

Madonna/Mother/Death and Child: Laura Muntz and the Representation of Maternity

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Producing Women
Ces femmes qui produisent ...

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Résumé de l'article

Vers la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, l'artiste torontoise Laura Muntz (1860–1930) était reconnue comme la peintre la plus importante du thème des mères et enfants du Canada anglais. Elle avait exposé à maintes reprises à Toronto et à Montréal et participé à de nombreuses expositions internationales (France, Angleterre et États-Unis). En 1898, après dix ans d'étude et de travail en Europe où elle avait acquis une connaissance solide des mouvements artistiques européens contemporains, elle revint à Toronto. Son arrivée coïncidait avec l'apogée du culte de la maternité au Canada. La glorification de la mère était étroitement associée à la notion de la Femme Nouvelle et au féminisme maternel conservateur et bourgeois qui préconisaient que les qualités humanitaires et nourricières innées des femmes justifiaient leur participation à la vie publique. Cet article traite de l'oeuvre *Madonna and Child* de Muntz et la met en relation avec les débats contemporains qui contribuèrent à la conceptualisation de la maternité. Il analyse le tableau dans le contexte des théories sur l'hérédité, du féminisme maternel et du mouvement canadien de pureté sociale, tout en considérant les implications psychologiques plus générales de l'identité féminine et plus spécifiquement les liens fin-de-siècle entre la féminité et la mort. Je propose qu'en dépit de son titre, ce tableau peu connu ne se limite ni aux thèmes chrétiens ni aux thèmes maternels, mais, au contraire, que l'image d'inspiration symboliste de Muntz peut être considérée comme un symptôme de l'ambiguïté et de la contradiction qui caractérisaient la fin de siècle et que l'oeuvre serait plus justement intitulée ainsi : *Madonna/Mother/Death and Child*.

Madonna/Mother/Death and Child: Laura Muntz and the Representation of Maternity

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Résumé

Vers la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, l'artiste torontoise Laura Muntz (1860-1930) était reconnue comme la peintre la plus importante du thème des mères et enfants du Canada anglais. Elle avait exposé à maintes reprises à Toronto et à Montréal et participé à de nombreuses expositions internationales (France, Angleterre et États-Unis). En 1898, après dix ans d'étude et de travail en Europe où elle avait acquis une connaissance solide des mouvements artistiques européens contemporains, elle revint à Toronto. Son arrivée coïncidait avec l'apogée du culte de la maternité au Canada. La glorification de la mère était étroitement associée à la notion de la Femme Nouvelle et au féminisme maternel conservateur et bourgeois qui préconisaient que les qualités humanitaires et nourricières innées des femmes justifiaient leur participation à la vie publique. Cet

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Laura Muntz¹ (1860–1930) was one of English Canada's leading artists in the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century. In her own time she was known as the foremost painter of mothers and children in this country, exhibiting widely in Toronto and Montreal, as well as participating in exhibitions in France, England and the United States. Toronto's *Saturday Night* magazine reported in 1913 that "One of our leading artists says he considers Laura Muntz the greatest painter in Canada, and the greatest woman painter on this continent."² Although the author of this article may have thought the praise over-effusive, she agreed that Muntz "is certainly unrivalled in her own particular line – that of children's portraiture." But as the century progressed, Muntz and her female colleagues were increasingly written out of the cultural past to which they had made substantial contributions.³

Laura Muntz was born in England, of upper middle-class Alsatian and Polish background, and emigrated to Canada with her family at the age of nine. She had received some formal art instruction in Hamilton and Toronto before departing for Paris in 1891 to study at the Académie Colarossi. For the next seven years, she travelled between the continent and Canada teaching at various schools and, with her close friend, the American painter Wilhelmina Douglas Hawley (1860–1927), took female painting students to Holland in the summers in order to help finance her travels. During this productive decade of the 1890s, Muntz exhibited five times at the Paris Salon, where she won an honourable mention in 1895, and was in that same year elected as Associate Member of the Royal Canadian Academy. In 1898, Muntz settled in Toronto and opened her own studio. Several of her female students, notably Estelle Kerr, Marion Long, Lilius Torrence Newton, Mary Wrinch and Henrietta Shore, went on

to become professional artists. Looking for a more sophisticated artistic milieu, she moved to Montreal in 1909, rented a studio on Beaver Hall Square, and continued both to produce commissioned portraits and to teach art at private girls' schools as she had done in Hamilton and Toronto.

In 1915, at the age of 55, Muntz made the decision to return to Toronto in order to marry her deceased sister's husband, Charles William Bayley Lyall, and to become stepmother to her nieces and nephews. Until the time of her marriage, she had single-mindedly pursued a professional career that included commissioned work, teaching and exhibition. From 1915 until 1924 her new family responsibilities caused her to reduce her professional activities drastically, and consequently she faded from public attention. Writing to Bessie Muntz, her brother's daughter and an aspiring sculptor, Muntz spoke directly of the choices necessitated by a career in art: "It is such a hard life for any woman, and I wanted you to marry and have children, but you can't do both – don't try to do both."⁴ Her return to the art world six years before her death brought her a degree of commercial success from portrait commissions but did not revive her critical acclaim. She died in Toronto in 1930.

