



*Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature*

# T. S. ELIOT AND THE MOTHER

Matthew Geary



ROUTLEDGE



# T. S. Eliot and the Mother

The first full-length study on T. S. Eliot and the mother, this book responds to a shortfall in understanding the true importance of Eliot's poet-mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns, to his life and works. In doing so, it radically rethinks Eliot's ambivalence towards women. In a context of mother-son ambivalence (simultaneous feelings of love and hate), it shows how his search for belief and love converged with a developing maternal poetics. Importantly, the chapters combine standard literary critical methods and extensive archival research with innovative feminist, maternal and psycho-analytic theorisations of mother-child relationships, such as those developed by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Jessica Benjamin, Jan Campbell and Rozsika Parker. These maternal thinkers emphasise the vital importance and benefit of recognising the pre-Oedipal mother and maternal subjectivity, contrary to traditional, repressive Oedipal models of masculinity. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the chapters look at Eliot's changing representations and articulations of the mother/mother-child relationship from his very earliest writings through to the later plays. Focus is given to decisive mid-career works: *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), 'Marina' (1930), 'Coriolan' (1931-32) and *The Family Reunion* (1939), as well as to canonical works *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943). Notably, the study draws heavily on the wide range of Eliot materials now available, including the new editions of the complete poems, the complete prose and the volumes of letters, which are transforming our perception of the poet and challenging critical attitudes. The book also gives unprecedented attention to Charlotte Eliot's life and writings and brings her individual female experience and subjectivity to the fore. Significantly, it establishes Charlotte's death in 1929 as a decisive juncture, marking both Eliot's *New Life* and the apotheosis of the feminine symbolised in *Ash-Wednesday*. Central to this proposition is Geary's new formulation for recognising and examining a maternal poetics, which also compels a new concept of maternal allegory as a modern mode of literary epiphany. *T. S. Eliot and the Mother* reveals the role of the mother and the dynamics of mother-son ambivalence to be far more complicated, enduring, changeable and essential to Eliot's personal, religious and poetic development than previously acknowledged.

**Matthew Geary** is an independent scholar in English Literature, Modernism, Psychoanalysis, Feminist Philosophy, Critical Theory and Maternal Studies.

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# T. S. Eliot and the Mother

Matthew Geary

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**For Tash, Louis, Elijah and Edan**

**Without Contraries is no progression.**

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

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# Note on the Text and References

For the most part, this book follows the *MLA Handbook*, eighth edition (2016). This is to aid clarity, accuracy and ease of reference and to keep interruptions to a minimum. It uses an author-page system to give parenthetical reference to in-text and footnote quotations with author name(s) and page numbers in brackets: '(Smidt 33)', '(Mitchell and Slotte 88)'. If the name of the author(s) is in the text, then only the page number is referred to in the citation: '(33)'. In a citation to one of two or more works by the same author(s), the date of composition or publication is included: '(Gordon, 1998: 19)' or 'Gordon (1998)'. If there is only one work by an author, then just the author's name is featured unless the date of composition or publication is relevant or important: 'Crawford' or 'Crawford (2015)'. T. S. Eliot's letters, poetry, prose and plays, as well as archive collections and other frequently cited sources, are identified in parentheses by abbreviation and page or call number(s): for example, '(*PI*, 15; *CP7*, 792; *LTSE1*, 11; *IMH*, 16, 47–59; *CPP*, 285; *HL*, MS 2560/262; *CES*, 35)'. On occasion, the original publication date of an essay, lecture, poem or periodical is included in the parentheses: '(23 May 1919; *CP2*, 41–47)' or '(1954; rpt. 1988: 209–19)'. Where there is no page number, as in some online web publications or periodicals, the author and date are provided: '(Dickey, 2 Jan. 2020)'. Quotations of Eliot's poems *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) are exceptions in this book and are cited by line number(s). Well-known works such as the Bible and those by authors Dante, Shakespeare, Virgil and Aeschylus are abbreviated in parentheses. Commonly studied verse plays and poems are cited by division (act, scene, canto, book, part) and line: '(*Purg.* 30.28–32; *Cor.* 1.3.17)'. Footnotes are used to give further comment, explanation and information that the text cannot accommodate and for references containing numerous citations or evaluative and extended comments on sources. Full details for both published and unpublished writings, articles, illustrations, photographs, media and other sources are included in

the bibliography. The bibliography contains cited sources. Entries in the bibliography are arranged in alphabetical order by author's last name or, if unknown, by title. If there are two or more works by the same author(s) then entries are arranged by date. Works sharing the same author(s) and date are ordered by title.



# Abbreviations

## WORKS BY T. S. ELIOT

- AVP            *Ara Vos Prec* (London: Ovid, 1920)
- A-W            *Ash-Wednesday. The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1*  
(London: Faber, 2015), 85–98.
- CPP            *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 1969)
- CP1            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 1: Apprenticeship Years, 1905–1918* (Baltimore:  
John Hopkins University Press, 2014)
- CP2            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926* (Baltimore:  
John Hopkins University Press, 2014)
- CP3            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 3: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929*  
(Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015)
- CP4            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 4: English Lion, 1930–1933* (Baltimore: John  
Hopkins University Press, 2015)
- CP5            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 5, Tradition and Orthodoxy, 1934–1939*  
(Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017)
- CP6            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 6, The War Years, 1940–1946* (Baltimore: John  
Hopkins University Press, 2017)
- CP7            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 7, A European Society, 1947–1953* (Baltimore:  
John Hopkins University Press, 2018)
- CP8            *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition,*  
*Volume 8, Still and Moving, 1954–1965* (Baltimore: John  
Hopkins University Press, 2019)
- FLA            *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*  
(London: Faber, 1928)
- IMH            *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*  
(London: Faber, 1996)

