

Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts
Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures

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We Need to Talk about Gender: Mothering and Masculinity in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* | BY EMILY JEREMIAH

Feminist debates about maternity have proliferated wildly over the past few decades. Underlying many such discussions is the conviction that mothering is widely dismissed and undermined. Naomi Wolf, for example, contends that modern American motherhood is "undersupported, sentimentalized, and even manipulated at women's expense" (1). This critique is echoed in Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, a work that forms a valuable, if reluctant, contribution to feminist thinking about mothering. In particular, as we will see, the text offers complex conceptions of corporeality, gender, and family—all sites of power—in the context of (American) postmodernism.

The novel also exposes and challenges the traditional conflation of "maternity" and "femininity"; women, it suggests, are not naturally or necessarily able parents. Nor are they always very "feminine." The text implies, in fact, that femininity is a rather undesirable condition. In challenging traditional assumptions to the effect that women are, or should be, both feminine and maternal, the work aligns itself with queer theory, which posits that gender and sexuality are not fixed givens that exist in a stable relationship to each other. It overturns, or "queers," dominant ideas about gender, then, paving the way for new conceptions of sex and of parenting. It calls into question the gender of mothering—a term that will now be investigated—and, in so doing, the nature and function of gender in general.

The Gender of Mothering

The feminist exposure of and challenge to "the feminine mystique" (Friedan) is not new; Simone de Beauvoir observed in 1949 that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). Gender is a construct, then—this goes, of course, for masculinity as well as for femininity. The sex/gender opposition is problematic, though, for it may suggest that gender is simply imposed onto sex, or society onto biology, where the latter is an immutable entity. In fact, as Judith Butler has pointed out, the body is itself a construct and by no means a simple or stable affair (6). In addition, the notion of constructedness needs to be treated with caution. Butler describes construction as "a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration" (10). Construction is an ongoing process; sex is fabricated by means of repeated acts that affirm norms, but that also allow for deviation and disruption.

This is a "performative" view of sex. Performativity is "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler 2). Gender, according to this understanding, is a series of acts that congeal over time to produce an effect of "natural" maleness or femaleness. Maternity has been viewed similarly: "To be a mother is to enact mothering" (Chandler 273). Such an understanding of parenting might seem to free women from oppressive models of mothering, such as those evoked by Wolf; or, indeed, from mothering altogether. If maternity is a performance or a mode of cognition—philosopher Sara Ruddick writes of "maternal thinking" (44)—then men can do it just as well. There is a danger here, it should be noted: in granting men the status of mother there is a risk that the work still done primarily by (female) mothers is overlooked. There is also the risk that the significance of women's experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding is trivialized or ignored.

The issue of men as mothers also raises a troubling question: Why, if we can accept this notion, are we so resistant to the idea of women as "fathers"? For as queer theorist Judith Halberstam notes, gender is apparently reversible only in one direction (269). This is perhaps particularly so where parenting is concerned: in the course of her discussion of masculinity in women, Halberstam speculates: "Presumably, female masculinity threatens the institution of motherhood" (273). Indeed, the ideologies of motherhood and femininity are closely intertwined, even interdependent. To disrupt one—to suggest, for example, that women might not be naturally caring and selfless—is to disrupt the other, in, one hopes, productive and interesting ways. This is what Shriver's novel does.

But what, first of all, is "masculinity"? As Halberstam points out, masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white-male middle-class body" (2); that is, it is normalized to the point of invisibility. Masculinity is seen as something that "just is"; femininity, on the other hand, is perceived as elaborate and artificial (Halberstam 234). And yet, as Halberstam points out, massive amounts of time and money are spent ratifying versions of masculinity that we support and trust (1). Masculinity, for Halberstam, has connotations of legitimacy, privilege, and wealth, and for her, female masculinity is empowering. She describes the figure of the stone butch as "viable, powerful, and affirmative" (126) and argues that masculinity in heterosexual women, too, has health benefits, traditional models of femininity being in many cases constraining and debilitating. Shriver's *Kevin* echoes and reinforces such challenges, as we will see.

