

**Legitimacy and Infanticide:  
The Isolated Widows of *Mrs. Keith's Crime*, *Manchester Shirtmaker* and *Alan's Wife***

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<1> Nineteenth-century English society nurtured a deeply rooted belief that acts of infanticide almost exclusively involved illegitimate (unwed) mothers killing illegitimate infants.<sup>(1)</sup> Many believed, as Anne-Marie Kilday notes, that the “relationship between infanticide and illegitimacy was symbiotic” (31). Embedded within this belief was the conviction that these mothers murdered their illegitimate infants largely motivated by shame and/or poverty. Legitimate (married) mothers were not believed to be capable of such an act (Kilday 64). These assumptions about infanticide were reflected in the law, judicial practice and the media. A number of literary works, such as Sir Walter Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (1819), Frances Trollope’s *Jessie Philips* (1843), Caroline Leakey’s *The Broad Arrow* (1859) and George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), also validated and critiqued society’s self-constructed infanticide narrative and its assumed interwoven components of illegitimacy, shame and poverty. However, at the end of the century, in the closing decades of the Victorian era, this same society’s infanticide narrative came under increasing scrutiny. Not only did laws and judicial practice begin to change,<sup>(2)</sup> but a number of authors also began to interrogate the previously understood boundaries of the infanticide narrative. The most famous and radical of these interrogations is Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* of 1895 with its horrific portrait of a child killing his half-siblings before taking his own life.<sup>(3)</sup> Hardy’s suggestion that even a child is capable of infanticide—a violent act heretofore understood as the purview of adults—explodes society’s presumptive understanding of infanticide and its motivations. Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, though the most horrifically radical, was not the only late-century literary work to challenge society’s comfortable understanding of infanticide. Of these other literary works, three in particular appeared that, in remarkably similar fashion, challenged the presumed components of society’s preferred infanticide narrative: Lucy Clifford’s novel *Mrs. Keith’s Crime* (1885), Margaret Harkness’ novel *Manchester Shirtmaker* (1890) and Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins’ play *Alan’s Wife* (1893).

<2> The infanticide narratives of Clifford, Harkness, Bell and Robins all similarly invert society's preferred understanding of infanticide as being an act that only a shamed, ostracized, destitute, illegitimate mother could bring herself to commit, by recasting their infanticide mothers as legitimate, and, in turn, the child that they each murder as legitimately born. Infanticide enacted within such a legitimate, socially accepted and sanctioned framework overtly disrupts one of the heretofore understood motivations for infanticide, shame due to illegitimacy. However, as this essay will demonstrate, the reconstructed narratives of these three works significantly do not eliminate the concept of "shame" but rather reframe it, calling attention to another potentially vulnerable nineteenth century female type—the widow.

### **Shame Reframed in Other Late-century Literature**

<3> These three works were not alone in their late-century reframing of shame within the infanticide narrative. For example, Mary Tuttiet's psychological, somewhat melodramatic novel *The Last Sentence* (1891) deflects the shame of infanticide away from the mother and onto the mother's father, the child's grandfather. Tuttiet's mother is falsely accused of infanticide and her child is eventually discovered alive. However, the child's grandfather dies of a guilty conscience, consumed with the realization that his actions (infidelity) and neglect cast his unwed daughter and her child into a vulnerable state, a vulnerable state read by society as one capable of infanticide. Ironically heightening Tuttiet's reassigning of shame to the man is the fact that he is a judge and as such presided over his own daughter's trial and was himself forced to sentence her to death for infanticide. Tuttiet is quite clear in her shaming, albeit sympathetically rendered, of the actions of the self-absorbed, faithless man (judge) in her infanticide narrative. Significantly, Tuttiet resists focusing upon the sexual behavior of her unwed mother and instead focuses upon the sexual behavior of the judge.

<4> Other late-century novels note-worthy for reframing infanticide shame are two examples of late-century naturalism, George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894) and Margaret Harkness' *In Darkest London* (1889). Moore's heroine Esther, a destitute illegitimate mother, readily accepts her public sexual shaming as her penance and slaves her life away to support her child. Moore's rendering of Esther's twenty-year-long struggle to raise her child squarely lays the blame for Esther's predicament upon the shoulders of her feckless lover and her morally judgmental society. Significantly, a turning point early in the novel is Esther's refusal of infanticide or baby-farming as a solution to her sexually shamed position. Harkness' *In Darkest London* (1889) also casts infanticide blame away from a murdering mother, this time upon her abusive husband and their economically abusive society. Significantly, the infanticide mother is legitimate and therefore not a target of sexual shaming. Both she and the child she drowns along with her are legitimate.(4)

<5> As for the reframing of sexual shame and infanticide in dramatic literature at this time, the most noteworthy example is Norwegian Henrik Ibsen's play *Ghosts* which was first performed in England in 1891. In the play's final moments a son, Oswald, a grown man, begs his widowed mother to end his physical suffering by injecting him with a lethal dose of morphine. Oswald is suffering from the effects of syphilis which he inherited from his philandering father who infected his wife who then in turn passed it to their son at birth. Much of the focus of the play is upon the extra-marital sexual appetites of the dead father, as he is posthumously shamed for the effects of his behavior upon the still living.

<6> Thus the three works here under consideration were part of a larger social/cultural shift in considerations of the interplay of shame and infanticide, a shift fueled by eugenic and imperialist thought, an increasing concern for child-welfare, and the rise of the New Woman. The unique characteristic evident in *Mrs. Keith's Crime*, *Manchester Shirtmaker* and *Alan's Wife* is that they all reframe the component of shame within infanticide narrative by casting their infanticide mothers as young widows, mothers alone, isolated within volatile states of widowhood and single motherhood.<sup>(5)</sup> Furthermore, by thus reframing infanticide narrative, these works demonstrate the magnetic power of such female isolation to attract social attention and its attendant assessment and judgment. Thus while their infanticide sisters in crime of earlier societal understanding were judged for how they *came to be* mothers, these three mothers are judged *for how* they mother. Their isolated widowhood causes them to become objects of public scrutiny, just as the immoral sexuality of their infanticide sisters cast them into the public spotlight.

