

**‘Matrophobia’ and
Plausibility
in Drabble’s *Jerusalem the
Golden***

**Mohsen Hamli
IPSI, University of
Manouba**

Abstract

*None of Margaret Drabble’s novels is as explicit in showing the author’s “fascination” with matricidal rage against one’s mother as her *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) in which she gets involved in what Adrienne Rich calls “matrophobia,” the fear of one’s mother, or of becoming one’s mother. Conspicuous is the affinity between the novel’s protagonist and the author who nurses a grudge against a mother who made her circuit judge husband’s life gruesome beyond limits and probably precipitated his death. This paper contends that Clara Maugham’s, the novel’s protagonist’s, “matrophobia” or matricidal rage verges on the extravagant and offends because it implausibly imitates life and violates readerly expectations about fiction.*

In response to her mother’s stoic attitude and rigidity at home,¹ Clara Maugham of *Jerusalem the Golden* cultivates an inclination for the complicated, the illicit, and the disastrous. At the age of twenty-two, while still at university, she falls on the Denhams in a Poetry Reading (Clelia, her father Sebastian, her brother Gabriel, then the rest of the family). The Denhams offer what Clara has all her life been waiting for the chance to forget shame, fear, and doubt and to begin again. At the end, uncommunicative Clara of

Résumé

*Aucun des romans de Margaret Drabble n’est si explicite en montrant une “fascination” de l’auteur pour une rage matricide contre sa propre mère que son *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967); un roman dans lequel elle se trouve impliquée dans ce qu’ Adrienne Rich appelle la “matrophobie”; la peur de sa propre mère, ou de devenir sa propre mère. Frappante est l’affinité entre la protagoniste du roman et l’auteur qui n’a jamais cessé de reprocher à sa propre mère d’avoir bouleversé la vie de son juge de mari et probablement précipité sa mort. Cet article affirme que la “matrophobie” ou rage matricide de Clara Maugham, protagoniste de *Jerusalem the Golden*, tend vers l’extravagance et choque car elle imite d’une façon irraisonnée la vie tout en décevant les attentes du lecteur*

Northam (a town in Yorkshire, background of Drabble herself). And the novel ends with news about her mother dying of cancer, but that does not affect Clara much, for she must survive the malicious old gibes and even her guilt that she has once, though unintentionally, wanted her mother, the source of all her areas of doubt, to die.

The novel is about the Denhams just as it is about Clara. They permeate the novel from beginning to end. And they seem to fascinate not only the twenty-three-year old Clara Maugham, but also the twenty-seven-year old Margaret Drabble, who has also suffered much from a nagging, neurotic mother.² Margaret Drabble believes in new chances, in the freedom to choose again and change one's unsatisfactory fate,³ as she has herself done when she divorced Clive Swift in 1975 to marry Michael Holroyd in 1982. The Denhams help Clara to begin again, though theirs is not better than her mother's world. It is even far from being convincing to the reader and possibly to Clara herself. Nevertheless, Clara chooses it, and insists upon its being better than her mother's, simply because it is different and challenging. The attraction of the queer is perhaps what is seen characterising her somewhat amazing interest in the Denhams.

Mrs. Maugham had gone to school and won prizes and kept a library at home, but had never, as a child, received a Christmas gift. The only time she saw a Christmas stocking hanging at the end of her bed was when "her elder brother, thinking to tease her, had hung at the end of her bed a stocking, and that when, excited, she had sprung to open it, she found it contained ashes from last night's grate" (55-56). She had loved and written love poetry only to be deceived. Clara lights upon these things mostly after having met the Denhams and developed a liking for 'interiors.' It is when she comes back home from her Paris trip (with Gabriel Denham) and finds the telegram about her dying mother that she takes the train to Northam and spends the evening in her mother's room. She has never done it before.

and finally she wandered into her mother's bedroom ... and started, methodically, assiduously, to open all the little pots and boxes, gazing earnestly, at rings and hairpins, ... looking anxiously for she knew not what, for some small white powdery bones, for some ghost of departed life. And in the bottom drawer, beneath a bundle of underwear, she found it. She found some old exercise books, and some photographs done up with a rubber band.