This article centres on Muntz's *Madonna and Child* (fig. 1), a large painting that has been scarcely documented. My reading of it proposes that, despite its title, it is restricted to neither Christian nor maternal themes. Rather, the image can be taken as a symptom of the ambiguity and contradiction which characterized the *fin-de-siècle*, and would more aptly be titled *Madonna/Mother/Death and Child*. My aim here is not to be definitive but suggestive, and to add another dimension to the largely documentary nature of the majority of publications dealing with historical Canadian women artists.

Figure 1. Laura Muntz, *Madonna and Child*, oil on canvas, n.d. Private Collection, Toronto (Photo: author).



Eugenics, Social Purity and the Domestic Madonna

At the end of the nineteenth century in Canada,⁵ as in America and Europe, painters were exploring the theme of motherhood, which functioned as a discursive site in which issues of morality, feminism, nationalism and religion entered the public debate. Late nineteenth-century representations of the maternal relied in particular on constructions of femininity which intertwined notions of the secular and the sacred. The earlier nineteenth-century concept of “separate spheres,” formulated in England but current in the colonies as well, assigned to the middle-class woman a special role as a secular Virgin Mary, a domestic Madonna. But it was made clear that women’s purity was not innate and could only be guaranteed if they remained, like Coventry Patmore’s angel, in the house.⁶ The social problems which accompanied rapid urbanization driven by industrialization threatened to disrupt the private, conservative, middle-class way of life, and women were called upon to become the moral conscience of society. It seemed only natural to most nineteenth-century Canadians that, while men competed in the

public world, women should safeguard the domestic sphere from the social consequences of progress. As the population of Canada increased and shifted more to urban centres, social problems became more complex. By the mid-1890s, the Social Purity movement, with women’s organizations in the foreground, made a central contribution to the debate surrounding such urban problems as prostitution, divorce, illegitimacy and immigration, and launched campaigns to increase public education, suppress obscene literature, and establish shelters for fallen women and needy children.

It can be suggested that the main political project in Canada at the turn of the century consisted of two grand and inseparable goals – shaping the nation and shaping morality. These concerns found currency through two beliefs: hereditarian biology, later developed into the pseudoscience of eugenics, and the Social Purity movement. The British scientist Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin and much influenced by Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), coined the term “eugenics” in 1883 to describe the principles of hereditarian biology, which held that it was possible to improve the human race by better breeding. The defenders of eugenics believed that just as people inherited blood types, so they inherited characteristics such as criminality, promiscuity, alcoholism and “feeble-mindedness,” a label which encompassed a wide variety of traits.

In the 1890s in Canada the term “eugenics” was not yet in use, but hereditarian ideas already had wide currency. The poor were seen in a Darwinian light, unfit for the struggle of life. The Canadian religious reformer S. W. Dean, speaking of vice and poverty, proclaimed: “Some may be convinced that ‘the sty makes the pig.’ There can be no question but that the pig makes the sty, and to prevent sty conditions the porcine nature must be transformed.”⁷ Sometimes that transformation even took the form of enforced sterilization, positioning reproduction as a property of society and science.⁸ As a corollary, childbearing and proper childrearing were the privileged-class woman’s greatest work for society. As Mariana Valverde has succinctly put it: “Women did not merely have babies: they reproduced ‘the race.’”⁹

The eugenic message found what was arguably its most powerful medium in the Social Purity movement. Women, and particularly the figure of the mother, were central to its functioning and its success. In contrast to the older British theme of “woman’s mission,” in which womanhood equalled devotion to hearth and family, the New Woman’s special mission was increasingly public, and was concerned primarily with social motherhood. Lady Ishbel Aberdeen, founder of the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) and wife of the governor-general, addressed the first meeting of the Council in 1894 with the statement “Our grand woman’s mission is mothering.”¹⁰

Reformist women's organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the NCWC, and the YWCA battled for causes such as temperance, sex education according to eugenic principles, and the abolition of the double standard, under the slogan "a white life for two." Whiteness stood for sexual purity; it symbolized clean milk and water in the fight against alcohol and disease; and it conjured up images of snow and Canada, thus stirring nationalist sentiment. At the same time, whiteness as an allusion to skin colour and ethnic purity betrayed a xenophobic mentality. The WCTU's stated mission to "carry the Gospel cure to the drinking classes"¹¹ articulates the essentially Christian temper of women's social reform movements, as well as their classist preconceptions.