<7> Before analyzing the reframing of shame, or public scrutiny, in these three works it is first helpful to note, by way of comparison, an earlier literary engagement of the traditionally understood infanticide narrative and its exploration of the causal relationship between gossip and shaming. While a number of examples exist as mentioned above, for the purposes of this essay Frances Trollope's novel *Jessie Phillips* (1844) offers a particularly resonant point of comparison with its pointed portrayal of the large role performed by community gossip in the shaming, shunning and judging of an illegitimate mother who is falsely accused, though ultimately believed to be guilty of infanticide.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **Traditional Shaming: *Jessie Phillips* (1844)**

<8> Trollope's *Jessie Phillips* alters the accepted societal narrative in part by casting the infanticide as the baby's father and not its mother. However, because Jessie's society never learns the truth and believes she is guilty, Trollope's recasting choice serves to thematically intensify the point that society is all too quick to assume the worst once a woman becomes an illegitimate mother. To this end, throughout the novel Trollope demonstrates the intense degree to which public condemnation, fueled by gossip and biased assumptions, hurl

illegitimate mothers, such as Jessie, into isolation. Before Jessie's seduction by the son of local gentry and resultant pregnancy, Jessie was a well-respected, hard-working member of the community, respected by all classes. However, once it is public knowledge that she is illegitimately pregnant her entire character becomes suspect in the eyes of her community as those who once sang her praises immediately shun her. Not only is she denied friendship but also work, forcing publicly shunned and now destitute Jessie to enter the workhouse. She later flees its harsh conditions and tries to prevail upon her child's father for support. Shunned by him, Jessie gives birth in a shed alone, her child's birth unwitnessed. Later coming upon unconscious Jessie, the father kills the child and flees. Jessie is discovered and charged with murder. Emphasizing Trollope's point that public assumptions of guilt, not proof, on shamed Jessie's part are all that seem to matter, the father's guilt of infanticide never becomes public knowledge. Thus, while much of the novel is about how Jessie came to be seduced, pregnant, shunned and her child murdered, equal time is also given in the novel to many characters of Jessie's village as they variously gossip among themselves, processing bits of circumstantial evidence, condemning Jessie in the court of public opinion well before her trial. Even those who want to believe her innocent of infanticide still condemn her sexual behavior. Thus Jessie's story of sexual shame functions to lay bare not only society's anxiety regarding inappropriately sexual women but its resultant rush to gossip about and judge them. By keeping the true guilt of the father a secret from almost everyone in the story, including Jessie herself, Trollope both interrogates and perpetuates society's accepted infanticide narrative. As Kristin Kalsem notes, "the law [and society] has constructed its own knowledge about fallen women and infanticide, and Jessie's experiences must be made to fit the epic narrative" (58). Publicly Jessie is guilty and that is all that matters.

### **Shame Reframed**

<9> The story of Jessie thus exemplifies the expected components of society's narrative of infanticide, demonstrating the very public, gossip-driven societal shunning and casting into poverty and isolation of illegitimate mothers, and by default, their illegitimate offspring, priming them, or so it was thought, for committing infanticide. To now turn to the reframing of shame within the three late-century works here under consideration requires further consideration of the very concept of shame. According to the traditionally accepted narrative, the notion of shaming meant ostracizing, condemning the non-marital sexuality of a woman. Her thus judged and shamed sexuality in turn resulted in a shameful state of pregnancy and eventual shamed motherhood. The woman of this narrative was a societal outcast, even before her act of infanticide, an object to be both pitied and condemned.<sup>(7)</sup> This shaming process involved observing, assessing, gossiping, judging the woman's behavior and finding it lacking, inappropriate according to the standards set by society for the female sex. The mothers at issue in this essay—Maggie in *Mrs. Keith's Crime*, Mary in *Manchester Shirtmaker*, and Jean in *Alan's*

*Wife*—are legitimate mothers. Acts of sexuality appropriately sanctioned by the marriage state conceived the children that they kill. There is, thus, no shame implied by how they came to be mothers and thus no immediate question as to their characters. However, in all three works the concept of shame, a key component to the accepted narrative, is still present. Like their counterparts, they are still positioned within their narratives as female entities set apart, entities to be evaluated and judged according to societal standards, this time the standard being appropriate mothering, an appropriateness defined by love, nurturing and sacrifice, the cornerstones of late-century Victorian ideals of womanhood.

### ***Mrs. Keith's Crime* (1885)**

<10> Lucy Clifford's *Mrs. Keith's Crime* is characterized by Marysa Demoor as a piece of sensationalist fiction, a novel so immensely popular that its author "became famous overnight" (276). At the time of its writing, Lucy Clifford was herself a young widow with two small children. She, like her heroine, was also left with insufficient financial means upon the death of her husband; her writing provided her income.<sup>(8)</sup> Therefore it is interesting to note that her *Mrs. Keith's Crime* is narrated in the first person by the mother herself.

<11> Briefly, when Clifford's novel begins, we meet Maggie as a young widow and mother of two small children. We learn that Maggie's marriage was a happy one, full of love and a hopeful future until her husband, an artist, suddenly drowned while Maggie was pregnant with their second child, casting Maggie into a state of middle-class widowhood and single motherhood marked by financial vulnerability.<sup>(9)</sup> Her husband provided for the family while living but did not leave an estate upon which his family could live after his death. Maggie's wealthy cousin refuses any assistance, arguing that a woman, upon marriage, becomes the sole concern of her husband's family. Her husband's uncle grudgingly provides support for her son but not for her daughter because he does not see the use of girls. Twice stymied by patriarchy, Maggie takes up children's portrait painting in order to secure enough of a living to pay the rent on the family home and employ a nurse for the children; a comfortable enough lower-middle class existence; however, one not adequate enough to cope with a consumptive child. Upon learning that her youngest child, Molly, is consumptive, Maggie plans to travel to the warm climate of Spain upon the recommendation of their doctor, in the hopes that Molly, now six years old, will recover. For this venture she receives a loan from a generous, kind-hearted old friend of her husband's. Meanwhile, her son Jack suddenly falls ill with scarlet fever and dies. A now doubly mourning Maggie travels to Spain with sickly daughter Molly. The remainder of the story takes place in Spain where young Molly's health fails to improve and where Maggie herself learns that she too is dying of consumption. The story ends with Maggie, having been told that she will precede her daughter in death, killing a dying Molly with chloroform only moments before she herself dies. Her reason for killing Molly is grounded in a fear that no one who loves Molly will