... She looked at the photographs first ... there were two that she had never seen. They were both of her

mother, her mother alone, her mother aged twenty, ... and in one she stared gravely at the camera from beneath her cloche, and in the other she smiled bravely, gaily, a smile radiant with hope and intimacy, at the unseen hands holding the unseen, long derelict camera. She looked thin and frail and tender, quite lacking the rigid misery that seized her face on the wedding photographs; Clara had never in her life seen such a look upon her face.... (194-95)

Then she opens the exercise books and falls on what she had never read before: her mother's expression of her "deception," "disappointment," and hopelessness.

O let us seek a brighter world
Where darkness plays no part:

...

I wait here for my life, and here I must wait
While all the world rolls on and passes by;
Surely my expectations have a date,
And I will find the answer ere I die? (196)

Her mother had either been betrayed by the man she had loved, the man holding the camera, and/or been forced by her parents to marry Clara's father. In both cases, she had not been allowed to choose: celibacy or hope for a better fate. Marriage to Mr. Maugham, in 1925, put an end to her hopes (196), to marry the man her heart had chosen. She could not make use of her gifted mind and reject. She stooped to a way of life that had been imposed on her. These are what Clara calls days of "darkness" glimpses of which she shrinks from (55).

Clara's attitude to the gibes of fate, to shame, fear, and doubt is different. Like her mother, she is brilliant at school. But unlike her mother, and having been mistrustful of what people choose for her, she likes only what they dislike. She is fond of the odd and eccentric Mrs. Hill only because the other girls make fun of her. She is good at physics, but because the headmistress, Miss Potts, asks her to stick to Sciences, Clara chooses Arts (36-39). That is the first important choice of her life; the choice that is going to stretch her away from what people do or want.

But there seems to be nothing of the eccentric in Mrs. Maugham. Judging from what her daughter reveals of her favourite maxims, we cannot but hail her triumph over what Clara calls, with tongue in cheek, the gibes of fate. Clara loathes her mother's belief that utility is a prime virtue (44), that "handsome is what handsome does" (49), and "that the truly refined can manage without toys, clothes or entertainments" (72). Mrs. Maugham cannot win, of course, as her daughter is bent upon hating her.

Too much is, I think, intended or intentional in the novel. The idea that there is 'malice' in her mother's attitude is really unbelievable. Clara's belief that there was intelligence and intention behind her mother's choice of a good name for her pained her (123); and of course, like any girl newly down from Oxford or Cambridge, she thinks that the mother does not have the right to pretend to know as much as her daughter does. She hates, in other words, her mother being so distinct.

But how, with so fine a sense of distinction and significance, her own mother could have called her Clara, she could neither understand nor forgive. Carelessness might have been forgiven, but not intention. And yet, at the same time, Annunciata might forgive her mother, had she needed to, because the intention was, Clara thought, so innocent, so lacking in harm (123).

It is rather because she fails to penetrate her mother's mind (123) that Clara hates her mother. This business of malicious intention is a forgery, a fantasy of the mind. It is in fact ridiculous, not forgiving one's mother for having given one a good name; and the text does not support anything of that sort. In fact, Clara envies her mother's "sense of distinction and significance," though she does not have the courage to admit this.

Clara resents also her mother's treatment of Mrs. Hanney (41-42) and people's respect of her mother (43-44), again for not really very obvious reasons, for what she thinks is her mother's malice. It is in the scene ending Chapter 2 of the novel. Clara is planning to tell her mother that she is going to do French. Notice how before she speaks of her mother's "contempt" of Mrs. Hanney, it is said, "Clara could tell from her [mother's] tone that she was pleased about something" (41). This "something" is "her mother's satisfaction" in discoursing

about Mrs. Hanney who often comes to use her telephone (41-42). But Mrs. Maugham's talk is rather very convincing: Mrs. Hanney must have a telephone at home; to call a doctor or the service men when needed. Clara is neither pleased with her mother's comportment nor with the neighbours' respect of her mother's "self-erected authority" (42-43).

