

Matthew Geary

*'Unkind and cruel, to deceive your Son | In borrow'd Shapes, and his Embrace to shun': Mother-son love in T. S. Eliot's 'La Figlia Che Piange'*

'La Figlia Che Piange' ('The Girl Who Weeps') — completed in November 1911, first published in September 1916, and later featured in *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917 — is distinct in T. S. Eliot's oeuvre as a love poem (*CP* 1969, p. 34).<sup>1</sup> Russell E. Murphy (2007) states 'there is no outstandingly obvious love poetry in the entire Eliot canon—with the possible exception of the poem "La Figlia Che Piange"' (p. 185). Edgar Jepson exclaimed in May 1918, shortly after its release, 'How delicate and beautiful in the emotion! How exquisite and beautiful the music!' (Grant 1997, p. 92).<sup>2</sup> In addition to the many compliments lauding its Apollonian qualities, 'La Figlia Che Piange' has been subsequently recognised by various critics (Lyndall Gordon 2000; A. D. Moody 1994) as the crucial origin from which the idealised 'Lady' in the later 'Ash-Wednesday' (1930), and the concomitant theme of divine love, is more fully developed and embellished by Eliot.<sup>3</sup>

Eliot's representation of the female figure standing at the top of some stairs with 'her arms full of flowers' (20) establishes 'La Figlia Che Piange' as a curious anomaly in his early writings. In comparison to poems contemporaneous with its writing such as 'The Love Song of St. Sebastian' (1914) and the prose poem 'Hysteria' (1915) where, as Marianne DeKoven (1991) states, 'vicious representations of women have been allowed to define Eliot's relationship to the feminine' (DeKoven p. 192), Eliot's 'La Figlia' is notable for her more positive treatment. In the third stanza, the speaker of the poem expresses a wish to be reunited with the girl he has been separated from. As Beatrice captivates Dante in his meeting with her in the *Vita nuova*, Eliot's 'La Figlia' continues to compel the speaker's imagination, and he remains 'troubled' (24) — even obsessed — by his memory of her vision: 'And I wonder how they should have been together!' (21).<sup>4</sup>

'La Figlia Che Piange' has been recognised by critics as a highly ambiguous and ambivalent poem. Bernard Bergonzi (1978) refers to it as 'an essay in Laforguan evasiveness' (p. 21) and Derek Roper (2002) states in comment on the poem's deliberate obscurantism

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‘even as fiction, it is remarkable how elusive the materials of the poem are. We know very little about the woman or her supposed story.’ (p. 230).<sup>5</sup> There may be very good personal reasons for such ambiguity. For F. R. Leavis (1969) the poem points towards but veils a remembered love that comes ‘from somewhere very deep in Eliot’ (p. 40).<sup>6</sup> Elaborating on this autobiographical line of inquiry, Gordon strongly supposes the image of ‘La Figlia’ to have been inspired by Eliot’s memory of his life-long Platonic love, Emily Hale.<sup>7</sup> According to Gordon, the impact of Eliot’s first meeting with Emily Hale in 1912 was such that she was to become ‘the source for a series of garden encounters in Eliot’s poetry, moments of romantic attraction to a woman’ (p. 81). This explanation seems highly unlikely, since the poem was supposedly conceived when — during Eliot’s sojourn in France in the academic year 1910-1911 — he went on an excursion to Northern Italy in the July of 1911 to view a marble relief entitled ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ which had been recommended to him by a friend. Eliot did not find the statue of the weeping girl.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, a poem inspired by the idea of the missing statue and its name was completed by Eliot on his return to Harvard from Paris in November 1911. Therefore, Roper believes that Eliot’s ‘La Figlia’ is ‘not Emily Hale’ (p. 223). Rather, he sees the poem as being in the tradition of the Victorian picture-poems created by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This is a view shared by Frances Dickey (2012) who sees ‘Rossetti’s deployment of a double perspective — inner and outer “standing points”’ (p. 76) as being an important influence on the portraiture present in Eliot’s early poems.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the various critical conjectures I have just summarised, this article looks at ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis to newly reflect on the presence of a shrouded maternal aspect within the poem, which has only received scant attention by commentators, and is rarely noticed by readers.<sup>10</sup> In consideration of the evasive nature of ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ (its stylistic intricacies and cryptic epigraph), I argue that the poem’s meditation on the issues of union and separation between two lovers is in fact a screen for deeper unconscious conflicting feelings of ambivalence between mother and son. According to Jacques Lacan, beyond the countless images apparent within dreams and artistic and poetic symbolic representations there is always one ‘fundamental fantasy’, an ‘initial radical trauma’ (S8, p. 127) which is unconscious and responsible for the subject’s mode of *jouissance*. I wish to show ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ to be both a defensive response to castration anxiety and a failed attempt to reconstruct, traverse and thus separate from the ‘fundamental fantasy’ that unconsciously orientates the speaker of the poem and his desire. Eliot’s ‘La

