

## ***Mothers and Daughters: Stability and Change***

Wednesday 7 May 2008 – Lyceum Club

“Oh, what a power is motherhood, possessing a potent spell.”  
(*Iphigenia in Aulis*, Euripides 45BC).

There is perhaps no more complex a relationship than that between a mother and her daughter and a girl or woman and her mother. All of us who are mothers have been daughters; although of course not everyone who is a daughter is also or will necessarily ever be a mother. It is not a relationship much written about in mainstream history nor indeed much commented upon in political or economic news but nevertheless is one of the bedrock relationships in our society.

Through an examination of what happens between generations of women, we can see how the social, economic, familial and political circumstances of women change and how they remain the same.

In my own case, my experience of my mother’s circumstances and my hopes for my daughter’s circumstances drove major events in my life and are responsible for where I am today. In the case of my mother, she is and was a woman blessed with shining intelligence and capacity but hampered in her working years by a lack of formal education beyond the age of 15. The headmistress at Girls’ Grammar where she was a boarder had written to her father a long hand written letter. This implored my grandfather to keep his daughter at school because of her intelligence and her clear capacity to undertake university studies and shine. Nonetheless given the expectations of girls at the time, at her own mother’s insistence, my mother left school.

My daughter was born on International Women’s Day many years ago. When she was still a tiny baby, I recall looking at us in a mirror and I told her that she must do whatever she wanted in life and not be constrained especially by her gender. She gurgled her appreciation. But then I looked at my own reflection and felt a bit foolish – how could I give her such instruction unless I was prepared to follow it myself. I had lived adventurously but nevertheless felt I had made career decisions based at least in part on gender. That sowed the seed that grew into a seedling when I commenced a law degree and which has flourished into my legal career.

My daughter too has followed her dreams and ambitions in a different direction excelling in the medical field.

There are, of course, in official history many famous examples of fathers and sons but as Sheila Rowbotham wrote in *Hidden from History - 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, Penguin Books 1974, women's lives were usually hidden from any official history. Prior to the introduction of the *Married Women's Property Act* in the UK in 1870 and in Queensland in 1891, women lost not only their names on marriage but also their property.

When I look back in my own family beyond that of my mother, there is no woman who would be recorded in the history books. My mother was able to compensate for her lack of tertiary education by working assiduously at her job as a *typiste* [sic] and because of her own obvious capacity go on to become the bursar at a university college. When she retired, she immediately embarked upon the university education she had been denied, doing an English Honours degree and a Masters, winning prizes along the way and continuing to be involved in the creative writing which has been a life long passion of hers.

Go one generation further back though and the situation was less optimistic. One grandmother gave up her promising career as an artist in Scotland to become a dutiful wife and mother in rural Queensland; the other had to content herself with her outlets in the church and playing the piano while she followed her school teacher husband around Queensland and looked after him and their children.

One great grandmother was born in England and came with her family as a child to the Coomera where she married twice and had many children. She was by all accounts a redoubtable woman but very poor. Another born in Scotland ran away with her Scottish police constable boyfriend to England to marry before she turned 21. Described as a domestic servant on her marriage certificate, as a poverty stricken widow she followed her daughter to Australia. Another born in England married, widowed, then married my great grandfather, came to Australia, got homesick (no doubt for her younger brothers and sisters whose mother had died), went back, gave birth to my grandfather and then came back to Australia with my great grandfather, and had no paid occupation. And the fourth great grandmother, born in Toowoomba, married in Mackay, drew some derived status from her husband who was for a time the Mayor of Mackay. All of my great grandmothers were by reputation redoubtable

women with strong personalities but all of them lived lives where their fortune was entirely tied to that of their husbands.

If one goes back another generation to the women who were born about 100 years before I was born, it is surprising how many of them worked in mundane work as weavers or on the farm or in domestic service. At this point I stop to reflect on how fortunate I am to have been born in the twentieth century and not a hundred years earlier when my life would have been circumscribed by lack of education, fear of death in child birth, class expectations, my fortune entirely tied to that of my husband. I am afraid to think that poverty and drudgery would have been my everyday experience.