be able to care for her in her final days after the death of her mother. She reasons that it is better for Molly to die in the arms of her loving mother rather than in the presence of strangers. The novel ends as Maggie is dying, lying next to an already dead, by her mother's hand, Molly.

<12> Clifford's infanticide narrative not only alters the traditional narrative with respect to illegitimacy but also in two other ways. First of all, the child that the mother kills is not an infant but rather a child of six years. A child of such an age develops a rapport with its mother through years of intimacy. The significance of this is that the child, Molly, can speak, can herself give public testimony as to the appropriateness of her mother's mothering. The other alteration to the traditional narrative is the defusing of the issue of poverty as a motivation for infanticide. While Maggie's husband did not leave his family provided for upon his death, she is, however, able to adequately fill the role of the male breadwinner. Furthermore, when she requires extra funds to care for her consumptive child she is able to secure financial assistance. Thus Maggie's widowhood is marked by economic hardship only to a degree and does not function as a motive for murder.

<13> With overwhelming financial vulnerability eliminated as a contributing factor for infanticide, Clifford's tale instead explores Maggie's parental vulnerability due to the absence of her husband and its impact upon her mothering of Molly. Catherine Hancock describes Maggie as a "heroine whose very identity is defined by her motherhood" (309). I would add that, more precisely, Maggie's identity is defined by her *single* motherhood. It is as a widowed, single mother that Maggie and her mothering of Molly are valued, judged. Once she and Molly arrive in Spain they quickly become part of an English enclave of tourists all staying at the same hotel. These non-family members of Maggie quickly judge her to be a model mother, a widowed single mother struggling alone, a mother willing to sacrifice all for her child, a mother whose sole focus in life is the care of her ever-present, needy child.<sup>(10)</sup> The character of Mrs. Greenside refers to Maggie as "courageous" (87) and observes that "sweet child" Molly is the image of her mother (90). In another instance Mrs. Greenside notes "she is so devoted to her child" (126) and asserts that other mothers in her situation would not necessarily be so (129). Throughout the novel other characters express similar sentiments. Maggie is, in their eyes, a mother to be emulated, the Victorian ideal of motherhood. However, Marysa Demoor's interpretation of Maggie as imagining "herself and her daughter as a symbiotic union" (285) points to the growing volatility of Maggie's bond with her child and her need to maintain its exclusivity. Public adoration, such as that of Mrs. Greenside, causes Maggie discomfort and she often quickly changes the subject away from herself towards the concerns of her friends, deflecting their public gaze. Various characters repeatedly offer Maggie assistance with Molly, solicitously noting that she is alone in caring for Molly and fatigued as a result. Maggie refuses all such offers of succor and support, preserving her privileged position as Molly's sole

caretaker. Molly at times also intensifies this mother-child exclusivity by responding to such offers by saying that she prefers to stay with her mother. Increasingly, as the story unfolds, Maggie turns inward towards a private self, one devoid of such public scrutiny.[\(11\)](#)

<14> Intensifying Maggie's increasing withdrawal into this private self is her persistent psychological attachment to her absent husband, an attachment that will prove to have dangerous repercussions for Maggie's mothering. Frequently she recalls fond memories of their lives together and her grief at his passing. Her remembrances perpetuate an understanding of herself and Molly as still part of a larger family unit involving husband and son. She constantly thinks about their graves back in England and the need to return to visit them at their graves. Memories of her husband and son are a constant presence in Maggie's mind, anchoring her in the past as she faces an increasingly dwindling future and a fraught present. Clifford reinforces Maggie's understanding of herself as tied to this now imaginative family unit through Maggie's resistance to fully embracing the friendship and support that is offered to her in Spain. Most significantly, one of the English doctors who attends to Molly, Dr. George, develops romantic feelings for Maggie and paternal feelings for Molly. Filled with admiration for Maggie's sacrificial mothering as he assesses it, he offers to share her struggles with her. Though she is fond of him as a friend, it is significant that Maggie vigorously resists acknowledging the nature of his feelings for her, feelings that can only be validated if Maggie fully concedes her widowhood to herself. In her mind, she thinks of him as a brother (253), unable to fathom the thought of the absence of her husband and Molly's father ever being filled. In Maggie's mind, to accept Dr. George's offer of joining in her life struggles would be inappropriate as it would intrude upon her exclusive bond with her daughter. Dr. George laments, "Your child is all the world to you . . . and no one else is any good to you or help?" Maggie honestly replies, "No . . . but it is not because I am ungrateful. If I had room for other feelings . . . I have no room now for anything or any one [sic] in my heart or life but the child" (253).

<15> Once again public assessment and admiration for Maggie causes her to withdraw into her private self. Her sending of Dr. George away, back to England, begins her path towards infanticide, an act that she will eventually justify as necessary because there is no one to care for dying Molly after her death. This caring father-figure doctor would have certainly opened his heart to Maggie and Molly and cared for both along their natural paths towards death, filling the absence created by her husband's death thereby negating Maggie's claimed motive for infanticide. Maggie's widowhood, then, drives her to murder Molly, not the fact that they are mutually dying. Maggie similarly withdraws from the rest of their friends, encouraging them to leave and continue their lives as she ultimately will not allow them into the inner sanctions of her heart and her practical struggles. She allows them to think that Molly is getting better, denying them the knowledge that Molly is deteriorating. She additionally maintains a veil of secrecy around her own impending demise, even denying Molly's doctors the knowledge that

she herself is sick until the final days of her life – secretly consulting another doctor without their knowledge.