The strongest strictures in the areas of social hygiene, sexuality and reproduction were directed towards women. An age-old view of female nature, restated in hereditarian terms, promoted woman's sacred role as mother, while constantly controlling her potential as the main pollutant of the public stream. Women had been indoctrinated to believe, well before Darwin, that they were the true custodians of genetic material, and hence the future of the race. In his *Advice to Mothers* (1803), William Buchan warned women that it was "little short of intentional murder on the part of a weak, languid, nervous or deformed woman to approach the marriage-bed."¹²

By far the greatest proportion of Canadian feminists were conservative, middle-class maternal feminists who believed, to a greater or lesser extent, in both social purity and hereditarianism.¹³ Maternal feminists justified women's entry into public life by their acceptance of the traditional belief in women's innate humanitarian and nurturing qualities, which in turn were said to give women pure and moral motivations, and thus make them ideally suited as social reformists. Most social issues that involved women were discussed in Christian terms, naming women as potential "saviours," as well as in the language of the maternal, as an extension of women's domestic role. In 1898 the WCTU could confidently state that "A nation rises no higher than its mothers."¹⁴ Furthermore, as maternal feminist philosophy had it, a woman who fulfilled her role as "social housekeeper," did not always need to have children in order to be considered acceptably maternal. In foreign missionary work, for example, where non-Christians were often regarded as children, or as a teacher of hygiene to working-class women, or of domestic skills to fallen women in shelters, the philanthropic middle-class woman believed she was mother to all.

The Relevance of Social Context

Current and socially relevant discourses such as maternal feminism and the domestic role of women, issues themselves in part derived from the larger concepts of social purity and eugenics,

informed the contemporary art viewers' interpretative framework. But although a knowledge of the social context is a crucial first step in the positioning of the work as a product of a specific historical situation, it cannot be assumed to explain it fully. Social and historical contexts are strands of the complex web of psychological and material interactions that constitute the work of art, but the uncovering of *meaning* is more an act of construction than of simply unearthing historical evidence. Marcia Pointon, among others, has cautioned against an uncritical application of the Foucauldian model of analysis, which perceives the subject as entirely constituted through discourse. She believes that such an understanding of ideological forces can allow the historical background to assume an overriding authority and result in a theoretical position that is suspicious of texts and confident with contexts.¹⁵ For the historian who imagines that the documents of the past, highly mediated by both time and authorship, can provide a kind of contextual "proof" for the object under study, the project of recovery is bound to be disillusioning. Neither images nor texts are simply mirrors of the world, and the assumption that the visual work of art can be translated into verbal terms "without remainder,"¹⁶ is in itself a questionable notion. The act of representation "stresses something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual, or pictorial terms, quite distinct from its social existence."¹⁷

How, then, can historical works of art be re-examined in light of contemporary theoretical ideas without denying the validity of past interpretations? As Donald Preziosi suggests, it may be more fruitful to ask what art objects may be evidence *for*, rather than recirculate the traditional question which seeks to resolve what art objects are evidence *of*.¹⁸ A visual representation is more than a message in code – a passive entity waiting to have its secrets unveiled once and for all. Once the search for unitary meaning is abandoned, the painting can be "reframed," not in order to deny any relevance it had in the past, but rather with the intention of bringing out the variety of possible meanings suggested by the image. Mieke Bal has proposed that the viewer/interpreter not take the work of art "tautologically as proof of itself" but rather see it as "questioning itself;" she asks that we not silence it and strike it dumb, and instead attempt to create a theoretical space in which the work is freed to accommodate "all possible questions it might challenge viewers to raise."¹⁹

Recent feminist theories of subjectivity can be helpful in formulating a viable method of dealing with visual culture, especially when the work is historical and produced by a woman. Feminist epistemologies that do not interpret the world teleologically, or in terms of valorized dualities, are more accepting of the necessarily partial and relational nature of knowledge; they not only acknowledge the necessity to problematize, but indeed see it as a positive value. Rosi Braidotti seeks to put

psychological distance between the terms “difference” and “deviation,” and asks instead: “How can we build a new kind of collectivity in differences?”²⁰ An analysis of Laura Muntz’s work calls for a similar expansive method of approach, especially since the small body of historical literature which describes her artistic production is journalistic rather than analytical or interpretive.

Braidotti’s notion of “nomadic subjectivity” has also been useful to my exploration of Muntz’s paintings. By that term, Braidotti means to describe a figurative way of thinking that struggles against convention and keeps the process of interpretation fluid and resistant to closure. She compares her nomadism to Gilles Deleuze’s formulation of “rhizomatic” processes of thought. A rhizome is a root that grows underground, sideways. Nomadic thinking, like the metaphor of the rhizome, is lateral and spreading; it moves away from the growth habit of trees; it distances itself from the visible, vertical, linear root of the Western tree of knowledge.²¹ Braidotti’s accommodation of ambiguity and contradiction offers an alternative to established ways of conceptualizing both the past and the present, which I believe can provide a strategy for problematizing accepted modes of thought.

Femininity and Death

At the heart of the debate concerning female subjectivity is the figure of the mother. Much psychoanalytic theory understands identity as something fragmented, as never complete and unified. Similarly, the maternal is a subject position beset by conflict and ambivalence. Rozsika Parker’s enquiry into the experience of maternal ambivalence, entitled *Torn in Two*,²² aptly assesses the passionate and contrary feelings of fulfillment and loss which reside in the mother-child relationship. The identity of the mother is linked variously with the emotions and the unconscious as sites of desire and longing, with the multiple and changeable cultural constructions of the maternal role and, indissolubly, with the discourses of biology.