Challenging Motherhood, Challenging Femininity

Shriver's dense, complex novel takes the form of a series of letters from Eva Kharchadourian to her husband, Franklin. Eva is the mother of Kevin. Aged 15, Kevin carries out a high-school massacre, killing nine people—seven fellow students, a teacher, and a cafeteria worker—with the aid of a bow and arrow. Eva begins her correspondence in November 2000, one year and eight months following her son's killing spree, and ends it in April 2001. Kevin is now nearly 18 and soon to be transferred from the juvenile correctional facility where he is currently detained to an adult prison.

In her letters, Eva reflects on the events leading up to her son's crime, in particular on her decision to become a mother and on her hostility toward her son, who appears sinister from birth. A series of malicious acts committed by Kevin is described. Although in some cases ambiguity surrounds these acts (for example, did Kevin cause the disappearance of the family pet?), the overall impression is one of malevolence. Interspersed with the account of Kevin's birth and development are descriptions of Eva's current abject, isolated life in Nyack, including her regular visits to Kevin in the Claverack institution where he is held. We also learn how Eva has been treated by neighbours and by the authorities following her son's crimes. Her house has been vandalized; she has been shunned, gawped at, or prayed for, and accused in a civil trial of "parental negligence." Halfway through the text it is revealed that Kevin had a younger sister, Celia. It also emerges toward the end of the book that both Franklin and Celia are dead: murdered by Kevin the same day he committed the high-school killings.

Already it is apparent that this novel challenges any residual notions of maternity as an instinctive and unproblematic affair. The work has indeed

been described as a "resolutely anti-parenthood and anti-children book" (Smith). Given this bleakness, the novel's popularity is interesting. Despite the author's initial difficulties in finding a publisher (see Cusk, "Darkness"), the novel (Shriver's seventh) has been a critical and commercial success in the United States and in Britain, where it won the 2005 Orange Prize for fiction.² Clearly, Shriver's multilayered depiction of contemporary mothering offers something useful. In particular, I would suggest, it poses a welcome challenge to idealizations of maternity, and to assumptions that all women can and should mother; Eva's existence is in fact destroyed by maternity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the novel has been criticized for its negative depiction of mothering. It has been suggested that in focusing on an extreme case, Shriver is being somehow dishonest: Jennie Bristow states that "most children are not Kevin, and we don't need to talk about them as if they were," an interestingly defensive position. Another critic wonders why Kevin and his family were not referred for assessment and counselling (Curtis), being unable, apparently, to accept the story that is presented. Sarah A. Smith thinks Shriver "has rendered her exploration of motherhood futile by linking it to such black events." Another critic opines similarly: "It would have been a braver, more interesting ... novel had Shriver steered clear of the headline-orientated denouement altogether" (Trippy). Shriver has herself commented on the anxious responses to her book, noting, "[Kevin] has drawn fire from Catholic websites for being hostile to 'family,' while grotesque distortions of the book's underlying theme ... have spored from article to article like potato blight" (Shriver, "No Kids" 38).

A further criticism that has been levelled at the novel is that it is unoriginal, because "there is nothing taboo about whingeing in print about the everyday grind of maternity"; here, this commentator cites Rachel Cusk, Kate Figes, and Naomi Wolf (Bristow). Two points are worth raising in response. Firstly, the fact that Eva's is an extreme case does not render her, or Shriver's, insights any less valuable (or uncomfortable). It would in any case be odd to expect that literary texts should present only typical stories with which one can easily identify. Secondly, it is a relatively recent development that women have been able to indulge in public "whingeing" about mothering, and a luxury not to be scorned. Shriver's "whinge," incidentally, does not arise from her personal experience—the author is not herself a mother—which renders the charge of self-indulgent moaning even weaker.