- LTSE1 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1: 1898–1922*  
(London: Faber, 2011)
- LTSE2 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 2: 1923–1925*  
(London: Faber, 2011)
- LTSE3 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 3: 1926–1927*  
(London: Faber, 2012)
- LTSE4 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 4: 1928–1929*  
(London: Faber, 2013)
- LTSE5 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 5: 1930–1931*  
(London: Faber, 2014)
- LTSE6 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 6: 1932–1933*  
(London: Faber, 2016)
- LTSE7 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 7: 1934–1935*  
(London: Faber, 2017)
- LTSE8 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 8: 1936–1938*  
(London: Faber, 2019)
- OPP *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1971)
- P1 *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1* (London:  
Faber, 2015)
- P2 *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 2* (London:  
Faber, 2015)
- PWEY *Poems Written in Early Youth* (London: Faber, 1967)
- VMP *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (London:  
Faber, 1993)
- WL *The Waste Land. T. S. Eliot: The Poems of T. S. Eliot,*  
*Volume 1* (London: Faber, 2015), 53–77, lines 1–433.
- WLF *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the*  
*Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra*  
*Pound* (London: Faber, 1971)

## BY CHARLOTTE ELIOT

- CES Charlotte Eliot Scrapbook. T. S. Eliot Collection,  
Houghton Library, Harvard University
- SA *Savonarola: A Dramatic Poem* (London: R.  
Cobden-Sanderson, 1926)

## BY SHAKESPEARE

- Cor. *Coriolanus* (London: Methuen, 2006)
- Ham. *Hamlet* (London: Thompson, 2006)
- Per. *Pericles* (London: Methuen, 2004)
- Tmp. *The Tempest* (London: Cengage, 1999)

## OTHER WORKS

- Aen.* Virgil. *Aeneid*. Trans. John Dryden (London: Penguin, 1997)
- Or.* Aeschylus. *The Oresteia: Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides*. Trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1979)
- Inf.* Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy, Part 1, Inferno*. Trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)
- Pur.* Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy, Part 2, Purgatorio*. Trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)
- Par.* Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy, Part 3, Paradiso*. Trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)
- Vn.* Dante Alighieri. *La Vita Nuova*. Trans. Mark Musa (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)

## ARCHIVE COLLECTIONS

- B* Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University
- BL* Bodleian Libraries, Oxford University
- HB* The Hayward Bequest, King's College Modern Archive Centre, Cambridge University
- HL* Houghton Library, Harvard University
- MH* Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center, St. Louis
- OL* Special Collections, Olin Library, Washington University
- RC* Special Collections, Eric V. Hauser Memorial Library, Reed College, Portland

## OTHER ABBREVIATIONS

- OED* Oxford English Dictionary
- MS* Manuscript
- TS* Typescript

# Introduction

## Charlotte Eliot: A Woman of ‘Unusual Brilliance’

T. S. Eliot’s mother, Charlotte ‘Lottie’ Champe Stearns (Figure 0.1), was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on 22 October 1843. A remarkable woman of great intellectual capacity and deep religious conviction, Charlotte led a long, active and creative life in both public and private spheres. As well as being a wife and a mother of seven children, she was a committed member of the Unitarian Church and several women’s clubs in St. Louis, Missouri. Far from a typical Victorian ‘Angel in the House’, she was a schoolteacher, active feminist and social reformer. Additionally, she was a prolific writer of prose, verse, hymns and essays and regularly contributed to journals, newspapers and magazines. Charlotte’s graduation testimonial describes her as a ‘young lady of unusual brilliance as a scholar’. A memorial written after her death in 1929, now held in archive collections at Houghton Library, Harvard, elucidates how ‘both by inheritance and personal conviction, she possessed the highest standards from individual education, development and responsibility’. The memorial ends: ‘her children rise up and call her blessed, and her works praise her’.

Biographers, critics, and scholars have long recognised the importance of Charlotte Eliot to T. S. Eliot’s life and works. Despite the amount of work conducted on Charlotte’s influence, however, the extent and complexity of her formative and permanent impact is still insufficiently examined. The continuing release of new Eliot materials, including ‘fugitive’ prose, previously unpublished poetry, and letters to, from and about Charlotte Eliot, confirms her to be a profound influence. Especially significant is Charlotte’s contribution to her son’s personal, spiritual and poetic development. The materials reveal the importance to Eliot of Charlotte’s critical opinion on his writings and their success, Eliot’s intense love for his mother and persistent need to be close to her, as well as a link between Eliot’s connection with his mother and his shifting perceptions and representations of women. Of greatest value is new knowledge about Charlotte Eliot’s death in 1929 and the transformative effect it had on Eliot and his poetics. Thus, a new, more thorough, balanced, sensitive and nuanced consideration of the Eliot mother–son relationship is timely and important.

2 *Introduction*



*Figure 0.1 T. S. and Charlotte Eliot. c. 1921.*

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*T. S. Eliot and the Mother* radically rethinks Eliot's changing attitudes towards women in his life and work, in a context of mother–son ambivalence (simultaneous feelings of love and hate), demonstrating how Eliot's search for belief and love converged with a developing maternal poetics. Importantly, the study combines standard literary-critical methods (close reading and extensive archival, contextual, and biographical research) with innovative feminist, maternal and psychoanalytic theorisations of mother–child relationships, such as those developed by Julia Kristeva, Jessica Benjamin, Luce Irigaray and Rozsika Parker, which emphasise the importance of the pre-Oedipal mother, contrary to traditional Western Oedipal models of masculinity. Applying this interdisciplinary approach, I analyse Eliot's changing representations and articulations of the mother/mother–child relationship—from his earliest writings to the later plays. From this, I reveal the latent fascination and traumatic relationship with the mother contained within early works, climaxing in *The Waste Land* (1922). Then, I show this relationship as becoming manifest and *more positive* in his mid-career writings: *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), 'Marina' (1930), 'Coriolan' (1931–32) and *The Family Reunion* (1939).