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Figlia' is, I contend, what Lacan calls the object (a).<sup>11</sup> She is 'an image set to work in a signifying structure' (*É*, p. 532) that represents a remnant of the hypothetical mother and child unity, and who also indicates the way in which the speaker of the poem wishes to be positioned in relation to the mOther's desire.<sup>12</sup>

It is well known that Eliot was 'genuinely devoted' (Ackroyd 1984, p. 20) to his mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns, a poet, feminist activist and social reformer, all of his life.<sup>13</sup> Only recently, however, with the continuing release of the Eliot letters, is the true extent of Charlotte's emotional and creative impact on her son's life and work becoming known.<sup>14</sup> Although finalised in America, 'La Figlia Che Piange' is related to the earlier context of Eliot's stay in Paris during 1910-11 when he and his mother were both experiencing separation difficulties. Manju Jain (1992) describes Eliot's time in Paris as 'fraught with emotional and intellectual tensions' which he attributes in part to Eliot's 'overwhelming feeling of liberation from the pressures of his family' (pp. 51-52).<sup>15</sup> In April 1910, in view of Eliot's plan to move to Paris in the autumn, Charlotte expressed extreme distress at the thought of separation from her son, stating: 'I cannot bear to think of your being alone in Paris, the very words give me a chill' (*LTSEI*, pp. 11-12). My new psychoanalytic reading of 'La Figlia Che Piange' does not directly equate biography with Eliot's works with a claim to a definitive understanding but claims real-life unconscious mother-son ambivalence to be a crucial element to be read alongside his works in order to further our understanding of them. I contend that to gather a deeper, more balanced and sensitive understanding of the often contradictory depictions of the maternal feminine in Eliot's works, to paraphrase psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, it is to mothers that we so deeply need to speak.<sup>16</sup> More generally, this article contributes to recent calls in psychoanalytic and maternal theory (see Rozsika Parker 1995; Barbara Almond 2010; Juliet Miller 2008) for recognition of mother-child ambivalence as a positive and creative — as well as destructive — force that works towards psychological development, restructuring and individuation.

Eliot insinuates the possibility of a submerged maternal intertext as primary to the construction of 'La Figlia Che Piange' with his chosen epigraph for the poem taken from Book I of Virgil's the *Aeneid*: 'O quam te memorem virgo' ('O Virgin! Or what other Name you bear'; 1.451; Dryden, p. 14).<sup>17</sup> This epigraph recounts an episode in the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas questions his mother Venus, the Goddess of love. Aeneas has come upon Venus manifesting as a virgin huntress in the Carthaginian woods. Fixing on Venus' face he does not

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distinguish his mother, only her divine status: ‘Above that style; O more than mortal fair! | Your Voice and Mien Celestial Birth betray!’ (1.452-453). Aeneas then goes on to mistake the apparition of his mother for the virgin goddess of chastity, Diana: ‘If, as you seem, the Sister of the Day; | Or one at least of Chast *Diana’s* ‘Train’ (1.454-455). As a consequence, Aeneas takes his mother as a potential love partner, much to his upset when he realises his mother’s true identity:

Unkind and cruel, to deceive your Son  
In borrow’d Shapes, and his Embrace to shun  
Never to bless my Sight, but thus known;  
And still to speak in Accents not your own. (1.564-567)

The impact of this scene from the *Aeneid* appears to have stayed with Eliot throughout his life. He states in a late essay ‘Vergil and the Christian World’ (1951):

[Aeneas] had a good deal to put up with from Juno; and even his mother Venus, as the benevolent instrument of his destiny, put him into one very awkward position.<sup>18</sup> (*OPP*, p. 143)

