

A Stranger in The House: Middle-Class Stepmothers in Nineteenth-Century America

In 1826, almost one year after the death of his first wife from complications following childbirth, Robert Smith Todd wrote to his fiancée, Elizabeth Humphreys, pressing her to agree on a wedding date. Left with six young children, Todd wrote imploringly:

I need to complete my domestic circle where, worn down by cares and complexities of the world I can retire into the sanctuary ... and enjoy that repose and happiness which the world with all its boasted pleasure and engagements can never give. (qtd. in Baker, 1987: 28)

Elizabeth Humphreys did eventually complete Robert's "domestic circle" and became the new matriarch of a well-established and wealthy Kentucky family. Her marriage, however, also placed her in the dubious role of new "Ma" to Todd's six young children, and Elizabeth's transition to step-motherhood was far from smooth. Her new husband was frequently away on business, the children's maternal grandmother lived less than 150 feet away, and the Todd children were in anguish over the death of their mother a year earlier. Elizabeth was an aggressive, sometimes domineering woman, and her relationships with her stepchildren, especially Mary, were at best precarious and often wildly contentious. The resulting undercurrent of hostility in the Todd family would last for the duration of Elizabeth's lifetime. As Mary Todd Lincoln would later write to her husband, Elizabeth could sometimes be "... very obliging and accommodating, but if she thought any of us were on her hands again, I believe she would be worst than ever" (qtd. in Turner and Turner, 1972: 37).

As Elizabeth Humphreys was accepting Robert Todd's marriage proposal, another southern woman, Sarah Gayle, was expressing in her diary her

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persistent fear of an untimely death. Plagued by ill health Gayle was convinced of the inevitability of her early demise, and was especially worried about the impact her death would have on her two young daughters. She took great pains to instill as much practical and moral education in her children as possible before she died, and expressed her wish that her guidance would have a lasting impact. Writing of her children in 1832, Gayle declared her intention to “try, while I am with them, to acquire an influence over which the grave will have no power” (qtd. in Fox-Genovese, 1988: 18).

Gayle’s fears also stemmed from her concern about the kind of care her children would receive after her death. She herself was an orphan and had no living female relatives. She worried in her diary that her children would be deprived of the kind of “maternal connexions [sic], who, in general, guard and comfort the orphan with double kindness” (qtd. in Fox-Genovese, 1988: 18). However, Gayle apparently felt that the right kind of “maternal connexion” would not be found in her replacement. In 1831, she left a written request to her husband that he not remarry after her death. “No stepmother for my poor girls,” she wrote, “she may be an Angel for you, but very different for them” (qtd. in Fox-Genovese, 1988: 27).

Elizabeth Todd’s experience—and Sarah Gayle’s apprehension—show that the idea of step-motherhood was sometimes a troublesome one in nineteenth-century America. In the 1800s, the ideal family was increasingly defined in terms of the emotional well-being of its relationships, especially those between mothers and children (Kellog and Mintz, 1988: 44-45). The stepmother occupied a troublesome position as someone who was both necessary and potentially threatening to familial and social stability. While white middle- and upper-class families were bound by rigid narratives of motherhood and domesticity, the stepmother represented a disjuncture in that narrative. She served as one symbol of the tenuousness of the white middle-class ideal. Moreover, because she was by definition a “replacement mother” she also served as a potential threat to women’s maternal power within the home. But stepmothers themselves were a part of the white middle-class culture that made motherhood the central criteria for family and community stability. When she agreed to marry Robert Todd and become a second mother to his children, Elizabeth Humphreys Todd joined a long line of stepmothers who have struggled to raise children who are not their own while mediating familial tensions, social expectations, and cultural stereotypes. As “replacement” mothers, they found themselves negotiating a role for which there was no prescribed codes, which was often looked upon with suspicion, and which often stood in stark contradiction to some of the most basic aspects of the motherhood ideal.

This paper seeks to explore the ways in which white middle-class stepmothers may have negotiated maternal and domestic power through their relationships with stepchildren. Early nineteenth-century domestic ideology focused on the mother’s role in maintaining the home as a peaceful refuge from the hazards of an increasingly diverse and competitive society, and as a place

where children would grow up to be productive and moral citizens. But as a stepmother, a woman might find herself confronted with uncooperative stepchildren, uncommunicative or even absent husbands, overly solicitous relatives, or nosy neighbors. The ways in which these women sought to sustain family harmony—while retaining some sense of maternal authority—reveal the complex relationship between step-motherhood and middle-class domestic ideology.

