

Mothers of Future Kings: The Madonna Redux Phenomenon

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Abstract

The visual culture that created Diana was motivated by Victorian constrictions of motherhood that enforced notions of stability and lineage. This article examines the cultural metaphors of nurturance – the “Madonna redux phenomenon” – in images of Diana, and in her predecessor Princess Alexandra. I argue that images of royal motherhood are staged affairs, constructed and performed as part of the Princesses’ main role as dutiful and loving mothers. Finally, I point up how moments of agency can be achieved within these images and how Diana, “the postfeminist princess,” embraced these moments.

Key Words: third wave feminism, Diana, motherhood

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This article investigates how images of Diana, Princess of Wales partake in Victorian constructions of femininity that uphold the sacred cult of motherhood while at the same time indicating how she subverts these constructions. Images of royal mothers are staged affairs, performed as part of a princess’ main responsibilities as a dutiful and loving mother. A comparison of Diana and Alexandra, the nineteenth-century Princess of Wales will demonstrate how Diana’s mothering function was constructed. The cult of royal motherhood will be read as an embodiment of third wave feminist empowerment through investigating how a princess wields power through her maternity. Such representations participate in a debate about power within postmodern discourses. Myra Macdonald argues that “[w]hat attitude we take in this debate hinges on whether we see experimentation with image and style, encouraged by postmodernism, as meaningless playful fun or, alternatively, as meaningful parody, challenging and resisting male-dominated conventions”(35). This article will account for a third wave feminism that allows such representations of women to be read in terms of gender and power, not conformity and repression. However, this is not to deny that Victorian constructions of the royal mother are maintained as Diana – an icon of late twentieth-century femininity – is entangled in the patriarchal structures of monarchy, the cult of motherhood and, by extension, family.

Sacred Motherhood: The Madonna Redux

The cult of motherhood stems from images of the Madonna. Sheila Kitzinger explains that this cult “is crystallized in the image of the Virgin Mother sitting in placid serenity with her infant Son on her lap. She is untouched by anxiety or passion, and represents the purity of woman given in service to her child” (172). Judith Higgins Balfe argues that mariolatry – worship of the Madonna – emerged when the power of the church was threatened.

Such expanding Mariolatry was, then, ‘descriptive’ reflection of the increased status and importance of women generally, not merely when they occupied

powerful political positions through inheritance or marriage (like Eleanor of Aquitaine). Rather, acceptance of the public power of mothers is evident in the statement of one abbot of the time, apropos Mary and her direct influence upon Christ: 'A mother does not pray, she orders. How then would Christ not listen to his mother?' (154)

As visual proof of this powerful Madonna, Balfe cites Mary's role as Queen of Heaven at the right hand of her son in the twelfth-century central portal of Autun Cathedral, which depicts the Last Judgment scene. By the thirteenth century, we see such examples as the Madonna and Child on the trumeau of Amiens Cathedral, a tender image of mother and child, mutually adoring, which Balfe reads as a sign of the increasing power of motherhood "overcoming the deeply-imbedded misogyny of the patriarchal church, the courts and other institutions Mary spoke of and to a real and alternative power in maternity" (154). Adrienne Rich's discussion of the institutional versus the experiential aspects of motherhood in the twentieth century maps nicely onto, respectively, Balfe's powerful versus tender Madonna images.

Comparing these Madonna pictures with modern examples, Balfe observes that "strong maternal images are largely absent from 20th century art" (144). However, I would argue that royal portraiture possesses these strong material images as queens and princesses negotiate their roles as mothers of future kings. As I shall demonstrate, a princess' power stems from her maternal, nurturing role. Her function emulates and mirrors – albeit in a different context from that of medieval Europe – the ways that imagery of the Virgin Mary created meaning. Balfe concludes that

[i]n search of an alternative model of womanhood, one which does justice to their own hard-earned understanding of women's abilities to be other than maternal and be seen as powerful individuals in public roles, feminists might well look to the early Gothic period in which Marian worship emerged...Then, not only did Mary order her Son about, but she exercised her power independently without his knowledge or consent. (162)

Balfe offers an empowered vision of the Madonna in terms of contemporary issues of motherhood. In the images of princesses and motherhood, we can also see the tender side of motherhood. This is not to deny that a princess' role is limited, but to point up how she does wield considerable command within prescribed parameters. Virgin Queen of Heaven or young princess, both representations belong to a group of cultural metaphors of nurturing which I identify as the "Madonna redux phenomenon."