<16> Hancock characterizes Maggie as “willing to make the supreme sacrifice [infanticide] to preserve the sacred union between mother and child” (311). I would add that herein lies the irony of Clifford’s reframing of the “shame” component of infanticide narratives. Public admiration of Maggie’s single mothering poses a threat to Maggie’s exclusive bond with her child causing her to jealously desire to isolate away from public assessment towards a private, unobserved space of exclusive motherhood, one in which she maintains control over her daughter’s fate.<sup>(12)</sup> Maggie’s social world has assessed, judged her to be a model mother and as a result reaches out to embrace her and offer her support. This is in complete contradistinction to the more typical negative judging and subsequent shunning of mothers in infanticide narratives such as *Jessie Phillips*. Not only is Maggie’s character judged positively but so is her manner of mothering. Yet, it is this public, positive judgment of her mothering which leads to her withdrawal into an insupportable private mother-daughter space in which she must, by her own reasoning, murder her child.

### ***Manchester Shirtmaker (1890)***

<17> Five years later, Margaret Harkness again interrogated the components of society’s accepted infanticide narrative in *Manchester Shirtmaker* (1890), having already done so in her novel *In Darkest London* (1889), mentioned above. Both works are of the genre of “slum fiction.” The abject poverty of the large urban centers of England, their slums, garnered a great deal of literary attention in the latter decades of the nineteenth-century.<sup>(13)</sup> Harkness, like others of this genre, openly engaged issues of imperialism and, most especially, eugenics in their portraits of slum life. Her concern, as demonstrated in *Manchester Shirtmaker*, with infanticide was as a product of and provocative solution to abject poverty, and less as an issue of sexual morality with respect to the parentage of children.

<18> In *Manchester Shirtmaker* we again encounter a recently widowed young mother, this time of a daughter less than a year old. Like Maggie, this mother, Mary, found herself widowed when her husband died of injuries sustained in an accident. As with Clifford’s Maggie, Mary’s pregnancy is associated with her husband’s death. The day her husband was brought home from the hospital to die, she gave birth to their daughter Daisy. Also like Maggie, Mary subsequently finds herself unprovided for financially by either her dead husband or his family (she herself has no family). However, unlike Maggie, Mary is unable to find work and also does not have social connections from which to borrow money. Unlike Maggie, Mary was born very poor and though her husband was middle class, they were both shunned by his family when he married Mary, a child of the workhouse. This shunning, shaming of Mary by her husband’s family due to class prejudice will prove to be a factor in Mary’s act of infanticide. Harkness’s

characterization of Mary as a destitute single mother of the working class parallels the economic marginalization of illegitimate infanticide mothers like Jessie Phillips of traditional infanticide narrative. Thus Harkness's contribution to the late-century reframing of the infanticide narrative is the conjoining of a state of poverty with a state of legitimacy.

<19> Briefly, when *Manchester Shirtmaker* begins, Mary is a destitute, widowed mother living alone in an urban environment, desperately looking for work as a seamstress. Through a series of work-seeking episodes Harkness exposes the overwhelming hurdles inflicted upon working class women by the now industrialized workforce. Unable to find work for food or rent, Mary is driven to pawn everything she owns, culminating in the desperate pawning of her sewing machine, symbolizing the end of her working potential. Ultimately, she and her child begin to starve. Symbolizing her inability as a mother to nurture her child, Mary's breast milk dries up, increasing her despair. With the few pennies remaining from the pawning of her sewing machine, she tries to purchase opium to ease her daughter Daisy's suffering. Although the chemist denies her opium, when his back is turned Mary uncharacteristically steals the drug. Once home, she gives Daisy the opium and the child dies. The next day a letter arrives with money from her husband's father, intended for the purchase of a headstone for his son, too late to save Daisy. Distraught, starving Mary buys a coffin for her child and a headstone for her husband and takes Daisy's body to a graveyard. When confronted about her lack of a death certificate, Mary is arrested and charged with murder. At her trial she expresses her mothering despair and is sentenced to an insane asylum where she eventually commits suicide.

<20> Harkness's Mary negotiates her psychological identity as a widow differently than Clifford's Maggie. Like Clifford, Harkness offers a window into the past marriage of her heroine through fond remembrances of the absent husband. While it is made clear through these remembrances that Mary's husband loved her and that she cared deeply for him, the overwhelming tone of Mary's remembrance of him is as her savior who saved her from the workhouse and sacrificed his comfortable family ties to build a life, a family with her. Throughout much of the novel Mary frets over not being able to afford a headstone for his grave, to dutifully pay homage to her savior. Unlike Maggie's fixation on graves and her longing to return to them as a place of belonging, there is a sense by contrast with Mary of needing to dutifully finish the burial customs a wife ought to carry out for a husband. This foreshadows her later determination to properly bury Daisy, to thus respect her child in death. For Mary, burials, headstones and coffins acknowledge respectfully lives that have passed. This urgency to finish the ritual demonstrates Mary's need to settle with the past in order to cope with the present, with widowhood. This is quite different from the sense of an ever-present romantic attachment to a dead husband expressed by Maggie who eventually wants to be one with her husband again in the graveyard. Mary, by contrast, plans to "slip away" to the river, to drown herself in a watery grave apart, alone in death, after she buries Daisy next to her husband. Mary's marriage

to her husband was intricately, intimately tied to her traumatic memories of growing up as a “workhouse brat” (28). Now, with his death, she is immediately confronted with the very real possibility of having to return to the workhouse, a fate to her worse than death—for either herself or her child. With the absence of her husband, her savior, she alone stands between Daisy and the workhouse. She must now be Daisy’s savior. As a destitute widow, she cannot afford romantic attachments.