A stepmother's problems could begin long before her entrance into a family. The ways in which families dealt with a mother's death, for instance, could have an important effect on stepchildren's reactions to a father's remarriage, and thus on a stepmother's attempts to incorporate herself into a "first family." Moreover, as years passed, the memory of a dead mother could reach saintly proportions, resulting in what sociologist Annagret Ogden has called the "dead mother cult." Placed on a pedestal of maternal perfection during life, mothers were often practically canonized after their death (Ogden, 1986: 5).¹

In the famous Beecher family, Lyman Beecher's first wife, Roxana, apparently personified maternal and moral fortitude and her untimely death only strengthened this image of domestic perfection. Beecher family biographer, Milton Rugoff, notes that the Beecher family "made a legend out of [Roxana's] sensitivity, gentleness, and purity, remembering only an angel who had never grown old—perfect mother, ideal woman (Rugoff, 1981: 34). The Beecher children's recollections of their mother reveal how Roxana's memory was idealized. Harriet Beecher Stowe was four when her mother died. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that she was subsequently cared for by not one, but two stepmothers, Stowe later wrote that her mother's memory had "more influence in moulding [sic] her family, in deterring from evil and exciting to good, than *the living presence of many mothers* (Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, 1988: 47) (emphasis added). The death of a mother could have a significant impact on adult children, as well. Catherine Sedgwick was 18 years old when her mother died, and she remembered her "beloved mother" as "wise and tender." In her autobiography, she stressed her mother's patient, pious, and unassuming nature. "She was oppressed with cares and responsibilities; her health failed; she made no claims, she uttered no complaints; she knew she was most tenderly beloved ..." (Sedgwick, 1993: 59).

The stepmother's position—and her relationships with stepchildren—was further complicated by the fact that many widowers remarried promptly in order to attain caretakers for their home and children. Although Robert Todd's former mother-in-law and unmarried sister helped to care for the Todd children after his first wife's death, he set out to find a new wife within weeks of his wife's funeral. Todd proposed to Elizabeth Humphreys six months later, and wrote persistent letters pleading with her to set a wedding date. The ardency of his courtship suggest that his primary motive may indeed have been the procurement of a new mother for his children as soon as possible, as well as a new wife for himself (Baker, 1987: 25-26). Todd's swift remarriage was a

source of scandal to his family and to the rest of the Lexington community (so much so that Todd complained about the “persons of ill-will” who had raised eyebrows at the courtship) (Baker, 1987: 26-27).

Lyman Beecher was left with eight children after his wife’s death. Although devastated by the loss, he remarried within the year. His own stepmother and half-sister had moved into the Beecher household to help with childrearing and housecare, and his oldest daughter, Catharine, also took over some domestic duties. However, when Lyman met and courted Harriet Porter, he did so swiftly, writing to her within a few days after their first meeting and almost every day after that until they were married (Rugoff, 1981: 34-35).

Given the reverence for deceased mothers, the swiftness of a widower’s remarriage could create major tensions between stepmothers and stepchildren. For children still mourning their mother’s loss, the widowed father’s sometimes rapid remarriage could be quite a shock, and the new stepmother viewed with suspicion. Nineteenth century writer Catherine Sedgwick lost her mother at the age of 18, and was highly displeased with her father’s remarriage a year later. Sedgwick not only expressed distrust of her new stepmother’s motives, but her reaction also revealed a preconceived prejudice toward stepfamilies:

My father was flattered into this marriage by some good-natured friends who believed he would be happier for it, and knew she would. *Like most second marriages where there are children, it was disastrous.* The poor lady was put into a life for which she was totally unfitted. (Sedgwick, 1993: 67) (emphasis added)

Catherine Beecher wrote a gracious letter of welcome to her first stepmother, Harriet Porter, when she learned of her father’s intention to remarry. Nonetheless, her letter carried an implicit warning as she stressed in the missive her deep and exclusive emotional connection with her dead mother:

... dear madam, imagine how terrible was the stroke that deprived me of my guide, my adviser, and my best earthly friend; that left me comparatively alone to grope my own way through the dangers and vicissitudes of life, for who can fill a *mother’s* place but *a mother*? (Boydston, *et al.*, 1988: 29-30)

Stepdaughters such as Sedgwick and Beecher especially felt the effects of their mother’s death, and, being unmarried and childless themselves, may have been especially sensitive to the threat posed by her “replacement.” When young women took over domestic duties after a mother’s death, problems invariably arose when they were displaced by their father’s remarriage. Beecher took on the responsibilities of family care after the death of her mother, and clearly considered herself as something of a family matriarch (Boydston, *et al.*, 1981: 226-227). Although her letters suggest that her relationship with her first

stepmother began amicably enough, Beecher later raised questions about her stepmother's diplomacy in running her household. While she admired Harriet's "refined style of housekeeping," she also noted that Harriet "sometimes failed in manifesting pleasure and words of approval at the well-doing of subordinates" (Boydston, *et al.*, 1981: 17).