The Angel in the House: Victorian Motherhood

Adrienne Munich claims that "[t]o imagine unproblematic motherhood, one needs never to have borne children" (192). In the nineteenth century, for a princess to have influence meant that she had to deny her body, disembodied as the Angel in the House. The construction of the Angel in the House promised a woman manly protection and economic support in exchange for her moral guidance over her husband and children, and her dedication to home and hearth.

Woman's power is for rule, not for battle, – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision....
By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and

temptation...[home] is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. (Ruskin 121-2)

Woman was thus safely ensconced in the home, the bosom of her family, emblematic of the comfort and nurturance of her own womb. Ruskin echoes Sarah Stickney Ellis who characterized this angel as “the humble monitress who sat alone, guarding the fireside comforts of this distant home...her character, clothed in moral beauty, has...sent him [her husband] back to that beloved home, a wiser and a better man” (31). Woman’s role as angel monitress was in wide use by the mid-Victorian period when her status as a leisured lady was symbolic of her husband’s economic success. Her role as moral guide contained and controlled her sexuality, emphasizing instead her reproductive duties.

On the 6 January 1866, the engraving *The Princess of Wales with the Infant Prince Albert Victor* appeared in the *Illustrated London News* (Figure 1). Here, as mother of a future king, Alexandra embodies the Angel of the House, her protective arms encircling her infant child.



Figure 1 - “The Princess of Wales with the Infant Prince Albert Victor,”
Illustrated London News (1866)

The piece that accompanied the picture placed it firmly within the Victorian tradition of the sacred cult of motherhood:

A young mother, holding a baby of two years, is one of the loveliest and holiest objects....[W]e must look upon this attitude of womanhood grouped with childhood as an embodiment of the most sacred affections and capabilities of human nature; and the ideal of maternity, which the mystic piety of the Middle Ages was inclined to worship...as an accessory to divine revelation, still remains all but the highest conceivable type of moral harmony and grace. There is no woman who bears a child [who does not]... exhibit a living picture of this adorable ideal. (“Princess” 8)

This emblem of sacred selfless nurturer is heavily implicated in Victorian constructions of motherhood where the Angel reigns supreme. The piece uses a “ministering angel” rhetoric in the description to stabilize Alexandra within this cult. Another example of this rhetoric can be found in George Elgar Hicks’ trilogy, *Woman’s Mission*, exhibited at the

Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1863. The central panel is *Companion to Manhood*, showing a wife comforting her husband in a moment of grief, flanked by *Comfort of Old Age* and *Guide to Childhood* (Figure 2). When Hicks exhibited the trilogy, the *Times* proclaimed that it portrayed “woman in three phases of her duties as ministering angel” (“Royal” 6). Susan Casteras declares that Hicks’ *Guide to Childhood* belongs to this selfless cult of motherhood:

The upturned gaze of the child and his arms form with the mother’s gesture a literal full circle, a perfect and unending cycle of female selflessness and loving dedication. The symbolic maternal role to guide children in a moral way and to inculcate values is also implied; that the female keeps her baby from stumbling through her own solicitude and vigilant attention is another extension of her motherly function. (52)

In Hicks’ trilogy, woman is the devoted wife, ministering mother and ministering angel. Kitzinger asserts that this:

myth of maternity...is commonly accepted in our own society – a myth which asserts that mothers have loving, tender feelings about their babies, that as a consequence of the biological act of having given birth women become different from their former selves, are selfless and giving and experience supreme satisfaction in sacrificing themselves in this way. (172)



Figure 2 - George Elgar Hicks, Sketch for *Woman’s Mission I: Guide to Childhood* (1863).
Oil on wood. Reproduction courtesy of Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Indeed, as Casteras points out, “in this panegyric of feminine virtue...the woman’s existence is in each stage defined by the needs of a male” (52). These portrayals are located within a strict code of proper sexual behavior, reflecting the position of many middle-class Victorian women.