In any discussion of the mother, a distinction should also be made between the maternal body and the sexualized female body. An incorporation of overt sexuality in the maternal body is one of the taboos of Western culture, associated as it has been with Oedipal dread and sacrilege. In the Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary’s status as the highest moral example for all women is based on the model of a motherhood unsullied by sexuality, and all of Mary’s qualities derive from selfless, maternal devotion. This view of an essentially unattainable, dematerialized motherhood was nevertheless circulated as an ideal, and was a component of much of the nineteenth century’s construction of gender. Victorian figures such as John Ruskin and Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) are infamous for their obsessive attachments to pre-pubescent girls, but the possibility of their

rationalization of such relationships was a consequence of the paradoxical and confused views of sexuality current at the time. Often the mother-son relationship was implicated in such cases, since the discourses of Victorian motherhood were fraught with contradictory meanings. The Scottish novelist J. M. Barrie had a penchant not for children, but for women much older than himself, and the autobiographical hero of his book *The Little White Bird* (1902) is tellingly made to confess: “Just as I was about to fall in love I suddenly found that I preferred the mother.”²³ Humour was not intended; the declaration illustrates both Barrie’s own ultimately irreplaceable closeness to his mother, and the cultural conditions that allowed him the innocence to make such a statement publicly at all.

Relevant to the understanding of Muntz’s *Madonna and Child* are the related discourses of femininity and death. The awareness of the inevitability of death has always dominated human consciousness. It is, as Sarah Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen describe, at “the limit of cultural representation [and] associated with that other enigma, the multiply coded female body.”²⁴ Because cultural myths surrounding both death and femininity are ambivalently encoded, they are destined to remain outside rational discourse, as sites of uncertainty, complexity and paradox. Like death, Woman in nineteenth-century patriarchal discourse was envisioned as the Other in an attempt to rid her of ambiguity, although, as with constructs of death, there could be no hope of a satisfactory resolution.²⁵

Rosi Braidotti believes that all representation “cheats;” it rests on the fantasy that visibility and truth work together, whereas in reality there is always more to the experience than the image can show.²⁶ This is particularly true about representations of death, because the most obvious thing one can say about death is that it is always only *represented*.²⁷ There is no knowing death, and all representations can only be misrepresentations. The question to ask, then, is what *else* can be pictured in the name of death. In Western culture, death is a disordering force; it represents chaos and is a site of paradox; it is the ultimate Other, dangerous and enigmatic in multiple ways. In my view, the spectre of death is on the very surface of Laura Muntz’s representation of motherhood.

Madonna/Mother/Death and Child

There is little information on Muntz’s painting, exhibited in 1988 under the title *Madonna and Child*.²⁸ A 1926 exhibition review, while not mentioning its title, grouped it among “three studies of child life,” and described it as representing “mother love in the sad-faced, hollow-eyed woman who draws back her black veil protectingly about the chubby child on her knee.”²⁹ At first glance, this painting seems to depict the Madonna. However, specific details complexify this reading: the black robe

and in particular the woman's finger slipped through a loop in the veil. Since neither the colour black nor a looped veil are conventional features of Marian symbolism, their inclusion implies a specific purpose. A parallel context of death, however, can convincingly absorb the dark robe, the mournful expression, and the shroud-like veil.

Muntz's careful delineation of the looped veil emphasizes the gesture of enclosure, an intent which was recognized in the contemporary description of the painting, which specified that the woman was in the act of drawing the veil "protectingly" about the child. Maternal protection, however, was normally figured as loving tenderness. Many of Muntz's own paintings of mothers and children, even those which openly allude to the Madonna and Child, show serene and smiling young women. Why, then, has Muntz chosen this dark and sombre vision to portray the subject of mother love? And alternately, if we give primacy to the subject of death, we should question why Muntz chose to cast it in a maternal role.

An article in *The Canadian Magazine* in 1911 described Muntz as an "intense and serious woman [who] abhors mere prettiness [...] One of the regrets of her life [...] has been the small amount of time that she has been able to give to big, creative work, to things that are allegorical" and stresses that her true power lies in her ability to express "some of the inevitable pathos of humanity."³⁰ The nineteenth-century English artist George Frederick Watts (1817-1904), whose sensibility and aims were similar to Muntz's, said "I paint ideas, not things" and understood art to be a "great cosmopolitan language" which the painter must use to express something timeless and universal.³¹ According to Julian Treuherz, the central paradox of the later Aesthetic movement lay in its commitment to the formal values of the cult of beauty, while at the same time seeking to comment on the profound issues of the human condition. He explains that in these late paintings "the formal perfection of aestheticism served to heighten their emotional power, while their use of symbolic reference, myth and archetype, often operating on a subconscious level, linked them with European Symbolism."³² It is possible, then, keeping in mind Muntz's disposition towards symbolic themes, that in *Madonna and Child* her purpose was not only to portray the subject of motherly love and protection *per se*, but also through it to reflect on the philosophical questions of life and death. Muntz's Madonna may be seen as the personification of death about to enfold its young victim, as well as a representation of the idea of maternal sorrow itself.

