Connotations
Vol. 22.1 (2012/2013)

Ruinous Fathers, Lethal Mothers: A Response to June Sturrock*

LENA STEVEKER

In her thoughtful essay "Artists as Parents in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice*," June Sturrock explores how Byatt draws on Murdoch's narrative, "intensifying and darkening it so as to forward her own literary concerns" (108). Paying close attention to both the parallels and the differences between Murdoch's and Byatt's texts, Sturrock argues that *The Children's Book* is indebted to the *Good Apprentice* in several ways, most significantly because of its "pervasive treatment […] of the parent as artist" (108). Prominent among the many narrative strands of *The Children's Book* is Byatt's reworking of Murdoch's story of the artist Jesse Baltram whose dysfunctional family revolves around his person and his art. Sturrock identifies Byatt's character of the potter Benedict Fludd as a second Baltram—who in turn is a fictionalized portrayal of the real-life sculptor Eric Gill—before she points out that Byatt shifts the focus of Murdoch's story by including detailed portraits of the artist's female family members. This strategy, Sturrock claims, enables Byatt to consider the traumatizing consequences that living with their abusive father entails for Fludd's daughters. As Sturrock perceptively notes, "Murdoch is not concerned to represent in any detail the damage Jesse does to his family" (112), whereas Byatt "imagines more fully the implications of such a household […] for its abused women" (112).

*Reference: Sturrock, June. "Artists as Parents in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice*." *Connotations* 20.1 (2010/2011): 108-30. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debsturrock02012.htm>.

In *The Children's Book*, however, women are perpetrating mothers as well as victimized daughters. Like her real-life model Edith Nesbit, the character of Olive Wellwood is a successful author of children's books. She is an artist mother who serves to complement Fludd, the destructive artist father. Her self-centredness leads her to neglect her children emotionally, a neglect that disastrously culminates in her eldest son's suicide. Both Benedict Fludd and Olive Wellwood allow Byatt to explore "the potential of the artist for social or moral destructiveness" (Sturrock 113). Although there are indeed more parents and more artists among the many characters in *The Children's Book* than Fludd and Wellwood, these two are clearly the most successful artists and the most damaging parents in the novel. It is through these two characters, as Sturrock convincingly argues, that Byatt presents "parenthood and art [...] as central to human life" (117) and negotiates "the dual responsibilities of the artist, to art and to 'life'—that is to human contacts and more especially to the child" (188).

There is much to commend in Sturrock's attentive discussion of Byatt's novel as reworking and further developing Murdoch's text. Rather than trying to find fault with her essay, I therefore propose to comment on one aspect which I see as complementing her discussion of parental failure in *The Children's Book*. Indeed, "[a]ll parents fail" in Byatt's novel (Sturrock 116). Both the potter Benedict Fludd and the writer Olive Wellwood damage their children. But the failure of Olive Wellwood, the novel's central female artist, is a failure with a difference, because it entails fatal consequences.

Olive Wellwood is the most recent and the most complex personification of the figure of the female artist, whose presence pervades Byatt's fiction.[1] In many of Byatt's novels there are characters who struggle with their identities as both women and artists. Her representations of female artists revolve around the question of how women can reconcile art and life. In her early novel *The Game* (1967), for example, art can be seen as preying on life, as the character of Julia Corbett exploits her sister Cassandra's experiences as a blueprint for a bestselling novel, which then causes Cassandra to kill herself.[2] A

discussion of how life in turn impinges on art can, for instance, be found in Byatt's Booker prize-winning *Possession* (1990), in which the poetess Christabel LaMotte loses her independence when she, an unmarried woman, finds herself pregnant in the wake of a passionate love affair with a fellow poet.[3] In *Possession*, Christabel LaMotte fails as a writer partly because the strict moral and social codes of Victorian patriarchal society stifle her creative potential. If, however, Byatt's female characters do become successful artists, such as Julia Corbett in *The Game*, and indeed Olive Wellwood in *The Children's Book*, they are portrayed as somehow missing out on "life," as lacking in sufficient emotional responsibility towards their children.