### **Popular Culture**

I wondered when I was thinking about this topic what popular culture made of mothers and daughters. The latest edition of the *Women's Weekly* has an article on that very topic entitled "*Mum's The Star*" with the sub-heading "*They're all famous, but these celebrity daughters have another thing in common – a mum who knew they were great long before the rest of the world*". The pen pictures of Giaan Rooney and her mum Jan, Kate Ritchie and her mum Heather, the Veronicas and their mum Colleen, Sonja Kruger with her mum Margaret, and Jolene Anderson (whoever she might be) with her mum Susan were, as one might expect, not very insightful, all praised each other all in the usual clichéd terms. Only one suggested something slightly more complex. Sonja Kruger said of her mother, Margaret: "It's funny to say this, but I'd won competitions, acted in a full length movie and done "Simon Townsend's Wonder World" for years, but it wasn't until I filled in on "Wheel of Fortune" that I felt mum was really proud of me". She obviously felt she needed her mother's praise and recognition.

That reminded me of the old saying "Behind every successful man there's a surprised woman". Hubert H Humphrey is reputed to have reprised this by saying "Behind every successful man stands ... a surprised mother-in-law". Perhaps it is also true to say that behind every successful woman stands a very proud mother.

Other famous mother and daughter figures include Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, Judy Garland and Liza Minnelli, Blythe Danner and Gwyneth Paltrow, Enid Blyton and her less well known daughters, Gillian Baverstock and Imogen Smallwood. Imogen has described her mother as "arrogant, insecure, pretentious, very skilled at putting difficult

or unpleasant things out of her mind, and without a trace of maternal instinct.” Moreover Enid despised her own mother, mostly it seems, because her father left her for another woman. Enid Blyton, on the other hand, is reputed to have written of her relationship with her daughters, Gillian and Imogen:

“We all have a sense of humour. We are all (thank goodness!) good tempered. Nobody sulks, nobody complains, nobody is unkind. But that, of course, is largely a matter of upbringing. Spoilt children are selfish, complaining and often conceited. But whose fault is that? It is the mother, always the mother that makes the home. She is the centre of it.”<sup>1</sup>

## Political history

Also very significant were Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia. Searching for a book about the Pankhursts I came across a biography called “*The Fighting Pankhursts: A Study in Tenacity*” written by David Mitchell (Johnathan Cape, London, 1967). The first chapter is entitled “Dr Pankhurst’s Women” and I reflected that I had not realised that Emmeline Pankhurst had medical or other such qualifications but all was revealed when I read the first paragraphs:

“1890. The last visitor had left the Pankhurst home in Russell Square, London, after yet another meeting of the Women’s Franchise League. The two girls, ten-year-old Christabel and eight-year-old Sylvia, who had helped to arrange the flowers and had enjoyed the strawberries, the music, the recitations and the speeches, handed the brocade collection bags to their mother and began to gather the leaflets which were lying around the drawing-room. Servants stacked chairs and cleared away plates and teacups. Dr Pankhurst, who had spoken to eloquently of the cruelty and stupidity of denying political rights to women, of stultifying the energies of half the population, sat down in an armchair and sighed deeply. He had been making very similar speeches for nearly a quarter of a century. His wife Emmeline, sensing his depression, walked over to him. As he often did when he was reading, or abstracted in thought, he reached out to take her hand.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gyles Brandreth, Was Enid Blyton the mother from hell? At <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/main.jhtml?=/health/2002/03/13/fmenid.xml> as updated 03/02.

Suddenly he jerked upright. ‘Why,’ he almost shouted, throwing his hands upwards in a gesture of angry bewilderment, ‘Why don’t you *force* us to give you the vote? Why don’t you *scratch our eyes out*?’ Christabel and Sylvia looked up, startled. Even their mother, for all her natural vehemence, was astonished. Dr Pankhurst’s gentleness, his infinite capacity for forgiveness, were almost legendary in the family, and in the wider circle of his professional and political activity. Neither wife nor daughters ever forgot this outburst.”

The history of the struggle for the vote for women cannot pass without mentioning the strength given to the movement and to Emmeline Pankhurst by the support of her daughters Sylvia and Christabel. The struggle deepened when Christabel refused to pay a fine imposed upon her and was imprisoned. “At this stage Mrs Pankhurst had no strategy of direct confrontation. Sylvia said she “... hurried to the cells with proud congratulations, pleading with motherly solicitude: ‘You have carried it far enough: now I think you ought to let me pay your fines and take you home.’ ‘If you pay my fine I will never go home again,’ her daughter answered hotly”.<sup>2</sup> This led Mrs Pankhurst to say to her daughter Sylvia in admiration of Christabel’s determination, “Christabel is not like other women; not like you and me, she will never be led away by her affections”.<sup>3</sup>