Symbolism and Death

Death in the late nineteenth century was often envisioned as a passage rather than an end. In part a legacy of the Victorian

Figure 2. George F. Watts, *Death Crowning Innocence*, ca. 1885, oil on canvas (Photo: Tate Gallery, London).



bourgeois obsession with control and order, it was constructed as a journey from one regulated realm to another, from a well-ordered life to a well-deserved heaven.³³ This would have been an especially comforting belief for the grieving parent of a young child. Death is here depicted as a gentle and sorrowing mother, bending her grave face down towards the child. To personify death as female was not unusual. G. F. Watts, like Muntz, pictured death as a consoling and gentle mother, who cradles the infant Innocence consigned to her care (fig. 2).³⁴

In the later decades of the nineteenth century death was such an overexplored topic as to be almost cliché. It was expressed through various means in all the arts, as well as in the popular fascination with spiritualism and hypnosis. Symbolist artists, writers and poets focused on the private universe of the soul and, preoccupied with the ideas of the ambiguous and the amorphous, decried factual statements as a kind of death of the

Figure 3. Laura Muntz, *A Madonna*, ca. 1913. Location unknown (Reproduced from the Art Gallery of Ontario clipping file, source unknown).



imagination. Because this subjective, suggestive kind of art often had a confessional quality, and made use of a very personal iconography, ambiguity of meaning was in a sense written into the initial premise.

Madonna and Child communicates Muntz's multiple conscious and unconscious thoughts and desires. As the personification of Death, the woman here pictured is the Symbolist femme fatale; as the Madonna, she is paradoxically the young Virgin Mary with the babe on her lap, as well as the Mater Dolorosa, engulfed by grief. Madonna/Mother/Death – she is young and old, both the giver and taker of life. Muntz draws a reference to the traditional symbol of pathos – the Mother of the Saviour – while at the same time invoking the contemporary secular symbol of selflessness as promoted by eugenics and the social purity movement, the “saviour-mother.” Just as the Madonna's purpose was to nurture and protect the Child, so women in contemporary Canadian society were enjoined to follow her example on both a personal and a social level. In this sense, then, the religious context serves as the conduit for a highly relevant topic of her time. This strategy is once again evident in a painting titled *A Madonna* (fig. 3). It portrays a

contemporary-looking mother and children, who, in light of the title, may nevertheless be interpreted as the Virgin with the Christ-child and John the Baptist. The use of the indefinite article in the title, however, alerts the viewer to the possibility of an alternate meaning, and underscores the deliberate conflation of the sacred and the secular. Muntz's painting implies that “a” Madonna is every happy mother.

Madonna and Child suggests yet another alliance of universal themes to particular circumstances. It is to the English Symbolist artist Edward Burne-Jones' attenuated forms (fig. 4) that Muntz's woman/death figure most closely corresponds. The child, however, is an incongruous element, an anachronistic presence. The woman and ground belong to the late nineteenth-century world of symbol and mystery, while the child appears to be a much more modern being. His healthy body could serve as an advertisement for the eugenic ideal of youth. But I believe that the incongruity of the two figures is a crucial aspect of the painting's symbolism, allowing the image to function simultaneously on two levels: the universal subject of life and death, and the particular topic of infant mortality.

Infant mortality was central to major discourses such as eugenics, social purity, motherhood and empire. At the turn of the century, one out of every five children in Toronto died within the first two years of life.³⁵ The medical community placed the responsibility for preventing infant death above all on the mother, already led to see herself as the redeemer of domestic ills. With that in mind, it may be proposed that Muntz used the pictorial language of Symbolism to present the female figure as an embodiment of an idea – a conflation of death and holy motherhood – more than as a real woman, while the representation of the child as a contemporary figure raised a specific concern of her day.

The combination of the subjects of death and maternity is an unusual one for the art of the time, particularly in Canada. The fact that these themes coexist in other paintings by Laura Muntz, for example in *Mother and Child* (Private Collection, Toronto) and *Protection* (fig. 5),³⁶ can be taken as an indication of the particular significance that this pairing had for the artist. Although none of these three paintings is dated, I believe they can be located between 1910 and 1915, when Muntz was in her fifties.³⁷ She had had no biological children, although she had acquired her own nephews and nieces as stepchildren upon her marriage to her deceased sister's husband in 1915, at the age of 55. In the years between 1900 and 1914 Muntz experienced the deaths of two sisters, two brothers, her father and a sister-in-law. As well, five of her nieces and nephews died in infancy, and two before they reached adulthood. Consequently, apart from any consideration of the larger social relevance of mothers and children, or of the *fin-de-siècle* legacy of melancholy subjects, Muntz's mature age, childlessness and intimate experience of

Figure 4. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1874, oil on canvas (Photo: The Board of Trustees of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Walker Art Gallery).



loss would have been reason enough for her contemplation of the connections between women, children and death.

