

Mothers Erased, Mothers Reclaimed: Tracing the Maternal Mythos in *The Waste Land*

Juanmo Xu

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Among the many disillusioning, allusive—and, of course, elusive—lines in *The Waste Land*, the barman's last call may seem surprisingly abrupt, even absurd. Yet this repeated line, shouted five times, echoes like a refrain of cultural urgency, punctuating a charged pub conversation about Lil, a working-class mother of five. With neither mythic grandeur nor classical lineage, Lil is one of the poem's most ordinary women, yet somehow also its most extraordinary. In a modern *Waste Land* layered with ecological, sexual, and spiritual barrenness, she alone has given birth, embodying, however bleakly, the lost potential of motherhood.

However, Valerie Eliot's 1971 restoration of the poem's original drafts revealed that Lil was not alone—at least, not at first. Two other maternal figures once ghosted the margins of the draft before being excised by Eliot and Ezra Pound: Venus, goddess of love, sexuality, and fertility; and Fresca, a bourgeois woman whose symbolic "labour" (*Facsimile* 39) takes the form of defecation. Unlike Lil, an exhausted echo of the Victorian maternal ideal, Venus and Fresca resist containment. Their mothering is unruly, unorthodox, unapologetic, rooted in myth, desire, and bodily autonomy. Their removal does more than tighten the verse; it exposes a deeper masculine unease that still lingers in today's cultural narratives, less visible perhaps, but no less powerful: a modernist anxiety about women's bodies, reproductive power, and what happens when female agency refuses the script. *The Waste Land*, then, does not merely forget its mothers. It erases them, mirroring a broader cultural silencing of maternal power in both literary history and public life.

Feminist thinking about motherhood has grown significantly since Adrienne Rich's groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born* (1976), where she draws a crucial distinction: first, the potential relationship of a woman to her reproductivity and children; second, the institution of "motherhood" that seeks to regulate and define that potential through male control (13). Rich redefines "mothering" not as a fixed, patriarchal role, but as a lived, female-defined experience enabling self-realisation and empowerment (13). Building on this, Andrea O'Reilly identifies four key ways to think about motherhood: as institution, as experience, as identity, and as agency (*Twenty-first Century Motherhood* 2-3). Taken together, these frameworks reveal how motherhood can both confine and empower, depending on who tells the story. These ideas invite us to trace a poetics of maternal erasure in *The Waste Land*, and to reconsider its maternal figures not as symbols or stereotypes, but as women caught between silence and survival, between cultural erasure and the quiet, persistent possibility of resistance.

As the only mother to survive male editorial cuts, Lil implicitly carries the symbolic weight of cultural and generational continuity. Eileen Wiznitzer even suggests that Lil (rather than Tiresias) might be the poem's "most important personage", as her reproductivity represents a vital—if often overlooked—force for survival (91). Yet Lil's fertility, far from empowering her, becomes a source of quiet suffering and relentless exhaustion, drained by her husband Albert, her children, and the unyielding weight of patriarchal expectation. In this, she becomes a tragic emblem of institutionalised motherhood: a woman silenced and consumed by a system that demands everything from her while offering nothing in return, not even a coherent voice.

Eliot gives us very little of Lil beyond her weary role as a lower-class mother. Her only moment of presence in the poem unfolds in a pub, a space of post-labour sociability traditionally dominated by working-class *men*. Even there, Lil is barely allowed a voice. The conversation is driven by another woman, whose scolding question pins Lil firmly to her expected roles: wife, mother, caretaker. According to Valerie, Lil's story is inspired by the Eliots' maid, Ellen Kellond, which adds a touch