Let us look now at the content of this "whinge." Before becoming a mother, Shriver's Eva is a wealthy and successful businesswoman who runs a company producing guidebooks and who travels frequently; as such she is

"masculine" in Halberstam's sense. Her initial worries about mothering—"I was afraid of being the steadfast, stationary anchor" (Shriver, *Kevin* 31)—are soon borne out. Her independence is gradually eroded and replaced with a life of boredom and entrapment. Eva and Franklin move away from Manhattan when Kevin is four, to a house of Franklin's choosing in Nyack, which is "woodsy and right on the Hudson" (31). The house seems to Eva bare and open: "I panicked, thinking, *There's nowhere to hide*" (32). It can be seen as an emblem of maternity: an institution that leaves Eva both confined and exposed. Eva's identity evaporates, as her knowledge and skills are proved useless in motherhood (153, 193). The destructive Kevin ruins the wallpaper Eva assembles from maps (157–58); her experience and memories are thus symbolically erased.

Eva's mother, in contrast to her globe-trotting daughter, is an agoraphobic. While this Armenian widow constitutes a complex character in her own right, she could be also seen as an extreme representative of a previous generation of women: cloistered and fearful (see Friedan 18). The differences between Eva and her mother tell of a generational shift, one that Gloria Steinem has seen as a move toward female masculinity: "we are becoming the men our mothers wanted us to marry" (qtd. in Wolf 102). Eva is, or was, affluent, attractive, and ambitious—and, as noted, "masculine." Eva's mother's household condition also calls to mind the feminist critique of the public/private divide, which served historically to isolate and confine women to the domestic sphere, while men were free (or bound) to participate in education, politics, and business (e.g., Badinter 145). At the time of her letter-writing, Eva herself is leading an isolated life, cut off from politics and from most forms of human interaction. "Having it all" has clearly not worked out for her (see Benn 45–47; Buxton 6), and retreat into isolation is the only possible option: a damning indictment of contemporary motherhood.

Shriver's novel also deals with the (relatively recent, Western) idea of maternity as a "choice," one that here appears perverse. Indeed, it would seem more natural for women *not* to become mothers, given that parenting involves such factors as "dementing boredom," "social demotion," "unatural altruism," and a "worthless social life"—not to mention the unforeseen risk "son might turn out killer," as Eva wryly reflects (Shriver, *Kevin* 26, 29). And the assumption that women are naturally inclined to be mothers is damaging:

For years I'd been awaiting that overriding urge I'd always heard about, the narcotic pining that draws childless women ineluctably to strangers' strollers in

parks. I wanted to be drowned by the hormonal imperative.... Whatever the trigger, it never entered my system, and that made me feel cheated.... By the time I gave birth to Kevin at thirty-seven, I had begun to anguish over whether, by not simply accepting this defect, I had amplified an incidental, perhaps merely chemical deficiency into a flaw of Shakespearean proportions. (27)

It is thus suggested that it would have been better for Eva to have accepted the lack of maternal urge (see Badinter xxi). Shriver can here be seen to criticize biologism: the assumption that the body—understood as “pure” and “natural”—conditions and constructs the self; in Eva’s case, it is societal and cultural factors that shape her decision. In retrospect, though, the choice to become a parent makes no sense to Eva, philosophically or psychologically; she considers the erroneous view that having a child gives meaning to life, for: “if there’s no reason to live without a child, how could there be with one?” And if one seeks purpose in a child, then the meaning of life is simply transferred to the next generation in “a cowardly and potentially infinite delay” (Shriver, *Kevin* 255).

Eva’s views, of course, are not to be taken as Shriver’s own. In a 2005 article for *The Guardian*, Shriver discusses her own and many of her contemporaries’ choice not to have children, problematizing and, to an extent, critiquing this decision. Declaring “I’ve had it with being the Anti-Mom,” she explores the declining fertility rate in the West and argues: “baby boomers and their offspring have shifted emphasis from the communal to the individual, from the future to the present, from virtue to personal satisfaction.... We will assess the success of our lives in accordance not with whether they were righteous, but with whether they were interesting and fun” (“No Kids” 41). Thus, Shriver criticizes widespread, rampant individualism. Shriver’s earlier novel *Game Control* likewise offers a thoughtful treatment of the issue of reproduction. It deals satirically, and often grotesquely, with the question of population control in Africa, investigating its political and ethical dimensions. At the end of the novel, we learn of the main female protagonist’s desire to have children, a wish that is perhaps to be read as ironic and absurd, but which might also be seen as a celebration of procreation—this is a typically ambiguous touch on Shriver’s part.

