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Hidden Mothers: Forms of Absence in Victorian Photography and Fiction

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Fig. 1. Hidden mother carte de visite, Walker Photo of Bank Street, Lincoln, undated (author's collection)

I. Introduction

<1>At first glance, Figure 1 shows us nothing remarkable. It's a photograph—a carte de visite—of a child in a white dress, standing on a chair. The image was made in a

studio or in a home: the child rests its hand against a piece of furniture, and the monochromatic furniture and the blank wall behind direct our attention back to that child, who occupies the center of the frame. In many ways, this looks like thousands of other such photographs: quotidian children's portraits designed to document the individual child. Yet there is something distinctive about the child's chair: it has an open back, behind which we can make out a dark figure. The child's white dress draws attention away from the person, shrouded in dark material, crouched behind the chair to secure the child. This is a hidden mother portrait.

<2>The expression "hidden mother," which appears to be a modern term,⁽¹⁾ refers to a Victorian photographic trend that was popular across America as well as England and continental Europe. Hidden mother photographs, as Linda Fregni Nagler's 2013 compendium of 1,002 such images demonstrates, were a popular convention for nearly 100 years.⁽²⁾ This photographic genre has received renewed attention in recent years, beginning with collectors' articles circulating before the release of Nagler's exhibit and subsequent book, and continuing with Laura Larson's 2016 *Hidden Mother* and Alicia Yin Cheng and Erin Barnett's 2020 *Atlantic* article, "Victorian Mothers Hid Themselves in Their Babies' Photos." Hidden mother images are pervasive in type and ostensible use: they may be found as daguerreotypes, cartes de visite, tintypes, and ambrotypes; they are most commonly sold today as individual images, severed from their original context, but they are also found in family photo albums, suggesting they were a recognized and normalized style common to domestic collections. They are examples of vernacular photographs, that type of ubiquitous, everyday photography Geoffrey Batchen describes as "the absent presence that determines its medium's historical and physical identity" (*Each Wild Idea* 59). Hidden mothers may appear under a shroud, obscured as another object, their limbs disembodied by the framing of the image, cut out of the frame entirely, or scratched or burned out of the image. These photographs were, as the duration and diversity of this practice indicates, extremely widespread, even as they represented several different subtypes.

<3>In their diversity and ubiquity, these vernacular images echo the diversity and ubiquity of another noteworthy category of hidden mothers: the missing mothers of Victorian literature. These literary mothers are often "hidden," both literally and figuratively, for in addition to a preponderance of mothers outright missing from these texts, Victorian novels also often feature mothers who do not represent archetypal good motherhood. These mothers' literal absences or their failures to perform domestic duties often form significant plot points in novels spanning the nineteenth century, as numerous scholars have noted. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Margaret Homans, Marianne Hirsch, Carolyn Dever, Natalie McKnight,

Nancy Armstrong, Barbara Thaden, John Jordan, (3) and others have all written about the conspicuous absence of mothers—in the form of either their physical or perceived moral absence—in Victorian novels, offering different reasons and distinct implications for the trend. Uniting many studies is a question of form: why is the *novel* so wedded to this motif? Is it, as Marianne Hirsch describes, that “Plot itself demands maternal absence” (*Mother/Daughter Plot* 67)? Or that, in Barbara Thaden’s words, “an ideal mother does not make an interesting fictional character” and, insofar as mothers “are often conservative forces in life and literature,” their excision from a text may allow the main character “greater scope for action” (4)? Are there “*structural* advantages of maternal loss,” advantages specific to “Victorian melancholic fictions” (Dever 22, original emphasis)?

<4>A photograph is clearly a different form of representation than a novel: by definition, a photograph is a singular object, one that may communicate a story but does so through different means than a prose narrative. More specifically and unlike many of the missing or bad mothers of Victorian fiction, hidden mothers in photographs tend to not represent significant plot points. While novels often use the missing mother as a device to develop an individual protagonist shaped by this parental absence, missing mother photographs are banal and unremarkable in their proliferation. But both photographic and literary mothers are literally or figuratively props for the focal point of the representation. In attempting to focus our attention on the child, both also evoke a double hiddenness, implying a definition of motherhood achieved through the mother’s effacement. Despite their notable differences, in other words, these photographs and novels share a structural placement of the mother. They are, to borrow from and extend Caroline Levine’s discussion of forms, “*an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*” that may be “as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions” as “to reading literature”—or to viewing photographs (15-16, original emphasis). Levine’s distinction between form and genre is helpful here. As she writes, while genre “involves acts of classifying texts,” forms “defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements, have a different relation to context: they can organize both social and literary objects, and they can remain stable over time” (25). Forms, in other words, have the capacity to remain “transhistorical, portable, and abstract,” as well as “material, situated, and political” (23). But just as a shape has a form, so too does the *absence* of such a shape. Negative space is given form by that which surrounds it. The hidden mother of photography and fiction is, I suggest, a formal expression of individual self-effacement that adopts different, situated inflections. She can represent a range of meanings, but many of these meanings coalesce around a situated, political figuration of motherhood in the Victorian era. This political figuration is their affordance, or latent potential (19). Levine and other formalist

cultural studies writers are wary of the “fissures and interstices, vagueness and indeterminacy, boundary-crossing and dissolution” as “formless or antiformal experiences” that have drawn too much critical attention in recent years,(4) but I would maintain that, rather than an antiformal experience, the hidden mother gives us way to read absence itself as a form (21).(5)

