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# Procrustean Motherhood: The Good Mother during Depression (1930s), War (1940s), and Prosperity (1950s)

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Procrustean Motherhood:  
The Good Mother during Depression (1930s), War (1940s), and Prosperity (1950s)

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## Abstract

Women have long considered home making, parenting, and fashion magazines, addressed directly to them, to be a trusted source for advice and for models of behavior. This trust is problematic given that sample magazine articles from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s show cultural portrayals of motherhood that appear more proscriptive than descriptive. They changed little, although real women's roles in both the domestic and public realms were undergoing significant shifts. During these decades of Great Depression, World War II, and unprecedented post-war prosperity, women went to school and entered the workplace in growing numbers, changed their reproductive choices, and shifted their decisions to marry and divorce, living more of their lives independent of matrimony. All the while, popular culture's discourse on the Good Mother held to the same sweet but increasingly stale portrait that failed to address the changes in women's lives beyond the glossy page.

*Procrustes, bandit son of the god Poseidon, lived along the road into Athens. He invited passers by into his home and then set them down on his bed, which he said fit all persons. If the guest proved to be too small for the bed, Procrustes stretched him to fit. If the guest's legs hung over the bed's bottom, he cut them off to proper size. Thus the Procrustean bed has been a metaphor for enforced conformity through the ages (Bulfinch, 151).*

Women in ancient Greece had more numerous, varied and complex representations of women as mothers and wives in their classic myths and stories than North American women in the early twentieth century saw in domestic magazines. In part, this may have been because the folk forerunners of magazines in North America were fairy tales, not Greek myths, and the fairy tales that were most popular tended to marginalize the roles of wife and mother, presented characters largely in one-dimensional fashion, and often ended with an implied marriage. (For example, see Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*.) The 'happily-ever-after' of married life was rarely portrayed.

Until very recently, female *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age stories about girls, invariably ended in this same manner: The main character married, and her narrative went blank (Goodman).<sup>1</sup> She lost dimension as she adopted the one-size-fits-all role of wife and mother. Her individuality turned into a monotonous story, indistinguishable from those of her neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

A sample of articles and advertisements from U.S. and Canadian magazines about “mothers” provides a look at what supposedly went on beyond that fairy tale sunset—and in most respects, the magazine representations were as one-dimensional as those of their fairy tale predecessors. According to these magazine images, taken from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, once a married woman gave birth, she lay down on a Procrustean bed to be stretched or cut to fit the role of the Good Mother. Magazines, especially those aimed at women, consistently held to a narrow range of maternal behaviors and attitudes. During the time period under consideration, women’s roles and responsibilities in both the domestic and public realms were changing significantly, but this reality played little part in the ‘once upon a time’ construct of magazines.

This finding is particularly disappointing given that magazines had tremendous power to influence women’s beliefs and attitudes during this time period and had little competition from other media; thus, magazines were *the* cultural arbiters of their time.

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<sup>1</sup> Both Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, and Marie Louise Von Franz in *Problems of the Feminine in Fairy Tales*, explore the notion of a selection of classic fairy tales as *bildungsroman*. Both note that as models for exploring various aspects of maturation, there is much less range for girls than for boys.

<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with Vladimir Propp’s thesis, articulated in *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, that characters in fairy tales are largely ‘stock’ and do not have character depth; rather, they play a role, and for women, that role usually consists of being a passive prize to be won or rescued by a prince.

John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, magazine historians, note “They were the only national communications medium, and their audience was unlimited, but primarily, they were the voice of the middle class” (77). (See also Kitch; and Marcellus).

Previous studies have indicated changes in popular magazine’s rhetoric about abortion and childbearing during the early to mid twentieth century. Magazines had occasionally, and with growing frequency, shifted their social construction of abortion in the 1930s from that of the single girl as the abortionists’ victim to the married woman hoping to hold her family together. During the war, some magazines exposed latent effects of the common policy of firing pregnant factory workers. They told stories about women who helped to hide co-workers’ bulging bellies or whispered instructions for the “three-day weekend,” a euphemism for an illegal abortion. (See discussion of evolving abortion rhetoric in Condit; Maloy and Patterson; Patterson and Hall.)