Patriarchal Western culture imagines both death and femininity as essentially unknowable concepts. Multiply coded and chaotic, Woman is positioned culturally as being closer to death than to life, described by Goodwin and Bronfen as “radically other to the norm, the living or surviving masculine subject.”³⁸ She is Mary and Eve, life and death; she is “the original prenatal dwelling place [...] and as Mother Earth, she is the anticipated final resting place.”³⁹ Despite this inconsistent construction of femininity, we imagine wholeness and security as embodied most clearly in the mother and child dyad, but a further paradox constitutes motherhood itself as ambivalent and contradictory. Although it is characterized by passionate feeling and is promoted as the paradigmatic cul-

Figure 5. Laura Muntz, *Protection*, before 1911, watercolour on paper. Location unknown (Reproduced from *The Canadian Magazine*, XXXVII, 5 (September 1911), 426).



tural model of protection, it also contains the potential for destruction.⁴⁰ In *Madonna and Child* the mother is also the personification of death and, as such, can be seen as the Symbolist vampiric femme fatale.

The Monstrous Other

The vampire represents the monstrous side of femininity. Rosi Braidotti traces this discursive positioning of women as a sign of aberrance to Aristotle’s theory of human reproduction, which established women as a deviation from the male norm. The construction of the irrational and inferior female, lacking in physical as well as in mental capacities, thus established the otherness of women as the necessary negative to the male positive: “The topos of women as a sign of abnormality, and therefore of difference as a sign of inferiority, remained a constant in Western scientific discourse. This association has produced, among other things [...] the horror of the female body.”⁴¹ In this context, Braidotti discusses the new nineteenth-century science of teratology, which consisted of the study and classification of monsters.

The language of teratology defined bodily malformations

in terms of excess, lack or displacement of organs. All these definitions marked a move away from the stable, definitive logic of the male body. Since the terms “excess” and “lack” were also used repeatedly as descriptions to disparage the “abnormal” feminine, it is not difficult to imagine the parallels that were made between monsters and women’s bodies. It was especially the mother that could be considered “morphologically dubious.”⁴² Because the mother’s physical body changes shape during the process of pregnancy and childbirth, it provided a material basis for the social constructions that identified her with all that was temporary, irrational, unstable and mysterious. Death, monsters and women in their reproductive (and therefore also sexual) function incarnated the feared and the unknown.

The identification of woman as a sign of the abnormal and the monstrous, then, can be recognized in the *fin-de-siècle* casting of the female as vengeful harpy, siren and vampire. In 1915, the American actress Theda Bara starred in the film *A Fool There Was*, in which she played the role of a femme fatale, an insatiable sexual predator and killer of men. Throughout the film she was identified only as “the Vampire;” within months of the debut of the film, popular culture branded “adventurous” women as “vamps.”⁴³ The film had been based on a book by Porter Emerson Browne. The cover of the first edition, published in 1909, reproduced Philip Burne-Jones’ infamous painting *The Vampire* (1897). It pictures a young woman in night-dress, who leans suggestively over the body of a man splayed out on a bed, his arm hanging limply over its side. Her mouth is set in a snarling smile as she gazes down triumphantly upon her latest victim, who by his closed eyes, ghostly skin and the dark wound-like spot on his chest signals a state of lifelessness. Whether he is actually dead or simply depleted by the vampire’s (clearly sexual) attack is moot – the point is that he is as good as dead. Medical discourse at the end of the century supported the conventional view of men as victims of their own sexuality, a condition which left them vulnerable to the schemes of predatory women. It was believed that men were physically and morally depleted by orgasm; conversely, women were perceived to feed off sexual encounters, and to draw life energy from men. Bram Dijkstra traces these constructions of the bestial sexual woman to the hereditarian theories which by the 1890s were absorbed into the popular consciousness: “By 1897 everyone knew that women who had reawakened the beast were doomed to slide back down the evolutionary ladder until they reached the hunting grounds of primitive humanity, for in them, nature yearned for savage rituals.”⁴⁴

Women, as the most visible Others in society, were the prime targets of eugenic diatribes. Throughout his book *Manhood Wrecked and Rescued* (1900), the Montreal clergyman W. J. Hunter used pseudo-medical eugenic terminology that is also

the language commonly used to describe vampires – words such as “blood,” “loss,” “drain” and “prey” – and stated apocalyptically that “loss of semen is loss of blood.”⁴⁵ It seemed clear to him that sexual activity that was not primarily reserved for the purpose of procreation would lead to the death of the race, and the female “vampire” must have figured as the biggest threat.

In the earlier part of the 1800s, however, vampires were not portrayed as demons or snarling aliens, the way that Bram Stoker imagined his Dracula in the last years of the century. As Nina Auerbach describes them, vampires were perceived as “singular friends” and it was considered “a privilege to walk with a vampire.”⁴⁶ Byron’s Augustus Darvell (1816) or Mary Shelley’s monstrous Frankenstein (1816) were represented as indeterminate creatures, dangerously close to humans. The female vampire, especially, did not need to display outward signs of otherness, such as fangs or red eyes, since she was considered already ambiguous and alien because of her sex. As well, female friendships in the nineteenth century were often characterized by a passionate devotion that was described in the language of the erotic. Sheridan LeFanu’s vampire Carmilla (1872), for example, reveals a human yearning when she whispers to Laura, her enraptured prey: “I wonder whether you feel as strangely drawn towards me as I do to you. I have never had a friend – shall I find one now?”⁴⁷