Any unexpected positive response that comes from her mother *depresses* her. Her mother's response to her choice of French, that ends Chapter 2, *depresses* her (45); and so does her mother's positive response to the first linguistic trip to Paris (57); and so does her mother's choice of the dress, which the girls appreciate as a very good choice, though Clara is ashamed of it. She wants her mother to refuse so that she could protest and fight for an inch of domination.

Here is her description of the 'horror' of her mother's unexpected 'consent' to let her go to Paris.

'I don't see why not,' said Mrs. Maugham, with a tight smile which seemed to indicate pleasure in her daughter's confusion. 'I can't say that I see why not. You say all the other girls are going, and if it's such a bargain as you say, then I don't see why not. Do you?'

Clara could hardly shriek at her, you know bloody well why not, you know bloody well why I can't go, ... it's because you think Paris is vice itself, and so do I, and so do I, and that's why I want to go, and that's why you won't bloody well let me. She could not say anything. So she said nothing....

And Clara sat there and endured it. Because the truth was that this evidence of care and tenderness was harder to bear than any neglect, for it threw into question the whole basis of their lives together. Perhaps there was hope, perhaps all was not harsh antipathy, perhaps a better daughter might have found a way to soften such a mother.... She had learned a fine way of sustaining deprivation, but gratitude was an emotion beyond her range.

She did not thank her mother. She sat there in silence, and resentment made her cheeks hot, she resented the wasted hours of battle with her own desires, she resented her failed and needless attempts

at empire.... Bitterly she thought, it is all spoiled, spoiled by consent, spoiled by refusal, it does not matter if I go or stay. By letting me go, she is merely increasing her power, for she is out-martyring my martyrdom (57-59).

The text speaks for itself in fact. The mother's tenderness throws into question the daughter's determination to hate her mother (58), the daughter's sense of martyrdom.⁴ She wants to go to Paris to show that Paris is *not* vice, as her mother thinks. But Paris *is* vice, though she insists that her nocturnal outings are harmless and her affair with the Italian in the cinema, with his hand into her stockings, demotes her mother's prejudice. And of all the girls, 'cowards' she believes, she is the only one who ventures to sneak to the dorm late at night.

Though Clara believes that there is too much intention in her mother's behaviour towards her, I think that it is the opposite that is rather true. She does not seem to know what her mother thinks (123) and so can not pretend to know whether or not there is intention. And as she likes the 'unknown' (155), she does not seem to be interested in knowing much about what she calls her mother's 'darkness'. In military jargon, Clara is on the offensive, always resenting, criticising, disagreeing, only to defend herself from being treated as an unloyal daughter. She uses her exaggerated resentment as a defensive colouring.

Mrs. Maugham dies just after Clara's second Paris trip with Gabriel; and Clara easily yields to the 'specialist's' explanation and *deserts* her mother. The specialist's talk is in fact well adjusted to Clara's thinking; it is the kind of argument that Clara would have written to herself or told herself to convince herself that there is no use staying in Northam, and that it is better to accept Gabriel Denham's offer to abandon the whole thing and go back to London.

'She'll be all right here with us, there's no reason to think of moving her, whatever she says, because after all you've got your own life to live, you won't want to be looking after her yourself, let's face it, will you?' ... she looked at him, at his square face, and his heavy glasses, and his knowing look, and her eyes dropped because of course she could not face it, he was right, he knew the limits of human effort

better than she herself had known them, for he had seen them more often than she had.

No,' she said, meekly, 'no, I couldn't stay here, I have to be back in London, I couldn't stay, I really couldn't stay ...' (197)

She could not know better than the doctor of course.