Expecting to find similar shifts in the social construction of motherhood, we took sample stories from the mid-1930s, 1940s, and 1950s because these three decades saw wide swings of social change. We expected to find that descriptions of the role of mother would shift with the social climate, and mothers would fulfill different functions in the private and public spheres as the world changed around them. We anticipated that stories would feature varying aspects of the archetype of motherhood adapted to meet social demands. We speculated, for example, that when families were called upon to sacrifice for the war effort, motherhood would be seen in its broader, more public aspects. We expected to see magazine writers, as well as the experts they consulted, push “maternal thinking” toward the more generalized and politicized construct that Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick have identified.

But such was not the case. Even during these great upheavals in the public sphere—the Great Depression, World War II, and unprecedented post-war prosperity—social prescriptions for motherhood in popular magazines remained essentially stable. While variations can be found within and among the three decades, what is most striking is that both the articles and the accompanying advertisements held to a uniform, prescriptive, and narrow definition of maternal roles, even while the public sphere and women’s emerging place within it, changed radically. William Chafe noted in *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* that despite new realities, people in North America largely rejected the idea that women should depart from the domestic sphere (62). He quoted Alice Hamilton who wrote in the *New York Times* that “The tradition lingers...that woman’s place is in the home, and the social philosophy regarding her status has not changed as rapidly as have the various social and economic institutions” (Hamilton qtd in Chafe 62).

Clearly women’s representations in magazines played a key role in stabilizing this lingering, backward-looking tradition. Meanwhile, women’s real lives as mothers twisted and turned with the times. Women went to school and entered the workplace in growing numbers, their reproductive choices changed, and their decisions to marry and divorce shifted in ways that meant they would live more of their lives independent of matrimony. All the while, popular culture’s discourse on the Good Mother held to the same sweet but increasingly stale portrait. It was not until after the 1950s that Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* and took an ax to the Procrustean bed.

### The sample

For each decade in our American magazine sample, we were able to find about one-fourth of the articles listed under the heading “mothers” in the *Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature*. While many women in Canada—then as now—read numerous American women’s magazines,<sup>3</sup> domestically, their only national magazine devoted to women’s issues during this time period was *Chatelaine*, and it is not yet indexed. To address this challenge, we examined issues of *Chatelaine* from 1934, 1944, and 1954 and studied all the advertisements in the sample issues. This method is consistent with the advice of John Pauly who suggests researchers read “*all* relevant texts whenever possible” (21). Also, as Jane Marcellus notes in “These Working Wives: Representation of the ‘Two-Job’ Woman Between the World Wars,” “actually browsing through magazines is the only way to find advertisements” (57).

<b>Time Frame<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Number of articles listed under “mothers”</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
July 1932-June 1937	60 articles listed	14 articles read
July 1943-April 1947	57 articles listed	15 articles read
April 1953-February 1957	61 articles listed	14 articles read

<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>Sample of advertisements in <i>Chatelaine</i></b>
1934 February	150 advertisements total
1934 April	141 advertisements total
1934 November	142 advertisements total

<sup>3</sup> The situation with so-called ‘split-run’ periodicals—American magazines with Canadian advertising inserts—eventually came to a head some thirty years after our sample. For more about this, see Barbara Freeman’s book, *The Satellite Sex: The Media and Women’s Issues in English Canada*.

<sup>4</sup> NOTE: The *Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature* changed its time frame included in its bound volumes during this time period.

1944 April	151 advertisements total
1944 June	144 advertisements total
1944 December	156 advertisements total
1954 March	152 advertisements total
1954 May	145 advertisements total
1954 August	154 advertisements total

### 1930s

Women's economic opportunities were increasing steadily throughout the early part of the twentieth century. "By 1930, almost 2 million women were employed as secretaries, typists, file clerks, and another 700,000 worked as salesgirls in department stores" (Chafe, *Woman* 50). These 'pink collar' jobs were a step up from the domestic, farm and unskilled labor positions that women occupied at the turn of the century. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the average female worker was single and under 25 years of age, but throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the median age of women working rose to 30, and "the proportion of females 25-44 who were employed grew from 18.1% to 30.6%" (56). The number of married women who were looking for employment also rose substantially during this period, and Chafe noted that by 1940, married women accounted for 35% of all employed women (56). In the 1930s specifically, the number of women who held jobs jumped significantly, largely because many families needed their income to survive.

