centuries-old Western theatrical productions that set precedents for judging femininity: mothers today must be forever young and desirable like Jocasta (though this ideal is equal parts threat), they must be eternally self-sacrificing like Madame Butterfly, and they must avoid at all costs the bestializing ambition and hardened affect that rendered *Mother Courage* an inappropriate object of identification. While the historical traces of these deeply rooted theatrical precedents are just barely perceptible in the modern mediatization of these feminine and maternal ideals, the mimetic cycle they script constantly ups the ante for ordinary women, who must compete with these unrealistic images or else be seen to fall short under intense scrutiny.

These parts taken from *Jocasta*, *Butterfly*, and *Courage* now comprise a mimetic monster that has emerged in popular consciousness as what Min has called “Frankenmom.” Min repeats the term in her 2012 book, *How to Look Hot in a*

Minivan, in which she instructs ordinary mothers on how to mimic celebrity moms' style—but warns them to stop short of undergoing multiple surgical procedures (such as liposuction and tummy tucks to erase all traces of pregnancy and childbirth) because otherwise they will find themselves absorbed by “the growing Frankenmom phenomenon.”⁹⁹ The term “Frankenmom,” appropriating the discourse of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, seizes upon the titular surname as “a word that monsterizes,” as literary critic Barbara Freeman notes. The horrors and marvels of motherhood provided imaginative fodder for Shelley's masterpiece: Shelley's famous mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died ten days after giving birth to her, and Shelley herself suffered the death of her firstborn baby before writing *Frankenstein* as a new mother. As Freeman points out, the novel's “title, once intended to name only the Monster's progenitor [Victor Frankenstein], now refers to the Monster instead.”¹⁰⁰ Despite Min's rather disingenuous use of the term to manufacture empathy from readers of the *New York Times*, “Frankenmom” turns out to be a remarkably apt descriptor for today's mimetic cycle of maternal images that not only scapegoats women who fail to conform properly to the redomesticated femininity celebrated in the media gaze, but also monsterizes female bodies instead of calling out the systemic sociopolitical problems that engendered these ideals in the first place.

The Frankenmom is particularly visible as a monster in the seemingly infinite permutations of the *Real Housewives* reality TV programs, first launched in 2006, which produce a fascination that novelist Toni Morrison has compared to the spectatorial arrangement of lynchings:

People used to stand around and watch lynchings. And clap and laugh and have picnics. And they used to watch hangings. We don't do that anymore. But we do watch these other car crashes. Crashes. Like those *Housewives*. Do you really think that your life is bigger, deeper, more profound because your life is on television? And they do.¹⁰¹

Morrison hints at the representational violence performed by *The Real Housewives* franchise when she compares it to spectacles of lynching and public executions of prisoners; she also signals her participation in the ritual destruction of these Frankenmoms when she demonizes the television housewives' self-absorption rather than the progenitors who created these media monsters. Few women want to embody these hated maternal monsters, so they find themselves mimicking the maternal ideal as painstakingly as possible, self-sacrificing in symbolic but meaningful ways that ensure the cycle will continue uninterrupted and the patriarchal order remain untouched. The dominant maternal model on today's public stages is the celebrity mom. And though she has Jocasta, Cio-Cio-San, and Mother Courage to thank for her inheritance, her mass media creators are merely reenacting a dramaturgy established by Sophocles, Puccini, Brecht, and other male playwrights of the Western canon.