Thinking about Christina Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market* (1862), Clara says that she had always been strangely compelled by "descriptions and displays of passion" and "that she had considered this particular manifestation to be a fabrication, a convenient lie. She began to think that literature did not lie, after all; nothing was too strange to be true" (117-18).⁵ The plot line in the novel, the intention lying behind each act, is in fact "too strange to be true." In real life, things do not happen like that; and even her belief that fate had sought her out to reward her intelligence and ambition is far remote from the plausible truth (60). It may be called accident, coincidence, artistic reality, but nothing else.

Clara takes the liberty to like and dislike to resent and not resent. She resents her mother for really not obvious reasons (even for not having photos of Elvera at home; the Denhams do have them instead, 156), Phillipa Denham for being capable of contending, Annunciata for being "ridiculously like" Clelia (117-18), Clelia for being much like Gabriel. She resents things being intended or intentional (in her mother's acts or attitudes, in Phillipa's, in the Denhams'), but tolerates her own "illimitable designs."

Just as her resentment of her mother is exaggerated, so is her treatment of the Denhams; the "starry inhabitants" of her new world; the representatives of the 'Golden Jerusalem' John N. Neale (1818-1866) spoke about in his hymn; a hymn Clara had particularly loved at school (32). In fact, the Denhams exacerbate Clara's hatred of her mother, though there is nothing fabulous about them except their talent for expressing their "moral impossibilities" and loose virtues.

But for a Clara, who has been gasping for anything radiant with "social joys," as the first verse of the hymn says, the Denhams' world is the "heavenly city where beautiful people in beautiful houses spoke of beautiful things" (32). Beautiful in the eyes of Clara, of course.

As she has not had any experience of anything until her third year at university, except those reminiscences about Walter Ash regularly undoing her bra strap (55), or the Italian in Paris inserting his hand

inside her stockings (68-69), Clara Maugham has never invited friends, bought herself a drink, asked about the Ladies' room, let alone gone to a theatre or attended a Poetry Reading (17-21).⁶ So that when she attends the Poetry Reading with Peter de Salis and discovers not only Clelia and her father, but also the gifts of listening to people's judgements, she feels impressed. She suddenly admits: "this is the kind of thing I have been looking for, and if this is not it, then it is nowhere else" (10).

And because the Denhams' world *has to be* the kind of thing she has been looking for (10, 25), Clara magnifies it and *intentionally* beautifies it to herself and astonishes the 'aching' 'reeking' Denhams themselves.

The Denhams' world appears much to light in Chapter 6 where more revelations about them begin to wreck her mind (106-107, 112). They are ridiculously like each other and ridiculously in love with each other (109). And 'ridiculously' is Clara's word, or her narrator's, as the distinction between them becomes very thin. Martin, the Italian artist, is in love with the mother (Candida) as well as with the daughter (Clelia); and mother and daughter seem to appreciate his attitude. Father Sebastian Denham makes sheep's eyes at Clara. Gabriel suffers flirtations from his boss (121). He is in love with his sister Clelia too; and apparently, according to the Freudian premise, he does to Clara, his sister's closest friend, what he would have liked to do his sister. And Magnus does inform Clara in Paris that he is in love with Phillipa, his sister-in-law (175, 183); then even requests Clara to kiss him, which she does when she joins him in the kitchen (184). This is the love-web, a web "rife with incest," that binds the Denhams (110, 170-71). Only Amelia and Magnus, considered outcast by the family, have made other choices and sought out foreign lands.

Because she loves the complicated (114, 175), and must fall in love, Clara chooses to be mad with the desire to *fall* in love with Gabriel Denham, a man married to a beautiful woman Clara cannot help but resent; the brother Clelia chooses to send to drive Clara to the Denhams' (115). Clara likes Phillipa incapable of contending, but she has been "hoping against hope" as Phillipa is *capable* of contending and "looks knowledgeable." She is "pretty," though she is wearing "no make-up," and "looked like as though she came off the front page of *Harpers*. Everything was intentional, and everything was new (118-19)." And so Clara resorts to that other female trick of stirring the woman's jealousy.