Specifically, this book argues that Eliot's infant, pre-Oedipal experience was a formative influence on his life and work, causing, in early years, a poetry characterised by hysteria and extreme ambivalence in its longing for the mother. From *Ash-Wednesday* onwards, however, there is a notable redefinition of the early connection with the maternal body. Eliot's post-1927 works, I show, demonstrate the achievement of the recognition of ambivalence towards the mother and a greater appreciation of the positive aspects of maternal ambivalence. Nevertheless, this recognition does fluctuate in works such as 'Coriolan' and *The Family Reunion*, with the re-emergence of male non-recognition, misrecognition, anger, anxiety, hysteria, repression and other symptoms, when ambivalence again becomes unmanageable. The full appearance of the mother as a Virgin Mary figure in *Ash-Wednesday* grounds my interpretation of the poem, marking a developmental achievement with respect to Eliot's understanding of the mother–son relationship. Moreover, Charlotte Eliot's death in 1929 is a key event (note: not *the* key event) in this changed poetic representation, marking both Eliot's *Vita Nuova* (New Life) and the apotheosis of the feminine symbolised in *Ash-Wednesday*. Central to this proposition is my new formulation for recognising and examining a maternal poetics, which compels a new concept of maternal allegory as a modern mode of literary epiphany. My argument for a more embodied view of Eliot's poetics opposes earlier classical psychoanalytic interpretations that only see a son's repeated literary efforts at violent separation from the maternal body for the accomplishment of adulthood, individual identity and poetic canonisation. In contrast, Eliot's oeuvre is his *Stabat Mater*, a hymn to the mother, which evinces a son's continuing, intense need to think, speak and symbolise the mother, as well as his unconscious and conscious longings to come to terms with his own attachments and

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ambivalences towards her. *T. S. Eliot and the Mother* shows the role of the mother and the dynamics of mother–son ambivalence to be far more complicated, enduring, changeable and essential to Eliot’s personal, religious and poetic development than previously acknowledged. In doing so, this book makes an important contribution to Eliot studies: emphasising just how important Charlotte Eliot was to his life and works.

### Advancing T. S. Eliot Criticism

At first, early modernist critics either marginalised or completely neglected Charlotte’s role. This was the result of a scarcity of available biographical information, a lack of attention to Charlotte’s social, political and religious work and prodigious writings, in addition to restrictions placed on the Eliot archives. Consequently, critics speculated about and even vilified Charlotte’s character (Beer 1953; Matthews 1974; Drexler 1980).<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s, even more diligent, well-intentioned biographers such as John Soldo (1983) and Peter Ackroyd (1984) continued to reprimand Charlotte and skim over her achievements as a mother and a woman. Ackroyd depicted her as a ‘thwarted artist’ who simply routed ‘her own frustration with her literary gifts ... into ambition for those of her son’ (19). Moreover, contemporaneous feminist and psychoanalytic criticisms of Eliot and his works served only to consolidate negative critical standpoints. Radical feminists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1988) lambasted Eliot’s literary attacks on women and identified in his work a mystification (and corollary appropriation) of the powers of the vernacular *materna lingua* (‘mother tongue’ or common tongue).<sup>2</sup> They viewed these actions as deliberate male intellectual revisionist strategies: linguistic fantasies that sought to define a male hegemonic modernism and a newly cultivated *patrius sermo* (‘father speech’) in the early twentieth century, against and over the growing power of women.<sup>3</sup> Although less partisan, Tony Pinkney’s post-Freudian approach in *Women in the*

1 A case in point, T. S. Matthews (1974) describes Charlotte as a ‘possessive’ (12), ‘clucking’, ‘protective’ and ‘apprehensive’ mother. An exception is Herbert Howarth’s account (1965), which depicts Charlotte as a more supportive, independently driven and tolerant mother.

2 Gilbert and Gubar’s ‘high’ feminist studies (1988, 1989, 1994) attempt to rewrite the masculinist version of modern history by introducing a ‘new’ modernism through the progressive reintroduction of women into the literary and cultural ‘no-man’s land’ previously held by men. They consider the fantasies of violence against women prevalent in Eliot’s works to be ‘virile reactions’ (1989: 37) to the rising powers of the ‘New Woman’, indicating male modernist fear of both emasculation and the erosion of male hegemony at the hands of the feminisation of literary culture.

3 Explicated by Walter Ong (1981), *patrius sermo* means the national speech bequeathed by ancestors who held it as a kind of property, whereas *lingua materna* means quite simply “mother tongue,” the tongue you interiorized as it came to you from your mother (or a mother figure) (37).

