Parents as a Destructive or Supportive Force in Carter, Murdoch and Lessing

Gillian M.E. ALBAN

Abstract

This writing evaluates the contribution of the father as well as the mother to their children's upbringing in three contemporary novels; Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, Iris Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels*, and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*. These three novels suggest a schema of different types of the family and parenting through these examples. The discussion of these novels show how fathers and mothers at times support their children positively through nurture and inspiring positive values like reasoning, while at other times they present negative, even malicious influences over their children, whether causing their children to struggle to survive, or enabling them to be strengthened in life. These extreme examples suggest some of the pitfalls of parenting, illustrating the hazards on both generational sides.

Keywords: *Father, Mother, Love, Power, Survive, Prefer, Violence, Carter, Heroes And Villains; Murdoch, The Time Of The Angels; Lessing, The Fifth Child.*

Özet

Bu yazı hem babanın hem annenin çocuklarına olumlu veya olumsuz katkılarını üç çağdaş romanda gösteriyor; Angela Carter'ın *Heroes and Villains*, Iris Murdoch'ın *The Time of the Angels*, ve Doris Lessing'in *The Fifth Child*, böylece anne-baba ve çocuk sorunları ve sorumluluklarını aydınlatiyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Baba, Anne, Sevgi, Güç, Dayanmak, Tercih, ŞIddet, Carter, Heroes And Villains; Murdoch, The Time Of The Angels; Lessing, The Fifth Child.*

[1] *Assistant Profesor, Istanbul Aydın University, English Language and Literature*

Introduction

This writing discusses the contribution of both parents to their children's upbringing in examples from contemporary literature. The mother's role of nurture and total responsibility towards her children has generally been accepted, while the father's position has been less subject to critical evaluation. I hope to shed light on various extremes of parenting, between responsible and outrageous, in a combination of nurture and control, while bringing up children. The three chosen texts fall into a certain pattern, suggesting a schema within these familial relationships. In Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, the mother loves her son, while her father loves his daughter unconditionally, inspiring her to emulate his own powers of reasoning; she becomes a survivor. Iris Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels* shows an oppressive and abusive father who neglects one daughter in preference for his other, illegitimate daughter, with whom he enters an abusive relationship; in this narrative, with both mothers dead, the daughters survive although they are damaged. Doris Lessing in *The Fifth Child* shows the determination to create an ideal, nurturing family going badly wrong, as the mother devotes all her energies to her destructive child, leaving her other, 'real' children to be nurtured by their father and the wider family; one child in particular is severely damaged through this preference. The struggle between love, support, assertion and violence may result in either death or survival for the offspring.

Embracing the Father's Rationality in Angela Carter

Thus this tower glimpsed in darkness symbolized and clarified her resolution; abhor shipwreck, said the lighthouse, go in fear of unreason. Use your wits, said the lighthouse. She fell in love with the integrity of the lighthouse. Carter, *Heroes and Villains* 139.

The first example of parental influence is shown in Angela Carter's novel, *Heroes and Villains* (1969). Marianne's mother makes no secret of her preference for her son, Marianne's brother, and when he is killed in a Barbarian raid, she allows herself to die almost gladly. However, Marianne is loved unconditionally by her father; he chooses her name, Marianne, as representing the allegorical figure of Liberty from the rule of order of the French Revolution, when "they had briefly worshipped the goddess Reason" (Carter 68); Marianne becomes a tough young acolyte

of Reason in this post-apocalyptic world. Her father taught her "reading, writing and history [from] his library of old books; in the white tower, in his study" (7). She loved him, but the forces of reasoning he teaches scarcely seem relevant to their post-atomic world. He encourages her to think rhetorically; when he asks her to visualize a 'million,' she multiplies the village people until she gives up. Asking her about the word 'city,' she responds with the word 'ruins,' at which point he gives up explaining and they return to his increasingly irrelevant books, out of touch with their present world, against the ticking of his clock. He advises her to evaluate their situation, the effete Professors locked in their towers surrounded by marauding Barbarian hordes, raiding for grain, cloth and weapons. If the Barbarian forces were to inherit this world, they would destroy it; they need the Professors, while the Professors blame the Barbarians for all their evils.