<21> Like Maggie, Mary’s widowed status thrusts her into the lime-light of public assessment of her mothering skills. After her husband’s death Mary is forced by circumstance and shame to rent a two-room hovel in a crowded slum, “to hide herself; for she did not wish her husband’s grand relations to discover that she had no money” (30). At this stage in the narrative Mary’s widow-with-child experiences mirror those of an illegitimate mother and child as Harkness tellingly equates class shame with the shame of sexual immorality. Within the slum environment to which she retreats nothing is truly private and all a source for potential gossip and assessment. Significantly, the parenting skills of the community at large are characterized as lacking. It is reported that a drunken woman across the alley is in mourning for her dead baby who died due to “over laying.” No charges are ensuing after the inquest against this drunken mother, in stark contrast to the later legal repercussions for Mary following Daisy’s death. This same community of lax parenting actively engages in gossiping, assessing, judging, shaming Mary and her mothering. A recurring motif in the novel is the observation and assessment by her neighbors of the coming and going of Mary from her home out into the city to seek work, food or a pawn shop. “She passed by a little group of women at the corner of the street. They stared at her; but did not begin to gossip until she was out of sight.” One of the women asks another who she is. Another woman remarks that she’s a “pretty crittur” as the last woman offers a cynical rejoinder implying that Mary is worthy of suspicion (32). On another day, with no sense of conscious irony one remarks, “makes herself miserable by herself . . . shuts herself up with the child and speaks to no one.” The response to this is, “the way she goes out and leaves that child alone doesn’t seem to me right. She can’t have a mother’s feelings” (80). Tellingly they simultaneously recognize her single-parent struggles while offering no support, only judgment. Her public jury outside of her door presumes to know of what goes on behind Mary’s closed door, the unity of gossips against a solitary mother and child. Their acknowledgment of her leaving her baby alone points to the absence of a husband and father, an absence that forces Mary outside of her domestic sphere into a public sphere where she cannot always take her child. This group judging of Mary highlights her isolation in widowhood and its subsequent single-parenthood. This crowd of neighbors never offers assistance, either material or emotional, intensifying Mary’s sense of isolation.

<22> The collective censure of Mary’s neighbors even questions her widow status, her legitimacy, and by extension, the legitimacy of Daisy. This is remarkable given that Mary is

visibly a widow, appearing in public dressed in traditional widow's weeds. In the scene quoted above, the judgmental gossip continues: "depend upon it, she isn't as quiet as she looks . . . these innocent looking women aren't to be trusted." Another voice queries, "I wonder where she comes from, and what her husband was?" As their doubting and judging continues another voice leers, "she may be a widow . . . but –," to which the quick response is "you mean, perhaps she isn't married?" (80). With this remark Mary's public trial now enters a new phase, one which again positions Mary along the path, at least as publicly understood, of the illegitimate infanticide. Mary's isolation as a widow is now complete as she has no one to vouch even for her widow status, no one to vouch, in other words, for her character. With the absence of a known husband, dead or alive, Mary's public identity as a woman is fraught with doubt, a matter of public negotiation, a process that does not involve Mary at all. Indeed, Mary experiences what Trefor Thomas characterizes as an "alienating loss of social identity" (xviii) as she is stripped of her rightful, respectable identity by a community that would ostracize her simply because she is a female alone. As the narrative progresses, Mary's isolation intensifies on both economic and moral grounds with the attendant specter of the workhouse, culminating in Mary's descent into thievery and infanticide. When Mary is arrested for killing Daisy, all of the presumptions of her neighbors seemingly prove true, presumptions that are brought into the court room to condemn Mary as one of her neighbors bears witness against her.

<23> This was the public version of Mary and her mothering. The private version is something quite apart. Within the private, isolated, domestic mother-daughter space of her home, Mary expresses the depth of love she feels for Daisy and her abject misery over not being able to properly provide sustenance for her. Hancock astutely reasons that Mary torturously imagines that "her infant's emaciated body is a reproach to her motherhood" (313) as she imagines Daisy plaintively asking "why do you starve me like this?" (98). In these unwitnessed moments Mary demonstrates her immense capacity for motherly love, a form of mothering that does not require a husband or a father. It only requires Mary's heart. However, mothering such as the physical nurturing of her child ultimately requires what is absent, a husband and father who is allowed to earn a living in the workplace, unlike women. Within the face of such absences, Mary must enact mothering to the best of her ability, an ability that is entirely sapped economically, leading to the only loving act of mothering left to her, the ending of her child's life in order to save it from the living death, as she understands it and lived it, of the workhouse. Thus Mary kills Daisy, an act of mothering that is publicly assed as an aberration of mothering, an assessment and judgment that sends poor, legitimate Mary to trial and, in turn, an insane asylum.(14)

### ***Alan's Wife (1893)***

<24> Three years later, Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins also challenged late Victorian mother and mothering ideals through a reframed infanticide narrative with *Alan's Wife* (1893), a play which aggressively wades into the New Woman politics of the era. While other so-called New Woman plays written at this time, such as Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) and *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895), tended to explore domestic ideological constraints upon wives, *Alan's Wife* additionally investigates ideological constraints upon mothers. Actress and playwright Elizabeth Robins was more particularly influenced by the works of Ibsen, having performed in British stagings of *Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, both in 1891.<sup>(15)</sup> Like Ibsen's plays, *Alan's Wife* shocked and horrified critics and audiences, reflecting cultural anxieties about the growing presence of New Women, women who were resistant to living according to ideological constraints. In particular, Bell and Robins' infanticide mother Jean starkly demonstrates the perceived threat to mother ideology posed by the New Woman.<sup>(16)</sup>