Regarding the same passage, Ellen Oliensis (1997), Philip Hardie (2002), and Marianne Shapiro (2005) all comment on the obvious ‘incestuous undertones’ (p. 12) in Venus’ teasing presentation of herself to Aeneas in the guise of a marriageable girl.<sup>19</sup> Here, Aeneas’ unconscious incestuous desire for the mother as the original love object is revealed. Yet, in Venus’ refusal of Aeneas he is forced as an adult to re-direct formerly infantile libidinal energies towards more acceptable substitute figures. Venus is shown by Virgil to be the guide and ideal for Aeneas’ later sexual relationship and transgression with Dido. Hardie writes in fuller explanation of the scene and its sources:

One of the models for the meeting in *Aeneid I* between Aeneas and Venus dressed as a Carthaginian virgin is the appearance in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* of Aphrodite to Anchises, an encounter that results in the conception of Aeneas. Ovid comments on an undertow both in the Virgilian scene between Aeneas and Venus, and in the consummated relationship between Aeneas and Dido, whose Diana-like first appearance must remind Aeneas of that other seeming virgin he met in the Carthaginian woods. (p. 188)

Hardie confirms the metonymic movement of desire from signifier to signifier — as demonstrated by the diachronic relation between Venus-Dido-Diana — as being rooted in the blissful narcissistic experience of an archaic pre-object relationship. Sigmund Freud states in

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his *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905 [1962]) ‘the finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it’ (p. 88) and we may say that Aeneas’ finding of Dido in the *Aeneid* is in fact a re-finding of the first object, Venus. The eroticism associated with Aeneas’ falling in love with Dido is a residual effect of the childhood relation to the mother, the first person occupying the position of big Other (A) for the child.

In consideration of this exposition, and if we take it that the usual purpose of an epigraph at the beginning of a poem is to ‘indicate the leading idea or sentiment’ (according to the *OED*), we are immediately struck by a new implication given by Eliot’s choice of epigraph for ‘La Figlia Che Piange’.<sup>20</sup> The speaker’s identification with the girl holding the flowers is an identification implying the return of a repressed memory that was previously confined to the unconscious. ‘La Figlia’ is a disguise for the original ‘ideational representative’ of the sexual drive or instinct, to quote Freud.<sup>21</sup> The weight of the meaning of ‘La Figlia’ to her male observer, and his continued ‘wonder’ (21), infatuation and erotic over-statement of her is due to just this resonance: ‘Sometimes these cogitations still amaze’ (23). Through reference to Aeneas’ seductive encounter with his disguised mother, then, Eliot’s ‘La Figlia’ appears not only a prototype of the hyacinth girl of *The Waste Land* and the ‘Lady’ of ‘Ash-Wednesday’, but also a ‘screen-woman’ (Felman 1981, p. 29) signifying a son’s deep held unconscious love for his mother.<sup>22</sup>

A. D. Moody (1984) notes the example of Dante, as well as Virgil, as another revealing guide to ‘La Figlia Che Piange’. Moody observes in the poem a ‘positive general relation with the visions and separations of the *Vita nuova*, and the meetings with Matilda and Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory’ in *The Divine Comedy* (p. 39). This link between Dante and ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ is strengthened by the fact that around the time of writing the poem Eliot was immersed in Dante, carrying around with him in his pocket the Temple Classics edition of his works. Furthermore, despite his notorious anti-Victorian stance, Eliot later admitted the early influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti who had translated the *Vita nuova* and was central in the modern revival of Dante.<sup>23</sup> He states in his *Dante* pamphlet of 1929 that ‘Rossetti’s *Blessed Damozel*, first by my rapture and next by my revolt, held up my appreciation of Beatrice by many years’ (*D*, p. 262). Eliot’s suggestion here is that his early ‘La Figlia’ is a narcissistic idealization of male desire which both adheres to and yet resists Rossetian erotics.<sup>24</sup> Her ekphrastic portrait is a kind of fetishization which, as Slavoj Zizek (1997) describes, betrays a ‘desperate attempt, on the part of the perverse subject, to

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*stage* the symbolic castration' (p. 130).<sup>25</sup> It is an attempt to dominate and achieve separation from the imaginary Other upon whom the speaker of the poem's desire and trauma is fixated: 'So I would have had him leave' (8). Nonetheless, by the end of the poem it is evident by the speaker's continuing 'troubled' (24) *recueillement* that male desire for the love object has not yet been fully sublimated, elevated and spiritualised in the manner of Dante's sublime rendering of Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*.