What was most striking in the Great Depression-era magazine articles is what they failed to say about mothers. Despite the unprecedented financial upheaval, the mothers featured in these magazines were stably situated in at least the middle class. Although they might not have household help, they were never someone else's help. The magazine mothers went blithely on with their household duties without any need to earn money or

even to make sacrifices, and they presumed their readers did the same. Fathers were invisible breadwinners, who rarely appeared and remained voiceless as parents. Even a brief article entitled “Mothers Need Vacations” recommended that mothers spend a week at a hotel without mentioning whether fathers should come along or what happened to children left at home. That article notwithstanding, magazine mothers rarely ventured outside the home where they wisely but discretely steered their children to make the choices that would shape them into happy, healthy adults. In fact, virtually all the articles we considered suggested mothers were to solely responsible for whether the child turned out OK. Schools, peers, and the society at large, implied the advertisements and articles in our sample, were powerless against their motherly influence. And they were severely warned against playing the role inappropriately.

In her article “Mama’s Boy” in *The Commonwealth*, Haryot Holt Dey targeted overindulgent mothers who kept their grown sons on their laps and out of the military or workforce. “Mother’s lap! Why even a watch-dog can be ruined, deprived of his vocation, by a lap” (Dey 67). Dey never mentions the father or the economic climate; if the son was a ne’er-do-well, the mom was to blame.

These articles, and others like them, advised women on how to fit the Procrustean bed and become the Good Mother. If mothers indulged their children with too many attentions, magazines warned, their children would grow up to be dependent and sissified. Mothers who attended too little to their children’s needs and too much to their own, turned into screaming shrews, and their children became neurotic and fearful. If these precautions were not sufficiently intimidating, the articles also held up mothers who did everything so perfectly that they became unbearable prigs, as Lisa Lenski described

“Mrs. Sprightly” in her article discussed below. Magazines guided mothers toward an ideal that either stretched them to give their children greater devotion or chopped them off for giving too much.

Advertisements, too, warned of dire consequence for the less-than-ideal mother. One ad for Cream of Wheat in *Chatelaine*, 1934, claimed that mothers could kill their children when introducing solid food if they went about initiating change in the ‘wrong’ way. The ad was designed like a magazine article complete with photographs of mother, son (before and after), and a wise male doctor who advised she feed him Cream of Wheat. In part, the text read, “Digestive disturbances at first solid food can be DANGEROUS!...My boy did fine until first solid food time. Then the trouble started. We tried one type food [sic] after another, but baby’s little stomach couldn’t handle them. He lost weight terribly. It got so I dreaded to pick him up, he seemed so thin and fragile. The neighbors were sure I’d never raise a boy!” (*Chatelaine* April 1934, 31). Luckily, after he ate the appropriate cereal, his health improved, and the ad’s final photograph showed a thriving boy. Another ad for Ovaltine admonished mothers who spoiled their children by allowing them to skip their milk. The appeal implied a dire outcome: “for the sake of your child, we urge you to try Ovaltine....” (*Chatelaine* April 1934, 55).

Magazines rarely acknowledged their own semiotic shenanigans. But in 1933, Lois Lenski, writing for *Parents*, made fun of the mythical Good Mother that the popular culture had created. She dubbed her “Mrs. Sprightly.” “I have followed her through magazines and books. I have listened to her praises in lecture hall, woman’s club, and doctor’s office. She has led me a merry pace,” Lenski wrote (20). A cartooned Mrs.

Sprightly, looking like Olive Oil in an apron, perfected prim efficiency with multi-tasking tricks like knitting while her children played in the park.

Lenski poked fun at her own inability to measure up to Mrs. Sprightly's perfection but without challenging the basic model. She portrayed herself as the only adult involved in her son's life, even though—she admitted in the article's last paragraph—she was committed to a career, had a maid to do the housework, and, unlike Mrs. Sprightly, left her knitting at home. Here, as in other articles, mothers were cautioned against trying to reach for perfection even while they were warned about the specter of falling too far short.

In *Parents* magazine, Rhoda Bacmeister, psychologist, mother and nursery school director, defined what she called a “great variety of types” of mothers “from the efficient business or professional woman who yet manages somehow to have a homelike home and to mother a healthy and happy family, to the quiet ‘homebody’ who can nevertheless always find time to help a neighbor in trouble or lend a hand with the church supper” (Bacmeister 20). But the range of mothers in reality was much wider, and in magazines much narrower and skewed more toward Bacmeister's latter ‘extreme’.