Lynda Nead argues that such Victorian paintings should be understood as part of a “process of the categorisation of acceptable and unacceptable sexualities during the nineteenth century” (26). We have come to understand, partly through Michel Foucault, the importance of the cultural codes embedded in such paintings. At a time when the family unit became a central focus of respectable sexuality, woman became that feminine ideal of good behavior. John Ruskin insists, for example, that this angel must be “incorruptibly good, instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise [with]...modesty of service”(123). Sexuality became strongly regulated, with the family as its focus and the mother at its center. Hicks’ trilogy embodies those self-effacing roles, ones which deny the woman a sexual role beyond reproduction.

This dialogue was equally true when a princess presented herself to her public. Alexandra toured Ireland with the Prince of Wales several months into her fourth pregnancy. She had been nearly fatally ill with rheumatic fever at the birth of her third child, Princess Louise but she convinced Victoria that she was strong enough to go to Ireland (Battiscombe 92-5). Each of Alexandra’s children was born prematurely and, considering she was on public display in Ireland while several months pregnant, she would have been wearing a corset. Special pregnancy corsets could be expanded as a woman’s body grew but as their function was to confine they could result in premature birth. Alexandra would have had to hide her growing figure within such a publicly scrutinized marriage as she was associated with the Madonna, who experienced a virgin birth. What then, does one do with a pregnant princess? Alexandra’s (and later Diana’s) body became the center of debate. Alexandra struggled against the model of the Angel in the House. In the images following the birth of her daughter in February 1867, we see not a glowing maternal mother but an exhausted figure, her dress disarrayed, and her hair unkempt and conspicuously down. The photograph was part of a response to an appeal from the public, who closely watched Alexandra’s health and who wanted reassurance of her recovery. Alexandra continued to represent the suffering maternal image, as her husband traveled to Paris on official business, but was seen in the company of several women. He was strongly criticized on his return to London and received harassment from the public. A fear over matters of sexuality is at work in these circumstances. Since Alexandra was ill, her “influence” was lost. The public agitation over this illness seems, in Foucaultian terms, to be as much about the apparent loss of Alexandra’s power over the prince (as the domestic center) as it was a genuine concern for her survival.

There is another sort of image – that of the family – which speaks to the power of women in these settings. In consultation with Laurits Regner Tuxen, Victoria commissioned *The Family of Queen Victoria in 1887* (Figure 3). Victoria sits on a couch to receive homage from her large family, which, through strategic marriages, would soon represent many of the royal families in Europe. Such portraits provide a carefully constructed image that duplicates both Balfe’s powerful Madonna/Rich’s institutional mother and Balfe’s tender Madonna/Rich’s experiential mother. Authority is signified by the support for new babe and old queen respectively as well as by the settings themselves. Matriarchs take center stage as nurturers of present and future rulers of nations. This powerful positioning of women is negotiated in images of the princesses in happy family groupings since royal mothers provide the means for agency in their progeny and family portraits with royal mothers at the center reiterate a notion of “family” values.



Figure 3 – Laurits Regner Tuxen, *The Family of Queen Victoria in 1887* (1887).
The Royal Collection © 2002, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth

A Postfeminist Princess? ⁱⁱ

Rosalind Coward and Diana Simmonds have studied press responses to Diana's pregnancies, arguing that few other people had been publicly pregnant, much less publicly pregnant and a royal princess. "According to the British press, Diana is pre-eminently modern. And this is almost certainly why they feel able to take such gloating interest at a time when, previously, 'decency' would have prevailed" (16). Coward and Simmonds find this application of "modern" problematic: "The modern pregnancy is celebrated in the media insofar as it denies the maternal body....The praise which Diana brought upon herself was for disguising the pregnancy....Here is modernity represented as the ability to 'carry off' pregnancy with as little loss to heterosexual desirability as possible" (16). The authors reject this representation, arguing that the term "modern" should be read as "traditional" and that the media are misapplying the term. An example of this can be found in the praise for Diana's ability to be fashionable *and* pregnant. Confirming that "[c]lever collar interest was the secret of several of Diana's 1984 maternity outfits, serving to balance out a figure that risked looking ungainly as the pregnancy progressed," Brenda Lewis gushes that

Prince Harry was born on 15 September 1984 and with his birth Diana said goodbye to her maternity wardrobe. But she had shown that in the *fashion battle of the bulge*, shapeless smocks were not the only answer. Diana had proved that even when heavily pregnant, mums could still look a treat. (383; emphasis added)