In the *Vita nuova*, which Eliot viewed as a 'mixture of biography and allegory' (*D*, p. 62), screen women are utilised by Dante as surrogates to preclude the identity of the real referent of the lover's desire. They are intermediates in a circuit of eroticised vision which starts and terminates in Beatrice. Dante states in canzone V:

Between her and me (Beatrice), in direct line with my vision, sat a worthy lady of very pleasing aspect who gazed at me frequently as if amazed at my glances which appeared to be directed at her [...] At once I thought of making this good lady a screen for the truth, and so well did I play my part that in a short time my secret was believed known by most of those who talked about me. (4-18)

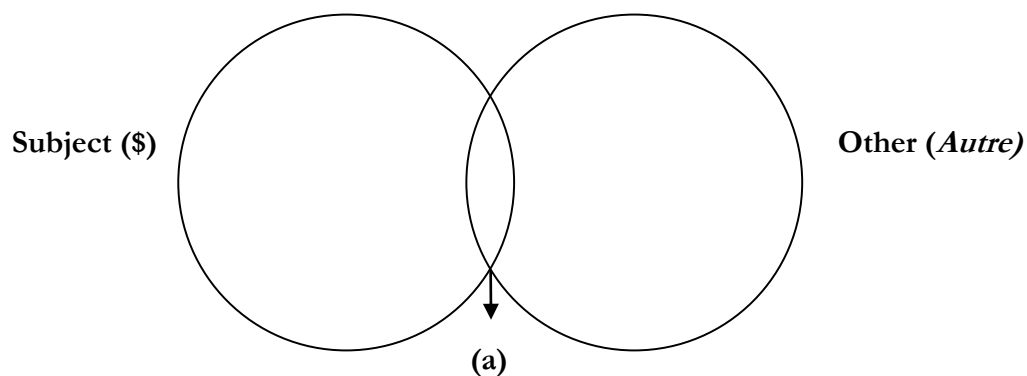
As indicated by Eliot's epigraph, a similar allegorical doubleness and play between surface and meaning, sign and referent, screen and object, is operative in 'La Figlia Che Piange'. Dante's *Vita nuova*, 'La Figlia Che Piange' and also the scene from Virgil's *Aeneid* chosen for the epigraph all enact a meeting between two people (an encounter with the other) through which erotic knowledge is cultivated. Yet Eliot's epigraph goes a step further than the *Vita nuova* in its suggestion that such profound sexual and spiritual awareness is primarily constituted by the reactivation of a previously repressed, instinctual maternal element. It is the stimulation of an esoteric by-product of the lost mOther — by the female love object (whether she be a real person, an ornament, a picture or an imaginary reproduction) — that is ultimately responsible for the phenomenology of bodily sensations, the ambivalent emotions and the disturbance of mental equipoise experienced by the poems' male protagonists. Eliot's choice of epigraph insinuates that his poem is not as misled as Dante's text in realising the true source and object of its affections.<sup>26</sup> As is typical of Eliot, the epigraph is a discreet public confession that indirectly admits the allure of the girl to be based upon a very primary and private pre-Oedipal relationship. Thus, the poem's true object of love is not necessarily the woman, art object or idea that is propounded to inspire the poem. Rather, like the 'screen lady' in chapter V of the *Vita nuova*, Eliot's 'La Figlia' is both a support for the speaker's autoeroticism and a chosen

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pretence through which the speaker's passions for a prohibited, unknown, or unobtainable love may be sublimated.<sup>27</sup> In other words, as Dante says of one of his screen women, she is an 'ideal defence' (VII.4). Shoshana Felman states in her comments on the 'screen-woman' that a screen can serve a triple function: 'it can serve to divide or separate, to conceal or hide, to protect or shield' (Felman p. 30). As signifiers, 'La Figlia' and her 'flowers' (4) go beyond the simple referent of the poem to properly name an impropriety. Expressed differently, they figure as beautiful euphemisms covering the less pleasant incestuous (unconscious) narcissistic fantasy of a child's love for the mother.

In reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis, 'La Figlia' and the autoeroticism that she evokes resembles both Dante's Beatrice and the virgin huntress in the *Aeneid* in that these figures represent the object (a).<sup>28</sup> Placed in the centre of Lacan's topology of the Borromean knot, (a) is the cause and symbol of desire. It is the archaic object of desire to which the subject was originally symbiotically attached (the mOther), but from which it is now separated from. Marking lack, the object (a) signifies and covers over that which promulgates desire: the phallus. It is the surplus indicating both symbolic castration (the split between the symbolic and the real), separation from the mother, and the division of the subject within himself. Lacan designates this split with the sign \$. The sustaining of desire by the object (a) — due to its 'residue' (*É*, p. 684) and condensation of *jouissance* — implies the building of a surreptitious connection between the subject and the barred mOther. It must be noted, however, as Jacques-Alain Miller states, that 'object *a* is a part of the Other, but not an element of the Other' (Quinet 1995, p. 143). Rather, the object (a) falls between the subject and the Other like a screen — as shown by Lacan's diagram (see *fig. 1*):



**Fig. 1. The Production of the Object (a) in the Subject's Separation from the Other**

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Lacan's diagram can also be used to show the relation between Aeneas, the virgin huntress, and Venus in *Aeneid* (see *fig. 2*), and also the relation between the speaker, 'La Figlia' and the Other in 'La Figlia Che Piange' (*fig. 3*):

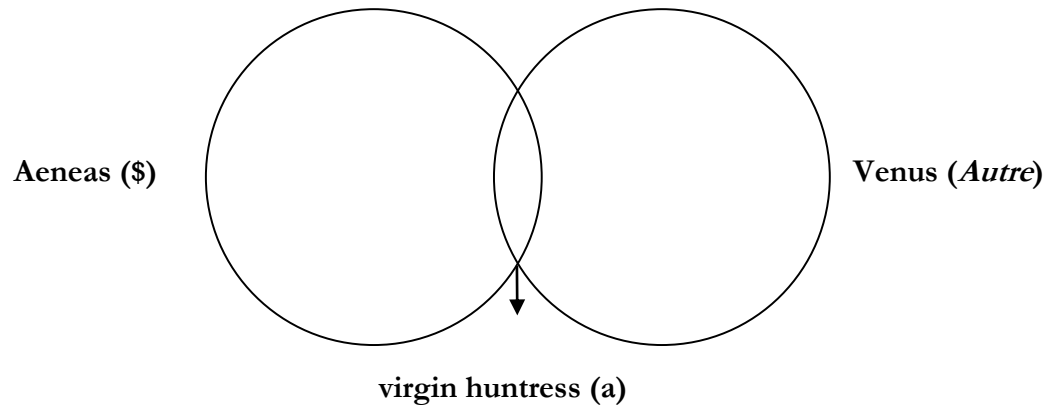


Fig. 2.

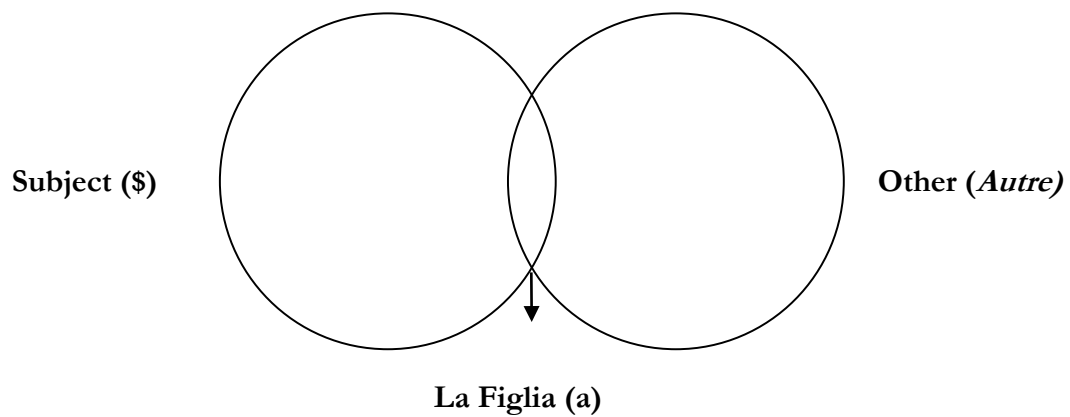


Fig. 3.