Ideally, according to these depictions, magazine mothers exercised singular and complete responsibility by staying in the background and quietly shaping their children's characters and personalities. “Keep in the Background” was one of Esther K. Harris's “Eleven Ways To Be a Good Mother”. She told mothers to allow children to resolve their own difficulties. “This is valuable learning which may be prevented when the adult interferes too hastily,” she said (73).

Yet despite taking this backseat role, mom's greatest success was to shine like the moon in the reflection of her children's achievements. If they failed, it was because she had. Experts, especially physicians and psychologists like Dr. Ellaine Elmore, reinforced the assumption that mothers were all powerful shapers. Dr. Elmore said she founded The Institute for Mothers in New York in 1935 "to bring the gift of knowledge to every mother in the land," so that each one "may prepare herself to make the proper adjustments to life and enable her children to achieve for themselves the highest degree of individual development, which is to be completely and continuously happy in living." ("Profession of Motherhood" 15)

*Literary Digest* lauded prime exemplar Otelia Augspurger Compton "because she has 'delivered the goods' as a great mother" ("Mother, LL.D" 30). In 1933, Mrs. Compton was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree by the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, solely for the accomplishments of her three sons. Each was famous in his field and one was a Nobel laureate. Mentioned in the article, but not as one of Mrs. Compton's accomplishments, was her daughter Mary, the wife of a college president in India. While Otelia Compton set a high bar for motherly success, this article conceded, any reasonable mother ought to be able to see her children into the "completely and continuously happy" life that Dr. Elmore prescribed.

"Mothers These Days," a Mothers' Day screed in *The Commonweal* in 1933, issued a scathing condemnation of mothers who failed, but ironically, this article also expanded the scope of motherhood further than any other. In discussing the overly sentimentalized mother, the author described: "the American mother who never sees her child on terra firma but in lofty aerial regions where vitamins, dietetics, "outlooks" and I.Q.'s combine

to fashion a cherubic denizen of nowhere at all (62). But this article took the Good Mother's possibilities far beyond the homely perfection described in most magazine articles. Instead, it prescribed a "practical remedy" for the American mother's "incurable sentimentality": Applying her maternal feelings and energies to larger causes, such as the eradication of child labor. "It is rather the obvious duty of every mother to perform the duties of a citizen where the children of the poor are concerned, and the duties of an educator in practical living where her own youngsters are concerned" ("Mothers These Days" 62). Such wide-angle views of mothers and families as the building blocks of the larger society were rare in this decade even while the Great Depression was causing some of the deepest need for a social ethic of care and responsibility.

### **1940s**

"No class of people experienced more change as a consequence of the [Second World] War than American women" (Chafe, *Journey* 11). While most institutions during the 1930s were urging women workers to return or remain home to maintain stability in the family and jobs for male breadwinners, the 1940s marked a clear shift in outlook. Because so many men were fighting, there was an unprecedented demand for workers who could replace their male counterparts. "In response, over 6 million women took jobs, increasing the size of the female labor force by 57 percent" (11). In addition, wages skyrocketed, as the number of married women who held jobs doubled (10-11). "Instead of frowning on women who worked, women and mass media embarked on an all-out effort to encourage them to enter the labor force" (11).

The notion of working was romanticized as part of the propaganda to encourage women's entry into the workforce. Rosie the Riveter became a national heroine and appeared in many national publications to flaunt 'woman power' and advertise products. An ad for Tangee lipstick depicted an attractive woman wearing makeup, welding goggles pushed up on her forehead, and a large, colorful kerchief over her hair. The text read, in part, "How difficult it is to keep that brilliant smile and that well-groomed look these days.... But a Tangee lipstick WILL save you precious time." (*Chatelaine* April 1944, 28). Like the women now playing professional baseball in flirty, short skirts, working women had to look feminine while they balanced the 'new' work routines with those of their all-important domestic realm. Tangee was promising to save women time, not challenging the amount or definition of work they now needed to balance.

Demographic characteristics of these new recruits are also important to note because, as William Chafe wrote, "women were doing jobs they had never performed before, [and] it was even more important that most of them were married and middle-aged" (13). By the end of the war, wives comprised the majority of workers. "Indeed, nearly 4 million of the 6.5 million women who joined the labor force during the war listed themselves as former housewives, many of them with children of school age or preschool age" (13).