*Poetry of T. S. Eliot: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (1984) argued similarly for a conflicted relation to the maternal body as compelling Eliot's textual violence towards women.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Maud Ellmann's more sophisticated poststructuralist reading of *The Waste Land* in *The Poetics of Impersonality* (1987) also named a 'ferocious misogyny' (98) towards the maternal body.<sup>5</sup>

There is a common factor here: when critics discuss Eliot, his work and its treatment of women, the real, complex mother and her perspective is often missing. Charlotte is absent, looked over, denigrated, idealised or discussed in abstract terms. Her voice is silent, and her subjectivity is lacking or expunged. Even criticisms that note Eliot's poetic explorations of the pre-Oedipal maternal realm, his dependence on, contest with and denial of the maternal feminine, and his adherence to patriarchal ideology and involvement in the gender and sex wars of the modernist period do not theorise the centrality of the real mother in and to his works fully. Instead, they support, if unknowingly and unintentionally, the patriarchal dictate of maternal erasure and displacement. As in Freudian Oedipal theory, reductive, simplistic and polemical interpretations of the Eliot mother-son relationship, which overlook maternal ambivalence, desire, contribution and subjectivity, have pathologised both Charlotte's mothering and Eliot's relation to the maternal feminine. Negative portraits of Charlotte as a barely good enough or domineering phallic mother who sought vicarious satisfaction through her children have been painted primarily from the son's perspective. In accordance, critics have blamed maternal dominance and failure, and the need to repudiate and separate from the omnipotent mother, for Eliot's Prufrockian anxieties as a man and the violent misogyny of some of his works.

Certainly, Eliot's writings display an intensively ambivalent relationship to the maternal feminine. Early poems, 'The Love Song of St. Sebastian' (1914), 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915), 'Portrait of a Lady' (1915), 'Hysteria' (1915), 'Ode' (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), to name but a few, are replete with instances of male abjection, breakdown, hysteria, sadomasochism, sexual inadequacy, physical and sexual violence towards women and revulsion of the female body. Some images, like a man brutally strangling a woman to death in 'St. Sebastian', or characters such as the volage-brained socialite Fresca who awakes from dreams of 'pleasant rapes' in a deleted scene from *The Waste Land*, are impossible to excuse for their unrestrained misogyny

4 Guided by the maxim from Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932), Pinkney claims 'any Eliotic text has to, needs to, wants to in one way or another do a girl in' (1984: 18). For Pinkney, the recurring figure of the 'murdered woman' in Eliot's writings is 'never simply one's mistress', but 'first and foremost recipient of unconscious phantasies pertaining to the most primitive stages of the infant-mother relationship' (49).

5 Ellmann's study implies that personal anxieties concerning an unresolved relation to the powerful mother are responsible for the poem's radical instability, self-division, fragmentation and apocalyptic abjection (see also Rose 1986; DeKoven 1991).



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and extreme fear, distrust and anxiety about women's bodies and female literary and social power. In addition, these poems suggest that seductive, dangerous and devouring *maternal* figures induce such highly intense and hateful feelings. It is no surprise, then, that many critics, mainly though not exclusively feminist, have vehemently attacked Eliot's treatment of women and upheld him as the figurehead for a male, elitist, monolithic modernism, the forbearer of New Criticism and the central villain framing an ideal order of a patriarchal literary history set against the maternal and the feminine (see Gilbert and Gubar 1988; Nicholls 1995; Julius 1995; DuPlessis 2012). Conspicuously, these accusations have had a near-exclusive focus on the negative pole of Eliot's ambivalent relation with women. However, in the wake of Eliot's admittance into the Anglo-Catholic Church in 1927, there is a notable turn in his works: from sinister *femme fatale* figures and devouring maternal monsters to images of silent, holy motherhood or guiding, restorative, more vocal and strong-willed maternal figures or substitutes, which continue to coexist with representations of maternal excess or neglect.<sup>6</sup> Figures of motherly benevolence include the Virgin Mary from *Asb-Wednesday* (1930), Marina from 'Marina' (1930), Agatha from *The Family Reunion* (1939), Mrs Guzzard from *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), and Monica from *The Elder Statesman* (1958). Those who argue for the misogyny of Eliot and his works conveniently overlook or discount these more sacred and positive portrayals.

Recent scholarship has confronted dogmatic, prejudiced and parochial views of Eliot's textual women by depicting his texts as containing multiple, fluid and non-traditional forms of sexuality, gender, desire and the feminine. Current feminist modernist studies now examine the polymorphous gender politics of the modernist period and gender instability as foundational to modernist concepts of identity and difference.<sup>7</sup> Concomitant with this, critics are reading Eliot's relationship to the maternal feminine as far more complex. A range of biographical, feminist, psychoanalytic, postmodernist and queer reassessments have led contemporary efforts to reconsider and recontextualise Eliot, with some critics conflating and employing two or more of these theoretical perspectives (see Childs 1997; Lamos 1998; Chinitz 2003; Laity and Gish 2004; McIntire 2008). These contributions promote a more comprehensive account of Eliot by looking at his largely unexplored engagement with various public and private worlds of women, homoeroticism, eroticism

6 Critics that note in Eliot's post-1927 works the increasing appearance of the female divine and more positive maternal figures include Gordon (1998); Schuchard (1999); and Däumer (1998, 2004).

7 For an introduction to the recent discussions taking place regarding gender complexity and instability in the modernist text, see Deborah Longworth, 'Gendering the Modernist Text' (P. Brooker et al. 157–77). For studies looking to move beyond polarised versions of modernism and postmodernism, see Huyssen; North; Lyon; Rainey; and Felski.

and the maternal. Emphasising Eliot's doubleness, complexity and self-contradiction, these publications counteract critical hypostasization of Eliot and male modernism more generally. To do so, they touch upon some of this book's key approaches, namely, a more nuanced consideration of the social, cultural, and biographical contexts of Eliot's works, and attention to the range and fluctuation of Eliot's portrayals of women throughout his oeuvre.