<25> Like Maggie and Mary, Bell and Robins' Jean suddenly finds her happy state of wifehood turned to widowhood. Like Maggie and Mary, her experience of pregnancy is inextricably linked with her husband's death. Unlike Maggie and Mary, however, Jean gives birth to a boy, creating a different thematic link not only between mother and child but also between mother and father. Her son will be born crippled, linking her with Maggie and Mary in that she too is faced with caring for a physically unfit child.<sup>(17)</sup> With respect to economic considerations as a contributing factor, while Jean's husband was alive she enjoyed a comfortable lower-middle class lifestyle. However, Bell and Robins significantly do not explore Jean's economic experience of widowhood, pointedly negating it as a contributing factor to her act of infanticide, focusing instead exclusively upon Jean's psychological negotiation of her widow and mother identities. Bell and Robins thus offer an even more radically different reframing of the infanticide narrative. Finally, in remarkably similar fashion to Clifford and Harkness, Bell and Robins present Jean's act of infanticide as motivated by love and care.<sup>(18)</sup>

<26> Unlike the husbands of Maggie and Mary, Jean's husband is still alive, though still absent, at the beginning of her tale. Briefly, the play begins with Jean at home waiting for Alan to return from work. As she cooks inside the house, her mother and a neighbor lady sit outside the house critically assessing Jean and her choice of husband. Throughout their conversation it becomes clear that Jean is a woman apart, a woman not understood by her family (mother) or the community at large (neighbor).<sup>(19)</sup> Then, Alan is suddenly carried on stage on a stretcher, dead from an accident at work. At the sight of him, Jean faints, ending the act. When Act 2 begins Jean is now the mother of a crippled baby, sitting apart while her mother and the neighbor attend to the baby, all the while critically assessing Jean's mothering. Eventually, a distraught Jean sends them away and is alone with the baby. Through an extended monologue addressed to the baby Jean expresses her maternal love, anxieties over her ability to care for a crippled child alone, and her fears for its future life when she is no longer around to care for it and

protect it from an unwelcoming world. The Act ends with Jean smothering the child. When Act 3 begins, Jean has been tried and found guilty and is awaiting execution. She has been silent since the murder of her child, refusing to speak in her own defense. Her mother and her jailor try to get her to speak and pray for mercy. As she is taken away to be executed, Jean finally breaks her silence, claiming that killing her baby was the most courageous thing she ever did (25). Also present throughout the narrative is the character of the local vicar. He too is critical of Jean, most pointedly expressed in Act 2 when he criticizes her mothering because she has not had the baby baptized. This religious component adds yet another layer to the public assessment of the mothering skills of Jean.

<27> As with Maggie and Mary, Jean's negotiation of her widowhood is informed by the nature of her relationship with her husband when married. While Maggie experienced a loss of a romantic figure and Mary of a savior figure, Jean experiences a loss of a sensual, sexual figure. With their sexually desiring heroine, a New Woman prototype, Bell and Robins both reincorporate and provocatively reframe the component of female sexuality within infanticide narrative. Jean's sexual desire for the father of her child is contained within a state of legitimacy, within the state of marriage. However, as Catherine Wiley asserts, her public expressing of this sexual desire in Act 1 "explicitly contradicts the Victorian view about women's nonexistent sexuality" (439). Her mother and the neighbor, in Act 1, criticize her for choosing a handsome man instead of a learned man, implying that the latter would set her on a higher economic plain, and they criticize Jean for overly doting on her husband. She counters this critique with "I want a husband who is brave and strong . . . and loves to feel the strong wind blowing in his face and the blood rushing through his veins" (12) as opposed to the learned vicar who she describes as a "poor fellow" who is physically weak. Jean's devaluing of intellect in favor of valuing the presence of manliness and virility in her life positions her on a collision course with mothering. The subsequent loss and absence of these qualities with the death of her husband casts her into a crisis of value as she attempts to mother a crippled male child. In Act 1 Jean longed for motherhood. Blissful in her marriage she looked forward to a child as an addition to her happiness. She mused that her assumed male child would "be called Alan, too, he will be just like him." She described the physicality of this presumed male child—eyes, hair, nose and mouth like his father's with sturdy limbs; "He'll be just such another as his father" (14). Jean's idealized fusing of father and son's physical qualities in Act 1 then haunts her from the cradle in Act 2 as she has, in the words of Elin Diamond, "reproduced the trauma of her husband's mutilated corpse" (34). This now ever-present trauma complicates her assumption of the mantle of widow and single mother as her child's physical state acts as a constant reminder of her husband's absence, psychologically anchoring her widowhood to her wifedom. In this fashion, Jean, like Maggie, is unable to break with the past into a sustainable identity of single-motherhood. Jean's child refuses her the ability to absent her husband from her identity and thus identify as a widow, a single woman. This in turn directly impacts her relationship with her

baby as she must negotiate through her husband's presence in the cradle to identify, as a mother, with the child as a separate entity apart from his father. Tellingly, this is an untenable situation of Jean's own making, the result of her daring to value a handsome, masculine husband for the sexual desire he inspired in their marriage.

<28> Jean's private struggles with her competing desires and identities are unrecognized by her public, the other characters in the play. After Alan's death, Jean withdraws into an increasingly isolated grief, one unreadable by her family (mother) and community (neighbor and vicar).<sup>(20)</sup> Jean's society's ideal of mothering requires that she value her baby irrespective of his physical state. Representing Jean's family her mother declares "how little I thought . . . that you would be so hard to the little fatherless child . . . just because it isn't the fine lusty lad you wanted!" Representing Jean's community, the neighbor lady observes of other more appropriate mothers, "there's many a mother with a family of fine boys and girls has thought more of her one deformed child than all the rest!" (17). Jean's attempts to speak in her own defense at this public assessing of her mothering are met with sharp rebukes. After the women leave the vicar stops by and criticizes Jean for a lack of Christian mothering. When finally left alone, in privacy, however, she speaks her defense of her mothering to her infant child, embodying him with the capacity to understand her mothering struggles, echoing Mary's conversations with baby Daisy. Carol Hanbery MacKay describes this "imaginary interchange" between Jean and her child as bridging "the isolation that has become so pervasive" (155) for her throughout the play. Communing thus with little Alan she acknowledges her struggles to cope with widowhood and subsequent single-parenthood, two identities that threaten her ability to mother. Echoing Clifford's Maggie, Jean wonders how her child will cope if she dies first, leaving him alone at the mercy of an unwelcoming world, his father already having left him. Echoing Harkness's Mary she imagines her child's rebuke of her mothering. "Mother, how could you be so cruel as to let me live and suffer?" (21). She begins to rationalize that killing him is the caring, strong, motherly thing to do. Katherine E. Kelly astutely reads late-nineteenth-century Jean as a mother of the modern era who asserts the right to control her child's body and destiny, claiming "ownership of a child otherwise believed to be a subject of the church, the community, and the nation" (546). Jean rejects the power of her public court to determine her mothering path and smothers her baby. Thus, like Maggie and Mary, she controls her child's destiny.