To return to *Kevin*: like Butler and such postmodernist theorists as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, Shriver understands (maternal) experience as constructed, or performed. During discussions about possible parenthood, Eva and Franklin engage in role-play: “[t]hese talks of ours had a gameliness.... This time I bid for the more daring role: ‘At least if I got pregnant, something would happen.’” (Shriver, *Kevin* 16–17). As well as re-

calling Lyotardian notions of “just gaming,” these references to play and performance also bring to mind Butlerian performativity. Eva performs pregnancy; she “assemble[s] [herself] into the glowing mother-to-be” (52). She deliberately styles herself as a “mother-to-be,” then, drawing on the stock of cultural associations and imperatives (asexuality, radiance, sobriety) that attach themselves to that figure. Eva’s performance recalls Wolf, who notes that the pregnant woman is supposed to express only a blossoming sense of joy and anticipation (53); ambivalence is not permitted here. Shriver’s Eva, having just given birth to Kevin and disappointed by her own lack of a response, “reache[s] for a line from TV” (82); again, there is a sense of performance, of inauthenticity.

Thus Shriver rejects biologism and embraces constructivism, or performativity. But while the novel critiques biologism on the one hand, it also, on the other, endorses it, by suggesting a view of the female body, particularly the pregnant body, as all-engulfing and all-powerful. Shriver states in an interview: “There are downsides to both sexes, and the downside to being female is pretty obvious. We haven’t run the world. It’s hard not to have some misgivings about the whole process of pregnancy and motherhood. It’s a tremendous imposition.” In the novel, pregnancy is indeed viewed as an imposition. It changes Eva’s view of her own body, rendering it animalistic. Her body becomes a resource: “I felt expendable, throw-away, swallowed by a big biological project that I didn’t initiate or choose.... I felt used” (Shriver, *Kevin* 51). Pregnancy constitutes an invasion; Eva refers to the “humbling price of a nine-month freeloader” (58). And childbirth, Eva states, is “awful,” and akin to “ramming a watermelon through a passage the size of a garden hose” (74, 76). In this way, the novel is reminiscent of early second-wave feminist rejections of motherhood. It brings to mind, for example, Simone de Beauvoir’s description of the pregnant woman as “life’s passive instrument” and “the prey of the species” (513, 515). The evocation of childbirth echoes radical feminist Shulamith Firestone’s reports of “shitting a watermelon” (189).

Eva’s discomfort with the biological facts of pregnancy, with her body, ties in with Western (“masculine”?) ideals of individualism and rationality. Eva’s agency is undermined by pregnancy: “I had demoted myself from driver to vehicle, from householder to house” (Shriver, *Kevin* 58). Such a challenge to individualism has been seen as productive and subversive by feminist theorists. Pregnancy, it has been pointed out, poses a challenge to the unified subject of humanist discourse (Cosslett 117). Mothering in general challenges Western capitalist ideals of individualism (Chandler 272; DiQuinzio xv). Shriver’s assertion of female corporeality, of natality, can

also be seen as subversive. When Eva looks round her on the street and registers with incredulity that "every one of these people came from a woman's cunt" (Shriver, *Kevin* 58), she is posing a challenge to a culture that routinely suppresses the mother's body, that, according to Luce Irigaray, practises matricide (47).

But more obviously, the novel is interested in how the female body, in particular the pregnant body, is constrained and controlled, in line with numerous feminist analyses, including that of Wolf (see also Rich 176). When Eva is pregnant, Franklin closely monitors her behaviour, disapproving, for example, of her drinking a glass of wine (Shriver, *Kevin* 51). He displays a proprietary protectiveness toward his unborn child; when Eva goes out it is "as if I were bearing away one of your prized possessions without asking" (63). Eva challenges foetalism, then, the stress on the unborn child at the expense of the desires, experience, and well-being of the mother (Faulstich 14). Eva's critical reflection that "the right to boss pregnant women around was surely on its way into the Constitution" (Shriver, *Kevin* 52) accords with contemporary feminist anxieties to that effect (see also Cusk, *Life's Work* 34).