However, there was no such ambiguity in Catharine's relationship with her father's third wife, Lydia Beals Jackson. This relationship reveals how an older daughter and a stepmother could go head to head over domestic and familial matters. At least one ugly incident arose when the third Mrs. Beecher challenged Catherine's decision to have a seamstress attend to her at the Beecher home. In an angry letter, Catherine raised doubts about the quality of care her father was receiving from her stepmother. She wrote, "There has been an increasing uneasiness and suspiciousness ... that something is wrong and that *father* in his declining years has to suffer deprivations which could wit be believed." She threatened to go public with the insult if the situation were not soon rectified, hinting that there would be dire repercussions "If it were believed that I could not live comfortably at home..." (Boydston, *et al.*, 1988: 237-238).

Catharine Sedgwick also saw her new stepmother, Penelope Russell as a threat to the stability of the Sedgwick family. She viewed her new stepmother with disdain, referring to her as "a languid valetudinarian, petulant and annoying to the last degree" who exhibited a "sort of frittering dissipation incident to a single woman's social life in a fashionable social circle" (Mintz: 155-156). Steven Mintz has also argued that Sedgwick's condemnation was rooted as much in her perception of her new stepmother as a frivolous woman who knew nothing of the business" of an appropriate domestic life, as it was from her unhappiness with the disruption of the Sedgwick family (Mintz: 155-156).

Tensions within stepfamilies were manifested in many different ways: through outright hostility, the ostracizing of a stepmother, or even just polite, but impersonal relations between stepfamily members. Indeed, a stepfamily did not have to be characterized by open conflict to create a difficult environment for a stepmother. Sometimes, she was simply ignored, especially in families with older children. Many stepfamily relationships also began with peace and equanimity on both sides, only to find tensions arising after. The story of Lyman Beecher's second wife, Harriet Porter, poignantly illustrates how the promising beginnings of step-motherhood could deteriorate in time.

Harriet Porter's entrance into stepmotherhood certainly began promisingly enough. As her stepdaughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, would later recall, the Beecher children all "felt a little in awe" of their refined and elegant stepmother, "as if she were a strange princess rather than our own mamma." But Harriet Porter's kindness soon won them over "never did a mother-in-law [stepmother] make a prettier or sweeter impression." Harriet apparently returned the sentiments, writing in a letter to her sister that the Beecher household was filled with "rosy cheeks and laughing eyes," and was one of great

cheerfulness and comfort. “She also praised the children, describing them as “helpful,” “affectionate” and “bright” (Rugoff, 1981: 35-36).

Soon, however, Porter found herself swallowed up by the intimidating clan. Plagued by ill health, the responsibilities of caring for eight children overwhelmed her. But Harriet Porter was also attempting to rear children who held a profoundly idealized image of their mother. Within a year of her marriage, Harriet Porter Beecher was increasingly despondent. One of her stepdaughters, Mary Beecher, wrote at this time that her stepmother was “not well and don’t laugh any more than she used to.” Overworked, ill, and homesick after the family moved away from Boston, Harriet’s suffering culminated in cold discipline and emotional detachment toward her stepchild. Harriet Beecher Stowe would remember her stepmother as “hard, correct, exact, and exacting” (Rugoff, 1981: 35-36, 160, 161-162). In his portrayal of Harriet Porter, Milton Rugoff writes that during her 18-year marriage to Lyman Beecher, Porter had “remained a visitor—a troubled, pensive transient.” Rugoff argues that before Harriet Porter Beecher died of consumption, “she had long before died of morbid melancholy” (Rugoff, 1981: 160).

In accordance with the prescribed feminine domestic role as the sustainer of family harmony, some accounts of stepmother / stepchild relationships indicate that tensions may have been suppressed in the interest of family unity. Some children also attempted to get along with their stepmothers out of respect for their father, or even out of respect for their dead mother. Catherine Beecher’s willingness to welcome her first stepmother into the family suggests that her father’s satisfaction was ultimately more important than her longing for her dead mother or her own desire to be the family matriarch.

Think then, dear madam, how great must be my joy and relief, and how unbounded ought to be my gratitude to God ... for providing one so competent and who ... will prove a kind and affectionate companion to my father, and relieve his mind from heavy domestic cares. (Boydston, *et.al.*, 1988: 30)

Likewise, in their threat to “go public” with her second stepmother’s indiscretion, Catharine Beecher openly acknowledged that familial unity was at stake, writing that “it is necessary for the reputation of the family ...” that she and Lydia resolve their differences (Boydston, *et.al.*, 1988: 238). Susan Hines, a planter’s daughter, wrote of her stepmother after her father’s death in 1852 that: “I do not and I can not love her as a mother, but I hope that I have too much respect for myself and my Father’s memory to treat her otherwise than with the greatest deference and respect that her relation to me demands” (Censer, 1984: 22).²