If dad had been absent from the home life depicted on magazine pages in the 1930s, he literally left home in the 1940s. In the real world, fathers were marching off to war, but ironically, they were also re-appearing with mom in magazines. In the April 1944 issue of *Chatelaine*, women were reminded of the importance of keeping in touch with dad while he was fighting. The text suggested that Parker Pens could alleviate some of

this strife because “When work must be done under conditions where performance counts, the first choice in writing equipment is the Parker vacuumatic pen...” (2).

Alongside the copy was a sketch of a soldier carrying a bundle of letters and smiling broadly. Another ad for victory bonds in the same issue of *Chatelaine* comforted readers that “you will hold your man if you write often...” (April 1934, 60). This kind of admonishment not only suggested that it was the woman’s responsibility to ‘keep’ her husband faithful but also that the most likely threat to his safe return was infidelity, rather than a bullet.

While journalists like Ernie Pyle and Bill Maudlin kept American newspaper readers aware of the death and destruction of the foreign battlefields (Chafe, *Journey* 6), the collateral effects of war played mainly in the margins of women’s magazines. In the heart of the story, motherhood remained the same. “Mrs. Sprightly” tended to all her daily duties with just a little more elbow grease and efficiency. This portrayal was consistent with the ambivalent attitude of government and social institutions about the importance of women both working and being full-time mothers. While the West Coast Air Production Council, among a few others, suggested that a national child care center could enhance women’s abilities to work more in the war effort, since “One child care center adds up to eight thousand man-hours a month” (15), many other institutions and individuals were clearly opposed to this idea. Child care centers offended the deeply held American belief, well articulated by the Children’s Bureau, that, “‘A mother’s primary duty is to her home and children. This duty is one she cannot lay aside, no matter what the emergency’” (qtd. in Chafe, *Journey* 15).

And for the most part, magazine moms did not. The Good Mother had to fill in for dad; a few went to work; others adjusted their homes to the stepped-up shifts they now worked in war industries. But few of the war's most profound damages penetrated the bulwark of magazine motherhood. Magazine moms did not face widowhood, a physically or mentally wounded husband, an unplanned pregnancy, seriously unruly children, or husbands missing in action. Gladys Denny Shultz's "Cited for Courage" about a widowed mother in *Better Homes and Gardens*, May 1944, was one exception. Even so, magazine moms did have to roll up their sleeves and be both mother and father: "Because that is what your children need and you know it," *Parents* sternly pronounced (Bennett 21).

Despite these additional burdens, magazines still held the would-be Good Mother accountable for her children's misbehaviors and neuroses. At the Consultation Center in Manhattan, up to half of the clients came in with war-related problems. While many were supposedly about children, mothers were really at fault, the *New York Times* reported. "The children's behavior was not the root of the trouble, for small specific problems were 'tied into one big one,' the case worker found. That was the mother's own feeling of sudden panic" (Mackenzie, "Father Goes to War" 28). The social workers blamed mothers who were overwhelmed by the weight of additional responsibilities and a sense of loss and helplessness. "Parents have been hearing right along, 'Your children can take it, if you can.' That still seems to be the size of it," Mackenzie concluded (28).

Yet in 1943, *Better Homes and Gardens* admitted the war was increasing the pressure on mothers, as their title said, "If Daddy's Gone to War." Advice columnist Gladys Denny Shultz told readers: "Deprived of him, you go thru [sic] a period when you feel as

inadequate spiritually as a man who loses his right arm must feel physically” (14). Stay “at home with your youngsters if it’s at all possible for you to do so,” Shultz advised (14). If a mother had to work, she risked being blamed for the wave of juvenile delinquency sweeping the country:

Just recently I heard of a tragedy. With father in the service and the 17-year-old son waiting to go, the mother, anxious to do her share, entered a defense plant. Son, at loose ends, got in with the wrong kind of companions and landed in jail. The heart-broken mother sums it up, “My boy needed me, and I wasn’t on the job” (72).