Eva's most explicit challenge to traditional femininity, and to the very notion of "tradition," comes during a discussion between Eva and Franklin about the surname of their unborn child. Franklin appeals to "tradition" when arguing that the child should take his surname: "since somebody's gotta lose, it [sic] simplest to stick with tradition." Eva replies: "According to tradition, women couldn't own property until, in some states, the 1970s. Traditionally in the Middle East we walk around in a black sack and traditionally in Africa we get our clitorises carved out like a hunk of gristle—You stuffed my mouth with cornbread" (Shriver, *Kevin* 59). Eva thus parodies and undermines the notion of tradition as a guarantor of rightness. She is then silenced; it is suggested that such critiques have limited power.

Further criticism of traditional femininity is to be found in the figure of Kevin's sister, Celia, a "girl-girl" whose "feminine diffidence and delicacy were foreign to (Eva)" (Shriver, *Kevin* 226). (Eva does, nonetheless, display care and connectedness in relation to her daughter.) Celia is squeamish and sensitive, and Kevin exploits her. A shocking manifestation of this dynamic—which may be expressed in terms of masculine dominance versus feminine submissiveness (see here Dinnerstein 40)—occurs when Kevin apparently pours cleaning fluid in Celia's eye. Kevin's murder of Celia is its horrific culmination. Shriver's portrayal of an exaggeratedly "feminine" femininity stands at odds with the "masculinity" of the maternal protagonist and brings to mind Halberstam's view that femininity is unhealthy.

(American) Masculinity in *Kevin*

"Masculinity" (in men or women) is not unquestioningly celebrated in the novel, however. We see this most obviously in the depiction of Kevin. Eva's reaction to discovering the sex of her first child is disappointment. She associates boys with menace:

For all our squinting at the two sexes to blur them into duplicates, few hearts race when passing giggles of giggling schoolgirls. But any woman who passes a clump of testosterone-drunken punks without picking up the pace, without avoiding eye contact that might connote challenge or invitation, without sighing inwardly with relief by the following block, is a zoological fool. A boy is a dangerous animal. (Shriver, *Kevin* 62)

Eva again indicates a biologicistic view of sexual difference here; sex, for her, is not a construct—"squinting" gender/queer theorists are dismissed—but a "zoological" affair. Such a view might be termed reductionist. But in any case, what is interesting here is the understanding of masculinity as threatening and violent. Eva finds boys to display an aggressive sexuality; and indeed, aged 14, Kevin masturbates openly in front of her, something Franklin refuses to take seriously (297).

Kevin uses his sexuality to hurt and humiliate others. Aged 15, he accuses his drama teacher, Miss Pagorski, of sexual harassment (Shriver, *Kevin* 331). Although it is never proven whether his charges have any real foundation—throughout the text, truth and blame emerge as uncertain terms—enough doubt is cast on his account by Eva for us to suspect that it is a malicious fabrication. It results in the demotion of the teacher in question, who is portrayed as inept and vulnerable. Again, masculine dominance over women is played out (see Benjamin 190), albeit in a stereotypically "feminine" (sly, indirect) way. A comparable slant is taken in Shriver's earlier novel *The Female of the Species*, in which a young man seduces an older woman, a respected anthropologist, eventually to reject and humiliate her.

Kevin also suggests how masculinity is bound up with nationalism, in particular Americanness. Kevin could be seen as standing for the United States in general. He defines himself firmly as "an American," rejecting any link to Eva's Armenian background, and his gung-ho militarism, which Franklin finds "adorable," is perhaps also to be read as typically "American" (Shriver, *Kevin* 214, 219). The terminally bored Kevin, lacking in interest in others and murderously jealous of those with passions, like those he kills, can be seen as representing a deadly, glutted empire; he has everything, and

yet he "hated being here so much" (90). Kevin's teacher speculates that it is affluence itself that makes him feel superfluous and destructive (333–34). The suggestive linkage between Kevin and the United States is affirmed when the patriotic Franklin defends his country: "Sure it was imperfect, you would add, with the same hastiness with which I observed before Kevin was born that of course some children 'had problems'" (37–38).