When Marianne's old nurse kills her father with an axe and poisons herself with a brass cleaning fluid, in an outburst of madness frequent in this post-apocalyptic society, Marianne burns her father's heritage of his library, and drowns his clock. She chops off her hair, resembling a demented, ugly boy; seeing her ugliness reflected in mirrors gives her huge satisfaction. Still bored, she looks around for some more damage to do. She sees their Tower as a grave, betraying through a slip of the tongue her sense of living a post-life existence, talking of the nurse who "loved us when we were alive" (15). Her approach to life remains highly thoughtful, even without her father's books. She refuses to be drawn into simplistic children's games of good and evil, us and them; a boy defines the Professors' Soldiers as heroes, calling the Barbarians villains, and he as a hero will shoot her, but she protests with a grimace: "Oh no you won't.… I'm not playing" (2).

As a six-year-old she had coolly observed her brother being killed; ten years later the Barbarians return with another attack. She watches a Barbarian surviving by feigning death, and takes him some food, when he grabs and gags her. She wonders aloud if her nurse's stories, that he would rape her and sew a cat up inside her, were correct, while he responds logically that he has no cats. They share the experience of having lost their fathers; his ten years ago, murdered he says, poetically echoing the words of Tennyson; everywhere is "red in tooth and claw" (18). Inviting her to escape with

him, he marks her as his hostage with warpaint, telling her to crash a lorry through the gate, while she defiantly asserts that she will go with him of her own volition. When she expresses regret at destroying bread by driving through a cornfield he calls her an intellectual. After impressively bursting from the gates and careering along thrillingly, he suggests she crash into a tree, destroying the lorry and providing a convenient suicide exit for herself, after which she spends the night weeping for her father. Bereaved and homeless, she continues to use the undeniable thinking skills her father has inculcated in her, as she joins the primitive Barbarian tribe, with Jewel a clever but not kind savage; they actually match each other well. Her father's cerebral influence continues with the Barbarians' leader, Professor Donally, who encourages Marianne and Jewel to grasp the power of their situation, for her to become Queen of the midden in their camp, as she asserts her longing for her father.

Jewel physically rapes and bullies Marianne, yet remains afraid of her, convinced that she will be the death of him (79, 80), although she saves his life three times. She retains a strong sense of her own integrity even as he rapes her: "she did not make a single sound for her only strength was her impassivity and she never closed her cold eyes" (55). During this violent rape, she connects Jewel's attack with her brother's murder which she had witnessed, as it turns out, by Jewel: "how the savage boy stuck his knife into her brother's throat and the blood gushed out" (55). Thus her rape reverberates with her first viewing of Jewel, when she looked down objectifyingly from her tower onto the Professors' world under chaotic Barbarian attack. She saw her brother, the preferred male of her mother, being killed by Jewel, without emotional response to his death. Neither she nor Jewel ever forget Jewel's "expression of blind terror" as he catches sight of the little girl looking down from her balcony. Carter emphasizes Jewel's fear of Marianne's ice-water eyes in coldly watching her brother's death, looking down as if it were "all an entertainment laid on for her benefit" (80). Jewel recognizing her reminds her of that old encounter on their wedding night, and his belief "that this child who looked so severe would be the death of me" (79), saying he hates her. He bares his chest in a death wish, asking her to kill him. This gives her a disquiet, "as if he had broken into her most private place and stolen her most ambiguously cherished possession. Her memory was no longer her own; he shared it.

She had never invited him there" (80). He protests that the little girl who had watched him murder her brother had looked down "as if it were all an entertainment laid on for her benefit. And I thought, "If that's the way they look at death, the sooner [the insouciant Professors] all go the better" (80). She identifies him with her lost brother whom he has replaced in a hostile intimacy. She later realizes that this enemy, Jewel, had actually been attempting to ward off her own penetrating and destructive Medusa evil eye, even while he was murdering her brother. This action creates a curious interplay of power, the aggressor fearful of his young observer. Jewel is shown as a prince of darkness, a devil incarnate and "created, not begotten, a fantastic dandy of the void" (72), suggesting an inverse divinity parallel to hers, while she exerts the power of Medusa through her cold gaze, and is also called Lilith. The dance of power of these two demons does not prevent him from greatly fearing her, calling her the firing squad (120). Carter describes Jewel as "he's *id*" (in Day 43) or pure instinct, and Marianne as "very much a stranger to her own desire, which is why her desire finds its embodiment in a stranger" (43).