<29> Following the murder of her child, Jean claims total silence, denying her now expanded public (family, community, church and court) any access to her private motivations.<sup>(21)</sup> By contrast, Maggie of *Mrs. Keith's Crime* died before she could suffer public condemnation of her act of infanticide and its expectation that she justify her action. *Manchester Shirtmaker's* Mary, however, like Jean was brought to trial but unlike Jean spoke in her own defense. Mary, through a lengthy speech which began with "Oh, Gentlemen, if you were but women," pointed

to issues of gender and class in her plea for understanding, conveying the particular horror of being an unemployed single mother unable to feed her child (158-9). Mary's expression of maternal sorrow gained her sympathy and leniency at her public trial, though she sought only understanding. She had already pled guilty, and in truth believed herself to be so. Mary's plan had always been to drown herself once Daisy was appropriately buried. Her taking of her own life in the asylum to which the public verdict consigned her thus reads as a claim to power, to self-determination, the court's leniency meaning nothing to her. It was ultimately powerless to contain her act of infanticide within its own judicial process. *Alan's Wife's* Jean similarly claims the right of self-determination as a mother infanticide, but along a different path. She lays claim to silence, what Elizabeth Alsop, in her article on "Withholding Heroines" describes as an "intentional act of female withholding" (85).<sup>(22)</sup> Jean's refusal of participation in the public process of a male-ordered court that would condemn her private act ironically compels her public judges to assess only her publicly understood mothering, resulting in her conviction and execution. Like both Maggie and Mary, Jean welcomes death, a death that she controls, as the final stage of her act of mother infanticide.

<30> Interestingly, according to the historical record, though many were tried, very few women were executed for the crime of infanticide in the nineteenth-century.<sup>(23)</sup> Ann R. Higginbotham notes one notable exception to this in 1900 involving the case of a woman with a suspect sexualized character who did not fit the presumed infanticide narrative with respect to poverty coupled with sexual shame (335-336). This woman was executed. The trial and execution of Jean is thus curiously positioned at the end of a century of judicial leniency towards mother infanticides. Importantly, then, Bell and Robins do not include Jean's trial within the action of the play, deliberately defusing its authority to truly assess or judge either Jean or Jean's private mothering. The final Act of the play presents a Jean who has removed herself almost entirely out of reach of public judgment. In her claiming of continued silence she deflates the power of public condemnation to identify her, to characterize her or her mothering. In the play's final moments her mother's haranguing judgment breaks through her private psychological wall and prompts Jean to exclaim "I've had courage just once in my life—just once in my life I've been strong and kind—and it was the night I killed my child!" (25). Her grieving expression of maternal love echoes Mary's "Oh, Gentlemen, if you were but women," as her visioning of a reunited family in death mirrors Maggie's similar death-bed vision. In this her final moment she imagines the family triangle in heaven that she will complete upon her death.

### **Widowed Motherhood**

<31> When viewed in conversation with each other and with the tradition of infanticide narratives, each of these three works teases apart different aspects of late-Victorian ideologies with respect to women and motherhood. Written at a time when "responsible motherhood"

was considered a “moral obligation” (Richardson 75),(24) Clifford, Harkness, Bell and Robins waded into a roiling sea of traditional biases and assumptions about the presence of infanticide within English society. At the heart of traditional thinking was a belief that illegitimacy was, as Kilday notes, “symbiotic” with infanticide (31). Additionally, as Higginbotham argues, “agitation over infanticide . . . revealed some basic assumptions about women, particularly fallen women” (337). In light of the analyses of these and other historians pertaining to nineteenth century infanticide, how very provocative, then, are the reframings of the components of illegitimacy and public scrutiny offered by Clifford, Harkness, Bell and Robins. Their infanticide mothers are not fallen women. Their children are not bastards. They are widows. Their children were legitimately born. Yet these widow-mothers are, like unwed mothers such as Jessie Philips, subject to public scrutiny, demonstrating that legitimacy does not necessarily constitute a shield from public scrutiny for women—especially if they are widows—and, in turn, does not necessarily protect their children from murder.

<32> Widows were awkwardly positioned within Victorian society. When married, they neatly fit into societal expectations for women, especially if they bore children to their husbands. As married women they were ideologically associated with the domestic sphere of English life, their husbands with the public, economic side of life. However, upon becoming widows, their negotiation of society’s notion of separate gender spheres became potentially fraught, forcing many into the public workforce to support themselves and their children.(25) The three widows here under consideration likewise find themselves living lives more public than they had ever expected. However, for these three widows it is the absence not only of a breadwinner but of a co-parent that opens them up to public assessment. The widowhood of these three mothers casts each into a state of vulnerability, publicly witnessed and assessed, that directly impacts their ability to mother their especially needy child as they increasingly isolate within an insupportable, exclusively mother-child space, absent of a husband and father.