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10. Beth Osnes and Jennifer Popple, "Introduction," in *Essays and Scripts on How Mothers Are Portrayed in the Theatre: A Neglected Frontier of Feminist Scholarship*, ed. Beth Osnes and Anna Andes (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 1–2, at 1.
11. Cameron Lynne Macdonald, *Shadow Mothers: Nannies, Au Pairs, and the Micropolitics of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1.
12. The original stage version of the Butterfly title character is David Belasco's 1900 play *Madame Butterfly*, in which she is called "Cho-Cho-San," a romanization of the Japanese word for "butterfly" (*choucho*) plus the Japanese honorific "san." Readers will be more familiar with the Italian spelling of the character's name as "Cio-Cio-San" in Giacomo Puccini's 1904 opera version, *Madama Butterfly*. In the analysis that follows, I focus primarily on Puccini's opera version because of its global influence and its continuing presence in the opera repertoire, and thus I refer to the character as "Cio-Cio-San." However, I refer to his opera's title in its English translation (*Madame Butterfly*).
13. Rudnytsky, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 87, 259. Other scholars, including Richard H. Armstrong, identify Oedipus' two mothers as his adoptive mother, Merope (labeled the "Good Mother") and his biological mother-cum-wife Jocasta (labeled the "Bad Mother" for attempting the infanticide of her son). Richard H. Armstrong, "Freud and the Drama of Oedipal Truth," in *A Companion to Sophocles*, ed. Kirk Ormand (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 477–91, at 489. However, Rudnytsky's assignments of the Sphinx as the phallic mother and Jocasta as the ideal mother are directly linked to Freud's reading of the play, particularly the reflection included in his biography on the onstage life of Oedipus, so I retain these assignments in my analysis.
15. Miriam Leonard, "Lacan, Irigaray, and Beyond: Antigones and the Politics of Psychoanalysis," in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, ed. Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131–2.
16. Richard Armstrong, "Oedipus as Evidence: The Theatrical Background of Freud's Oedipus Complex," *PsyArt: An Online Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts* (1 January 1999), accessed 25 March 2013, www.psyartjournal.com/article/show/armstrong-oedipus_as_evidence_the_theatrical_backg. In a later essay, Armstrong admitted that "while there is no direct evidence that Freud saw Mounet-Sully's *Oedipe Roi* or Wilbrandt's *König Oedipus*, he was in both cities during periods when he would have been made aware of the success of Sophocles' play on the modern stage." Armstrong, "Freud and the Drama of Oedipal Truth," 482.
17. Mounet-Sully quoted in Armstrong, "Oedipus as Evidence," who cites [L.] Vernay, "Chez Mounet-Sully à propos d'Oedipe Roi," *Revue d'art dramatique* 11 (1888): 136–41, at 138–9.

18. Fiona Macintosh, *Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 90. See also Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 193–4.
19. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1899], trans. A. A. Brill (1913; repr., Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth, 1997), 156.
20. Armstrong, “Oedipus as Evidence.”
21. Freud, *Interpretation of Dream*, 156–7.
22. Armstrong, “Oedipus as Evidence.”
23. Richard H. Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 227; Armstrong’s italics.
24. Armstrong, “Oedipus as Evidence.” The precise quotation from *The Interpretation of Dreams* is this: “If the *Oedipus Rex* is capable of moving a modern reader or playgoer no less powerfully than it moved the contemporary Greeks, the only possible explanation is that the effect of the Greek tragedy does not depend upon the conflict between fate and human will, but upon the peculiar nature of the material by which this conflict is revealed” (Freud, 156). In other words, Freud’s collapsing of the millennia between these two theatrical eras is essential to his argument for the Oedipus complex.
25. *Ibid.*, 158.
26. Macintosh, 12.
27. Army, “Le Théâtre aux Arènes de Nîmes” (review of *Oedipe Roi*), *L’Art dramatique et musical au XX^e siècle* 3 (1903): 218–19, at 218; translated by Julie Burelle.
28. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; repr., New York: Routledge, 2006), 103.
29. E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 29, 45.
30. Amber Jacobs, *On Matricide: Myth, Psychoanalysis, and the Law of the Mother* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 57–8.
31. Toril Moi, “The Missing Mother: The Oedipal Rivalries of René Girard,” *Diacritics* 12.2 (1982): 21–31, at 27.
32. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 170.
33. *Ibid.*, 12.
34. *Ibid.*, 95.
35. Moi, 29.
36. *Ibid.*, 24. Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo quoted in *ibid.*, 25.
37. Rudnytsky, 258; Rudnytsky’s italics.
38. *Ibid.*; Rudnytsky’s italics.
39. Freddie Rokem, “The Female Voice: ‘Greek’ and ‘Hebrew’ Paradigms in the Modern Theatre,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 10.2 (1996): 78–98, at 85, 87.
40. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, in *The Norton Anthology of Drama*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, ed. J. Ellen Gainer, Stanton B. Garner, and Martin Puchner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).
41. Rokem, 85. Some artists have attempted to restore Jocasta’s voice in her own story. In her exhaustive production history of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Fiona Macintosh calls choreographer Martha Graham’s 1947 *Night Journey* “the first of numerous feminist reworkings of Sophocles’ tragedy for the stage” because it “radically refigures the Sophoclean text in order to allow the mother figure, Jocasta, to come centre stage.” Macintosh, 184, 182.
42. Rokem, 82.
43. See, for instance, Graeme Turner, “Gossip: The Extended Family, Melodrama and Revenge,” in *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2004), 113–18; and Joke Hermes, *Reading Women’s Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
44. Kaplan, 45.