Jewel demands her to "Conceive, you bitch, conceive" (90), offering three reasons — patriarchal or dynastic need, status, and revenge on her — by shoving something of himself up her. She asks if he wants her to give birth to a monster; like the sleep of reason, he retorts. When she becomes pregnant he asks if he should go and surrender to the Professors for the sake of their unborn child. But she suggests they would treat him as a specimen of otherness: "The Barbarians are Yahoos but the Professors are Laputians" (123); he would be objectively studied, analysed, and reduced to a mass of footnotes in a book, as one absolute strange to them, and she declares she would not care for him as such an other. Jewel and Donally evaluate Marianne as Eve or Lilith, in her total insubordination and insouciance. Donally considers making a Tiger Boy of their child, but by the end of the novel, it is actually Marianne who embraces the fate of being their "tiger lady, [set to] rule them with a rod of iron" (150).

Seeing a tower of Professors and a broken clock reminds her of her father's supreme use of reason. "This tower glimpsed in darkness symbolized and clarified her resolution. Use your wits, said the lighthouse. She fell in love with the integrity of the lighthouse" (139). Considering whether to leave

the Barbarians to join the yet more primitive Out People, she wonders whether they couldn't create a new and tough subspecies of man by living in caves, leading a dangerous but fearless life; such a "rational breed would eschew such mysteries as the one now forcing her to walk behind the figure on the shore, dark as the negative of a photograph, and preventing her from returning home alone" (137), as she follows Jewel when he attempts to kill himself. After his failed suicide, and already coughing with consumption, Jewel squanders his life by first ousting their leader Donally from the tribe in rivalry, then weakly reneging on this decision, attempting to save him the next day on receiving a note from him, against Marianne's advice that he stay and father his own child. After nihilistically hoping that he and his brothers will "all together make a beautiful dive into nothing" (144), he fatally falls into a posse of soldiers. His indecisiveness weakens him in the eyes of his brothers and the spiteful, calculating Marianne. This teenage girl proves her strength while rejecting the wifely role assigned by the tribe, developing her indomitable psyche in spite of her youth at a young sixteen, and in her tough conditions, through her sharp cultivation of practical and mental acumen, her reasoning, as learned from her father. The novel ends with her poised to take over as leader after the death of both male leaders, using reason as the paramount force: "in the conceptualisation of an order beyond the patriarchal" (Day 55). Day suggests she embraces reason while experiencing desire with the Barbarians, thus: "in Marianne's case reason may order, like an iron rod, the inchoate energies of the id, while the energies of the id — the energies of the 'tiger lady' — may enrich reason" (53), combining both her erotic and cerebral power as a Lilith figure. Husband and wife circle each other suspiciously from their alien worlds, while she proves her ruthlessness to the tribe, outflanking Jewel at every step. Jewel dies, Gerardine Meaney implies, as "Messiah, Arthur or hero, [his] blood sacrifice demanded by the Mother Goddess and the socio-symbolic contract" (100), and she inherits his mantle, exploiting the tribe's fear through her forceful self-assertion. Jewel's death enables Marianne to come into her own, affirming she will be Queen, "tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron" (Carter 150). They call her Lilith, often shown alongside big cats. With the death of Jewel, Marianne assumes his rule, clearly more challenging than remaining in her old enclosed life with the Professors. This defiant Lilith, Medusa figure exercises her witchy, snakelike force against her oppressors, as she "absolutely refused

to be party to the contract and whom the Law of the Father turned into a most Medusa-like monster instead. Lilith with a little knowledge would be a dangerous woman indeed" (Meaney 120). She is an early exemplar of Carter's powerfully intellectual women bestriding their small worlds defiantly.

Escaping the Father's Pernicious Power in Iris Murdoch

He was too large to be included in her thoughts. He bulked beside them, impenetrable and ineluctably present. It was not exactly that Muriel thought about him all the time. She wore him, she carried him, she endured him all the time. Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*

Iris Murdoch's dark novel, *The Time of the Angels* (1966), shows the perniciously oppressive power of Carel Fisher, Muriel's father. An atheist believing that the transcendent God is dead, he continues to play with ideas like demonic forces as angels. Carel is a dysfunctional priestly father in charge of a churchless parish, in order to limit any damage he might inflict. One of three brothers, Carel and Julian had become entangled in a relationship with another woman while both married. When Julian ran off with this woman, Carel exacted revenge by sleeping with Julian's wife, and Julian returned to find his wife pregnant from his brother, and killed himself in desperation. The posthumous child, Elizabeth, whose mother dies, grows up ostensibly as Carel's niece, alongside her cousin Muriel, Carel's legitimate daughter, after both mothers' deaths; Carel excludes the third brother from their life, thus assuming sole parental influence. Muriel has lived without fulfilling expectations, often as a shorthand typist, refusing encouragement to attend university; she also attempts to write poetry. Carel's niece Elizabeth, the dead Julian's daughter who is actually Carel's daughter, lies encased in a mysterious corset in her room after suffering a debilitating back weakness, working a jigsaw puzzle or reading *The Iliad* in the Greek she learned from Carel. The reader sees little of Elizabeth's mind, the novel is related through the perspective of Carel and Muriel. The two sister/ cousins scarcely seem competitors; Muriel accepts her cousin's superior beauty, but is unaware of how much Elizabeth has advanced intellectually, assuming her own superiority. Elizabeth's weak health makes her reclusive, and the virgin Muriel assumes her cousin's sexual innocence; both accept the concept that everything is permitted