<33> The reframing of the components of society’s traditional infanticide narrative by Clifford, Harkness, Bell and Robins also calls attention to the vulnerability of the legitimate children of widows. Ironically reflecting social biases, the legitimacy of the children of Maggie, Mary and Jean affords them a narrative subjectivity not afforded to the illegitimate murdered child in infanticide narratives such as Trollope’s *Jessie Philips*.(26) The children of Maggie, Mary and Jean are embodied as characters, as children in need of mothering. Maggie’s 6 year old daughter Molly not only interacts with her mother but also with all of the other characters in the story. Mary’s infant Daisy communes with her mother in many scenes as Mary talks to her, fondles her, while Daisy sucks on a necklace of blue beads around her neck, a gift from her father to her mother. Jean’s little Alan is cooed to by his grandmother and the neighbor as they tuck him in his cradle. Later his mother pours out her heart to him, imagining his thoughts both now and in the future. Maggie is spoken to by her child while both Mary and Jean imagine that

they are as well. This subjectivity accorded to the to-be-murdered legitimate children thematically highlights the relationships between mother and child and, in turn, the mothering skills of the mothers—the very skills that are subject to public assessment and judgment.<sup>(27)</sup> While stories such as Jessie Philips’s focused upon the relationship between the mother and the father of her illegitimate child, these stories do not. The fathers are dead. They variously linger in the minds and hearts of the women but they are not materially present. They are not the point. Their absence is the point as their widows, now single mothers, each in her own unique fashion, struggles to maintain a sustainable, mothering relationship with her child. In words evocative of the mothering experiences of Maggie and Jean as well, Mary laments after Daisy’s death by her own hand—“Baby couldn’t live without Jack and me” (110-111).

### Endnotes

(1)The nineteenth-century’s accepted infanticide narrative has its roots in preceding centuries, as most recently and thoroughly examined by Kilday.<sup>(^)</sup>

(2)See Kilday’s extensive documentation and analysis of the changes to law and judicial practice throughout the nineteenth-century.<sup>(^)</sup>

(3)See Josephine McDonagh’s analysis of Hardy’s reworking of the infanticide motif (178-183) and its conveying of the “abysmal meaninglessness of child murder” (183) at the close of the century.<sup>(^)</sup>

(4)The incidence of infanticide in this work is not overtly connected to the novel’s main narrative but rather serves to convey the true measure of the economic depths of despair within which the poor of London exist, sexual shame not being the novel’s focal point.<sup>(^)</sup>

(5)Ibsen’s *Ghosts* shares much in common with these three works in this regard except that its infanticide narrative involves a grown man.<sup>(^)</sup>

(6)A number of other literary works, such as George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, also engage society’s preferred infanticide narrative. See Krueger, McDonagh and Chapter Two of Kalsem for discussions of such works.<sup>(^)</sup>

(7)Jessie dies of “shock” at the news of her child’s father’s death, before her execution, reflecting society’s ambiguity with respect to infanticide and infanticide law. See Krueger, Higginbotham and Chapters Three and Four of Kilday regarding this ambiguity.<sup>(^)</sup>

(8)Demmor (276) discusses the politics or lack thereof in Clifford’s writings.<sup>(^)</sup>

(9)See Curran for a discussion of the vulnerability of middle-class, Victorian widows.<sup>(^)</sup>

(10)George Moore's *Esther of Esther Waters* is also admired at various times in her story for her self-sacrificing work on behalf of her child. Notably, those admiring Esther's struggles are other women.[\(△\)](#)

(11)Moore's *Esther* is also characterized as a very private woman, one who holds her own counsel in the face of public scrutiny.[\(△\)](#)

(12)Hancock (310) also suggests that Maggie's memory of lack of control over her son's death "fuels her passionate wish to remain by Molly's side throughout her illness."[\(△\)](#)

(13)See McKean's contextualization of Harkness' work within the slum fiction genre.[\(△\)](#)

(14)The committing of infanticide mothers, convicted of either murder or concealment, to asylums reflects historical practice. See Hunt, Higginbotham and Chapter Three of *Kilday* regarding concealment as a crime associated with infanticide.[\(△\)](#)

(15)See Joannou for a discussion of the influence of "Ibsenism" on the writings of Robins.[\(△\)](#)

(16)Robins herself, a prominent suffragist, lived the life of a New Woman, a curious factor to consider in light of the fact that she performed the part of *Alan's Wife's* heroine, Jean, for the play's only two public performances in 1893. Also interesting to note is the fact that Florence Bell, the play's other author, was an anti-suffragist. The opposing personal politics of the members of this playwriting team are reflective of the complexities surrounding dramatic and literary attempts to define the New Woman during the suffrage era. The play was considered so controversial that its female authorship was hidden for many years.[\(△\)](#)

(17)All three works lend themselves to analysis from the perspective of late-nineteenth-century eugenic thought. See Chapter Six of *McDonagh*. Also see Richardson for a broader discussion of "eugenic love."[\(△\)](#)

(18)All three works lend themselves to additional analysis on the subject of sacrificial mothering and "mother love." See Kelly, Hancock and *McDonagh* (179).[\(△\)](#)

(19)The subject of understanding Jean as a New Woman is addressed by Diamond, Kelly, *McDonagh* and Wiley.[\(△\)](#)

(20)See Diamond (37) regarding the "untranslatability" of Jean; Hunt (88) regarding the public "readability" of women's private self; Hunt (74) and Krueger (271) regarding the private character of infanticide.[\(△\)](#)

(21)Regarding Jean's silence see Diamond (32-38) and Kelly (546).[\(△\)](#)

(22)Also see Rosenman for an analysis of women's speech and silence as a narrative device.[\(△\)](#)

(23)Regarding the non-execution of women found guilty of infanticide see Higginbotham and Kilday.(^)

(24)See also Gordon and Nair regarding Victorian mothers as “moral and spiritual guardians” (133).(^)

(25)See Curran. Also, Jalland particularly notes the “social exile” of Victorian widows (231).(^)

(26)See Kelly regarding subjectivity as a thematic device in *Alan’s Wife*.(^)

(27)Ibsen’s *Ghosts* again somewhat parallels this paper’s analysis of these three works. The relationship between the adult child Oswald and his mother, Mrs. Alving, provides the narrative core to Ibsen’s play, a relationship thrown into almost unbearable intensity at the play’s conclusion when Oswald seeks death at his mother’s hand.(^)

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