But in the very next paragraph, Shultz warned mothers away from the other precipice: “Don’t over-indulge them.... The worse fault we modern mothers have....” A military adviser unofficially lent his weight to Shultz’s warning, denouncing American mothers as a peril to the nation. According to psychiatrist and consultant to both the Army and Navy, Professor Edward A. Strecker, “the blame for many psychoneurotics in the armed forces, and for many neurotic rejectees, rests on their ‘mom,’ who either by over attention or stern domination during the formative years keep their sons from maturing emotionally....” (Amram Scheinfeld, *Ladies Home Journal*). Whether mom is sweet, doting and self-sacrificing, or stern, capable and domineering, Dr. Strecker warns, “Both these moms are busily engaged finding their children ego satisfactions for life’s thwartings and frustrations.... They are accorded praise and adulation for giving their lives to their children. Hidden from view is the hard and tragic fact that . . . they exact in payment the emotional lives of their children” (Scheinfeld 36). Dr. Strecker was giving “Mrs. Sprightly” a spanking.

Warning mothers that their nerves could bring on a wide array of childhood disorders, Irma W. Hewlett advised them to relax with exercise, outside interests, or psychiatric help. “But whatever is needed, any mother who comes to see what her nervousness is doing to her children will find some way to redirect her nervous energy and become more emotionally stable” (Hewlett 19).

As the war drew to a close and dads came back home, magazine mothers now had to reintegrate them into family, with children who hardly knew them. For a brief period, some of the magazines under consideration acknowledged that the Good Mother might actually think of herself as a wife as well as a mom and negotiate between the two roles. Virginia Moore, M.D., the author of “When Father Comes Marching Home” in the January 1945 *Parents* even addressed advice to the returning fathers. Despite the magazine’s name, *Parents* rarely addressed fathers.

But soon after the war, magazines again placed mothers on their Procrustean bed. *Parents* again asked moms: “Are You Trying Too Hard?” (Harris) and told them: “Worry Never Made a Good Mother” (Sanderlin). The *New York Times* magazine now reported on a New Jersey mental health program that was preparing mothers to handle their children’s ordinary naughtiness, instead of their wartime neurosis. Mrs. Sprightly dropped her extra wartime duties; her efficiency had brought her through the war unchanged. But her fundamental drive to fit the Good Mother form was threatened from another direction.

In 1946, the *New York Times* reviewed *The Commonsense Book of Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock. Spock urged parents to relax and have faith in themselves. “Sociologists might read this book for its reflection of parent anxieties in our

contemporary culture,” the review opined (Mackenzie, “Good Advice” NP). Spock also covered a variety of topics that magazines rarely touched: nursery schools, separated parents, adoption, and working mothers. Would Spock’s ideas speak to Mrs. Sprightly and her similar incarnations in popular women’s magazines?

### **1950s**

While women made significant advances during the war years, these changes still occurred within a structure of assumptions and values that perpetuated inequality. Still, as prosperity and optimism appeared on the horizon of the next decade, many women hoped that the strides they had made during the war years would continue. It is significant to note that the vast majority of women who had taken jobs during the 1940s wanted to keep them. Chafe wrote, “In New York, the figure was 80 percent and in Detroit 75 percent” (*Journey* 83). This idea of women continuing to work had some government support in The Women’s Advisory Committee that wanted to see the establishment of a family assistance program and child care facilities to assist employed women. “‘No society can boast of democratic ideals if it utilizes woman power in a crisis and neglects it in peace’ the committee asserted” (83). Even more shocking was the fact that the War Department issued a pamphlet to returning soldiers urging them to help with household chores and to support the idea of family allowances and child care facilities. But all this must be understood within the more dominant theme of virtually all postwar publications: Women ought to return to their ‘natural’ place in the home. A Southern senator even said that Congress should “force wives and mothers back to the kitchen” (qtd. in Chafe, *Journey* 83).

In facing these kinds of assumptions, it is no surprise that women initially lost jobs in large numbers. The Selective Service Act allowed veterans priority over wartime workers for positions they previously held. With the crisis in finding employees now over, some companies also reinstated an age policy that terminated jobs for women over the age of 45 (84). Still, women were determined, and two years after the war ended, “women’s employment rates had begun to return to wartime peaks” (84). By 1950, the “proportion of women at work had increased to 32 percent as opposed to 27 percent a decade earlier. The change was greater than that for the entire preceding thirty years” (84), and the largest increase actually occurred in women 45 to 54 years of age (84). “Women had been returning to work all along. Many waiting until the children were grown or taking part-time jobs while they were in school” (Maloy & Patterson, 52).