morally, while living a highly enclosed life. The handsome but "glazed and stiffened" Carel formally and repeatedly asks Muriel "what arrangements [she] proposed to make," about finding employment (31), in order to get her out of the house and stay with Elizabeth. Asked when young to call him 'Carel' and unable to do so, Muriel has no way of addressing her father by name.

Carel uses the Jamaican-Irish Pattie O'Driscoll as both servant and lover, encouraging her to believe he would marry her after his wife's death; her confidence and 'crowing' over the dying woman infuriated both Muriel and Elizabeth. The marriage of this poor, illegitimate, orphan girl of mixed race, actually Carel's sex slave, was always improbable. Muriel realizes her father is also to blame for this relationship, and she should forgive Pattie, "but some mechanism of her universe made Carel's fault invisible" (33); her father seems god-like and above blame to her. The bohemian and decadent son of the Russian concierge, Leo, starts amusing himself with Muriel, who pretends considerable maturity with him. He suggests she should be in love with her father, and he should hate his father, Eugene; hasn't she read her Freud, he rhetorically demands?

Carel increasingly places Muriel under pressure to work and move out, as Muriel contemplates shocking Elizabeth into an awakening through a relationship with the attractive Leo. Carel on the contrary insists that Elizabeth be sheltered, implying Elizabeth is trying to leave them in some way — possibly projecting onto her the suicide that will later tempt him. She is shown as a sleep walker or Sleeping Beauty not to be awakened, a dreamer weaving her web like the Lady of Shalott (130), while Muriel believes she actually needs change and company. Insulating himself within his own pernicious, nihilistic thoughts and repetitive Tchaikovsky music, Carel lays down the law for all inmates of the house, crushing Muriel. Her old headmistress declares him "neurotic, selfish, isolated, self-obsessed" (140); instead of fearing him, she encourages Muriel to resist his influence, asserting that introducing Elizabeth to the young Leo would do no harm.
The dénoument occurs with Muriel promising Leo an encounter with her beautiful cousin Elizabeth. The two of them retreat from Pattie into the adjoining linen cupboard which has a crack showing the bedroom of Elizabeth; the secret knowledge of this peep view has long been bearing

down on Muriel. Prompted by curiosity, Muriel looks into Elizabeth's mirror reflecting her bed, showing her and Carel enfolded in a many-armed sexual embrace, presenting a scene which Muriel intuits goes back into a distant past. When Leo demands to look, they tussle in the cupboard, bringing in Pattie as well as the other brother Marcus, to observe them. Here Muriel determines to 'save' her father from a desperately compromising situation by calling out his name, Carel, for the first time in her life, in warning. Her declaration enables him and Elizabeth to understand that Muriel has become aware of their ongoing liason, through the urgency of the warning she utters. Carel clearly initiated the relationship with Elizabeth, however Electral her feelings for the man who brought her up in *loco parentis*, who may even have declared himself to be her father; Elizabeth is somnolent and initiates nothing in the novel. Carel masterminds the entire action, whether forcing Muriel into a job or to leave the house, or resuming his relationship with the servant Pattie, even after she has fallen in love with Eugene, or blocking visitors from the house, including his brother Marcus; he always does precisely what he wants. So Elizabeth is apparently a victim of child abuse and also incest. All Muriel can think when she finds out not only about their sexual affair but also more damagingly that Carel and Elizabeth are actually father and daughter, is how very cold they both are, this similarity confirming their blood relation.