Lacan defines the object (a) in relation to Plato's *agalma* — which literally means 'ornament' (*É*, p. 699). Dylan Evans (1996) explains 'just as the *agalma* is a precious object hidden inside a relatively worthless box, so the *objet petit a* is the object of desire which we seek in the other' (p. 128). In 'La Figlia Che Piange' the object (a) operates in fantasy as both a screen and guide to the speaker of the poem. She alludes to the true real of his desire (the kernel or void of his being) that regulates his *jouissance* and subjective activity, but which is inaccessible to self-consciousness due to primal repression. As Dante speaks of his 'screen lady' in the *Vita nuova*, 'La Figlia' is a 'screen for the truth' (V. 15-16) that points to an absence

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and a quality beyond specularly. Like the virgin huntress who Aeneas meets in the Carthaginian woods, she forces the speaker to 'butt up against the question of his essence,' as Lacan states (*É*, p. 690). The speaker's recognition-misrecognition of 'La Figlia' is 'a misrecognizing that is essential to knowing myself [*un méconnaître essentiel au me connaître*]' (p. 684). It is as locus of the Other as lack, 'namely, the Mother' (*É*, p. 688), that 'La Figlia' (who may or may not have been a real person) retains her captivating and seductive imaginary power in the symbolic. For this reason she is recaptured through memory and re-imagined as a kind of marionette of fantasy by the speaker. In her textual/textile reconstruction (as indicated by the repeated 'weave, weave' in stanza one), 'La Figlia' promises narcissistic completion of the self and nostalgic continuity with the mOther by way of mediation of frustration, lack, loss and castration anxiety in fantasy. The poem's weaving produces a text(ile) body through which the maternal body is reconstituted and concealed but never completely revealed.<sup>29</sup> The iridescent 'sunlight' (7) to which 'La Figlia' is enjoined to weave in her hair is a vision that sees the enigmatic relation between the subject and the origin of his desire.

In this respect, 'La Figlia Che Piange' adheres to Freud's recollection of his grandson's *Fort/Da* game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) which Lacan refers to in 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' (*É*, pp. 197-269).<sup>30</sup> In discussion of his grandson's attempt to come to terms with his weaning from his mother, Freud (2001, p. 9) notes how the child when playing with a cotton-reel would exclaim *Fort!* ('gone') when throwing it out of his cot by the string and *Da!* ('there') when pulling the reel back to make it reappear. For Freud, his grandson's game is a 'great cultural achievement' in its demonstrating 'the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction' in allowing the mother to go away. The child compensates for the loss of mother by 'staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach'. In this way, he moves from the 'passivity of the experience to the activity of the game' (11). In Lacan's reading, the action of Freud's grandson 'negativizes the field of forces of desire in order to become its own object to itself' (*É*, p. 262). As a consequence of this action, a reversal can now take place and the mother brought back to his desire. For both Freud and Lacan, it is by the child's metaphoric substitution of the mother (production of the object *a*) that demand, anxiety and frustration are assuaged.

As seen in the first stanza of 'La Figlia Che Piange' the speaker figures as both self and Other. He controls the lost love object even *in absentia*. She is *Da!* and he directs her

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movements with a series of imperatives — ‘Stand’ (1), ‘Lean’ (2), ‘Weave’ (3), ‘Clasp’ (4), ‘Fling’ (5) — much like a theatre or film director or a photographer:

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair —  
 Lean on a garden urn —  
 Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair —  
 Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise —  
 Fling them to the ground and turn  
 With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:  
 But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair. (1-7)