of realism to her domestic fatigue (*Facsimile* 127). Placing this scene in a pub is no accident. In the nineteenth century, public houses were seen as “masculine republics” (Gutzke 5), where women were excluded by prevailing social norms. Though wartime temporarily loosened these boundaries, the post-war period saw a return to rigid gender divisions, with demobilised “Alberts” urging women back into domestic roles (Giles 240). The repeated last call rings out over Lil’s story like an alarm, subtly pushing her out of public space and back into private duty. O’Reilly describes this dynamic as the “privatisation of motherwork”, where caregiving is pushed behind closed doors, expected to be selfless, unpaid, and invisible (“Outlaw(ing) Motherhood” 17-18). It also individualises motherhood, placing the full burden of care on women, even when they contribute economically (18). This double bind recalls the section’s original title, “In the Cage”—exactly where Lil finds herself, and where many mothers still do *today*. Trapped in the same enclosure, Lil’s friend, instead of offering empathy, turns on her: “[w]hat you get married for if you don’t want children?” (*Poems* 60) The stinging line reveals a feminine betrayal that is “necessary to the social and political domination of the patriarchy” (Wiznitzer 90), reinforcing the demand that women dedicate their fertility to a system where they remain largely excluded. While Albert enacts masculine history through war, Lil’s story goes unrecorded. Her short-lived step into a male-coded space is not liberation, but a glimpse of what is denied her: visibility, solidarity, and the freedom to mother on her own terms.

As a helpless “Angel in the House”—or rather, in the cage—Lil is forced to embody the patriarchal ideal of the tender, fertile, self-sacrificing mother. Her reproductive capacity is thoroughly exploited, culminating in the traumatic birth of her fifth son, George, whom she “nearly died of” (*Poems* 60). The cultural glorification of motherhood renders her body as a site not of honour, but of exhaustion and disintegration. Childbirth, traditionally imagined as a sacred transformation, instead nearly kills her, turning a moment of renewal into one of fear, suffering, and erasure. Notably, it is the birth of a *son* that intensifies her trauma, reinforcing the gendered violence embedded in patriarchal reproduction. Her friend’s offhand dismissal of Lil’s

near-fatal labour shows how pain, like pregnancy itself, is naturalised within the ideology of motherhood, making it nearly impossible to disentangle physical suffering from deeper psychic wounds rooted in sexual guilt and knowledge denial (Rich 158, 162-63). While Albert ties her worth to her sexual and reproductive conformity, even her knowledge of her own reproductive health is monopolised by a male chemist. At first glance, her decision to abort a sixth child seems like an act of resistance. Yet her reliance on the chemist's pills returns her body to male authority. As Rich notes, obstetrics, "an élite medical profession from which women were barred" (142), has long served as a patriarchal tool for managing female reproductivity. Estranged from her own body, Lil is left to trust the chemist's assurance that "it would be all right", only to suffer a lasting rupture: "but I've never been the same" (*Poems* 60). What appears to be agency is, in the end, a form of punishment, enforced by a cultural logic that disciplines women who deviate from the ideal of the compliant, self-effacing mother.

Patriarchal motherhood exerts its power not only by exploiting women's reproductive labour, but also by regulating their sexuality, most vividly embodied in Lil's forced tooth extraction. Her decayed teeth echo the "dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit" (*Poems* 68), a haunting image of overworked *Waste Land*, and by extension, Lil's depleted sexuality. They conjure an earlier, childless version of Lil from Eliot's 1915 poem "Hysteria", where her flashing, militarised teeth—"accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill" (26)—pulse with energy. Her passive male companion is drawn into "her laughter and being part of it", while the "dark caverns of her throat" (26) suggest a consuming force that appears sensual, excessive, and uncontrollable. Her mouth becomes a site of desire and danger, evoking the myth of the *vagina dentata*—the toothed vagina—a figure of male castration anxiety and a symbol of female power in its raw, physical form. Her teeth, in this reading, are weaponised to threaten the male body and ego. They enact a "reversal of feminine interiority versus masculine exteriority" (Lamos 84), suggesting a phallic femininity that unsettles patriarchal binaries. Yet Eliot ultimately neutralises this threat. To satisfy Albert's aesthetic demands—or rather, his demand for control—Lil is expected to have