The ‘secret of Phillipa’ is, I believe, an addition, rather unconvincing; the kind of afterthought inserted to make the balance weigh in favour of Clara, the “warm, enthusiastic, easily, amusing” Clara (140). Ever since the second week of their marriage, Phillipa has made Gabriel’s life miserable: “crying because she could not manage ... [the] accoutrements of contraception;” feeling “reduced” and limited; buying clothes she could not wear or that “would drive her into a frenzy;” weeping in the street, weeping on the steps, becoming impossible particularly after the birth of the third baby (a girl); and many other recollections that suddenly come back to Gabriel’s mind when his lips meet Clara’s hungry lips (140-43, 145)

But in spite of his wife’s impossibility, Gabriel has never kissed anyone except her (140); and probably would have remained so, that is faithful and helpful, had not Clara appeared from the blue and shaken him or ruined him. In fact, Gabriel’s devotion to his wife, and later to Clara, is revealing of the way the Denhams get admirably and inseparably webbed to anyone that joins them. And it is the advent of Clara that helps him or *makes it easy for him*, as he thinks later, to talk of Phillipa and reveal secrets (170).

Reveal secrets to complicate things is in reality what Clara does to the Denhams. Having realized Gabriel’s incestuous love for his sister Clelia, the subject of whom she “had always avoided” (169), and the sense that in no way could she have him altogether for her as “her own hitherto *illimitable designs*” have “limits,” Clara cuts her hair like Clelia’s, buys a dress that looks like Clelia’s, and jumps in bed in wait of Gabriel (169-70, emphasis added). It is then that he tells her that *he likes her to be like Clelia* (170). Thus Clara, not only drives him to divulge the amorous incest clutches in him, but perform ‘incest’, by proxy, as it were.

And still in Paris, Clara invites Magnus to the *Place du Trocadero*, shortly after having learnt from him that he envies Gabriel and is in love with Phillipa. And when Magnus goes to the kitchen to make coffee, she follows him and there they kiss. When they come back to the sitting room, they find that Gabriel has left. And here again, she blames Gabriel for having walked out on her, not her blatant unfaithfulness and awkward attitude which Gabriel must have noticed. It is because she does not want to be told that she “was not made that way” and that she made “a fool of herself” after having chosen what she calls the “taste of liberation” (inviting people to the *terrasse*, drinking incessantly, kissing in the dark, “forcing her nature beyond

the limits of its spring”) that she decides to defend her choice and stick to it, in spite of its being rather ridiculous. There is no going back. And she walks out on Gabriel as he has walked out on her (184-85) and is seen admitting, for the first time, the value of adages or proverbs as reminders of the appropriate measure one must take. “To renounce is to value” (197). She has belittled this before, as reminders of the “ghost” of mother.

In spite of what Clara thinks of them, the Denhams are far from being “saints.” They even do not think so of themselves anyway. “Saints” is in fact Phillipa’s term; she accuses the Denhams of vanity, of imposing the image of a “marvellous world” on the rest, of thinking of themselves as “self-erected saints” (170), which is in fact very much true. But, unlike Phillipa, who rejects them, Clara believes that they “are real saints.” Gabriel thinks that the “gifted Clelia” is “the real thing,” the real saint, if there is a real saint in the Denhams’ marvellous world. It was perhaps for this that he “used to be in love with Clelia.”