Whether stepmother / stepchild relationships were openly hostile or simply distant, stepmothers nonetheless sought ways to assert their maternal authority in the home. While a stepmother’s active participation in her step-

children's upbringing was no doubt expected, this participation also provided ways for her to assert her authority and stress her maternal role. Elizabeth Humphreys Todd was a strict disciplinarian, and although she soon had children of her own she continued to play an authoritarian role in the lives of her stepchildren. These disciplinary efforts sometimes resulted in explicit displays of hostility. At least one account tells of Elizabeth's harsh and shaming rebuke when Mary attempted to wear (at the age of nine) a home-made hoop skirt to Sunday school. Another account, however, suggests that Elizabeth may have indeed had her hands full with her young stepdaughter. Although she once referred to Mary as "a limb of Satan loping down the broad road leading to destruction," it was in response to the fact that young Mary had put salt in her coffee (Turner and Turner, 1972: 29-30).

The fervor with which some stepmothers undertook the care of their stepchildren also suggests that they may have felt extra pressure not to shirk their "maternal" duties. Eva Berrien Jones married the widower Charles Jones when his daughter was just a baby. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Eva seemed especially concerned that her husband's family knew of her care for her stepdaughter: "I am trying in every way possible to do my duty in *every respect* towards this little one ... although I am a 'cruel stepmother,' she is remarkably fond of me; I wish it were possible for you to meet us in Savannah so you could see the child, she is so sweet and smart ... I keep her constantly with me" (Myers, 1984: 573-574). Of course, there were many stepmothers such as Eva Jones who were genuinely close to their stepchildren. Eva may have been careful to inform her in-laws of her maternal skills, but she wrote at great length in her correspondence about her care and affection for her young stepdaughter. Referring to her stepdaughter as "little Ruthie," she filled her letters with lists of Ruth's accomplishments, and her maternal pride toward the young girl is evident.

More often, though, stepmothers balanced precariously between a sense of maternal duty, on the one hand, and a sometimes keen awareness of the vulnerability of their maternal power, on the other. The case of Elizabeth Duncan demonstrates how the life of a stepmother could be marked by high degrees of both powerlessness and control. In 1864, Duncan's 17-year-old stepson, Willy, ran away while her husband was out of town on a business trip. When he had not returned by morning, Elizabeth lamented in her diary about the "grace we need to bear the trials and temptations of life." During his absence, Elizabeth frequently expressed her sense of despair, worry, and embarrassment about this all too public display of family disharmony. "How long will I have to suffer in mind as I have today," she wrote, "I trust my stay in this world will be short if I always have to feel as I now do." By the time her stepson had been found and carted home, her misery had heightened: "I can say that I have no desire to live any longer."

Although Elizabeth does not record what happened after Willie was carted home, after his return her distress turned into a keen sense of perse-

cution at the position in which she had been placed by his desertion. "I have had my patience very severely tryed [sic]. I will try by the grace of God assisting me to not let the trial tempt me as far from that good way that I can never get back," she wrote. "I desire to be good, faithful and useful but it does seem to me as if I have more to bear than any one in the world." By the next Monday, she had apparently decided that her aim to be "good, faithful and useful" did not prohibit her from expressing a well-justified fury toward her stepson: "I came home ... feeling just as angry as I ever had in all my life. I have made up my mind that I will not be imposed on any longer by *the one that has caused me more trouble than all the others* in the world." She does not explain how she went about it, but Elizabeth made good on her threat. The very next day her diary cheerfully notes: "This has been a lovely day. This morning I went downtown ... and got Willies [sic] clothes for him to go away to school" (Armitage, 1987-88: 275-289).

However they asserted their maternal authority in the home, stepmothers engaged in an ongoing negotiation of familial relationships and social expectations. Many stepfamily relationships were complicated by the fact that nineteenth-century motherhood ideals often stood in stark contrast to the realities of stepmotherhood. The feminine domestic ideal in nineteenth-century America required women to maintain domestic harmony and to preserve the home as a sanctuary—and stepfamilies were often forced to contend with complex issues and dynamics that popularize that unity. Moreover, the ideal of domesticity itself affected the ways in which stepmothers and stepchildren interacted. Taught to idealize their dead mothers, stepchildren were then introduced to new mother figures who often complicated that ideal. How women confronted the intersections between stepfamily relationships and domestic ideals help us to understand more fully both social attitudes toward step-motherhood, and the ways in which middle- and upper-class women dealt with the inherent ambiguities of a domestic narrative which, while restrictive, also often served as their only source of social power.

¹Nineteenth-century domestic literature also reinforced the idea of a maternal influence that extended beyond the grave. Mothers were considered to hold a moral and emotional influence that prevailed long after their demise.

²Censer finds the troubled step-mother / step-child relationships were often subordinated to the larger necessity of maintaining family unity.

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