

## William Wordsworth, "The Mad Mother" (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1798)

Her eyes are wild, her head is bare,  
The sun has burnt her coal-black hair,  
Her eye-brows have a rusty stain,  
And she came far from over the main.  
She has a baby on her arm,  
Or else she were alone;  
And underneath the hay-stack warm,  
And on the green-wood stone,  
She talked and sung the woods among;  
And it was in the English tongue.

"Sweet babe! they say that I am mad,  
But nay, my heart is far too glad;  
And I am happy when I sing  
Full many a sad and doleful thing:  
Then, lovely baby, do not fear!  
I pray thee have no fear of me,  
But, safe as in a cradle, here  
My lovely baby! thou shalt be,  
To thee I know too much I owe;  
I cannot work thee any woe."

A fire was once within my brain;  
And in my head a dull, dull pain;  
And fiendish faces one, two, three,  
Hung at my breasts, and pulled at me.  
But then there came a sight of joy;  
It came at once to do me good;  
I waked, and saw my little boy,  
My little boy of flesh and blood;  
Oh joy—for me that sight to see!  
For he was here, and only he.

Suck, little babe, oh suck again!  
It cools my blood; it cools my brain;  
Thy lips I feel them, baby! they  
Draw from my heart the pain away.  
Oh! press me with thy little hand;  
It loosens something at my chest;  
About that tight and deadly band  
I feel thy little fingers press'd.  
The breeze I see is in the tree;  
It comes to cool my babe and me.

Oh! love me, love me, little boy!  
Thou art thy mother's only joy;  
And do not dread the waves below,  
When o'er the sea-rock's edge we go;  
The high crag\* cannot work me harm, \*cliff  
Nor leaping torrents when they howl;  
The babe I carry on my arm,  
He saves for me my precious soul;  
Then happy lie, for blest am I;  
Without me my sweet babe would die.

Then do not fear, my boy! for thee  
Bold as a lion I will be;  
And I will always be thy guide,  
Through hollow snows and rivers wide.  
I'll build an Indian bower;\* I know \* room made of branches  
The leaves that make the softest bed:  
And if from me thou wilt not go.  
But still be true 'till I am dead,  
My pretty thing! then thou shalt sing,  
As merry as the birds in spring.

Thy father cares not for my breast,  
'Tis thine, sweet baby, there to rest:  
'Tis all thine own! and if its hue  
Be changed, that was so fair to view,  
'Tis fair enough for thee, my dove!  
My beauty, little child, is flown;  
But thou will live with me in love,  
And what if my poor cheek be brown?  
'Tis well for me, thou canst not see  
How pale and wan it else would be.

Dread not their taunts, my little life!  
I am thy father's wedded wife;  
And underneath the spreading tree  
We two will live in honesty.  
If his sweet boy he could forsake,  
With me he never would have stay'd:  
From him no harm my babe can take,  
But he, poor man! is wretched made,  
And every day we two will pray  
For him that's gone and far away.

I'll teach my boy the sweetest things;  
I'll teach him how the owlet sings.  
My little babe! thy lips are still,  
And thou hast almost suck'd thy fill.  
—Where art thou gone my own dear child?  
What wicked looks are those I see?  
Alas! alas! that look so wild,  
It never, never came from me:  
If thou art mad, my pretty lad,  
Then I must be for ever sad.

Oh! smile on me, my little lamb!  
For I thy own dear mother am.  
My love for thee has well been tried:  
I've sought thy father far and wide.  
I know the poisons of the shade,  
I know the earth-nuts fit for food;  
Then, pretty dear, be not afraid;  
We'll find thy father in the wood.  
Now laugh and be gay, to the woods away!  
And there, my babe; we'll live for aye.\*" \*ever

Commentary: We hear from the mother that she was married and is now deserted and from the poet that she is talking in "the English tongue". What should we make of her loving sentiments towards both child *and* father? Robert McHale writes: 'One of the ways Wordsworth says that he will achieve the "purpose" of his poems is "to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature [...] by tracing the material passion through many of its more subtle windings" in poems such as "The Mad Mother" (Preface, p.126).' He goes on: 'Wordsworth adapts a "case history [...] for the observation, dramatic display, and interpretation of the workings of the imagination.' (McHale, "Wordsworth's "Mad Mother": The Poetics and Politics of Identification", in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 39:3, Summer 2008), 108-114; p108.)