Muriel can gain no insight into Elizabeth's feelings; any conversation they have is trivial and pretentious. Muriel describes her father as so strange, so dark, so intimate and yet unknown, "impenetrable and ineluctable" (177), as if she is describing God. While the girls continue their jigsaw puzzle as if nothing has happened, Elizabeth freezes when Carel enters the room. A terrible scream builds up inside Muriel's head for her guilt at being caught watching her father and cousin in bed. Elizabeth's expression becomes first conscious and then smooth and vacant, as Carel summons Muriel to repeat his insistence that she find a job and leave the house. His eyes glaze over as he requests her to leave him together with Elizabeth, as if their living together were normal, while she moves out; the one her father intends to live with is her young cousin/ sister and companion. He thus exiles Muriel, assuming the priority of his sexual relationship with his blood daughter over his lifelong paternal relationship with his legitimate daughter. Muriel leaves him declaring: "I hate you", clearly expressing her desperate appeal

for the love she is excluded from, which he ignores (181), discarding her, exhibiting to Muriel the same cold nature.

The desperately jealous Muriel fights with Pattie, accusing her of having killed her mother, while Pattie retorts that Muriel had prevented her father Carel from marrying herself. Muriel throws a pot of soup over Pattie as Carel and Eugene burst in, which enables Carel to insist that Muriel move out, embracing a sobbing Pattie (188). In revenge, Muriel reveals to Leo's father, Eugene the concierge, that Pattie is her father's whore, destroying their budding intimacy. When Muriel tells Pattie her father has asked her to leave because of the primacy of his sexual relationship with Elizabeth, Pattie determines to leave Carel, refusing his emotional pressure over her in asking her to suffer and be crucified for him. She finds it intolerable: "They'll be like a married couple, thought Pattie. And I shall be their servant" (210). "She could not stay and see him with Elizabeth. She could not love him that much. She could not make his miracle of redemption" (212). Muriel advises Pattie to get out like herself, although Pattie is the first to leave. Pattie tells Muriel that Elizabeth is her sister: "Carel seduced Julian's wife just out of spite, for revenge. When Julian knew that his wife was pregnant he killed himself" (211). Pattie intuits that Carel and Elizabeth were brought together by incestuous attraction, with Carel effectively seducing his daughter Elizabeth. For Pattie this is the limit, and refusing this relationship, with herself the peripheral servant, and now hopeless in her own relationship with Eugene, she takes herself off to help the refugees.

Leaving the house, Muriel returns on impulse to find Carel slipping into unconsciousness after taking her supply of sleeping tablets, the escape route she had not been desperate to use even in her despair. She agonises over the dying Carel, yet finds herself unable to exercise any power over him to summon him back into a life which he had determined he could not face: "to be hauled back by his heels into a hateful life" (219). He chooses death when Pattie asserts her refusal to contine as the sex slave of a man who has made his daughter his sexual partner, thus when Pattie declares her intention to leave her commitment and love for him, accusing him of killing her. After years of abusing her, Carel dies with Pattie's farewell note in his hand, thus it is actually because of his servant/ concubine Pattie that Carel

finds himself unable to face life after her desertion. Muriel finds herself left in a darkness without either God or the father whom she had loved, both of these a shared but now absent "rock of ages" (220). "There had always been a darkness in her relationship with her father and in that darkness her love had lain asleep.… If only there could have been just herself and Carel together" (221). But she realizes she had never been central to her father. Jealous of Elizabeth, the apparently inexperienced virgin who proved the experienced one, Muriel finds herself in "between dark and dark. It was a love immured, sealed up" (222). Carel rejects his legitimate daughter while embracing his illegitimate daughter. By absenting himself from the world in suicide, he rivets the two cousins or half sisters together, in a hell in which the one would be the torment of the other, as in Sartre's *Huit Clos*; hell is the other person. "There would be no parting from Elizabeth now. Carel had riveted them together, each to be the damnation of the other until the end of the world" (222). Muriel has been excluded from the chosen Elizabeth's experience. This knowledge remaining between them embittering any chance of their decent relationship; Elizabeth as physically handicapped actually needs her sister, while Muriel's feelings of resentment can scarcely be imagined. Their father Carel thus twists them all, lovers and daughters, perniciously around his fingers, casting a long shadow of influence, virtually a curse, over both his daughters.

Beyond Nurture: Only the Child in Doris Lessing

This strange girl was smiling, but it was a nasty smile, not friendly, and the little girl thought this other girl was going to reach up out of the water and pull her down into it. Lessing, *The Fifth Child* 56.

In Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* of 1988, David and Harriet aim to create an ideal, large family against the prevailing decadence of the sixties' free love. Harriet's family assumes "family life was the basis for a happy one" (12) while since David's parents divorced when he was seven, he has two homes and sets of parents. The two plan a large, traditional family, find the perfect sprawling Victorian home, and start having children immediately, in the face of the opposition of three sets of parents, from whom they require financial support. David realizes that "Everything *could* very well be taken away" (22) from them. Their relatives join them for house parties and holidays, affording them financial and physical support, particularly

Harriet's mother, Dorothy, who almost becomes a housekeeper, while Harriet continues to bear children. Such domestic parties create a wonderful atmosphere for years as they enjoy their extended family, as outside "battered the storms of the world" (29).