<5>In what follows, then, I read iterations of the hidden mother of Victorian photography alongside the missing mother of Victorian fiction and suggest that, despite the different representations and critiques of motherhood as self-abnegation they express, they each show motherhood to be a form structured through effacement and absence. It is precisely through the diversity of these representations that they open a space for absence to be read as a form; the patterns of this effacement give us a new way to think about culturally situated forms of motherhood. In reading photography and fiction together, I build on the foundational work of Nancy Armstrong, who demonstrates the way in which photography and fiction came together in the nineteenth century “as partners in the same cultural project” (26). Literary realism developed, according to Armstrong, by referencing “a world of objects that either had been or could be photographed,” while photography “offered up portions of this world to be seen by the same group of people whom novelists imagined as their readership” (7-8). The two were mutually constitutive. Daniel Novak develops this line of inquiry further, asking “What if we read photography and its interchangeable subjects as a ‘model’ for how we read character and identity in the realist novel?” (6).(6) My own question is different, though related: what do photographic and literary representations of the effaced mother show us about formal patterns of maternal effacement in the nineteenth century, and how might we be able to use this to understand the way we interpret absence as scholars?

<6>What follows is an exploration of some of the different ways we might read forms of absence. Photographic hidden mothers fall into several categories, but three archetypes recur: (7) veiled mothers, mothers obscured as different kinds of objects, and mothers partially or wholly cut out of the frame. Similarly, many missing or bad fictional mothers may be grouped into those who abandon their children, those who don’t act like mothers, and those who are altogether missing.(8) In this article, I pair three sub-types of hidden mother photographs alongside instances of hidden mothers in Victorian fiction: the veiled mother alongside the mother who abandons her role in *Bleak House*, the mother-as-object alongside the mother who disguises herself and performs a different role in *East Lynne*, and the mother outside the frame alongside the utterly missing mother in *Villette*. The effaced mother, transmuted mother, and wholly absent mother each express a different aspect of the hidden mother. These pairings demonstrate multimedia similarities that mark the hidden

mother as a phenomenon that extends beyond photography or literature alone, signifying a formally expansive, cultural preoccupation with motherhood and absence. These pairings are not always neat and tidy: at times they demonstrate startling correspondences, while at others they introduce possible new ways of reading and viewing the maternal. Notably, many of the missing mothers of Victorian fiction are implicitly “bad” because of their absence, whereas hidden mothers in photographs from the era may be understood as “good” in their role precisely because they are hidden.

<7>Despite these differences, one constant remains: the mother is defined through her effacement, either in her proper maternal role or as an individual. The differences of these representations afford us an opportunity to nuance our interpretation of effacement and absence, to see these not as external to forms but as forms in their own right. The Victorian mother is a curiously and diversely empty category. Her effacement aids the focus on children and the development of plots. But it is not the absence of the mother that enables these things: it is absence as a form itself. One of the affordances of effacement and absence, I will argue, is a refiguring of motherhood itself—an unmaking of the category as its own form.

II. Hidden Forms



Fig. 2. Hidden mother carte de visite, Clements Brothers, undated (author's collection)

<8>In *Hidden Mothers*, Nagler notes that her interest in hidden mothers came from a modern seller's description of one such image: “Funny baby with hidden mother” (Measure). Max Petsch's much earlier essay, “Children's Pictures,” from *The Philadelphia Photographer* in 1872, helps to explain one reason for the hidden

mother phenomenon. Petsch describes the shrouded figure as ideally a mother who can give her child a sense of “security”: it is the mother’s role to calm the child and ensure a successful photograph (68). Indeed, Petsch cautions photographers to limit those family members admitted into the studio: “Of accompanying persons, only the mother, and possibly the nurse, should be admitted,” for all other family members will profess “to know best how to attract the little one; in a circle they stand around the child, and stare as if they had never seen it before” (67). The mother knows best how to keep the child still for the photograph—and yet she does not get any visual credit. Self-abnegation seems intrinsic to her status as a mother and the efficacy of her role in the photographic process.

<9>Significantly, the obscured individuals in these images are not always mothers. Sometimes they are clearly fathers, or men or women hired by the photographic studio for such a purpose, or family servants: a nanny, a governess, or—in the case of several examples from the southern United States in the 1840s and 1850s—likely an enslaved person of African descent. (9) Indeed, the term “hidden mother” masks the complexities of gender, race, class, and domestic work present in these images.(10) This term itself functions as a kind of double elision, obscuring the true identity of the people behind the shrouds. The descriptor “hidden mother” is thus imprecise. Yet at the same time the phrase is useful, both as a way of interpreting the double-edged demonstrative obfuscation of motherhood and labor of mothering across multiple forms of representation in the nineteenth century, and as a way of signaling the limits of what we, as researchers, can know. The expression “hidden mother” is performative, in that it perpetuates the effacement it describes. Because of this, it is not important that the mothers are not all literal mothers or women: that is, indeed, part of the point. These are not mothers in a strictly biological sense, but people occupying an effaced subject position as caregivers whose labor is simultaneously essential and erased. The Victorian mother, these images and our descriptions of them suggest, is a figure defined through effacement and idealized through absence.