In this context, it is intriguing that Eliot added a memorandum to his will in 1960 stating 'I do not wish my Executors to facilitate or countenance the writing of any biography of me' (*LTSE5*, xx).<sup>8</sup> Biography, in particular, provides a productive zone for gender/sexuality re-readings of Eliot and his works. To illustrate, Lyndall Gordon's thorough biographical expositions, combined in *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (1998), have been instrumental in revising and complicating earlier interpretations of his attitudes towards women, sexuality and gender.<sup>9</sup> Gordon's biography revealed new insights into four quite different relationships with women: namely, Eliot's lifelong Platonic love, Emily Hale, his first wife, Vivien Haigh-Wood, his close friend Mary Trevelyan and, finally, his second wife, Valerie Eliot. Notably, Gordon also called attention to Charlotte Eliot's formative and significant influence, providing a more detailed explication of her accomplished life and relationship with her son than previously seen, a fuller and more nuanced examination of Charlotte's writings, as well as numerous suggestions about how Charlotte inspires and enters Eliot's work in different ways. This work encouraged the emergence of more complex and sympathetic critical assessments of the centrality of the mother's place in Eliot's development (Oser 1998; Däumer 1998, 2004; Crawford 2015). Notwithstanding such improved treatments, however, critical and biographical accounts of the Eliot mother-son relationship remain sketchy and underdeveloped, with many questions still unanswered. For example, how and to what extent did Eliot's intense early relationship with his mother inform his relationships with and opinions of women? To what degree did it inform transformations in the

8 Eliot wrote to friend John Hayward on 15 February 1938: 'And I don't want any biography written, or any letters printed prior to 1933, or any letters at all of any intimacy to anyone. In fact, I have a mania for posthumous privacy' (*LTSE8*, 800). Eliot again expresses his reservations about biographical and psychological explanations of literature in 'The Frontiers of Criticism' (1956), distinguishing between the 'explanation' of origins and the importance of context (*CP8*, 128). Although not dismissing critical biography completely, he states that it 'is a delicate task in itself; and the critic or the biographer who, without being a trained and practicing psychologist, brings to bear on his subject such analytical skill as he has acquired by reading books written by psychologists, may confuse the issues still further'.

9 For Gordon, Emily Hale is the most pervasive female presence. She cites her as the most likely source for the many ethereal women in Eliot's poetry: La Figlia in 'La Figlia Che Piange', the hyacinth girl in *The Waste Land*, the 'Lady' in *Ash-Wednesday* and Celia in *The Cocktail Party*.

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style, content and form of his writings, in addition to his conflicting and changing depictions of women? How and why did Eliot's relationship with the maternal feminine change in his mid-life, moving into his later years? Moreover, how is this associated with his ongoing search for belief and love?

Importantly, *T. S. Eliot and the Mother* draws extensively on the wide range of new Eliot materials now available, which are transforming our perception of the poet and challenging critical attitudes. These revealing new materials mean that scholars, critics and biographers can approach the Eliot mother-son relationship in a more comprehensive and nuanced manner. Thus, prevailing questions about Charlotte's impact can be answered. At the time of writing, these new materials include eight volumes of correspondence (1898-1938); eight volumes of Eliot's complete prose (1905-53); and new, complete and authoritative scholarly editions of Eliot's poetry (Ricks and McCue 2015). Volumes 3, 4, and 5 of the Eliot letters—covering the years 1926-31—are especially significant, and I refer to them throughout. In addition to these, I incorporate Eliot and family testimonies given in television and radio documentaries and interviews. Furthermore, I examine materials from extensive T. S. Eliot and Eliot family archival resources located variously around the world. These include Charlotte Eliot's scrapbooks, poetry and writings, family photographs, obituaries and diaries, as well as unpublished Eliot family correspondences. They also include original notes, drafts, manuscripts and typescripts of Eliot's poems, prose and plays. Indeed, the unique insights gained from long-neglected or previously embargoed archival resources are one of the driving forces behind this book.

Compared to earlier Eliot studies on the mother, this book draws on a far fuller archive of telling biographical and contextual information. Most crucial, I give unprecedented attention to Charlotte Eliot's life and writings. I detail her lifelong commitment to the Unitarian Church and feminist involvement in several activist women's groups. I closely examine her many religious verses and social and political writings, and I suggest connections with her son's poetry, prose and plays. I emphasise Charlotte's passion for the Virgin Mary and suggest its importance. I shed new light on the traumatic impact on the Eliot family of the premature death of a daughter, Theodora, in December 1886, just a year and a half before T. S. was born. This fact has received virtually no critical attention. Furthermore, I note many important letters, which document and elucidate the intimacy and development of the Eliot mother-son relationship. By these means, I give voice to Charlotte's individual experience of female-maternal subjectivity so that readers may determine a truer, more human and balanced sense of her character. Charlotte's achievements, affiliations, identifications and investments were vital in helping her creatively manage her maternal ambivalence to achieve an individual sense

of self beyond the mothering role. Her extraordinary example, I show, played a significant role in Eliot's ambivalence towards women and his dealing with this ambivalence in developing personal, spiritual and poetic individuation.

### T. S. Eliot's 'Maternal' and 'Between' Works

Just as Eliot believed that we must read the whole of Shakespeare's work as 'one poem... united by one significant, consistent, and, developing personality' (CP4, 482, emphasis in original), *T. S. Eliot and the Mother* examines the oeuvre in its entirety to properly ascertain the varying pattern in the relation to the maternal.<sup>10</sup> It is beyond the scope of this book to examine all of Eliot's poems, prose and plays. Therefore, I select and give new readings to the most important 'maternal works'—as I call them—which position the maternal and suggest Eliot's relation to the maternal at various stages in his life. These include little-known, suppressed or insufficiently attended-to published and unpublished poems 'A Lyric' (1905), 'Mandarins' (1910), 'The Love Song of St. Sebastian' (1914), 'La Figlia Che Piange' (1916), 'Coriolan' (1931–32); canonical texts 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915), *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), *Dante* (1929) and *Four Quartets* (1943); mid-career works *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and 'Marina' (1930); and the decisive late melodrama *The Family Reunion* (1939), and his final play *The Elder Statesman* (1958).