In the context of *Madonna and Child*, the intimate nature of the female vampire suggests a parallel to passionate maternal love and protection. On a physical level Muntz’s female protagonist remains human (like Carmilla she does not have unusual markings), but everything else suggested by her presence functions, on the level of the psyche, as a sign of intensity and otherness. As vampire, she represents consuming intimacy, shared blood – much like the passionate feelings of a mother for her child which, as maternal mythology has it, exceeds the normal bounds of everyday human emotions. But in the alternate reading of the vampire as an incarnation of the forbidden passion of the sexual female, the child then becomes a problematic figure. And so, to partially deflect sexual connotations, it is pictured androgynously, neither clearly male, as a possible object of heterosexual interest, nor female, as a sign of erotic love between women. The nudity of the child is further desexualized by the separate narratives of the religious and the domestic. The Madonna protects the exposed body from sexual reference (although it remains disturbingly large, the pale flesh displayed against the black robes), while the cultural construction of “holy motherhood” similarly shields the pair from any troubling associations. It is important to recognize, however, that the themes of Christianity and motherhood are not sufficient to dispel all sexual connotation; Leo Steinberg has shown that sexuality has long been a component in representations of the Christ-child, and John Pultz, in his discussion of Victorian

photographs, suggests that in itself, "the depiction of the nude child in the deeper allegory of domesticity is disturbing."⁴⁸

The maternal angel in Muntz's *Protection* shows a different representation of feminine passion, suggested by the angel's sensual face, cascading hair and outspread wings. However, like the vampire/Madonna, she is also a strongly maternal figure, and therefore, there can be no overt signs that her desire includes a sexual component. The children whom the angel, her gaze averted, cradles to herself are covered to the neck, inhibiting any possible sexual reference to the body. By contrast, in *Madonna and Child*, the vampire is permitted to remain intent upon the child's nude body only because the sexual references are countered by the mitigating presence of the Virgin. In *Protection* the angel's virtual absorption of the young bodies into her own suggests that all her passion is rooted in the selflessness of maternal protection; the children's heads have visually replaced her breasts, now given up solely to their maternal function.⁴⁹ She has renounced her sexual identity (an identity nonetheless clearly pictured) and redirected her desire into the sphere of the domestic. Desire, however, tends to rebel against such constraint. Just as *Madonna and Child* may be understood to signify in several simultaneous ways, so this image of the angelic mother may also be imagined to act out its drama on the enormous scale of Greek tragedy; a monumental figure dressed in classical robes, the winged mythological being protectively cradles the sleeping/dead children,⁵⁰ at the same time that she mourns the loss of her own potential for wholeness.

In both *Protection* and *Madonna and Child*, then, the discourses of Muntz's social and artistic milieu, as well as the artist's own individual experience and psychology, combined to produce the symbolic figures of the angel, the Madonna and the vampire. They may be understood in part as an attempt by a woman artist to picture female longing and desire, albeit within the conventional context of the maternal.

Notes

- 1 After her marriage to Charles William Bayley Lyall in 1915, Muntz signed her works with both her married and maiden names; consequently, contemporary as well as modern references cite her either as Laura Muntz, or Laura Muntz Lyall. Her practice of sometimes adding her married name to the signature on paintings completed before 1915 adds to the difficulty of dating her work. Since my discussion concentrates on the work done before her marriage, I refer to her throughout as Laura Muntz.
- 2 Estelle Kerr, "The Artist," *Saturday Night*, 7 June 1913, 29.
- 3 Russell Harper acknowledges Muntz with only one backhanded compliment, stating that although she had "failed to accomplish all that her Parisian study promised [...] her early mother and child compositions went beyond mere narrative in their unsurpassed subtleties and freedom of brushwork." J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History* (Toronto, 1977), 232. Dennis Reid does not mention her at all, and Maria Tippett provides only a brief reference and a reproduction of *A Daffodil* (ca. 1890, National Gallery of Canada), a work which Tippett describes as "saccharine to a modern viewer." Maria Tippett, *By A Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto, 1992), 33. Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 2nd edn (Toronto, 1988).
- 4 Undated letter from Laura Muntz to Elizabeth Muntz; quoted in Paul Duval, *Canadian Impressionism* (Toronto, 1990), 50.
- 5 Throughout this article I am speaking only about conditions in English Canada; most of the social and political issues here discussed have a different genealogy and interpretation in French Canadian culture.
- 6 The English poet Coventry Patmore's best-known work, *The Angel in the House* (1854), has generally been taken to epitomize the confinement of Victorian middle-class women to the domestic sphere.
- 7 Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto, 1991), 47.
- 8 This policy had its greatest popularity in British Columbia. Valverde, *The age of Light*, 48.
- 9 Mariana Valverde, "'When the Mother of the Race is Free': Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism," *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, eds Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto, 1992), 4.
- 10 Wayne Roberts, "'Rocking the Cradle for the World': The New Woman and Maternal Feminism, Toronto 1877-1914," *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880's-1920's*, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto, 1979), 21.
- 11 Wendy Mitchinson, "The WCTU: 'For God, Home and Native Land': A Study in Nineteenth-Century Feminism," *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, ed. Kealey, 165.
- 12 Sally Shuttleworth, "Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era," *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (New York, 1992), 34.
- 13 Linda Kealey understands the term "maternal feminism" as an incorporation of committed social feminism and domestic ideology, which "refers to the conviction that woman's special role as mother gives her the duty and the right to participate in the public sphere." Kealey, *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, 7.
- 14 Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson, eds, *The Proper Sphere: Women's Place in Canadian Society* (Toronto, 1976), 230.
- 15 Marcia Pointon, review of *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* by Lynda Nead, *Art History*, XII, 1 (March 1989), 117.
- 16 Stephen Bann, *The True Vine: On Visual Representation and the Western Tradition* (Cambridge, 1989), 28.
- 17 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London, 1988), 6.
- 18 Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven, 1989), chapter 1, "A Crisis in, or of, Art History:"