Harriet's sister Sarah is in an unhappy and quarrelsome marriage with William, which Harriet believes "had probably attracted the mongol [fourth] child" (29); this needy child prevents these unhappy parents from separating. Thus Dorothy, the mother of both sisters, is torn between the family needs of both her daughters, each with four children. Harriet's first fight with David is caused by her condemnation of her sister, while he accuses her of fatalism and silly hysterical thinking (29). But both David and Harriet crow with self-righteousness over their successful, large family and house parties, and others emulate them in having larger families, while Harriet's mother Dorothy shoulders the burden of running this household with Harriet's frequent pregnancies. She becomes pregnant immediately after their fourth child, instead of waiting as they had promised. Meanwhile their youngest, Paul, lies whimpering in his pram, sacrificed to the large family ethos.

The unborn baby asserts himself violently, kicking against Harriet in her worst pregnancy. She uses sedatives to calm the child who pushes so painfully against her internally, also walking constantly. Imagining hooves or claws biting into her entrails, she lives for the evenings and the family's return, pretending normality, while the monstrous foetus tears at her innards. David tells a story of a brother and sister lost in the forest; the girl looks into a pool to see a strange girl looking back at her, smiling with a nasty smile, as if she were going to reach up and pull her down into the pool; at this point Dorothy interrupts and finishes the story, erasing the creature looking up from the pool and reuniting the girl with her brother. She denies the monstrous other emerging from the pool, actually the monstrous child whom they are enabling to enter their lives, as if David has looked at their own fate reflected and seen this creature joining them. The ferociously strong baby fights out of Harriet's body: "A real little wrestler,… He came out fighting the whole world" (60). A heavy-shouldered hunched baby, forehead sloping from eyes to crown, his hair standing on the top of his head in yellowish stubble, pads of muscle in his

hands, he looks like a troll or goblin. When Harriet feeds him, he empties each breast, painfully grinding his gums onto her nipples, leaving her heavily bruised. He immediately struggles to stand, in the same way she had felt him asserting his limbs while inside her. Against all her previous principles of natural mothering, she weans him at five weeks, unable to bear his malevolent grinding of her breasts. She calls him alien, a neanderthal baby (65), while the doctor dismisses her qualms, merely describing him as hyperactive, and that it's not unusual to dislike your own children.

People visit and have a good time as usual — this seems to be what this family has been reduced to. Meanwhile David and Harriet become cautious in bed — what if they were to have another such child? Their youngest, Paul, deprived of his mother's nurturing care through the neglect during this aggressive pregnancy and child, is fascinated by the new child Ben. When Paul goes up to his cot, Ben pulls his arm hard against the bars, bending his arm backwards and badly spraining it, causing Paul to nearly lose his arm, while Ben crows with sadistic satisfaction and pleasure. This teaches them all to keep their distance from Ben. By the time he is six months old they understand that "he was going to destroy their family life. He was already destroying it" (72). Ben has accidental narrow escapes, when they reluctantly save his life. He kills their pets without suffering any consequences. When they bring him down from his upstairs barred 'prison' at one year old, he watches the children: "whomever he was looking at became conscious of that insistent gaze and stopped talking; or turned a back, or a shoulder, so as not to see him" (75), evading his alien, penetrating gaze, which expresses only the desire to inflict pain. Harriet sees him as a troll or hobgoblin, giving her "a long stare, alien, chilling" (76), often locking him behind heavy bars. When Dorothy enables them to leave him for a holiday, they leave the so-called idyllic family home for the first time when freed of their fifth child. This child seems rather like the violent child of the legendary snake woman, Melusine, called Horrible, who bites off his nurse's breasts, kills grroms and also animals while still an infant.

His cousin, the Downs Syndrome child Amy, is lovable and adored by everyone; she can never be left with the dangerous Ben. Harrriet tries to understand Ben's cold yellow-green eyes, as he constantly watches Amy,

the afflicted child, and learns to evokes their pity by calling himself poor Ben. Sarah feels that she has been dealt a bad hand by fate with her daughter Amy, like Harriet with her son Ben, but Harriet rejects any similarity to her sister, whom she condemns, feeling this mongol child has been brought on by their marital problems (80). Amy is the centre of attention, affectionate with everyone, while Ben watches this afflicted but loveable child with alien eyes. Meanwhile the neglected Paul becomes nervous and sensitive, subject to fits of rage and screaming, trying to attract his mother Harriet's attention, while her attention is firmly fixed on Ben to prevent any incipient trouble.