<10>Functionally, the images are designed to erase the supporting individual, and Petsch describes exposure techniques that might help a photographer achieve this erasure:

When we have a very light, or if possible, pure white dress, a light background and a light chair, the exposure will be twice as short, as if the surroundings were dark, for instance, the favorite black velvet dresses. As with so short an exposure, the decorations would look very dark, it is better to omit them altogether, and to have a graduated

background; in this way the supporting arm of the mother is also removed. (67)

Hidden mothers are necessary to circumvent long exposure times: the supporting individual is present only to *be* obscured—rendered an object, an inanimate prop of sorts, which often quite literally props up another. Many hidden mother images do not strike the modern viewer as necessarily subtle. While many of these photographs would have appeared under oval mats, which disguise the full contour of the shrouded figure and help that figure blend into the background, others are daguerreotypes or ambrotypes in cases with frames that do not attempt to disguise. As Batchen writes, images like this “take for granted our ability ‘not to see’ things when it suits us...we are invariably asked to not notice the incongruity of fake balustrades standing on carpets or the artificiality of painted backdrops and other obvious props. Such photographs call on the viewer to exercise a heightened degree of imaginative perception” (“Hiding” 5). Insofar as she is part of the image as a whole, we are supposed to look at the hidden mother. We are just not expected to really *see* her.

<11>At the same time, these photographs are about motherhood; they say, as Batchen puts it, “something profound about the nature of parenting” (4). They not only indicate that effacement is part of that role but also associate this effacement “with the practice of photography in general, as if to take a photograph is necessarily to enact a palimpsest to put in motion an endless reciprocation of the visible and the invisible” (4). The parent is there, “a muffled visual presence, but he or she is not exactly seeable, or at least not identifiable; these parents have made themselves forever anonymous through a willed transfiguration from person into object” (5). The “mother” of such images hides in plain sight, present only as an absence. These images are domestic and intimate, yet they withhold. They are alien. They represent the uncanny, as Nagler writes (14).

<12>While the rarer daguerreotypes in their delicate jewel cases would have originally existed as stand-alone images, many other types of hidden mother images emerge out of Victorian family albums. According to Pierre Bourdieu, photography serves a “*family function*,” and the collecting and organizing entity of this family function is the album (19, original emphasis). Found within the pages of the album, hidden mother images signify beyond pure utility: they position the mother as prop or support. But in the process, they have the potential to reimagine family life. Albums can reveal cultural trends through similarity: Marianne Hirsch notes that the “conventional and predictable poses” of family photographs “make them largely interchangeable” (“Familial Looking” xiii). But albums can also reveal details about

individual families—to differentiate (between families, or between roles within families) even while they enact social norms. If there is a mind-numbing sameness to many of these portraits and albums, this apparent sameness can distract us from subtle but significant differences—among which are the different types of hidden mother photographs.

<13>What does it mean to picture a family? The uniform ideal of the Victorian album offers one answer, but it is challenged by hidden mothers of both photography and fiction. The explicit staging of hidden mother photography offers a way to intuit and analyze the missing mother of Victorian fiction, and to see some of the broader stakes for the erasure or displacement of motherhood in nineteenth-century cultural productions. James Kelley notes that it frequently fell to “wives and mothers” to create photographic albums and act as “curators of the information relating to the images preserved within these albums’ covers” (237). Kelley reads the mother’s trace across the editorializing that frequently accompanies particular images and the overall construction of the album. But through hidden mother images, we may also read her trace within individual images, literally supporting the younger members of the family while obscuring herself. Elizabeth Siegel observes that “Through albums, women were able to project selected aspects of their gender identity and hide others, as much consciously playing a role as being reflected by the images they created” (266). Indeed, hiding the self entirely is yet another form of this gender performance. The objective of the album is to organize individuals into family forms, and to arrange the family in a particular order in relation to those outside. The hidden mother photograph complicates this work by showing us the “mother” as an absence—as does much Victorian fiction. This is the arrangement of disappearance, of objectification not as spectacle, but as effacement.

III. Veiled Mother/*Bleak House*



Fig. 3. Unmarked hidden mother cabinet card (author’s collection)

<14>Photography and fiction can perform parallel cultural work: as Laura Wexler explains in the context of nineteenth-century domesticity, “While the middle-class home became the port of entry for sentimental fictions of all sorts, the hall table and the parlor were accumulating photographs at an impressive rate. Like domestic novels, the resulting accumulation of images helped to make, not merely to mirror, the home” (255). The hidden mother of photography performs her proper role through self-abnegation, while the good mother of Victorian fiction is generally absent from the pages of the novel—but this very absence is then stigmatized. This stigmatized mother stands in stark relief against the good hidden mother of photography, who is hiding herself in order to support and highlight her child. To be a good mother in a hidden mother portrait, one must veil oneself. To be a good mother in many a Victorian novel, one must be either good and absent, or one is bad *because* absent—and both positions form a hurdle for the fiction’s protagonist to overcome.

<15>The missing (good) mother of Victorian fiction is commonplace nearly to the point of cliché—and hardly surprising considering the high maternal mortality in the period.⁽¹¹⁾ In *Jane Eyre*, for instance, we quickly learn our title character is an orphan, her cruel Aunt Reed hardly a substitute mother figure. Bad and missing mothers litter the pages of *Wuthering Heights*, and all of the major characters grow up without the influence of a good mother. Mary Barton the elder is killed off in chapter three of Gaskell’s novel, and *Vanity Fair*’s Becky Sharpe is likewise an orphan, her mother’s French roots and career as an opera girl suggested as a reason for Becky’s immoral trajectory. Victorian sensation fiction relies upon the absence of the mother figure as a whole: the mother’s absence from the family or her failure to live up to her proper role helps propel the plots of many novels in this genre, from *The Woman in White* through *Lady Audley’s Secret* to *East Lynne*. The literary missing mother motif is a staple of realism and naturalism as well: Dorothea and Cecilia Brooke’s mother is gone as the novel opens, as is Jude Fawley’s. In *The Nether World*, mothers are either missing, like Jane Snowdown’s mother, or evil, like Mrs. Peckover. In Dickens particularly, mothers do not fare well at all: Oliver Twist is famously an orphan, and Esther Summerson is effectively one. ⁽¹²⁾ Mrs. Gradgrind is utterly ineffective until she is dead, and her daughter Louisa’s own future as a wife and mother we learn is a “thing...never to be” (*Hard Times* 287). Little Nell, Little Dorrit, Pip, David Copperfield, Rosa Dartle, Florence and Paul Dombey: all lose their mothers, and all these losses prove important for the development of plot and orphaned character.