Several competing discourses around issues of sexuality are at play. The press is reluctant to give up its gorgeous fashion princess, and this unwillingness acts as a denial of her fertile body. But this denial references a Victorian notion of motherhood and the cult of the Virgin Mary. This representation of Diana during pregnancy, this "battle of the bulge," is more about maintaining her as the innocent, devoted mother. Diana's

apparent compliance with the media's wishes, to "hide" the sexual fact of her pregnancy (odd because that was her "real" royal job), speaks to Diana's ability to conform to an outmoded construct. The media's repression itself is false. It hides something powerful; it attempts to keep the sexual power of such women in check. A pregnant woman is regarded as being in an unnatural state. Hence, we can argue that Diana's public appearances while pregnant reflect their desire to project a feminine and (sexually) attractive representation that defied patriarchal norms.

In her article on Diana and Charles at home with Prince William, Gwen Robyns asserts that the calming influence of motherhood extends to Diana's presumed firm hand over her husband as well. Robyns claims that Charles has given up his tomcatting days for quiet evenings at home with his wife and son. This article is accompanied by happy family photographs of mother, father, and infant cuddling on the couch in their Kensington palace apartment, the parents proud and radiant (85-87). In 1985 Diana described her job as "supporting my husband whenever I can, and always being behind him, encouraging him. And also, most important, being a mother and a wife" (qtd. in Moore 308-09). Here, it is evident that Diana's "moral superiority (deriving from nineteenth-century ideals of middle-class female chastity and of the maternal) can lurk even where the pedestal has been kicked down" (Rich xxiv). Although Diana was placed on a pedestal, especially in articles in women's journals, as a royal woman of the twentieth century she was still tied to these Victorian constructions of maternal and wifely influence.ⁱⁱⁱ Her "moral superiority" over her former playboy husband reinforces nineteenth-century representations of the taming influence of the Victorian wife and mother, helpmate and support, keeper of the hearth. Such images of Diana present us with a view of motherhood as emblematic. "For most of us a woman provided the continuity and stability – but also the rejections and refusals – of our early lives, and it is with a woman's hands, eyes, body, voice, that we associate our primal sensations, our earliest social experience" (Rich 12). Rich's two meanings of motherhood – "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (13) – can be applied to the grand scale of royal portraiture as representing simultaneously the family and the dynasty. In representing royal mothers, royal image-makers play on the cultural memory of them as images or signs of maternity.

This cultural memory is played upon in the royal family's christening images. For example, for Prince William's christening, Diana is seated on a couch with Charles's family (Figure 4). They are photographed in front of Flameng's effusive court portrait of Alexandra, now in her role as Queen of England (Royal Collection). There is no mistaking the claim of royal pedigree in such images. Although birthing practices have changed and the principal players are different, the images have remained remarkably unchanged. A former Princess of Wales in a majestic Queen of Heaven portrait – a powerful, institutional Madonna – looks down on the same scene in which she once had a central role – as tender Madonna – affirming this image as a physical embodiment of the Madonna redux phenomenon.



Figure 4 - *The Royal Family at the Christening of Prince William* (1982). PA Photos.

(Royal) Mothering in the Third Wave

In viewing Diana as a powerful agent, it is impossible to disagree with Rich when she asserts that “[t]he desire for a clearly confirmed past, the search for a tradition of female power also springs from an intense need for validation. If women were powerful once, a precedent exists; if female biology was ever once a source of power, it need not remain what it has since become: a root of powerlessness” (85). Images of Diana as mother are anything but impotent; they attest instead to success at producing “an heir and a spare.” But beyond that reproductive role, their power stems from their ability to shape the lives of future generations of monarchy and to be involved, if not at the center of influence, in their children’s futures as rulers and leaders. Much was made – before and after her death – of what a *good* mother Diana was and how she had provided an upbringing for her children that would not have been otherwise allowed in the royal household; one article asserted that “she was devoted to [her children], and made sure they mixed their royal training with outings to hamburger joints and serious visits to homeless shelters” (Delano 36-47). That institutional demand, as powerful Madonna, by no means precludes unconditional love for children, or the role of tender Madonna. As with the Virgin Mary’s ordering about of Christ, or the rhetoric surrounding Diana’s influence over her boys, the mother is invested with the job of the education of a future king, a job that goes hand-in-hand with her domestic activities. It is an almost overpowering image of the mother, commanding obedience from her offspring. The education and guidance this mother provides for male and female children is emblematic of her central power and importance in their lives.