her teeth extracted. This symbolic penetration renders her mouth docile and compliant, evoking the spectre of marital rape, one of the “double violences” (Rich 265) women experience under patriarchy (the other is the draining institution of motherhood itself). Once a threatening sign of excessive desire, Lil’s hysteria is replaced by silence and suffering. Unable to fulfil her dual role as sexual partner and selfless mother, she becomes what patriarchy punishes most. Her pain invites reflection beyond the poem, unveiling how motherhood, far from offering reprieve, becomes an added layer of submission, stacking maternal duty atop conjugal obedience in our society.

Although described as “a rebellious rather than a submissive one” (Wiznitzer 99), Lil is ultimately silenced by a cultural system that denies women the agency to define their own maternal experience. In stark contrast stands Fresca, a figure of maternal autonomy: fertile, erotic, and unmarried. She enters the unpublished opening of “The Fire Sermon” as everything Lil is not: rejuvenated rather than aged, wealthy rather than impoverished, self-directed rather than consumed by duty. Since her recovery, critics have read Fresca as a salon hostess, poet, or prostitute (Chinitz 243; Lehman 71-72; Sicker 427), yet her implicit role as a mother has received little attention. Her maternal identity surfaces through one of the poem’s most notorious moments: the metaphorical fusion of defecation and childbirth. Following “dreams of love and pleasant rapes” (*Facsimile* 23), her “labour” is framed as effortless, even pleasurable, culminating in the symbolic birth of excrement. This grotesque yet generative scene echoes Leopold Bloom’s defecation in *Ulysses*, where faeces are imagined as a source of regeneration: “Want to manure the whole place over, scabby soil [...] All soil like that without dung.” (Joyce 55-56) In this light, Fresca’s “delivery” is more than a parody; it symbolically fertilises the modern *Waste Land*, offering a provocative counter-narrative to patriarchal historiography. Her body becomes a site of irreverent creation, challenging the moral authority that has long dictated how and why women give birth.

Notably, this vision of maternal autonomy arises only in the absence of male figures. Unlike Lil, whose motherhood is shaped, surveilled, and sanctioned by male authority, Fresca reclaims mothering as a self-directed act of agency. In *Of Woman*

Born, Rich identifies two sources of maternal power: first, the biological capacity to bear and nurture life; second, the “magical power” projected by men, manifested as either reverence (in goddess worship) or fear (13). Fresca’s “labour” encapsulates both. Her body enacts reproduction, while her sexual autonomy evokes a mythic dread that has long shadowed cultural responses to female agency. The “pleasant rapes”, though framed in the language of violence, originate not in male aggression but in Fresca’s own libidinal imagination, suggesting an internal, unapologetic sexual agency. Their plural form gestures not towards monogamous obligation, but towards a matriarchal fantasy of polyandry glimpsed in certain matrilineal cultures (Majumdar v; Briffault 400). Her “conscious sheets” (*Facsimile* 23) become a matrilineal archive: a sensual, self-authored record that disrupts the linearity, exclusivity, and possessiveness of patriarchal kinship systems. The absence of a father figure in her narrative is not an omission, but a refusal: a quiet revolt against the logic of patriarchal descent.

Fresca’s world offers a glimpse of an alternative cultural logic that values female agency, autonomy, and sexual imagination outside of reproductive utility. Matriarchy, as Robert Briffault argues, is not simply the inverse of patriarchy, but a fundamentally different social structure grounded in the social authority of women, particularly as mothers (433-34). One major force behind the historical displacement of matriarchal systems, he suggests, was men’s attempt to monopolise the “magical powers” of maternity (434). This anxiety, projected onto women’s bodies, remains deeply embedded in cultural narratives that vilify female desire and erotic power. Fresca is no virgin mother, no gentle madonna. Instead, she embodies a transgressive eroticism that defies patriarchal containment and destabilises traditional notions of feminine passivity. Her fascination with *Clarissa*—“the pathetic tale of Richardson”, where a virtuous woman is drugged and raped—does not align her with victimhood. Instead, it “ease[s] her labour till the deed is done” (*Facsimile* 23), transforming a legacy of sexual violence into a fantasy of agency. Her libidinal excess becomes a poetic force, turning male fantasies of control into elegies of masculine vulnerability echoed in the Fisher King’s genital wound. Her matriarchal magic also turns toward the male body. Her tactile