<16>It is harder to locate mothers—and harder yet to locate good mothers—in Victorian novels than it is to trace their absence across the century’s major works.

Indeed, as Carolyn Dever puts it, “in the mid-Victorian period, it could be argued, the *only* good mother is a dead mother” (19). In their introduction to the collection *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, Claudia C. Klaver and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman argue that “The Victorian maternal ideal was at once more complex, less stable, less coherent, and less universal than the iconic simplicity it connoted.” The existence of an ideal does not preclude resistance to it: as Klaver and Rosenman write, “the very force of the ideal provided metaphorical material that could be loosened from its intended aims and directed to other ends” (12). The mother’s absence may also function in this more complex way. Indeed, hidden mother portraiture shows us is that there are several different ways for a mother to be an absent presence. The first of these possibilities is the shrouded mother—the mother who is not pictured as such alongside her child but removes herself from the image by adopting a covering. This photographic figure is echoed across Charles Dickens’s 1853 novel *Bleak House*, though Lady Dedlock and her child, Esther Summerson, complicate an alignment between veiled hidden mother and good Victorian motherhood.

<17>Lady Dedlock, Dickens’s mysteriously bored character, is a literally and figuratively veiled figure. In her introduction in the second chapter of *Bleak House*, we see that she “screens her face” against Tulkinghorn’s gaze (27). The two habitually maintain a metaphoric blind between them—and when Tulkinghorn observes Guppy on his visit to Lady Dedlock following Krook’s spontaneous combustion, “for an instant the blind that is always down flies up. Suspicion, eager and sharp, looks out. Another instant; close again” (536). The screen is not limited to Tulkinghorn: The Lady “supposes herself to be an inscrutable Being,” yet “every dim star revolving about her, from her maid to the manager of the Italian Opera, knows her weaknesses, prejudices, follies, haughtinesses, and caprices” (24). She wears a veil, in other words, but it is insufficient protection from the prying eyes of those who surround her. If anything, such a veil only draws more attention, like a shrouded hidden mother portrait.

<18>Indeed, Lady Dedlock wields a literal screen, or fan, in her encounter with Guppy—referenced nine times in that chapter—which she keeps raised near her face throughout the meeting (459-69). She also wears a veil when she hires Jo to learn about Nemo and to visit his grave. It is not a wholly successful guise: “She should be an upper servant by her attire, yet, in her air and step...she is a lady. Her face is veiled, and still she sufficiently betrays herself to make more than one of those who pass her look round sharply” (260). Jo later mistakes Esther, Lady Dedlock’s secret daughter, for the veiled lady: Esther wears a veil to visit the sick Jo in the brickmaker’s cottage, and Jo immediately thinks he sees Lady Dedlock instead

(489). The irony is that the veil, designed to obscure, draws more attention to Lady Dedlock. Jo is able to identify her despite her veil; in fact, the veil enables an association between mother and daughter.

<19>This confusion of Esther for Lady Dedlock echoes their likeness, while the trope of the veil or screen foreshadows Lady Dedlock's eventual disguise during her flight. Guppy is the first to detect the similarity between Lady Dedlock's and Esther's face: visiting Cheney Wold, Guppy sees a portrait of the Lady and knows immediately that he has seen the face before, despite having never seen Lady Dedlock (110). Lady Dedlock cannot contain the observation of this similarity: although the portrait, which "proves" the connection, "has never been engraved," another representation of the Lady has found its way into *The Divinities of Albion*, or *Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty*, Weevle's "choice collection of copper-plate impressions"—images available for mass distribution (330, 510). Esther herself initially experiences Lady Dedlock's appearance as a confusion, a recognition only partially recognized: "I knew the beautiful face quite well...And, very strangely, there was something quickened within me, associated with the lonely days at my godmother's; yes, away even to the days when I had stood on tiptoe to dress myself at my little glass, after dressing my doll" (293). She experiences this "although I had never seen this lady's face before in all my life," and cannot understand "why her face should be, in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances" (292). She does not just see a resemblance in Lady Dedlock's face; she intuits on some level that this is her mother. During a subsequent encounter, she is "rendered motionless...by a something in her face that I had pined for and dreamed of when I was a little child; something I had never seen in any face; something I had never seen in hers before" (578). Lady Dedlock's veil, and the veiled connection between her and Esther, foreshadows her final escape. She exchanges clothes with the poor Jenny as a disguise and ends up dead by the gate to the burial ground she once visited, also in disguise, with Jo. Esther initially misrecognizes her in her clothes, but lifts her head, pushes aside the veil-like "long dank hair" obscuring her face, and sees her mother, "cold and dead" (915).