The criterion largely (but not completely) discernible in choosing Eliot's 'maternal works' is the presence of either one of two 'passion scenes' recurrent and metamorphosing throughout his writings: the Coriolanus scene and the garden-flowers scene. Formulated by Anthony Cuda (2010), 'passion scenes' refer to 'a trope or scenario that occurs regularly over some segment of a writer's career, one which tends to appear at key moments of intellectual or emotional discovery' (10). These scenes 'typically portray passive suffering, vulnerability and powerlessness; passion in its several senses is their subject matter'. For Cuda, the critical interest of the 'passion scene' derives 'from the way that its unpredictable shifts and modulations register the artist's shifting modulations and concerns', sketching 'the wildly uneven contours of a lifelong emotional and intellectual engagement, complete with all its false starts, circularities and paradoxes' (11). Cuda sees changes in the 'passion scenes' in an artist's work as indicating 'important tensions in his or her thinking about passion and creativity' (11). I show such tensions in Eliot's Coriolanus and garden-flowers passion scenes as intrinsically

10 Eliot states in 'John Ford' (1932): 'the whole of Shakespeare's work is one poem; and it is the poetry of it in this sense, not the poetry of isolated lines and passages or poetry of the single features he created, that matters most' (CP4, 482).

related to and representative of lifelong changes and notable events in the real mother–son relationship. Critics miss the maternal dimension of Eliot’s passion scenes, or its implications are underexplored.

The years 1925 to 1939 have received far too little attention in recent Eliot scholarship. These years mark a crucial phase in T. S. Eliot’s development, which relates to substantial subjective, spiritual and poetic transformations, as well as to a notable change in his relation to the maternal and the feminine. Eliot’s more direct, visionary and ascetic ‘between’ works, *Ash-Wednesday*, ‘Marina’ and ‘Coriolan’, in addition to the play *The Family Reunion* (which are all, in part, concerned with maternal love and childhood), reflect these transformations. These works focus this study. The major events that critics habitually note as informing Eliot’s ‘between’ works include his acceptance into the Anglo-Catholic Church and severance from the United States in his taking up British citizenship in 1927, the fragmentation of his marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood in the 1920s and ’30s, and his reunions with Platonic love Emily Hale. Barry Spurr rightly contends that we cannot understand Eliot’s post-1927 works fully, and their changes in poetic focus, form, style and content, without a comprehension of what it meant for Eliot to become a member of the Anglo-Catholic faith. Gordon argues for Eliot’s renewed meetings with Emily Hale as inspiring his figuration of the ‘Lady of silences’ in *Ash-Wednesday*. Moreover, Eliot’s disastrous marriage to Vivien most certainly feeds into *Ash-Wednesday* and ‘Coriolan’, and especially the depiction and murder of the protagonist’s wife in *The Family Reunion*. That these autobiographical factors inform Eliot’s ‘between’ works, in one way or another, to varying degrees, is well-trodden critical ground.<sup>11</sup>

### *A Note on The Emily Hale Letters*

The T. S. Eliot letters to Emily Hale, made available in January 2020 by Princeton University after a sixty-year embargo, confirm that Eliot saw Hale as vital to him both as a man and a poet. The letters validate beyond doubt Gordon’s arguments about Emily’s impact as muse and confidante. However, at the time of completing this book, the Hale letters are yet to be published, and the full contents unknown. Despite this, Frances Dickey’s excellent early blog reports from the archive testify that Eliot

11 Biographers and critics have thoroughly explored the influence of Vivien Eliot and Emily Hale on Eliot’s writings. For controversial interpretations of Eliot’s first marriage and its impact on his work, see Michael Hastings’ play *Tom and Viv* (1985), and Carole Seymour-Jones’s biography *Painted Shadow: The Life of Vivienne Eliot* (2001). Regarding Vivien’s and Emily’s influence on Eliot’s middle-period works, Tony Sharpe states of *Ash-Wednesday*: ‘the feelings requiring sublimation were those towards his wife Vivien (who in 1928 told friends he couldn’t stand the sight of her) and Emily Hale’ (Chinitz, 2009: 199).

believed the letters,<sup>12</sup> which start in October 1930, would provide an unrivalled posthumous understanding of his poetry.<sup>13</sup>

Eliot's renewed correspondence and meetings with Emily Hale between 1927 and 1939 reinvigorated his life and poetry. Moreover, we now have evidence that corroborates Emily's influence on and presence within *Ash-Wednesday*, including how Eliot believed she would understand the poem better than anyone.<sup>14</sup> This information has led to suggestions that Emily is *Ash-Wednesday*'s 'Lady' and that his love for her solely inspires the poem. However, as is always the case, there must be caution in seeking singular meanings or explanations for Eliot's works and the complex figurations within them. Indeed, another highly significant event to occur during Eliot's mid-life, in and around the composition of his 'between' works, was the death of his beloved poet-mother on 10 September 1929. Eliot's correspondence with family and friends in the late 1920s shows that news of Charlotte's failing health and eventual death had a tremendous impact on him. In the Hale letters, Eliot in 1930 admitted to Emily his intense love for his mother and how he had felt very much alone since her death.<sup>15</sup> For him, Emily would take some of Charlotte's place. Chiefly, for this book, Dickey tells how in the first preserved letter, dated 3 October 1930, Eliot praises Emily's spirituality and states how she has inspired his turn to religious faith. In the second letter, typewritten a month later, he then expresses the similarity between Emily and Charlotte and his sympathy and love for both. Such comparisons and conflation are revealing. Emily's looks, personality, abilities, desires and frustrations remarkably align with descriptions of Charlotte's. Both were extremely intelligent but had not gone to university. Further to this, both women were teachers, and both were ardent Unitarians, which would cause Eliot deep-pained conflict and heartache as he accepted and asserted the Anglo-Catholic faith. Eliot and Hale both referred to their love and relationship as 'abnormal', and this love was no doubt intensified and elevated through the perpetual obstacles, missed opportunities and postponements to their union. She was his Beatrice, occupying the place of the intensely desired but forbidden object of

12 Frances Dickey, 'Reports from the Emily Hale Archive.' *The International T. S. Eliot Society*, Jan–Oct. 2020, [www.tseliotsociety.wildapricot.org/news](http://www.tseliotsociety.wildapricot.org/news).