45. See, for instance, Ann Curry, "Jolie's Most Important Role, Not in Movies," *Dateline NBC*, 10 June 2005, accessed 28 March 2013, www.nbcnews.com/id/8162179/#.UVTcJe3iipE.
46. John Bowe, "The Octomom and Her Babies Prepare for Prime Time," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 November 2009, 50.
47. "Pure sacrifice" are the words the Pinkertonesque character Gallimard uses to describe his misinterpretation of the female impersonator Song's performance of *Madame Butterfly*'s death scene in David Henry Hwang's Tony Award-winning satirical play *M. Butterfly* (1988; repr., New York: Plume, 1993), 17.
48. Joshua S. Mostow, "Iron Butterfly: Cio-Cio-San and Japanese Imperialism," in *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly*, ed. Jonathan Wisenthal et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 181–95, at 193.
49. Susan Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 48.
50. Seung Ah Oh, *Recontextualizing Asian American Domesticity: From "Madame Butterfly" to "My American Wife!"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), ix.
51. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, "Settling Scores: The Metamorphosis of Madame Butterfly and Her Transnational Legacy," *Pacific Coast Philology* 42.2 (2007): 257–63, 261.
52. Emily Bazelon, "The Place of Women on the Court," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 July 2009, 22.
53. *Ibid.*, my italics. Thanks to Joshua Chambers-Letson for bringing Ginsburg's statement to my attention.
54. Arthur Groos, "Cio-Cio-San and Sadayakko: Japanese Music-Theater in *Madama Butterfly*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 54.1 (1999): 41–73, at 53.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Jan van Rij interprets Puccini's condensation of the opera's action differently, arguing that the excision of a scene at the consulate was a return to Belasco's original dramatic structure and a way of focusing on the "crude confrontation" between the two women competing for Pinkerton's affection. Van Rij believes this confrontation was of particular interest to Puccini because it mirrored the "neurotic fixations" in the composer's personal life: Puccini's Kate-like wife, Elvira, had forced him to break off an extramarital affair with the self-effacing (Butterfly-like) Corinna, even offering the mistress money to leave her husband alone. Jan van Rij, *Madame Butterfly: Japonisme, Puccini, and the Search for the Real Cho-Cho-San* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2001), 97, 100.
57. Mostow, 194.
58. Van Rij, 10.
59. Mostow, 194.
60. Keiko Hirao, "Contradictions in Maternal Roles in Contemporary Japan," in *Working and Mothering in Asia: Images, Ideologies, and Identities*, ed. Theresa Devasahayam and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 51–83, at 68.
61. *Ibid.*, 66.
62. Janet W. Salaff, Arent Greve, and Xuan Chen, "Motherhood Shifts When Chinese Families Relocate: Chinese Women's Education Work in Canada," in *Working and Mothering in Asia*, 221–50, at 227–8.
63. John Luther Long, *Madame Butterfly* (1897; repr., New York: Century Co., 1903), 27–8; Long's italics.
64. Giacomo Puccini, *Madam Butterfly*, English libretto by R. H. Elkin (New York: Ricordi & Co., 1904), 65. Significantly, it is only the live, embodied versions of the Butterfly myth (Puccini's opera and Belasco's play) that have demanded that the mother be sacrificed. In Long's original story, Butterfly is unable to go through with the suicide when she hears her baby crying and instead runs away with him. Long's story ends with the famous line, "When Mrs. Pinkerton called next day at the little house on Higashi Hill it was quite empty." Long, 152.
65. Yoko Kawaguchi, *Butterfly's Sisters: The Geisha in Western Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 284.