<20>The similarity between Esther and her mother is presented as a hint, an open secret, the implications of which are clear to the reader long before all the characters. It is this visible similarity that threatens to reveal Lady Dedlock's secret, and yet the literal and metaphorical veils she dons to erase connections to her former life reveal more than they obscure. Like a shrouded mother in a photograph, Lady Dedlock's veils draw attention to her obfuscation and to her connection to her child, Esther. Esther's self-abnegation reiterates the connection between mother and daughter: she wears a veil to visit sick Jo in the brickmaker's house and to disguise her scars after

her recovery from smallpox, and she spends much of the novel drawing attention to her own inconsequence. For example, “It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the narrative of *my* life!” she narrates, in her first chapter (40). And later on, she begins a chapter, “I don’t know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to write about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible,” Esther notes, about herself (137). Esther is given a slew of nicknames—“Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden”—so many names that her “own name soon became quite lost among them” (121). These names, many of which characterize her as a mother figure, also obscure Esther. Her veils also obscure her, her changed appearance after recovering from smallpox obscures her, and her own narrative obscures her—which is to say, all of these literal and figurative veils associate her ever more clearly with her mother.

<21>*Bleak House* presents the connection between Lady Dedlock and Esther through obfuscation: it is effacement that establishes their familial relationship, far more than the visible similarity Guppy notes. This connection through what is *not* seen works on a thematic level in the novel, as we see the screen functioning as a persistent leitmotif in the scene between Lady Dedlock and Guppy. *Bleak House* tells the story of a mother who cannot be acknowledged as such, who cannot be seen in connection with her child, who must not be seen alongside that child. Lady Dedlock’s effacement is not selfless, but rather helps to preserve her own social position. Of course, this is a scandal she cannot contain. Mr. Bucket, “looking and acting very much like a camera,” as Ronald R. Thomas puts it, sees behind the veil—as do a range of other characters and likely the reader (134). Society dictates that Lady Dedlock can only perform a semblance of a motherly role by obscuring her identity. This, of course, is not sustainable—it is a fleeting image. Lady Dedlock helps to prop up the plot of *Bleak House* by cloaking herself, and this cloaking marks Lady Dedlock as a bad mother. Yet Esther’s duplication of the veil motif suggests there may be another way to perform effaced motherhood. The full implications of this other way are left hanging by the novel’s unfinished concluding sentence: Esther’s loved ones can “well do without much beauty in me,” she famously ends the novel, “even supposing—” (989). In this concluding line, Esther, who has spent the novel supporting others and caring for them like the Mother Hubbard she is playfully compared to, hints at her physical appearance without providing us with a complete picture. Her description is an absent presence—a “good” hidden mother portrait, rendered in words.

IV. Mother as Other/*East Lynne*



Fig. 4. Hidden mother under rug, cabinet card, Original Fowler Studio, undated (author's collection)

<22>It is easy to see a hidden mother photograph without seeing the figure—or seeing that figure only after a second glance. Yet there the mother sits, propping up the child, enabling the image. In images like Figure 4 above, the hidden mother has been transmuted into a furry object. The attempt here is to more completely disguise the mother through this transmutation. The mother is transformed into a backdrop, a thing noted for its use value and nothing more. The mother here is not just rendered anonymous—she is inanimate, not even notable as a human being. As Nagler has noted, these pictures depict “a genuine attempt to make her blend into the background... This is no longer a process of concealment, but the aim here is one of genuine transformation” (11). The mother becomes something else entirely.

<23>The hidden mother-as-object photographic sub-type resonates with the role of the mother in Ellen Wood's sensation novel *East Lynne*. The novel ostensibly centers around a murder mystery, but this mystery plays second fiddle to the novel's scandalous focus: Lady Isabel's abandonment of her husband and children and her later melancholic return as an unrecognized governess. Lady Isabel, in short, becomes a hidden mother in her former home—she becomes a figure who performs a specific function: teaching the children. As a governess Lady Isabel has more contact with her children than does their stepmother. She teaches, cares for, and supports the children under the guise of a governess—a fact which reflects an anxiety about who is permitted to mother the children in a wealthier family.

<24>If we need any indication that the Lady Isabel plot is the true center of this novel, we may read it in the title: the name of the town where the murder occurs is West Lynne, whereas East Lynne is the name of Mr. Carlyle's home—the home Lady Isabel Carlyle dramatically leaves and to which she later returns. Lady Isabel marries Mr. Carlyle rather below her own station, as a result of the death of her father, the Earl of Mount Severn. The Earl's many unpaid debts place the hapless Isabel in a difficult position, which the well-meaning Carlyle aims to remedy through marriage. The marriage is a happy one, although Isabel recognizes that she esteems her husband greatly but loves him “almost as she would love a brother” (119). Her heart, tragically, belongs to her roguish cousin, Francis Levison. Years and three children later, Levison convinces Isabel that her husband is carrying on an affair with a local woman, Barbara Hare, and the two elope. Alas, Levison refuses to make an honest woman of Lady Isabel after her divorce; he abandons her and their out-of-wedlock child; and a dramatic train crash in France kills off the child and Isabel herself is presumed dead as well.

<25>Lady Isabel is not killed, but—like Esther in *Bleak House*—disfigured, and so when she learns her own son is languishing from what is likely consumption, she determines to go work as a governess in her former home, under the incognito of her altered physical appearance. Lady Isabel's disguise is described as partly inadvertent: “what the accident left undone, grief and remorse accomplished. She limps slightly as she walks, and stoops, which takes from her former height. A scar extends from her chin above her mouth, completely changing the character of the lower part of her face, some of her teeth are missing, so that she speaks with a lisp, and the sober bands of her grey hair—it is nearly silver—are confined under a large and close cap” (388-89). Wood's lengthy description of her disfigurement is a judgement on Lady Isabel, and a punishment for her sins.