Olive is a particularly unsettling example of how Byatt envisions creative women damaging their families. She is, I would argue, both the most successful female artist and the most dangerous mother Byatt has created up to date. To all appearances, Olive is the first of Byatt's female artists who is able to overcome the art/life dichotomy. She is a popular author whose tales sell well enough to support her large family. She has seven children, and she feels deeply attached to all of them, especially to Tom, her eldest child. She thinks of him as "her beloved son" (*Children's Book* 529) and believes that "Tom was part of her, and she was part of him" (203). But although her public image is that of a woman who is both a popular author and a loving mother (e.g. 527), she is revealed as privileging her identity as a writer over her identity as a mother. Developing an ever increasing insight into her mother's personality as she grows up, Olive's daughter Dorothy realizes that "Olive [...] was most complete in the act of reading and writing herself" (316). As Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards de Campos have noted:

> She [Olive] is a woman writer who has had the will to follow the life of the mind, who has literally and figuratively attained a room of her own, and paid for it by her own handsome earnings. And yet, she has [...] gained this at the expense of her immediate family. She has neglected her children [...] so that she can indulge herself in [...] imaginary worlds [...], and her perceptions of others [...] are tinged with narcissism. (122)

Olive is indeed very protective of her identity as an artist. As she finds herself unable to write whenever anything disturbs her peace of mind, she "ignores a great deal" (*The Children's Book* 301) of what troubles her children. Thus, she deliberately turns a blind eye to the distress Dorothy experiences upon learning that Humphrey, Olive's husband, is not her biological father. Worse, Olive likewise chooses to ignore the feeling of unease that accompanies her decision not to tell her son Tom that she is about to make public a story she has written for him alone by turning it into a West End play. She decides to keep "the whole truth about the play" (529) from Tom although she "kn[ows] she should say [...] something" (520) to him about her theatre project. Her feeling of foreboding proves to have been correct as Tom's sense of betrayal and his feeling that "[s]omething had been taken away from him" (524) are so strong that he commits suicide after attending the play's opening night. Taking his own life is Tom's only means of protecting himself against his mother. Committing suicide is his way of "be[ing] revenged on Olive, evad[ing] Olive, free[ing] himself from Olive and being written about" (569-70). While Olive's disregard of Dorothy shows her general emotional carelessness towards her children, it is her tragic neglect of Tom which particularly exemplifies, as Sturrock argues, that "[a]s with Fludd and his daughters, she [Olive] has damaged her children by turning them to art, by putting them to the service of herself and her art" (115).

Although I agree that both artist characters inflict serious harm upon their children, I would argue that the novel inscribes a gender difference between its male and female artist figures in that it portrays the mother artist as even more dangerous than the father artist. There can be no doubt that Benedict Fludd gravely damages his daughters. Their father's sexual abuse and his tyrannical control leave each of them traumatized. And yet, his crime against them—a crime that clearly marks Fludd's utter parental failure—is not presented as having the same existential consequences that Olive's failure as a mother has for Tom. I do not want to imply that, in *The Children's Book*, a father's sexual abuse is shown as being in any way "better" or easier

to bear than a mother's emotional neglect. But I think it is noteworthy that, while Benedict Fludd's daughters are eventually allowed to escape their father's influence and lead lives of their own, Olive's son is denied any such liberation. For Tom, the only means of taking himself outside his mother's reach is an act of self-annihilation. Byatt's male artist is a "near-ruinous" father (Sturrock 113), but her female artist is a lethal mother. Sturrock observes that, in *The Children's Book* "Byatt questions [...] the moral status of the artist not just in relation to art, but also in regard to the world of other people" (Sturrock 126). With Olive Wellwood destroying her son's world, the moral status that appears most questionable of all is that of the female artist. That is gender trouble indeed.

Universität des Saarlandes

NOTES

[1]Franken provides in-depth readings of the various female artists in most of Byatt's novels.

[2]For more detailed discussions of how The Game is concerned with the relation of art and life, cf. Alfer and de Campos 24-34, and Steveker, "Solitude" 161-63.

[3]For closer discussions of LaMotte as a failed woman writer cf. Steveker, *Identity and Cultural Memory* 55-60, and Steveker, "Solitude" 157-61.

WORKS CITED

Alfer, Alex, and Amy J. Edwards de Campos. *A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010.

Byatt, A. S. *The Children's Book*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2009.

Franken, Christien. *A. S. Byatt. Art, Authorship and Creativity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Steveker, Lena. *Identity and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

——. "'My Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have': A. S. Byatt's Female Artists." *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Thing in British, Irish and Canadian Fiction after 1945*. Ed. Anette Pankratz and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz. Heidelberg: Winter, 2012. 155-68.