13 For instance, Eliot dates his first meeting with Hale as early as 1905 (see Dickey, 27 Jan. 2020), when they were teenagers, correcting previous biographical speculations that place their acquaintance no earlier than 1911–12, after Eliot's return from his year abroad in Paris. This fact has a potential bearing on Eliot's compositions preceding 1911. In the first letter, dated 3 October 1930, and typed after Emily met Vivien in London, Eliot freely admits his long-held love for her (Dickey, 2 Jan. 2020). In the second letter, he directs Emily to passages in his poetry that prove this love: 'the hyacinth garden scene in *The Waste Land* and the "Datta" section at the end of "What the Thunder Said", "A Cooking Egg", and *Ash-Wednesday*'. Emily's 1965 chronicle of their relationship confirms *Burnt Norton* to be Eliot's 'love letter' to her.

14 Dickey, 2 Jan. 2020.

15 *Ibid.*

courtly love leading him to the love of God. Many of Eliot's works play out this impossible love, such as 'La Figlia Che Piange', *The Waste Land* and *Ash-Wednesday*. However, as I demonstrate, Eliot's writings also associate such unattainable love, if more surreptitiously or obliquely, with the love and desire of/for the mother.<sup>16</sup> The publication of the Hale letters in 2021 compels a more comprehensive account of their relationship and its long-standing influence. But as Eliot and his works have continually inferred, there is invariably something of mother-son love and desire behind his quest for human and spiritual love. It is this shadow of the maternal object that I bring to the fore. Despite Charlotte's influence on her son, her life and death and its impact on his poetics have received negligible attention. This book addresses this critical shortcoming and demonstrates its vital importance for enhancing understanding of Eliot; specifically, the complexity of his relationships with women, and the often contradictory and changing representations of women throughout his works.

In Dante's *Vita Nuova* (a significant interest of Eliot's around the time of his writing *Ash-Wednesday*), the real-life death of Beatrice is pivotal to precipitating Dante's entrance into a new Christian life and her transfiguration and idealisation as female divine. In the same way, Charlotte's death in 1929 is also a decisive juncture marking both his New Life and the change in his relation to women symbolised in the poem. In this book, I show how Charlotte's death significantly affected the poem's writing, to the point that female divinity became a central religious trope. Concerning this, I reread the transient moments of allegory that occur in *Ash-Wednesday* to be a modern mode of literary epiphany connected to redemptive death and the maternal body. These fragile emergences, which I theorise as 'maternal allegory' (that also appear in 'Marina', 'Coriolan', *The Family Reunion*, and *Four Quartets*), are instigated by male poetic reflection upon the death of the mother within a maternal poetics. Eliot's meditations on Dantean allegory through his prose works of the 1920s, as well as Walter Benjamin's modern reconceptualisation

16 For psychoanalytic perspectives on courtly love, see Jacques Lacan, 'Courtly Love as Anamorphosis' (1992: 171–90); and Slavoj Žižek's essay 'Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing' (1994: 89–112). Lacan writes on the 'Lady' of courtly love: 'The object involved, the feminine object, is introduced oddly enough through the door of privation or of inaccessibility. Whatever the social position of him who functions in the role, the inaccessibility of the object is posited as a point of departure' (1992: 149). The Lady is Lacan's *objet petit a*, or *Das Ding*: the impossible object cause of desire that inaugurates desire itself. For the subject, this idealised object in the Symbolic Order represents unconscious desires and stands in for the lost union/plenitude with the mother in the pre-Oedipal Imaginary. For a description of Lacan's object *a*, see D. Evans 128–29. The object *a* 'denotes the object which can never be attained, which is really the CAUSE of desire rather than that towards which desire tends' (128, capitalisation in original). For Lacan, the object *a* is 'any object which sets desire in motion'.

of allegory stated in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), underpin this idea.

Importantly, this study takes an interdisciplinary approach to reassess the complex impact of the mother on T. S. Eliot. This is to maximise the potential for this work to be taken on and extended to other male modernists, modernism more generally, and other different inter/disciplinary studies on motherhood, mothering and the maternal. For me to make explicit my rationale for interdisciplinarity, it is now important to provide a brief context and grounding for modernism and early psychoanalysis. This is to historicise the male Oedipal treatment, theorisation and understanding of the mother, motherhood, mothering and the maternal in these inseparable discourses, which arose as practices at around the same time in modernity. It is also to show the limitations and prejudices of earlier critical and classical psychoanalytic approaches. Moreover, it is to emphasise the necessity and utility for this study of combining standard archival, biographical and literary-critical methods with new psychoanalysis, contemporary feminist philosophy and maternal studies: disciplines that all look to articulate maternal subjectivity. Integrating insights from these relevant but different disciplines constructs a more comprehensive, balanced and sensitive (and therefore more reliable) understanding of the Eliot mother–son relationship. Contextualising modernist attitudes, practices and representations in this way thereby helps to advance, challenge and complicate disciplinary knowledge and perspectives on mothers, motherhood, mothering and the maternal.<sup>17</sup>