<26>She amplifies the change brought about through the accident, “that the chance of being recognised may be at an end” (289). She does this by wearing “disfiguring green spectacles, or, as they are called, preservers, going round the eyes, and a broad band of grey velvet coming down low upon her forehead” (289). In addition, she selects clothes that are “equally disfiguring. Never is she seen in one that fits her person, but in those frightful ‘loose jackets,’ which must surely have been invented by somebody envious of a pretty shape...she was altered beyond chance of recognition. She could go anywhere now” (389). Thus disguised by glasses, a headband, and a boxy jacket (horror!), Lady Isabel Vane Carlyle becomes Madame Vine. The remaining third of the novel intermittently concludes the murder mystery and develops a subplot in which the good Carlyle runs for political office, but primarily focuses on Madame Vine's new role as governess in her former home,

spending much time on her many feelings about her altered position and the fact that she is with her children but not able to tell them she is their mother. She occupies merely a supporting role in their lives, transformed from the lady of the house to a figure in the background—a hidden mother until a family servant recognizes her without her disguise, and the Carlyles recognize her on her deathbed, her face “free from its disguising trappings” (611).

<27>Lady Isabel’s disguised return home as a servant to care for her children effects, in fictional form, a move similar to the hidden-mother-as-object—after all, her presence in the home becomes the novel’s focus for several hundred pages. Both disguised fictional and photographic mothers are there to support children. Both are disguised as something they are not. Lady Isabel’s disguise is necessitated by her failure as a mother; it is a sign that she is a selfish “bad” mother. Here, class descent is analogous to the mother-turned-object. But as the novel progresses, we see the meaning of her disguise shift such that it becomes a marker of her selflessness and ultimately her redemption as a mother. She alone notices that her son William is “rapidly fading away,” and she attends his deathbed with her former husband (562, 576). She ultimately dies, her punishment complete.

<28>This hidden mother is ostensibly a mother attempting to obscure herself in the interest of her children—but in the process challenges the way we look at the family. On her deathbed Lady Isabel declares “there will be no marrying or giving in marriage in heaven: Christ has said so,” suggesting that despite their divorce they will be reunited in heaven (617). In a most literal sense, Lady Isabel’s disguise is so complete it leads to the utter erasure of the mother and, consequently, to bigamy. The novel represents Lady Isabel’s self-abnegation as a sign of attempted redemption—and attempt to be a “good” mother once again—but this self-abnegation distorts the family as a whole. It is as though the disguised mother is the ideal mother, but also no mother at all.

V. Missing Mother/*Villette*



Fig. 5. Post card photograph of child, undated (author's collection)

<29>Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* thematizes both the centrality and yet the utter absence of the mother, and has accordingly inspired numerous psychoanalytic readings of how that absent mother helps us to better understand (or not) Brontë's protagonist Lucy Snowe.⁽¹³⁾ As Bernadette Bertrandias puts it, the novel is "permeated with the subliminary presence of the absent figure 'par excellence': the Mother" (129). What many of these studies share is a focus on the mother as she impacts the psychic development of Lucy: these analyses treat the mother as an archetype, valuable only insofar as she impacts the novel's narrator. In contrast, my reading teases out what we can see of the mother herself through this absence. This is a mother-focused reading, a thought experiment demonstrating how we might read *Villette* as we would a hidden mother photograph—which is to say, a reading of how the novel obfuscates the mother and while pointing to that obfuscation.

<30>Lucy, Brontë's narrator, never mentions her mother. In fact, she only mentions her family obliquely, in an early passage that foreshadows the novel's more famous concluding shipwreck metaphor. When the novel starts, Lucy is visiting her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, and she describes a vaguely unhappy home life in visual terms, evoking the image of a "shadow," a "cloud" that threatens her new life at Bretton: "I was staying at Bretton," Lucy explains, "my godmother having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence" (62). Lucy notably does not reference a mother, or any family members more specifically than the generic and distant "kinsfolk" here—a marked contrast to Polly Home, whose name connotes a familiarity Lucy does not express about her own kin. Indeed, as many have pointed out, this passage at once draws attention to Lucy's family and blocks our access to that part of Lucy's life.

<31>We don't ever get to know who these "kinsfolk" are or how they have made Lucy's life unpleasant. Yet they surely play some important role in her unhappiness, for she believes that Mrs. Bretton "then plainly saw events coming, whose very shadow I scarce guessed; yet of which the faint suspicion sufficed to impart unsettled sadness, and made me glad to change scene and society" (62). One day, a letter arrives and gives Mrs. Bretton "surprise and some concern. I thought at first it was from home, and trembled, expecting I know not what disastrous communication; to me, however, no reference was made, and the cloud seemed to pass" (62). Lucy emphasizes her unhappiness at home—an "unsettled sadness" that, she presages, would one day form a "shadow" over her life. When she thinks a letter might be from home, her first thought is that it must be some unknown "disastrous communication." Lucy hides her family from us, giving us only enough information to surmise that her life at home is unhappy and uncertain: her family itself is a shadow, present only to provide disaster. This dread is never resolved for us, for we do not learn any more about Lucy's kin. But by giving us this faint hint, Lucy's narrative performs a similar rhetorical move to that of the hidden mother: showing us enough to help us realize we do not fully see.