Having rejected her mother’s world to embrace that of the Denhams, Clara is therefore the epitome of her narrator’s belief that one *must* choose again if one is not satisfied with one’s fate; even when one’s choice is far from being plausible. This is not far from what Drabble herself has believed in. She has “increasingly come to see that freedom is very important: the freedom to choose, the freedom to make mistakes, the freedom to begin again.”⁷ Can this, then, mean that Clara is choosing what Drabble herself has been inclined to choose? Is Clara a projection of Drabble? Is her furious mind and troubled breast, expressing, perhaps, the author’s unexpressed fury? Do we have to recognize that Clara’s groundless hatred of her mother is the inevitable step (or martyrdom, as Clara calls that) that daughters have to take to survive; distorting the myth of mother’s influence, one’s ancestor, in the Bloomian sense, to survive.⁸

Notes

¹ Clara hates her home and, of course, her mother “with such a violence that when she returned each vacation from University, she would shake and tremble with an ashamed and feverish fear. She hated it, and she was afraid of it, because she doubted her power to escape.” *Jerusalem the Golden* (London: Penguin, 1967), 27. All references to this novel will henceforth be given parenthetically in the text.

² Mohsen Hamli, “Interview with Margaret Drabble,” unpublished interview, 26 July 1990. “But she was very difficult,” she said about her mother. “She made my father miserable. She made *me* miserable. I would invite her to stay with me so that my father would have his friends to stay with him. She would stay here and she would talk endlessly with great bitterness about my father who had been extremely good to her. Theirs was a difficult peculiar marriage. When he was very ill he did not want to see her. She was a real classic nag. This relationship is very bad.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ “The mother,” as Rich says, “stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr.” *Of Woman Born*, 236. See Clara’s reference to her martyrdom: to her mother “out-martyring her martyrdom” (59), to her “bleeding martyrdom” (83). For the treatment of mother-daughter relationships and matrophobia, see Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), 235-3; Judith K. Gardiner, “A Wake for Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women’s Fiction,” *Feminist Studies*, 4, 2 (June 1978), 146-149, 153; Joseph C. Rheingold, *The Mother, Anxiety and Death: The Catastrophic Death Complex* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967); Jane Flax, “Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psycho-dynamics, Politics, and Philosophy,” in Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., *The Future of Difference: The Woman and the Scholar* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), 20-40.

⁵ *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). The poem supports “trite ideas” “that one should be careful of temptation,” or “that little girls should not talk to strange men,” or “that sisters should love one another.” There is, however, an effort to create the image of a female hero, or heroine, performing a heroic action to save her sister; but it

remains a passive kind of heroism as Lizzie (the ‘heroine’ of the poem) does not attack the goblin men.

⁶ Drabble’s Paris, as is in *A Summer Bird-Cage* (10) and *Jerusalem the Golden* (64-70, 178-80), is associated with foreigners (Italians, Arabs, etc) and stockings.

⁷ Mohsen Hamli, “Interview with Margaret Drabble,” unpublished interview, 26 July 1990.

⁸ Reference is to Harold Bloom's dialectic theory of influence that a poem, in the sense of any form of writing, is a response to a poem; re-writing the precursor (he calls it *misprision*) to survive his/her influence. *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 19; *A Map of Misreading* (New York and London: OUP, 1975), 3; *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

Works Cited

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

_____. *Map of Misreading*. New York and London: OUP, 1975.

Drabble, Margaret. *Jerusalem the Golden*. London: Penguin, 1967.

Fishaut, Rebecca M. "A Form That Encompasses: Maternity and Sexuality in Five Novels by Margaret Drabble." Amherst College Library, 1998.

Flax, Jane. "Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psycho-dynamics, Politics, And Philosophy." Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds. *The Future of Difference: The Woman and the Scholar*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980, 20-40.

Gardiner, Judith K. "A Wake for Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women's Fiction," *Feminist Studies*, 4, 2, June 1978.

Genette, Gérard. "Vraisemblance et motivation." In his *Figures II*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969.

Hamli, Mohsen. "Interview with Margaret Drabble." Unpublished interview. 26 July 1990.

Rheingold, Joseph C. *The Mother, Anxiety and Death: The Catastrophic Death Complex*. Boston: Little Brown, 1967.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976.