66. Yoshihara, 78.
67. *Ibid.*, 92, 82.
68. Bates quoted in *ibid.*, 82.
69. *Ibid.*, 94, 90.
70. Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).
71. Yoshihara, 78.
72. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (1972; repr., New York: Continuum, 2004), 67–186, at 100–1; Derrida's italics.
73. Sara Lennox, "Women in Brecht's Works," *New German Critique* 14 (Spring 1978): 83–96, at 84. Iris Smith expands on Lennox's brief reference to Brecht's female characters (most of them framed as mothers), defining demonstration objects as "figures whose flatness is created not so much by the actress's demonstration of the character as by Brecht's appropriation of her to fulfill unquestioned models of natural or 'appropriate' female behavior." Iris Smith, "Brecht and the Mothers of Epic Theater," *Theatre Journal* 43.4 (1991): 491–505, at 495.
74. Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, trans. Tony Kushner (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 9. The play was originally published in English in 1941 as *Mother Courage*, trans. H. R. Hays, in *New Directions in Poetry and Prose 1941*, ed. James Laughlin (Norfolk, CT: New Directions), predating German publication in 1949 as *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*.
75. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, 2d ed., ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 121.
76. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 89.
77. Smith, 493.
78. Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.
79. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (1966; repr., New York: Verso, 2003), 34.
80. Brecht quoted in Peter Thomson, *Brecht: Mother Courage and Her Children* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 77.
81. Benjamin, 35, 34.
82. Diamond, 9; my italics.
83. Susan Cannon Harris, "Mobilizing Maurya: J. M. Synge, Bertolt Brecht, and the Revolutionary Mother," *Modern Drama* 56.1 (2013): 38–59, at 42.
84. Brecht quoted in Smith, 499.
85. Brecht, trans. Kushner, 147; my italics.
86. Sarah Bryant-Bertail, "Women, Space, Ideology: *Mutter Courage*," in *Brecht: Women and Politics*, ed. John Fuegi, Gisela Bahr, and John Willett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 40–61, at 52–3.
87. See, for instance, Brecht, trans. Kushner, 113, 131.
88. Joe Dziemianowicz, "In 'Courage,' Streep Braves Ill-Fitting Role," *New York Daily News*, 22 August 2006, 37.
89. See, for instance, David Rooney, "Mother Courage and Her Children," *Variety*, 22 August 2006, 6.
90. Meryl Streep quoted in Ruthe Stein, "Meryl Streep Draws on Family to Play Eldest Sibling in Lughnasa," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 December 1998.
91. Glenn Whipp, "Meryl Streep's 'True'/Life: New Film Mirrors Values She Treasures Most," *Daily News of Los Angeles*, 18 September 1998.
92. Ben Brantley, "Streep Meets Chekhov, Up in Central Park," *New York Times*, 13 August 2001.
93. Charles McNulty, "My Meryl Streep Problem," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 February 2012.
94. Whipp.
95. Rebecca Traister, *Big Girls Don't Cry: The Election That Changed Everything for American Women* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 228.

96. For this latter interpretation of Palin's maternal failings, see the 2012 HBO film *Game Change*, an adaptation of the 2010 book by political journalists Mark Halperin and John Heilemann. Actress and mother Julianne Moore won a Golden Globe and Emmy Award for her sympathetic but pathologizing depiction of Palin in the film.

97. Palin quoted in Kaylene Johnson, *Sarah: How a Hockey Mom Turned the Political Establishment Upside Down* (Kenmore, WA: Epicenter Press, 2008), 141.

98. Angela McRobbie, "Beyond Post-Feminism," *Public Policy Research* 18.3 (2011): 179–84, at 181–3.

99. Janice Min, *How to Look Hot in a Minivan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 188–9.

100. Barbara Freeman, "'Frankenstein' with Kant: A Theory of Monstrosity, or the Monstrosity of Theory," *SubStance* 16.1 (1987): 21–31, at 28.

101. Ariel Leve, "Toni Morrison on Love, Loss and Modernity," *The Telegraph*, 17 July 2012, accessed 4 April 2013, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/9395051/Toni-Morrison-on-love-loss-and-modernity.html.