America, it is implied, breeds violence, on which it thrives; Kevin's crimes offer excitement and interest (Shriver, *Kevin* 96, 357), just as his birth had promised eventfulness and distraction to his parents. This is a hollow and materialistic place, a country in which "materials are everything," as Franklin's father opines (4, 136), and in which nothing is authentic. Franklin, a locations finder for an advertising company, boasts that he can "find you the Rhone Valley in Pennsylvania" (37).⁵ Eva reflects on the design of a Campbell's soup tin, recalling Warhol: this is a telling detail, for as Eva muses, "The whole country's lost, everybody copies everybody else, and everybody wants to be famous" (3, 314). Nothing in Eva's current life is stable or authentic: "This tremulous little house—it doesn't feel quite real, Franklin. And neither do I" (5). The country itself seems unreal, ridiculous. Eva writes her letters against the backdrop of the hung election of 2000, a detail that implies the impossibility of change, the absurdity of the political process.

Franklin does not offer an entirely positive model of masculinity, either. Unlike Eva, Franklin embraces the role of parent with a simple-mindedness that occasionally strains the reader's good will. Eva reflects that in general Franklin "seemed to be able to squint and blur off the rough edges" (Shriver, *Kevin* 135). As a father, he "bun[ny] into all that stuffed-bunny schlock" (75), as his view of Kevin, so radically at odds with Eva's (and the reader's), also implies. Paternity here appears unquestioning, and even ridiculous, though not unmovable. In the end, Franklin is destroyed.

What of Eva, then? Is there in her "female masculinity" (Halberstam) something to be celebrated? What can be salvaged from this story? Eva is certainly not an obvious role model. While she may be subversively "feminist" in her rejection of traditional ideals of women as nurturing and caring, her ("masculine") individualism and pragmatism are not attractive. Without telling Franklin, Eva has the foetus she is carrying tested for Down Syndrome, and the reasons she gives are brutal: "I did not want to mother an imbecile or a paraplegic; whenever I saw fatigued women wheeling their stick-limbed progeny ... my heart didn't melt, it sank" (Shriver, *Kevin* 72). As Kevin will later point out, Eva can be "kind of harsh" (273). This harshness is manifested most awfully in her methods of mothering, as we will see.

Eva is as much a product of America as her sons. Her nomadism (Braidotti), her endless quest for novelty, is as much symptomatic of American excess and boredom as are Kevin's apathy and violence. In this, Eva is like Estrin Lancaster in Shriver's *Ordinary Decent Criminals*, with her "avaricious, crackling of maps" (60). When Kevin challenges Eva regarding her anti-Americanism, her mind goes blank: "I ... worried that maybe I hadn't kept the U.S. at arm's length from sophisticated cosmopolitanism, but rather from petty prejudice" (Shriver, *Kevin* 276). Kevin also observes that Eva falsely "others" Americans (307). When it is revealed that Kevin admires and is proud of his mother, Eva's detachment, from her son and her country, is further challenged. She has to acknowledge: "I live here" (307).

Eva's mothering is certainly not ideal. Recent feminist theories of maternity stress "mutuality" or "interdependence" between mother and child (Benjamin 19; Everingham 6). As mentioned before, mothering has been seen to pose a challenge to the individualism prized by Western capitalism. Maternity has been viewed as a key site of ethical behaviour (e.g., Kristeva 182); indeed, the mother-child dyad could be theorized as the source of, or model for, all ethical behaviours. This view is not without risks; it could be dangerous to reinscribe women as "angels of the house," guardians of morality. But in any case, this risk is not run in *Kevin*, in which Eva is a self-confessed "rotten mother" (Shriver, *Kevin* 250). While she might resolve to "[meet] Kevin halfway" (120), her attempt at mutuality falls in the face of Kevin's intractable awfulness. There are hints of maternal sadism: Eva feels a "gush of savage joy" when confiscating Kevin's squirt gun (150). Most shockingly, she throws the six-year-old Kevin across the room in a rage, causing his arm to break (194). Such a reminder of maternal power is on the one hand useful—it brings to light the importance of mothers' care and protection—but on the other hand, this is of course no way to behave.⁶