fascination with an egg's "well-rounded dome" (23) evokes a subtle but unmistakable reference to male genitalia, suggesting a latent castration potential. This gesture recalls Freud's claim that the male psyche, when confronted with autonomous female sexuality, responds with "narcissistic rejection" and despicability (199). Fresca, then, becomes a cultural symbol of a radically different vision of motherhood, which resists domestication, embraces desire, and unsettles the very foundations of patriarchal order.

Eliot's apparent disdain for Fresca, and perhaps for his mother, Charlotte Eliot, who mothered her son "with particular intensity" (Crawford 6), can be read as an Oedipal recoil. By displacing Fresca's womb into an anus and reducing her child to excrement, Eliot diminishes her generative power, thereby shoring up his own phallic authority. Another tactic he deploys is the polarisation of maternal figures: on one hand, the self-sacrificing martyr; on the other, the "plain simple bitch" (*Facsimile* 27). Neither poses a threat. Neither makes "demands in the sexual, ethical, or intellectual sphere" (Horney 146). Yet these defensive manoeuvres reveal more than they conceal. They betray a deeper, Prufrockian anxiety: a broader modernist unease with unruly femininity and the maternal body's cultural authority. Her erasure speaks further to an ongoing cultural struggle over who controls female reproductivity, and which maternal narratives are allowed to survive.

While Fresca triggers male dread, Venus asserts maternal authority through ancient goddess worship. Her "smooth celestial pace" (*Facsimile* 29) compels Aeneas to gaze upward in awe, establishing a vertical hierarchy grounded not in blood but in divinity. More than filial reverence, this gaze evokes the mythic moment when Venus, in an act of divine retribution, strikes down Aeneas's mortal father for exposing her godhood. Her "altered face" (29) deepens her inscrutability, dramatising the gulf between an omnipotent mother and her fragile, mortal son. From a Freudian perspective, goddess worship re-enacts the child's earliest psychic encounter with the mother as an "all-powerful source of both gratification and deprivation" (Patai 24). Venus protects Aeneas from "an unfamiliar place" (*Facsimile* 29) only to disappear, offering safety without comfort, intimacy without accessibility. The ambivalence positions her not as

a domestic caretaker, but as a sacred sovereign beyond reach, beyond rule. Unlike Lil, whose motherhood depletes her, Venus's maternal role enhances her potency. She embodies not sacrificial femininity but mythic autonomy: a divine, maternal force immune to patriarchal domestication. Her powerful yet fleeting appearance reveals a broader cultural pattern, where maternal figures who cannot be managed, softened, or assimilated into patriarchal order are swiftly suppressed.

While Venus and Fresca transgress male-centred narratives and gesture toward maternal empowerment, their claims to agency are ultimately thwarted by male intervention. The pencilled existence of Venus, confined to the margins of the poem's earliest draft, was erased by Eliot before the typescript ever reached his misogynistic editor, eliminating even the faintest trace of goddess or mother worship. Similarly, Fresca's passages were cut following Pound's critique that their rhymes and couplets "drag it out to diffuseness" (*Facsimile* 39), which silences her matriarchal voice and diminishes her disruptive maternal energy. The masculine collaboration performs a symbolic suppression of maternal magic, erasing maternal narratives—whether divine or erotic—that threaten the masculinist foundations of modern literature, history, and culture. Only Lil, whose motherhood is reduced to function and fatigue, survives the editorial purge. Her abortion becomes the poem's final symbolic revolt: the end not only of motherhood, but of regeneration itself. Cultural renewal dies with the fetus. Ironically, Eliot himself was the sixth surviving child in his family, rendering Lil's abortion a kind of metaphorical self-erasure. In this reading, patriarchal motherhood does not merely oppress women; it rebounds upon its architects. Its violence is circular, leaving behind not triumph but a sterile, exhausted world. The erasure of the maternal, then, is not just a gendered loss, but meanwhile a civilisational collapse.