<32>A few chapters later in the novel Lucy notes, in a long, elliptical, and figurative description that foreshadows the shipwreck scene of the novel's conclusion, an image of a vaguely unhappy home life. "It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! The amiable conjecture does no harm, and may therefore be safely left uncontradicted. Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather," she begins (94). Yet "it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have been a wreck at last, for "a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished...Of Mrs. Bretton I had long lost sight" (94). Lucy first suggests an interpretation—that she was glad to return home—and then undermines it, telling us we may picture her happy, but if that is the case, she must have lost that happiness somehow. If family life is an ocean voyage, death is present (though not directly present) even when things seem idyllic: the steersman, after all, is "buried, if you will, in a long prayer" (94).

<33>The passage's rich visual descriptions accompany its concurrent withholding of an accurate view of Lucy's family life. In fact, we do not even have an accurate view of who these "kindred" may be: Lucy's mother is never mentioned, only obliquely referenced through the collective "kindred" who fleetingly appear before being erased from the narrative. Lucy asks the reader to "picture" her, to see her and her steersman, who faces heaven but with eyes closed. Lucy's eyes themselves are

closed here, as she slumbers “as a bark.” “Picture me,” she repeats—and then her metaphor takes a twist. She describes her own nightmare, and it is a nightmare of drowning—it is a nightmare without sun or stars to guide the way. How can we adequately picture Lucy, who has given us so little to picture? She is asking us to see something that is not fully there, to imagine an image only to deny us full access to that image. Lucy’s family is a present absence. Evoking violent death, they exist in the background but have been removed, and they support the narrative by establishing the shipwreck metaphor Lucy will return to by the novel’s conclusion.

<34>While Lucy distances herself and the reader from her family, referring to them by the more detached “kinsfolk,” of her mother she says nothing at all. Mrs. Bretton, Lucy’s godmother, stands in as proxy for that figure. Yet Lucy acknowledges, following the shipwreck description, “of Mrs. Bretton I had long lost sight” (94). She is adrift, without family or godmother to anchor her. When she leaves England for Labassecour, Lucy thinks to herself that she “had nothing to lose...if I died far away from—home, I was going to say, but I had no home—from England, then, who would weep?” (110). Lucy loses her family somehow, loses track of her surrogate family somehow, has no home, and ends up in a town whose name means, through an embedded reverse definition, home: in Old and Middle English, after all, “home” was “A village or town, a collection of dwellings; a vill with its cottages” (“home”). Lucy displaces family, mother, and home throughout her narrative. At times hints of these figures rise up, only to be obscured once more. Replaced by Mrs. Bretton, Lucy’s mother is hidden from us entirely, like a hidden mother standing behind the photographer, visible only to the child in the image.

<35>Figure 5 gives us a glimpse of one such image: this is a photograph of a child with no clear hidden mother in the frame—and that is the point. The child smiles at the photographer, suggesting perhaps the hidden mother stands behind the camera. Maybe she doesn’t—this form of hidden mother is so absolute we can only detect trace of her in the possible recognition of the child. As Nagler notes, a shrouded person often sits behind the child to hold it still, while the photographer crouches under a black cloth behind the camera. The child “is thus surrounded by ghosts, and so there needs to be a third person there to distract him, to stop him getting scared, and this task is most likely down to the mother, who therefore remains outside of our field of vision” (10). The hidden mother, in short, may also be the individual distracting the child beyond the frame: this is the person the child is looking at, rather than the person propping up the child from behind. But whereas Nagler suggests this figure stands in counterpoint to the ghosts that surround the child—as shrouded figure and photographer—this hidden mother is in fact a ghost of a different sort. This hidden mother haunts the photograph as absolutely as any obscured, cropped,

or effaced individual in the frame. Like Roland Barthes's Winter Garden photograph of his own mother, which he does not show us in his book on photography, this hidden mother is wholly omitted. She is not a present absence but rather an absent presence: an implication rather than a figure.

<36>Removing the mother absolutely, *Villette* asks us to picture Lucy in relation to a family we are blocked from seeing. This family is present in *Villette* and yet it is absent. This absent presence structures the novel, bookended as it is by shipwrecks and filled with gaps and omissions. Hidden mother photographs are not the only lens through which to read maternal elements in *Villette*, but the complex and subtly distinct ways the photographs figure mothers models an approach to the novel intent on reading the silences and gaps: an approach that treats the hidden mother as subject and invites us to paradoxically visualize her through her absence.

VI. Conclusion

<37>Representing "good" motherhood as well as "bad," the hidden mother form assumes different iterations, compelling us to understand her presence not as a monolithic whole, but as a multimedia trend with numerous sub-types, a system of representations of Victorian maternity that undermine the effacements they evoke and suggest multiple ways of being a mother, hidden. Veiled, objectified, and omitted entirely, hidden mothers seem to support Victorian ideals of self-abnegating domesticity. And then they challenge us to look again.

<38>A reading of photography and literature together exposes fissures where seemingly similar representations diverge and where seemingly divergent representations coincide. They expose an extensive practice of representing mothers as hidden, but all missing mothers do not look alike, nor are they each entirely unique. Somewhere in between we can begin to trace patterns of absence and see these patterns in turn in other representations of the period—to trace, in other words, maternal absence as a form that is transportable across different types of media. The photographs figure absence as a visual paradox and implicitly position motherhood as presence mediated by different forms of absence. In doing so, they give us new ways of interpreting the absent fictional mother as in many ways present—and new ways of seeing absence as a subject worth exploring in all its complexity.