Ben learns talking and social skills from the children, but he always acts with malice. Harriet feels she is being treated like a criminal through giving birth to this defective child, as they discuss putting him in an institution, with his carers increasingly haggard. So Ben is bundled off with cries of rage and apparently indecent haste in a black van, after which the family expand "like paper flowers in water" (93) in hysterical relief. But Harriet cannot expel Ben from her mind. It is not love nor affection she feels, but guilt and horror keep her awake at night. She finally drives across England to check his situation, finding him heavily sedated and in a straight jacket alongside various hopeless and strange creatures. Seeing him as pathetic with his eyes closed, hosed down for hygiene purposes on a slab, she decides to bring him back home. The two harassed staff members inform her he is so strong he needs constant sedation; she realizes he has been kept half starved, between drugs and his protests interfering with feeding. She takes him home with the straight jacket and the drugs, declaring to all the family that "they were killing him" (104). She admits that what she has done is criminal, but that she had no choice because he was being murdered. David states in reply that he was most careful not to see what was going on with him, jeeringly suggesting he assumed they were turning him into a well-adjusted member of society.

From this point on these parents' roles are assigned — Harriet is the mother of Ben, neglecting all her other children, while David assumes responsibility for the ones he calls the real children. Harriet resocializes Ben, including toilet training onwards, holding the fear of the institution over him to remind him that he could be sent back there, which she inwardly

swears never to do. She finds a tough, unemployed young man prepared to spend all day with Ben, between his motor bike, and mates in the café, which is done at David's expense. Then, having papered over the cracks in their highly fragile family life, assumed a façade of normality, Harriet suggests they carry on with their dream and have more children. David enquires, what about the children they already have, particularly Paul, who never recovers from his usurping younger brother, not having received enough maternal love or care at the right tender age. Gradually each child learns to fend for themselves, carving out their own space outside their nuclear family. The older two go off to boarding school at the expense of different grandparents, with whom they make their home in the holidays, as the family breaks up. The third child goes to her aunt with the three healthy cousins and the little DS Amy. Ben starts school with the younger ones, learning to evoke pity as poor Ben. He is only once violent to a girl at school, when Harriet threatens to take him back to the institution, which threat he seems to understand, although she has no concept of his mind beside this fear.

Paul ends up regularly visiting a psychiatrist, going there after school instead of returning home. Once Harriet finds Ben threatening Paul, reaching his hands up to his throat, utterly terrorizing the only slightly older boy; she separates them, but enforces no consequences for Ben. As a result of their financial burdens and the splintering family, with their own children moving away, David transfers the centre of his life to work, coming home less frequently. Harriet and David wait with dread for Ben to become sexual, without taking any precautions. He becomes involved in a gang at school, and she hears reports of robberies, rapes and killings, suspecting his gang, but she neither reports on him nor prevents his activities in any way; one wonders what it would be like to be subject to the violence of such a strong monster. So she allows her son to grow up as a menace to his own family and socially, allowing her children to scatter as their dreams of family life evaporate. The family is broken up, and while the older children survive, Paul is permanently traumatised by his brother, not growing up normally because he never had a normal babyhood or childhood. Harriet asserts that she could not have let Ben be murdered, but she has actually chosen to save him in preference to preserving the rest of her family. She regards this fate as dealt them as a result of hubris,

since they had been so defiant of fate and unstoppable in their desires, effectively calling down this thunderbolt from the sky, which David takes up tauntingly: "Pogroms and punishments, witch-burnings and angry gods — !" (141) he taunts her.

Their large home becomes a base for the 'Ben Lovatt' gang, who trash it until David asks them to clean up. Harriet follows the outrageous activities of this gang on the news as they evade the police. Lessing implies that Ben is the centre of a nucleus, although he is actually socially inept, lacking the skills to understand much, remaining the butt of other's mockery and deception, as he had been with his siblings, watching them for direction while watching television or other activities. Harriet is convinced that she has no right to take steps to prevent her child from being a nuisance or peril to others, preferring to make the entire family suffer and destroying the peace of mind of all, particularly his closest sibling, Paul, who never recovers. Harriet knows that "if I had let him die, then all of us, so many people, would have been happy, but I could not do it" (157).