It was not until 1971 that Valerie recovered the two erased mothers and reintroduced them as latent forces of renewal within the modern *Waste Land*. While her husband, assisted by a misogynistic "midwife", sought to abort these disruptive maternal presences, Valerie offered them a literary (re)birth and a female-centred revival. Her editorial labour becomes a form of motherwork: a generative, restorative

intervention that reimagines motherhood not as an institution of containment, but as a mode of creative agency. She not only restores Venus and Fresca to the text, but also re-inscribes maternal presence into the broader literary and cultural imagination. Valerie's work affirms the enduring relevance of maternal power in a world that too often marginalises, sanitises, or erases it. In reviving these figures, she reopens the possibility of a maternal agency that unsettles the sterility of modernism and reclaims motherhood as a source of creative, cultural, and symbolic renewal—past, present, and urgently ongoing. At a time when reproductive rights are under threat, maternal labour is undervalued, and gendered care is both exploited and invisibilised, her editorial gesture resonates far beyond the page. It reminds us that maternal stories—especially those that resist control—still hold the power to reimagine the architecture of care, the politics of gendered authority, and the cultural memory through which societies define not only who matters, but how futures are made.

Works Cited

- Beach, Julie. "The Nature of Women: Transpersonal and Existential underpinnings of a new Paradigm of Development through the Lens of the Matriarchal Society." *Journal of Heart Centered Therapies*, vol. 22, no. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 71-79.
- Briffault, Robert. *The Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions*. Vol. 1, The Macmillan Company, 1927.
- Chinitz, David. "T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide." *PMLA*, vol. 110, no. 2, 1995, pp. 236-47.
- Crawford, Robert. *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to The Waste Land*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.
- Daumer, Elisabeth D. *A Literary Mother and a Literary Son: Charlotte Eliot and T. S. Eliot*, Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*. Edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, vol. 1, Faber & Faber, 2015.
- . *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Edited by Valerie Eliot, Faber & Faber, 1971.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Taboo of Virginity." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, vol. 11, Hogarth, 1957, pp.191-208.
- Giles, Judy. "'Playing Hard to Get': Working-class Women, Sexuality and Respectability in Britain, 1918-40." *Women's History Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1992, pp. 239-55.
- Gutzke, David W. *Women Drinking out in Britain since the Early Twentieth Century*. Manchester University Press, 2014.
- Horney, Karen. 'The Dread of Woman.' *Feminine Psychology*, edited by Harold Kelman, W. W. Norton, 1967, pp. 133-46.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage Books, 1986.
- Lamos, Colleen. *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and textual errancy in T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

- Lehman, Robert S. "Eliot's Last Laugh: The Dissolution of Satire in 'The Waste Land'." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 32, no. 2, Winter 2009, pp. 65-79.
- Majumdar, D. N. *Himalayan Polyandry: Structure, Functioning and Culture Change*. Asia Publishing House, 1962.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-First Century." *Hecate*, vol. 36, 2010, pp. 17-29.
- . *Twenty-first Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*. Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Patai, Raphael. *The Hebrew Goddess*. Wayne State University Press, 1990.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W. W. Norton, 1986.
- Wiznitzer, Eileen. "Legends of Lil: The Repressed Thematic Center of *The Waste Land*." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 13, 1986, pp. 87-102.