Only two years later in 1906, Mrs Pankhurst went to interrupt Winston Churchill’s meeting in Deansgate, Manchester, to ask the question “Will the liberal government give the vote to women?” She was immediately attacked physically but defended herself vigorously and managed to get her question in again. She was sent to jail for her activity and was disgusted when her husband came to get her out. Hannah Mitchell wrote of this, “He knew that we did not wish our fines to be paid and was quite in sympathy with the militant campaign, but men are not so single-minded as women are; they are too much given to talking about their ideas, rather than working for them. Even as Socialists they seldom translate their faith into words, being still conservatives at heart, especially where women are concerned. Most of us who were married found that ‘Votes for Women’ were of less interest to our husbands than

---

<sup>2</sup> *Hidden from History* page 78 citing E Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, London, 1931 pages 52-53

<sup>3</sup> *Hidden from History* page 79 citing E Sylvia Pankhurst, 1931 page 47.

their own dinners. They simply could not understand why we made such a fuss about it.”<sup>4</sup>

The extent of the hostility that the suffragette movement was up against was referred to by Lord Hugh Cecil in the UK Parliament speaking of the violent opposition of Cabinet Minister Lewis Harcourt to votes for women on any terms at all. Lord Cecil said it was not just Harcourt’s antagonism to vote for women but, “the extraordinary quarrel he appears to have with the female sex in general. He might have been recently spanked, and he feels so deeply and bitterly as never to have got over the indignity of having been born of a woman.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Academic writings – sociology**

Academic Maria-Regina Kecht publishing in the German Quarterly in the Summer of 1989, referred to the formerly marginal issue of mother daughter relationships.<sup>6</sup> She postulates that the rise of the feminist movements in the United State and Europe had lead to a number of women – writers, artists, journalists, scientists and film makers – stepping back to look at their own mothers and the “effects of the mother – daughter bondage in order to comprehend their own identities in the light of the (s)mothering that they have experienced.”<sup>7</sup> That led Ms Kecht to “the recognition that mothers are the ones who frequently perpetuate and reinforce the patriarchal structure of Western societies.”<sup>8</sup> She speaks of the maternal as effective patriarchal surrogate and oppressor and refers to novels which present a very grim and depressing picture of tyrannical mothers and victimised daughters, of sadistic domination and masochistic dependence, exemplifying how mothers transit patterns of inferiority and submission. Kecht opines:

“Under the Law of the Father their position of social powerlessness in conjunction with the psychological power of being the sole caretaker usually causes conflict for the child, particularly the daughter. As feminist critics have pointed out, maternal thought tends to be inauthentic. Inauthenticity is understood as self-denial of the mother’s own interests in ‘preserving, reproducing,

---

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Mitchell, ‘The Hard Way Up’, London 1968, p 149 cited in *Hidden from History* page 81.

<sup>5</sup> Hansard 24 January 1913, quoted in Neale Blewett, “The franchise in the United Kingdom, *Past and Present*, No. 32, December 1965, p 54; see *Hidden from History* at p 83.

<sup>6</sup> Maria-Regina Kecht, “In the name of Obedience, Reason and Fear”: Mother-Daughter relationships in WA Mitgutsch and E Jelinek, *The German Quarterly*, Vo 62, No 3, Focus: Literature since 1945, (Summer, 1989) pages 357-372.

<sup>7</sup> Maria-Regina Kecht, 1989 page 357.

<sup>8</sup> Maria-Regina Kecht, 1989 page 357.

directing, and understanding life.”<sup>9</sup> Inauthenticity is revealed in the mother’s willingness ‘to accept the uses to which others will put [her] children,’ and to her willingness ‘to remain blind to the implications of those uses.’<sup>10</sup> The values of obedience and good behaviour, as propagated by the dominant culture, are fostered and promoted by the mother, only to continue the pattern of subordination. As long as the desires of the male hegemony are considered the standard of acceptability, and as long as mothers train their daughters to move up to this standard, the pervasive inequalities of our gender roles will not disappear. This largely unconscious maternal collaboration with the existing structure results in female self-hate, the consequence of the experience of inferiority and social impotence.”

I examined my own life to see if that had any resonance at all. In spite of my mother’s early lack of further formal education she certainly never brought me up to have a sense of inferiority or the need to submit to patriarchal authority.

Nor does any of this resonate for me with my relationship with my own daughter, in which there are no complexities of love and hate. Her life and her achievements give me nothing but joy. However it did remind me of Germaine Greer’s criticism of her mother and many feminist articles I read in the early days of women’s liberation criticising their own mothers and disowning motherhood.