<39>Hidden mother photography shows us that it might be possible to see these narrative moments as part of a system of representations of absence, one that highlights our need, as viewers, to reflect on how our interpretations of these images and texts impact our time. As Batchen writes, the study of vernacular photography

must “trace the presence of the past, but as an erasure...motivating the object in the present. The critical historian’s task is not to uncover a secret or lost meaning but to articulate the intelligibility of these objects for our own time” (*Each Wild Idea* 79). It is our task—as viewers, readers, and scholars—to see these texts and images in their own contexts but to simultaneously note how they produce meaning for us in the present. By challenging a monolithic image of what it means to be a hidden mother, images and texts open space for readings of effacement as potentially good *or* bad, and of absence as a form with the latent potential to diversify our interpretations of the role(s) of Victorian motherhood.

<40>How much agency does the hidden mother possess? As with so much else related to these figures, it is difficult if not impossible to tell. But we may return to Petsch’s description of “Children’s Pictures” for the beginning of an answer. The mother, Petsch writes, gives the child comfort and then, placing “her hand through the back of the chair, she seizes the child firmly” (68). She exerts control over the child physically, holding the child in place. The mother’s arm thus emerges into frame, a material, maternally coded sign of labor that gives absence form. This is not the passive action of an absent figure but the active, physical action of a figure whose work continues, despite her erasure from our view.

Notes

(1)Online references to hidden mother photography emerge in the first decade of the 21st century, in photo collector and photo historian circles: a 2008 blog post on the site *Accidental Mysteries*, titled “The Hidden Mother,” is the first reference I have found to the phenomenon but indicates the genre is already established enough to be “highly sought after by collectors.” A 2010 article for the online *Antiques and Auction News*, “Fanciful Curiosities for Collectors—Uncovering The Hidden Mother (And Father) Photographs,” describes the trend as already well known in collector’s circles.(^)

(2)Nagler’s book covers the 1840s-1920s.(^)

(3)See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Margaret Homans’ *Bearing the Word*, Marianne Hirsch’s *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Carolyn Dever’s *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud*, Natalie McKnight’s *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels*, Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Barbara Thaden’s *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction*, and John Jordan’s *Supposing Bleak House*.(^)

(4) In a similar vein, Anna Kornbluh argues against what she sees as a “ubiquity of unsettling and unmaking” (4).(^)

(5) Reading absence as form may also provide a new way of thinking about the postcritique debate. Many postcritique scholars position themselves in counterpoint to what they frame as ideology critique’s hermeneutics of suspicion: Rita Felski, for example, describes her project as a “negation of a negation” (1). In response, Robert T. Tally Jr. describes postcritical approaches as sharing “ideological mystification” (781). Both, in other words, criticize the negative space opened up by the other—the outer limit, the remainder, what is not seen or appropriately attended to. Reading absence as form offers a new method of approaching this debate.(^)

(6) Novak’s work focuses on composite photography and other techniques that abstracted, fragmented, and fictionalized bodies, explaining how these manipulations influenced realism not by representing “the visual residue of history” but instead forming “the raw material of new photographic and fictional narratives” (14).(^)

(7) These archetypes do not exhaustively capture all of the forms of hidden mother photographs. In most, for instance, the child is alive, while in others they are dead: while nineteenth-century photographic trade publication writers like Max Petsch and contemporary scholars such as Laura Larson and Batchen identify squirming, living children as the reason motivating the hidden mother trend, a subset of these images depict postmortem children. In other images, the face, hands, or body of the hidden mother are scratched out or chemically removed on the image or negative—more of a violent erasure than an obfuscation.(^)

(8) Gale Jesi writes of “the transition from hidden mother to missing mother,” describing the shift from figures under a shroud to figures who remain out of the frame, or only partially in frame. Jesi describes this shift in historic terms, noting that “After about 1900, there appears to have been a transition stage whereby the mother, depending on the viewer’s reference point, is either partially missing or emerging into view”—a transition likely aided by the increasing ubiquity of the faster exposure time of the dry plate process.(^)

(9) For a range of analyses of formal portraits featuring “nursemaids, nannies, servants, or slave women (mostly black) holding white infant children on their laps,” see Marianne Hirsch’s collection, *The Familial Gaze* (xiv).(^)

(10) As Batchen notes, “although these supporting figures are sometimes indisputably male, they are invariably referred to as ‘hidden mother’ images in

vernacular circles...as if the erasure of the self that is enacted in such pictures is a manifestly feminine subject position, even a specifically maternal one” (*Hidden Mother* 6).(^)

(11)Writing for the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Geoffrey Chamberlain uses Registrar General Reports to document the 1850 maternal death rate at about 55/1000—5.5%.(^)

(12)Or, as Hilary Schor suggests in *Dickens and the Daughter of the House*, Lady Dedlock has been dead all along: “Honorina was dead (as well as deadlocked) from the beginning, and the novel only a bizarre action of startling her into life, and returning her to the inaction of the frozen lady she was before reading her dead lover’s living hand” (122).(^)

(13)See, for instance, Graham Stone’s “Memory, Imagination and the Mother: An Irigarayan Reading of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” Bernadette Bertrandias’s “*Villette* and the Poetics of the Haunted Self,” and Isabelle Hervouet-Farrar’s “The Narrator-Narratee Contract in *Villette*: Polyphony and the Haunted Novel.”(^)

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