Power, Blame, Ethics

As implied, blame is a complex issue here, for the "truth" is manipulable and even inaccessible (Shriver, *Kevin* 68, 70). As we have only Eva's perspective on events, we cannot easily reach judgment. Shriver's treatment of the issue of responsibility is nuanced. While Eva is widely shunned and blamed for her son's crimes, she herself is wary of that side of her account that renders her accountable. Guilt can be self-indulgent, she points out: "There's a self-aggrandizement in these wallowing mea culpas, a vanity" (65). Eva critiques the phenomenon of mother-blaming, then (see 157), highlighting the fact that mothers are not isolated from their societies. As

philosopher Ruddick expresses it, mothering is a practice that "begins in response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world" (17). At Eva's civil trial, Eva is asked by her lawyer if she monitored Kevin's toys and television and video viewing:

"We tried to keep Kevin away from anything too violent or sexually explicit, especially when he was little. Unfortunately, that meant my husband couldn't watch most of his own favorite programs. And we did have to allow one exception."

"What was that?"

"The History Channel." A titter; I was playing to the peanut gallery. (Shriver, *Kevin* 144)

Childhood and adulthood are constructs, Eva notes, and when people "protect" their children, they are simply boosting their own self-importance by holding on to an idea of some adult mystique (147).

Mothers might be powerful, but so, in Eva's view, are children (Shriver, *Kevin* 107, 302). Parental authority is fragile and dependent on threat (202). In addition, as Eva observes, all children are different and present varying challenges; she is puzzled as to how anyone can claim to "love children," as if they were all the same (180). Eva points out to her lawyer that she herself was unprotected from Kevin's "coarsening influence" (144), a claim that highlights the agency and particularity of the child. While for Franklin, who has "that insouciant boy-things going," Kevin is a simple creature, a blank slate, for Eva he is "pre-extant, with a vast, fluctuating interior life" (116). The question of nature versus nurture, like that of blame, is subtly explored here. As Shriver states, "Clearly, both nature and nurture have an effect [in the shaping of the self]."

Shriver, then, presents a complex view of mother-child relationships and their interaction with particular societies. She also critiques the heterosexual family. Although her novel is not explicitly interested in queerness—there is, for example, a dismissive reference on Franklin's part to "the fag" downstairs (Shriver, *Kevin* 92)—and nor is Shriver herself (see note 1),⁷ the dissection of heterosexual relationships offered here could usefully be harnessed for a queer agenda. As we have seen, Shriver's work challenges the assumption that sex and gender are stable and unquestionable, and it undermines dominant ideals regarding women's capacity for mothering. In questioning the idea of the "family," it contributes even more powerfully to feminist and/or queer debates.

Eva questions patriarchal "tradition," as shown. She also views the notion of "family" with suspicion: "We were no longer Eva and Franklin, but

Mommy and Daddy; this was our first meal together as a *family*, a word and a concept about which I had always been uneasy" (Shriver, *Kevin* 54; see also Shriver, *Perfectly Good Family* 116). After Kevin's birth, Franklin appears to prioritize his son over Eva, not, for example, noticing that she is seriously ill (Shriver, *Kevin* 94). Gradually the relationship between Eva and Franklin is destroyed. We are told that Eva defies "heterosexual norms" when she reveals her sexual fantasies to Franklin (64)—but when she wants to talk about her ambivalence as a mother this is not permitted. This is an interesting detail, suggesting that motherhood, in contrast to sex, is still surrounded by taboo. Similarly, Eva vows she will never reveal to anyone that childbirth left her unmoved (83). This detail recalls Halberstam's observation regarding the closely linked ideologies of motherhood and femininity.