Nancy Chodorow positions mothering as “a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself” (9). Thus we expect to see visual reminders of the woman’s

central role, *materfamilias*, of the family, which, at the same time, pay tribute to the prowess of her male provider and partner. Some reified models are readily apparent in the family images in which royal mothers are joined by their spouses and/or children. Each of these images shows a royal family at leisure and represents a unified front of happy domestic life, with the mother at its center. Such representations of domestic bliss are then a synecdoche of royal power, stability, authority and continuity. However, the way in which motherhood is represented among royal women is based on gendered cultural expectations.

One of the undertakings of feminist work has been to distinguish between sex (as anatomical difference) and gender (as the culturally variable, social organisation of difference). This distinction was an important basis for disputing the legitimating power of the 'natural' and then for arguing that identities and behaviours were socially constructed and hence mutable. Debates about how much is natural and how much constructed continue to hover, often unfruitfully, around the essentialist/constructionist opposition.

(Matus 8)

Foucault underlines this debate in his work on the history of sexuality by viewing sexuality as a cultural construct within history, but one that allows for subversion and resistance. He emphasizes that "[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." (*History* 100). Through engaging in a representation/construction of herself as a sexually attractive woman *and* mother, Diana exposes such dialogues about sex and gender. Chodorow, commenting on the essentialist/constructionist debates, points out that "[t]he assumption [that women are natural mothers] is questionable...given the extent to which human behavior is not instinctually determined but culturally mediated. It is an assumption in conflict with most social scientists' insistence on the social malleability of biological factors." (14). While visual representations of Alexandra reinforced the same dominant function, one which denies woman a sexualized role in reproduction, Diana's playful attitude to fashion and her image – sustained within the ideological confines of the royal family – mark her as stepping outside of traditional expectations of royal motherhood.

Sophia Phoca and Rebecca Wright characterize postfeminism as "a desire for empowerment without telling women how to experience their sexuality" (171). What third wave feminists desired from Diana was an ability to be a modern woman; that is, to unite aspects of "sanctification" (saintliness) and "colonization" (motherhood) with sexuality. Many have embraced Diana as "a princess for the post-feminist generation" for her ability to embrace her femininity and her maternity (Kelly 20). Third wave feminism asks us to embrace the performative nature of gendered identity as well as a focus on resistance and power. Diana performs her appropriate, constructed roles as saintly mothers (moral guides) – her sex allows her to be a mother, which allows her to wield power. In his analysis of power and knowledge, Foucault has argued that "there are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" ("The Subject" 420). Diana colluded in a public representation of themselves as subject and subjugated. These images respond to the struggles that Foucault enumerates: "there are

three types of struggles: against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission)" (*ibid* 421). Those struggles do not, however, mean that the subject herself is without power. Just because someone participates in a construction of herself does not mean she is passively accepting that construction; she requires and makes use of agency and control. Roles of guidance and tender compassion allowed Diana to play with the models of traditional motherhood – as represented by Alexandra and the Madonna Redux phenomenon – to attain a powerful position. That said, Diana is also a site of tension as representations of her attest to how powerful images of motherhood and saintliness are still unable to be reconciled with burgeoning sexuality. The category of femininity is challenged and parodied by third wave feminists but the popular representation of woman remains mired in the patriarchal concerns of sexuality and motherhood. The real life princess, like any mother, sits somewhere between essentialism and construction, but the sacred cult of motherhood leaves no room for such mutability. Public constructions of motherhood – of which royal mothers are an exemplar – have been sites of tension for the past two centuries and the debates surrounding Diana indicate this a fertile ground for third wave feminist thought.

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ⁱⁱ I am using postfeminist to refer to the media construction of contemporary feminism. I am not equating postfeminism with third wave feminism; however, I would argue that the tensions which emerge in postfeminism – such as the figure of Diana – should form part of the study of third wave feminism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jude Davies argues that concepts of Diana rely on “constructing Diana primarily in terms of gender.” While this is indeed so, I disagree with the statement that many publications “emphasise a particular model of femininity conceived of as transcending not only class but also time and even culture: a domestic femininity as caring, deferential, defined by deference to a more powerful male” (58). I argue that such a model of maternal femininity is heavily grounded in Victorian ideology and hence neither timeless nor unrelated to culture.

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