## **Current affairs**

The mother daughter relationship may be one that’s hidden from history but it’s hardly hidden from current affairs. A glance at last weekend’s newspapers shows how true this is. This weekend marked the one year anniversary of the disappearance of Madeline McCann. The newspapers endlessly speculate as to the role of her mother Kate McCann. Was the mother involved in the disappearance or is she a tragic figure? The media play with these versions of the truth as they look for the story. Remember Lindy Chamberlain and her baby daughter Azaria.

Rosemarie, the wife of Joseph Fritzl, the Austrian man who apparently kept his daughter a prisoner in a cellar for many years while he sexually abused her and she bore his children, is suspected of having been complicit in some way in the imprisonment of her daughter by her

---

<sup>9</sup> Citing Sara Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking”, *Feminist Studies*, 6.2 (1980) page 347.  
<sup>10</sup> Sara Ruddick, 1980 page 354.

husband. The *Australian* on Monday 5 May 2008 ran a story from The Sunday Times under the headline “Wife of incest Dad comes under suspicion”. The story commences “Suspensions were growing at the weekend that the wife of the Austrian man who imprisoned his daughter for 24 years, fathering seven children with her in a windowless, underground warren of sound-proofed rooms, knew more about the crime than she has revealed.”<sup>11</sup> It is Hilary Clinton’s daughter Chelsea who softens and provides a more human side to Hilary. Bindi Irwin wins herself a Logie for best female new talent with her mother Terri by her side providing the quotes to the media.

On Tuesday 22 April 2008 the *Courier Mail* had a story under the heading “Warning for mum buddies”. That story commences “They like going out with their daughters, have the same taste in clothes, and would rather have a good giggle with them than issue a ticking off. But mothers who try to act like their child’s best friend could be scarring them for life, experts warn.”<sup>12</sup> The expert turns out to be a former policeman and church minister who works as a psychologist specialising in the relationship between fathers and sons, and who bases his ideas entirely on his own experiences in Los Angeles.

## Literature

Perhaps one of the most famous of literary mothers with daughters is Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, which has the advantage of being my favourite novel. Mrs Bennet is seen by many as a silly interfering old busy body who lacks the intelligence and calm of her bookish husband Mr Bennet. But a friend of mine with daughters of her own pointed out to me that Mrs Bennet knows what she has to achieve in life and sets about emphatically to that end. She knows that Mr Bennet’s estate is entailed and so his unpleasant and obsequious nephew the Reverend Mr Collins will inherit his property not his daughters. As Jane Austen says of Mrs Bennet “The business of her life was to get her daughters married.”<sup>13</sup>

Jane Austen commences the novel:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in position of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. However little knowing the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the

---

<sup>11</sup> At page 14.

<sup>12</sup> At page 29.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Collins, London, 1952 edition page 17.



minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.”<sup>14</sup>

And so Mrs Bennet sets out to marry one of her daughters to Mr Bingley who is a single man with the large fortune of 5,000 a year. Her daughters are Jane, Elizabeth, Kitty, Mary and Lydia. By the end of the novel Jane is married to Mr Bingley, Elizabeth is married to Mr Darcy. The skittish youngest daughter, Lydia, ran away with the dastardly Wickham and eventually under Darcy’s insistence he married her. Kitty and Mary remained unmarried but their prospects are good. Mrs Bennet may be vain and superficial but she succeeds in her life’s work!

Jane Austen was of course perfectly capable of painting a portrait of a dear sweet sensible woman as a mother and did so in *Sense and Sensibility* although the mother’s straightened circumstances in that novel meant that she was not able to assist her daughters Elinor and Marianne in achieving happiness. And there is *Mansfield Park* in which the poverty stricken mother sends her daughter Fanny Price away to her wealthy relations so that she can better herself in spite of the fact that it would have been so much easier to have her daughter at home to help her bring up the other children.

Of course the perfect mother in literature may well be the mother of the four girls in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. However I must admit that I find the mother in that tale just too irritatingly good. Its success however is perhaps due in no small part to the differences between the four March sisters each showing different ways of being female but the heroine definitely being Jo the most independent and intelligent of the girls. She is the most articulate and the most likely to find pleasure and fulfilment in work as well as a relationship.