But most popular portrayals failed to reflect these trends. “The image of American women portrayed in the mass media during the 1950s was a well-groomed wife and mother; any other kind was an aberration,” Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissman wrote in *A History of Women in America* (328-329). While the television moms—on the “Donna Reed Show,” “Ozzie and Harriet,” “Lassie,” “Father Knows Best,” and the like—were now carrying on the tradition of the perfect Good Mother, magazine moms were becoming slightly more complicated. They reflected a little of the ambiguity apparent in North American society at large. Old themes droned on, but subtle changes crept into advertisements and articles. Magazine dads were taking a small part in child rearing now. Moms were also occasionally concerned with being wives, and, most surprisingly, magazines were sometimes advising them to consider themselves first.

In fact, if magazine moms did not hang onto some interests of their own—you guessed it—their children’s lives were ruined. In a 1954 article in *Parents*, “Who Comes First, You or Your Children?” Rachel Rubin sounded the familiar warning to parents not to over indulge their children. (See also Greenberg’s “If I were a Young Mother Today”.) Mom was still at fault, but the reason had changed. Now, when she did not have outside interests to pursue, all that leftover energy made her and her children neurotic. When one mother, an accomplished musician, gave up piano, her sons turned out with effeminate and antisocial tendencies. While she could not be “fully blamed” for this outcome, well... everyone knew domineering mothers caused those problems (Rubin 124).

A movement of mothers’ day out programs was growing across the country, and *Parents* magazine credited them with sending moms “home happier, more relaxed, and more companionable wives and mothers” for having had a little time away from homemaking (Applebaum, 43). Prosperity was allowing the Good Mother a bit of time for herself.

However, some magazine husbands now needed almost as much attention as their children. A 1950s *Chatelaine* advertisement for Pepsodent toothpaste spoke to this elision as it told women “the strongest men often have poor teeth” (March 1954 39). It was a woman’s job to look after his needs as if he were her child: feed him well and buy Pepsodent. In 1955, *Parents* magazine began an article entitled “Which are You First of All: Wife or Mother,” with an almost unheard of story of divorce. “... Joan is to blame...—too much mother, too little wife” (Boyle, 35). Now the overprotective mom was not only ruining her children but also neglecting her husband. *His* happiness

required *her* to feel that her greatest happiness was in being his wife and the mother of his children. In turn, her wifely happiness, the article proclaimed, would make her sons more masculine (83).

Like their counterparts during World War II, magazine moms of the 1950s worried about being too busy. In 1956, the *Ladies Home Journal* began a series of articles about whether young mothers were bearing a heavier load than those of earlier generations. The age of childbearing had dropped, and this series featured a couple having their fourth child at the age of 25. Moms were still trying too hard. Barclay (“Changing Ideals”) warned them in the *New York Times* magazine they were discouraging their daughters from following in their footsteps. She had good evidence for her fears. A month earlier, Barclay (“How Girls Judge” 32) had reported on a survey of adolescent girls that showed their considerable confusion about the “feminine role.” While Barclay had not predicted doom, she noted some substantial changes in women’s lives since the end of the war. They had less household help, were more aware of community concerns and politics, felt less emphasis on family relationships and a diminishment of autocratic family roles (“How Girls Judge” 32). Despite such evidence of unrest, most magazines and their advertisers were more interested in reinforcing than questioning the status quo in sex roles.

One ad for bathroom cleanser displayed a photo of mother and daughter dressed in identical dresses and aprons cleaning the tub. “No help required”, the headline read (*Chatelaine* June 1954 20). This ad for Old Dutch matched a number of articles that encouraged magazine moms to begin training their daughters early in homemaking and beauty routines. Magazines increased both the number and tone of beauty ads in the

1950s, and they engaged in new scaremongering about things like feminine hygiene. Lysol advertised a douche to combat something women were ‘careless’ about and men just could not ignore (*Chatelaine* June 1954 24). While the ad does give a nod to working women, the woman’s boss suggested that she needed to address this ‘neglect.’ Now women had to look and smell perfect, not just be perfect.

### **Concluding Observations and Relating Magazines to Fairy Tales and Myths**

Mothers rarely played the main protagonists in classic fairy tales, as they did in these magazine articles. But in mythology, many of the Greek Olympians were mothers. Demeter (Ceres in the Roman myth), the goddess of grain and mother of Persephone, was the one goddess for whom motherhood was central to her story. Responsible for the world’s fertility, Demeter doted on her daughter and fell into a deep depression when Persephone was kidnapped by Hades and taken to his underworld. Demeter neglected the earth until Persephone was returned to her. Each year, the fall and winter months represented the time that Persephone returned to Hades (Mercatante and Dow 278).