## Oedipal Modernity/Modernism

In 1941 Virginia Woolf wrote ‘it was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict between love and hate is a common feeling called ambivalence’ (2002: 116). The birth of psychoanalysis that coincided with literary modernism in the 1890s was marked by a deep ambivalence towards the maternal and the feminine. Sigmund Freud, the foremost male modernist gender theorist, saw the defensive conflict of simultaneous positive and negative components in the emotional attitude as an instinctual dynamic instrumental in the formation of the Oedipal complex. Yet, Freud in defence of his theorisations was unwilling to go behind the Oedipal situation to the primal object relationship of the child and the all-powerful mother. Instead, he situated the mother as a mere passive object and recipient of the child’s libidinal urges rather than a subject in her own right—her subjectivity, desire, power and autonomy relegated to the margins of consideration. Moreover, while Freud side-lined the mother’s importance and

17 For current work that draws on literature and harnesses interdisciplinary perspectives to shed new light on diverse real-life experiences and cultural representations of motherhood, see Rye et al. (2018).



denigrated her as inferior and castrated, at the same time, he idealised the mother-son relationship, stating:

a mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships. A mother can transfer to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself, and she can expect from him the satisfaction of all that has been left over in her of her masculinity complex.

(2001o: 133)

Freud's strategies in formulating the Oedipus complex obscure the mother's relative strength and importance compared with that of the infant. Furthermore, Freud's speculations on culture determine that the young boy must separate, repudiate and transcend the pre-Oedipal mother and all feminine identifications and attributes to negotiate his castration complex and establish himself as a male subject. In Freud's conception, the father stands for the principles of individuation, triangulation, prohibition and separation, which the son must identify with for socialisation to take place. In contrast, the son must repress and make unconscious the pre-Oedipal mother under social and cultural law and language.

For Luce Irigaray, feminist revisionist of Freud, the whole edifice of Western culture is erected upon a patriarchal Oedipal/castration model that insists upon a primal matricide (as demonstrated in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* with the murder of Clytemnestra), as well as parricide (as Freud theorised in *Totem and Taboo*), for healthy psychosexual development and maturity.<sup>18</sup> For Freud, as for Jacques Lacan, his prominent follower, Oedipal identification with the father's law (the Name-of-the-Father) and assumption of the phallus is the male solution for separation from the mother. Oedipalisation is the marker of sexual difference and the *sine qua non* for accessing language and reaching individuation. However, as Irigaray points out, the Oedipus myth—and its underlying matricide—has tragic consequences. Matricide directs the idealisation, the denigration, the repression and the silencing of the mother in Western discourses and forbids access to the maternal body. It animates 'a forgetting of life, a lack of recognition of debt to the mother, of maternal ancestry, of the women who do the work of producing and maintaining life' (2001: 7). In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's seminal work *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), they assert the Oedipal narrative to be not only a central, controlling feature of Freudian psychoanalysis, but also a master framing discourse

18 Irigaray writes in her famous essay 'Body against Body: In Relation To The Mother' (1981): 'one thing is plain, not only in everyday events but in the whole social scene: our whole society and our culture operate on the basis of an original matricide' (1993c: 7–21).

of male modernism more generally—even though much of modernist art and literature is defined by the schizo flows, breakthroughs and decoding of desire and sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Lee Oser affirms: ‘the period of Freud’s Oedipus complex was the most Oedipal in modern history. Revolution and war dominated politics. Style overthrew style, philosophy philosophy’ (2007: 97). Oser adds:

The Oedipus Complex is the modernist version par excellence of generational conflict because it minimalizes, denies, or voids the love of parent and child. Giving and receiving, all the primary affections between parent and child, are transformed by the Oedipus Complex into a mask behind which lurk hostility and violence.

Exemplified by Ezra Pound’s famous modernist injunction to ‘make it new’, Oedipal preoccupation with masculine identity and fathers (personal and universal; literary, real and imagined; missing, lost or inaccessible) motivates many of the milestone texts and manifestos that the New Critics of the 1940s and ’50s legitimatised to advance an exclusively white, male, ‘high modernist’ canon: Pound’s Vorticist program; Wyndham Lewis’ *Tarr* (1918); T. S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) and *The Waste Land* (1922); James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922). However, in these and other important modernist works such as D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), there is also a preponderance of what Jacques Trilling calls *l’écriture matricide* (enactments and fantasies of the death/murder/repression of the mother, as well as of parthenogenesis).<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida highlights in ‘The Night Watch’ (2001), his preface to Trilling’s book on James Joyce, how all writing partakes in a ‘certain matricide’ (Mitchell and Slotte 88).<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, he adds:

here is the aporia that never fails to appear—and far from paralyzing the matricidal impulse this aporia actually exacerbates it, begins by motivating it, and opens the way for it: if one distinguishes between (*trier*) the mother and maternity, it follows that one can dream of

19 Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) criticises the prevalence of the Oedipal myth in Freudian psychoanalysis and modern society and culture as imperialistic, domesticating and a totalising, pathological formation of bourgeois capitalism. It is, they state, ‘colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony, and we shall see that even here at home... it is our intimate colonial education’ (110). Deleuze and Guattari draw on and praise several ‘anti-oedipal’ modernist writers, such as Marcel Proust, Antonin Artaud, D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, for their denial of the Oedipal interpretation.

20 Jacques Trilling in *James Joyce ou l’écriture matricide* (1973; rpt. 2001) notes a relationship between writing and fantasies about the maternal (mother/maternity).

21 See Derrida’s essay ‘The Night Watch’ (2001) in Mitchell and Slotte 87–110.