More recent novels, such as Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Orchard Thieves*<sup>15</sup> and Alice Sebold’s *Almost Moon*,<sup>16</sup> which commences with the daughter killing her aged, demented mother, paint a far less attractive picture of the mother-daughter relationship: the first from the point of view of the unhappy mother and the second from the point of view of the unhappy daughter. Even so, when we consider that so many famous novels and other works of literature pay so little attention to this relationship, it is refreshing to see the mother-daughter relationship taken up and analysed from all angles. How interesting and important too are the non-fiction

---

<sup>14</sup> Jane Austen , 1952 edition page 15.

<sup>15</sup> 1995, Viking.

<sup>16</sup> 2007, Picador.

analyses of mothers and daughters in biographical stories like *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang covering three generations of women, living through the tumultuous events of twentieth century China.<sup>17</sup>

## The Law

Simone De Beauvoir wrote *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*<sup>18</sup> and I am afraid I have to tell you how the common law used to countenance the economic exploitation of the “dutiful daughter.”

An example of the law’s attitude to young women and their duty to their parents was shown in *Simms v Lilleshall Coal Company* [1917] 2 KB 368. Miss Simms claimed compensation as sole dependant of her father who was killed by accident at the respondent’s colliery. Nine years before her father’s death Miss Simms who was then in domestic service, left her situation to go home and nurse her mother. The mother died a year afterwards and Miss Simms then remained at home to keep her father’s house. The question arose as to whether or not she was entitled to be compensated for his death having been entirely dependent on his earnings for her livelihood. The statements by the judges show the attitudes of the time. Lord Cozens-Hardy MR said:

“If she had done such an unfilial and improper act as to leave her own father and to compel him to procure a housekeeper to keep the house together, then she would not have been dependent at all, or even partly dependent.”<sup>19</sup>

Bankes LJ said:

“It seems plain that this applicant, in accordance with what persons in that class of life ordinarily regard as their duty, upon the death of her mother, gave up her situation and went and looked after her father.”<sup>20</sup>

Lord Cozens-Hardy referred to a statement by Lord Ardwall in *Moyes v William Dixon Limited* 42 SLR 319, 321 when he referred to her doing what it was her duty to do in the circumstances which was to stay at home and keep house for her father rather than compelling her father to get “a strange woman for his housekeeper”.

---

<sup>17</sup> 1991, Touchstone, Simon & Schuster.

<sup>18</sup> 2005, Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

<sup>19</sup> At 379.

<sup>20</sup> At 371.

Miss Simms won her case but the attitudes expressed as to what is expected of a daughter are very revealing.

For many years, it was uncertain whether an injured plaintiff who required long term care was able to obtain compensation in a common law action for such care unless there was a legal or moral obligation for the injured person to pay the provider of the services for care. It was only when there was such an obligation which produced a financial loss to the plaintiff that the courts were prepared to award compensation for that loss. As a consequence no compensation was awarded if the services were performed on an unpaid basis by, for example, a “dutiful daughter” or a wife. Such a dutiful daughter’s work was uncompensated in the Queensland case of *Renner v Orchard* [1967] QWN 3 where, because of her mother’s injuries, an adult daughter came every day for 12 weeks and did all the housework for her mother that her mother was unable to do. Thereafter the amount of time diminished because her mother’s needs were not as great. Had the mother engaged professionals to do the same work, she would have been compensated for that loss but since the work was done by a “dutiful daughter” who felt a moral obligation to do it, and for which the mother was not obliged to pay, the services were uncompensated.

In the High Court decision of *Griffiths v Kerkemeyer* (1977) 139 CLR 161, the court held that the compensation that can be claimed by someone who suffers personal injury as a result of the negligence of another includes not only claims for pain and suffering and loss of earning capacity but also the need for domestic assistance or nursing services. Where the injured person’s need for reasonable domestic assistance or nursing services is provided commercially, the cost of such services can be claimed. In *Griffiths and Kerkemeyer* the court recognised that where services of domestic assistance or nursing are provided gratuitously i.e. on an unpaid basis by friends or relatives of the injured person, then the injured person should be compensated because the need for such services arises from their injury. The claim is usually in the amount that it would have cost if those services had been provided commercially.

## **Conclusion**

Whether one looks at law, literature, politics, sociology or popular culture one can see the journey that has been made but that there is still, I hope, much change to come. But there is a fine measure of stability derived from the relationship of mother and daughter. After all,

“You look at yourself in the mirror and already you see your own mother there and soon your daughter, a mother.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Luce Irigaray, “And one doesn’t stir without the other,” Translated Helene V Wenzell, 7, (Autumn 1981): 56 – 67.