Demeter is the maternal archetype representing eternal motherhood, preserved in mythology and often retold in dreams, religious rites, and works of art (Jung 47). As a myth, Demeter’s is a skeletal story embellished by the particular culture in which it is retold. As a psychological archetype, Demeter is even more, according to Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen. She—along with other mythological figures—can be seen as imprints of our human psyches, representations of the powerful internal forces that shape our hearts and minds. As psychological patterns, these archetypes represent differences among and within women, Bolen said (1). What is fulfilling to one type of

woman may be meaningless to another, depending on which “goddess” is dominant in her personality. Moreover, the more complicated the woman, the more likely that many archetypes –masculine and feminine—are active within her. And what is fulfilling to one part of her will be meaningless to another (2).

But cultures place heavy value on some feminine models and diminish others, so that women may feel compelled to develop according to cultural expectations and against their own natures, Bolen said. Demeter represents the maternal instinct “fulfilled through pregnancy or through providing physical, psychological, or spiritual nourishment to others” (Bolen 171). Psychologically, this archetype can direct a woman’s life and lead her to have a powerful effect on others. But it can also “predispose her to depression if her need to nurture is rejected or thwarted” (171). Until she has some insight into her unrealistic expectations that she should be the perfect mother, she expects herself to be all-knowing and all-powerful, capable of foreseeing events and protecting her child from all pain” (186). Therefore she is prone to become overprotective, Bolen warned, and just the kind of overindulgent or domineering mother that the sample magazine articles derided.

Magazine articles in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s repeatedly exacerbated this weakness by painting mothers as all-powerful influences on their children and—without seeming to contradict themselves—warning them against overindulgence and overprotection. As Shari Thurer said: “Motherhood—the way we perform mothering—is culturally derived. Each society has its own mythology, complete with rituals, beliefs, expectations, norms and symbols....Our particular idea of what constitutes a good mother is only that, an idea, not an eternal verity” (xv).

What the magazines failed to do—with rare exceptions—was to suggest what might counterbalance the bad tendencies. According to Bolen, these tactics could include: “Learning how to express anger instead of bottling it up” to combat the predisposition to depression (193). But most articles in the sample recommended that mothers should tamp down anger and always speak in well-modulated tones. Few indicated that children could survive expressions of anger as long as they were basically secure.<sup>5</sup> The Good Mother needs to mother herself to avoid depression, Bolen said (194), and that includes: “Developing other goddesses within herself” (193). Every woman needs some of the cold wisdom and calculation of Athena and the concentration and fierce independence of Artemis, the huntress, as counterweight to the vulnerability of Demeter. Until the 1950s when a few articles suggested that mothers needed time for themselves or their husbands, most allowed almost no elasticity in the mothering role.

Carol Gilligan writing *In a Different Voice* posited that the all-giving, self-sacrificing woman, so typified by the magazine mom, exemplified a middle stage in a hierarchy of ethical development. In order to grow, Gilligan claimed, women had to acknowledge the legitimacy of their own needs and simultaneously apply their motherly nurturance to a wider community and goal. Sara Ruddick furthers Gilligan’s idea by exploring how “maternal thinking” could expand political processes, especially in peacemaking. The ancients recognized this wider

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Gladys Deny Shultz’s “My Mother Never Raised her Voice,” 1933, as an example of the former and Jean R. Klomaiko’s “So I’m not a Perfect Parent,” 1956, as an example of the latter.

application. Demeter's story included her responsibility for all fertility and agriculture.

Magazine articles and advertisements of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were missing important trends in the lives of real women who could be said to be on this pathway to maturity and into the wider narrative of the Demeter archetype. Instead, they offered readers a narrow definition of motherhood. It was a definition that reflected the old needs of the Industrial Age, which segregated sex roles into the public and private spheres and gave women the job of keeping their homes as havens in a heartless world (Ehrenreich & English).

The Good Mother myth has tenacity. She offers comfort in turbulent times. As a narrow ideal, she also creates the kind of insecurities advertisers can prey upon. But she is a myth. When real women feel forced to conform to her model, they suffer like Procrustes' victims. They are robbed of their true selves and denied their individuality and variety.

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