Harriet's behaviour is strikingly in opposition to that of the legendary snake woman Melusine of the fourteenth century, who together with the knight Raimondin bears ten children. A snake woman creature from another world who is regarded as demonic in this Christian era, her sons have various odd marks; two of them are harmful to others. One of them, Geoffrey à la grande dent, goes to his brother's monastery in fury at his brother Fromont incarcerating himself there, and burns down the monastery with his brother and a hundred monks. This brings about the end of the marriage, as Raimondin returns from this experience to castigate Melusine; "Hé! très fausse serpente, par Dieu, ni toi, ni tes faits ne seront qu'illusion. Jamais enfant que tu aies porté ne viendra à bonne fin" (d'Arras 196) [Hey, you deceptive serpent, by God, you and all your works will be nothing but illusion. No child you have borne will ever come to good.] This son lives to regret his action, and he reforms and becomes a knight who fights honourably for the pope, remaining devoted to his mother and finally reconciled with his father before death.

Another dreadful child of theirs however, Horrible, grows up like Lessing's Ben, biting off the breasts of the women who nurse him,

killing two grooms and animals, wreaking havoc while still an infant. When Melusine is betrayed and blamed by Raimondin after the action of Geoffrey à la grande dent which causes her to leave him, she orders her husband to destroy Horrible: "Beaux seigneurs, si votre honneur et vos biens vous sont chers, prenez garde, sitôt que je m'en serai allée de faire sorte qu'Horrible soit mort tout secrètement" (d'Arras 200). [Sirs, if your honour and own good are dear to you, be sure when I have left to make sure that Horrible is secretly destroyed.] She warns them that if he does not do so, Horrible will destroy them all, which advice Raimondin carries out; one life does not have supreme value over all the others. How does a child like Ben have a greater right to life than the people around him, not just his siblings, one of whom he tortures and traumatically threatens, but also the innocent people whom he and his gang attack? How does Harriet ease her conscience regarding his victims when he goes on the rampage, raping and killing, refusing to deal with the problem at source and leaving him free to wreak havoc in the world? In *Melusine the Serpent Goddess in A. S. Byatt's* Possession *and in Mythology*, I make the connection between Melusine as a mother and Lessing's mother Harriet in *The Fifth Child*, suggesting how difficult it is to destroy one's own child, which unfortunately leads to the result that "this child gradually destroys his family instead. In this context Melusine's decision to have her son killed is cold-blooded, if far more realistic" (185). The life of one child should not be elevated over all the others; all members of the family, as well as soceity, have the right to a decent and unthreatened existence; one person is not supreme over all the others.

The sequel to this novel, *Ben in the World*, focuses on Ben, not on the damage he does to others, particularly Paul, who remains traumatised. Here Lessing transfers her sympathies to poor Ben, showing him actually developing a caring relationship with an old woman who feeds and protects him until her death, a relationship which he had never achieved with his mother. Ben survives to be used by criminal elements as a paw or agent, and continues on the wrong side of the law in South America. He dies an accidental death, without having done anything worthwhile, or interacting with any one other than the one woman, merely surviving on the backs of various criminal elements.

Conclusion

This writing has focused on the responsibilities of fathers, who often have a less intimate and responsible relationship with their children, as well as mothers. Fathers can be great parents, and Marianne's father in Carter's *Heroes and Villains* loves her and teaches her thinking skills when her mother prefers her brother; Marianne turns out a tough survivor. In Murdoch's dark work, *The Time of the Angels*, the father is a pernicious force. Carel reneges on his duties to his legitimate daughter, entering an incestuous relationship with his niece/ daughter, while yet in thrall to his sexual relationship with his servant, and when she deserts him he evades life in suicide, leaving both daughters severely wounded. The burden of parenting falling on the mother is prevented in this novel by the mothers' deaths. In Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, the mother assumes total responsibility towards her child and defends him, in defiance of his outrageously violent anti-social behaviour which threatens family and society. Her evasion of her responsibility of making him socially adaptable and accountable allows him to fall into criminal behaviour outside normal society. These extreme examples indicate the heavy burden of parenting, showing that even total nurture is not the sole ideal, and the child is not the only one to be considered, as in the case of Harriet and her defence of her malicious son. Parents need to love and nurture their children equally and fairly, whatever their children's sex. Parental influence is a powerful force, which may be dangerous, and it is also incalculable — early influence continues beyond the grave. Parenting is clearly a challenging matter, and experience is a hard task master!

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