- 19 Mieke Bal, "Reading Art?" *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London, 1996), 30.
- 20 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York, 1994), 99.
- 21 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 23.
- 22 Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London, 1995).
- 23 Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (New York, 1976), 86.
- 24 Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, eds, *Death and Representation* (Baltimore, 1993), 13.
- 25 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York, 1992), 66.
- 26 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 69.
- 27 Goodwin and Bronfen, *Death and Representation*, 20. I have found the authors' four-point summary (itself indebted to the ideas of Mieke Bal and Jean Baudrillard) to be a very useful starting point for my own exploration of the subject of death. I paraphrase their outline before applying some of their general thoughts to Muntz's paintings.
- 28 Robert J. Lamb, *The Canadian Art Club 1907–1915*, exh. cat., Edmonton Art Gallery (Edmonton, 1988), 76.
- 29 "Modern Canadian Art Charms Tourists," *Toronto Star Weekly*, 21 August 1926.
- 30 Newton MacTavish, "Laura Muntz and Her Art," *The Canadian Magazine*, XXXVIII, 5 (September 1911), 423, 426.
- 31 Christopher Wood, *Olympian Dreamers: Victorian Classical Painters 1860–1914* (London, 1983), 82.
- 32 Julian Treuherz, *Victorian Painting* (London, 1993), 143.
- 33 Regina Barreca, ed., *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature* (Bloomington, 1990), 6.
- 34 In two versions of the same subject, Watts portrays death as a mature woman in order to stress the idea of protection. Yet he does not depict her as old, avoiding the parallel of old age and the end of life, thereby retaining the believability of her maternal role. It can be suggested that Muntz follows much the same logic in her *Madonna and Child*.
- 35 Katherine Arnap, *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto, 1994), 15. The infant mortality rate in Montreal was the highest in North America, claiming one in three babies before their first birthday.
- 36 In both these paintings, the children are shown as if asleep, a convention followed in post-mortem photography of the time. In *Mother and Child* there is a disconcerting limpness to the child's body, which the sad-faced mother does not cradle but holds strangely upright against her own. The allusion to infant mortality in Muntz's *Protection* is mentioned further in this text.
- 37 *Protection* was reproduced in *The Canadian Magazine* in 1911, and *Mother and Child* can be situated roughly within the same time period, since it is similar in subject and style. The only direct reference to *Madonna and Child* dates from 1926, but it is almost certain that the painting was completed before that date, and almost certainly no later than 1915.
- 38 Goodwin and Bronfen, *Death and Representation*, 13.
- 39 Goodwin and Bronfen, *Death and Representation*, 13.
- 40 For example Medea, Euripides' child-murdering mother.
- 41 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 79.
- 42 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 80.
- 43 Bram Dijkstra, *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood* (New York, 1996), 12.
- 44 Dijkstra, *Evil Sisters*, 84.
- 45 Dijkstra, *Evil Sisters*, 86.
- 46 Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago, 1995), 13.
- 47 Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, 38.
- 48 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* 2nd edn (Chicago, 1996). John Pultz, *Photography and the Body* (London, 1995), 41.
- 49 There is a striking visual similarity between *Protection* and Eugène Delacroix's *Medea About to Kill Her Children* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille), a work which created a sensation when first exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1838, and again when it was shown at the Exposition Universelle of 1855. Delacroix's bare-breasted Medea, dagger in hand, clutches her children to her body as she glances back at her pursuers. As Barthélémy Jobert points out, Delacroix's representation of this crucial moment in the story is intentionally ambiguous: "[I]s she protecting her children, or on the contrary preparing to slaughter them?" Barthélémy Jobert, *Delacroix* (Princeton, 1998), 246. Muntz's appropriation of this image (with which I believe she must have been familiar) sublimates both the overtly sexualized body and the act of violence.
- 50 The subject of infant mortality is highly relevant to the understanding of *Protection*, as it is to *Madonna and Child*. The motherly angel pictured here may be protecting the merely sleeping, innocent children, but there is a hollow-eyed pallor, particularly on the face of the child on the right, which suggests death. The angel's intensity of emotion alone directs the viewer's thoughts to more dramatic circumstances. I discuss this painting fully in *Women and Children in Context: Laura Muntz and the Representation of Maternity*, Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2000.