But while maternity and the family are subject here to deconstruction and suspicion, the mother-child bond is powerfully, if disturbingly, affirmed: Eva maintains a relationship with her son and keeps a room ready for him in her house for when he is released from prison, so that "perhaps what comes across most strongly [in the novel] is the sheer power of the parent-child bond—for better or for worse." Eva reflects that "it must be possible to earn a devotion by testing an antagonism to its very limit" (Shriver, *Kevin* 400). In testing maternal ambivalence to the limit, the novel earns serious attention, ultimately promoting respect for the intensity of the mother-child relationship. And in its very "harshness," even perversity, it triggers questions that a sentimental, glossed-over treatment of motherhood could not do. Eva notes that "for Kevin, progress was deconstruction" (397): the novel's deconstruction of mothering—particularly the gender of mothering—likewise constitutes progress, enriching existing debates about parenthood and opening up new lines of inquiry.

In conclusion, although *Kevin* is not concerned with offering ethical guidance as to the issue of parenting, its very complexity and ambivalence can be seen as ethical: the work calls for a necessary reappraisal of current social arrangements. In particular, it asks that we look again at traditional assumptions about gender, sex, and parenting, as argued. A perverse reading of the novel might even say that it is profoundly "maternal," where "maternity" is understood as connoting relationality, dialogue. As Cusk puts it, this is a book "about the dangerous distance that exists between what we feel and what we are actually prepared to admit when it comes to family life ... about what we need to talk about, but can't" ("Darkness").

Notes to Chapter 10

- 1 Shriver is not keen on the term "feminist": "I'm uneasy with the label 'feminist,' which is unfortunate. What the word means on the face of it I should be able to embrace. But the connotations of the term have soured. These days if you say you're a feminist people hear that you are A) ugly, B) probably a dyke, C) shrill, touchy, and eager to bring you to book on some minor infraction of political correctness, and—worst of all, in my view, D) utterly lacking a sense of humour" (Lawless). Shriver's fear of being perceived as a "dyke" is interesting, smacking as it does of homophobia, as is her general fear of others' perceptions, which seems uncharacteristic.
- 2 As Shriver herself notes: "In the context of my hitherto doomed literary career, the novel that won last year's Orange Prize was already selling bizarrely well by the time it made the shortlist. Nevertheless, the prize gave those sales long legs, and raised my public profile to the point of embarrassment" (Shriver, "It Pains Me").
- 3 Like Shriver, "a woman writer with a man's name" (Cusk, "Darkness"). Cusk reports: "Lionel Shriver changed her name from Margaret Ann when she was 15. She was, she says, a tomboy, but there was more to it than that. 'Lionel' isn't a pseudonym, or an alternative identity. It's an alas that frees her in a small but important sense. As a child, everywhere she looked—among her peers, in her parents' marriage, on the shelves at the bookshop—boys, men, had a better time. So, on the threshold of womanhood, she declined."
- 4 Eva does, however, enjoy the company of men, as the rather barbed explanation follows: "I liked their down-to-earth quality. I was prone to mistake aggression for honesty, and I disdained daintiness" (Shriver, *Kevin* 62).
- 5 "That was one of your favourite themes: that profusion, replication, popularity wasn't necessarily devaluing," Eva recalls (Shriver, *Kevin* 37).
- 6 At a reading on 13 Dec. 2005, in the Purcell Room on the South Bank in London, Shriver chose to read out the passage in which Eva injures her son. She prefaced the reading by assuring us that she would never publicly advocate child abuse, "at least not in this country"; but, she added provocatively, in scenes of mother-child conflict "violence can present itself as an almost refreshing opportunity."
- 7 See also the following squeamish passage in an earlier novel: "There had been times in a public bath when she had stared at a handsome woman in a way that made the other uncomfortably assume Constance was—no, it wasn't that" (Shriver, *Ordinary Decent Criminals* 77). See also a review by Shriver of Nora Vincent's *Self-Made Man*, which describes the year the author spent passing as a man: "Gay or not [Vincent is] still a woman with a woman's perspective," she observes unnecessarily ("Stubble").

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