The Other dominating the speaker’s affections is now (in fantasy) dominated and made privy to his design and demands, rather like Freud’s grandson’s retrieval of the cotton reel. ‘La Figlia’ is fetishized as property by the director-speaker and the gaze of the Other is imagined and manipulated to satisfy the scopic drive in the structure of this male scopic fantasy. Lacan states in his theory of the gaze ‘as soon as I perceive, my representations belong to me’ (*FF*, p. 81).<sup>31</sup> Hence, the Other is made to exist — despite its absence — in service to the speaker’s desire and *jouissance*. Painted by the speaker, the poem as a picture-screen facilitates a de-alienating dialogue with the Other due to his ‘given-to-be-seen’ by the gaze of ‘La Figlia’ (*FF*, p. 74). As object (a), the girl’s specular image facilitates an ontological retrogression which both confirms and denies the trauma of separation from the mOther and the split in the subject. In this idealised dream scene it is the speaker who is representing himself as ‘La Figlia’. As Lacan states, he is ‘seeing oneself see oneself’. It is a ‘gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other’ (*FF*, p. 84). The ‘fugitive resentment’ that is present in the eyes of ‘La Figlia’ (the privileged object) — due to the split between self and Other (primal separation) — is not that of ‘La Figlia’ but that of the male speaker. He is the consciousness of this dream-sequence.

This fantasised scene continues in the second stanza where the speaker moves to take a phenomenal voyeuristic overview:

So I would have had him leave,  
 So I would have had her stand and grieve,  
 So he would have left  
 As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,  
 As the mind deserts the body it has used.  
 I should find  
 Some way incomparably light and deft,

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Some way we both should understand,  
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand. (8-16)

In the couplet ‘As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised, | As the mind deserts the body it has used’ (10-11) the man’s departure from the girl is equated with the departure of a soul from a body. That is to say, for the speaker the split between man and woman is described as being deeply traumatic. The lines indicate a fundamental dissociation between previously united contraries (man and woman, body and soul), highlighting male lack or incompleteness. Moreover, if we return to consider the maternal subtext of Eliot’s epigraph, these lines take on the striking new connotation of childbirth. They give ‘La Figlia’ a maternal characteristic that is not immediately obvious but relates her to the rites of birth and death also spoken of in ‘Ash-Wednesday’ in the figure of the ‘torn and most whole’ Lady (68).<sup>32</sup> The couplet suggests that it is the mother’s ‘torn’ (10), ‘bruised,’ and ‘used’ (11) body that is being violently vacated by the newborn child. The harmony of mother and child signified by the couplet is severed by the following line, ‘I should find’ (12), which acts as an impediment to the iambic metre. Only momentarily and indirectly through the mediation of the object (a) — as both a residue of the real and the cause of desire — can the trauma of the original union and separation of mother and child be re-felt. Only through the object (a) is the speaker of the poem reminded of the fact that there is something else, something lost that is yet to be found. ‘La Figlia’ as object (a), we may say, marks the ‘cut in the real’ that signifies the division of mother and child in the symbolic (Lacan *S2*, p. 97). In other words, her representation dialectizes both the first real trauma of separation in child-birth and the symbolic castration through which the subject and his desire and unconscious are constituted.<sup>33</sup> Roper states how ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ is ‘hardly about love at all’ (p. 223). On the contrary, the poem is completely about love. As in Dante’s *Vita nuova*, it is in the brief traumatic appearance of the real as void in the speaker’s encounter with ‘La Figlia’ that he has experienced the immense feeling of falling in love. For what other reason would the speaker of the poem maintain such libidinal fixation on ‘La Figlia’? He has experienced in the girl what Lacan calls the *tuché* (*FF*, pp. 53-66): that is, love as the truth of the real and its incursion in the symbolic order.<sup>34</sup>

The third stanza suggests that for the male speaker the separation was forced and unwilling, yet necessary:

She turned away, but with the autumn weather  
Compelled my imagination many days,

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Many days and many hours:  
 Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.  
 And I wonder how they should have been together!  
 I should have lost a gesture and a pose.  
 Sometimes these cogitations still amaze  
 The troubled midnight and the noon's repose. (17-24)

Circumstances dictate that he and 'La Figlia' cannot be together. Yet, there has been an awakening, an unveiling. The pleasure principle governing the fantasy has faded into the domain of reality. In retrospect, then, the first and second stanzas appear as a constructed fantasy scenario in which the male speaker would have been more in control of the situation, less affected by female loss and more understanding of the reasons for the separation. Like Freud's grandson's *Fort/Da* game, 'La Figlia' relays a fantasy of omnipotence in reaction to feelings of helplessness, melancholia, loss and confusion. It is a gesture which states 'I chose to end this not her. I can have her if I want'. This action is very similar to what Lacan says about courtly love in his seminar *Encore*: 'A very refined manner to supplant the absence of the sexual relationship is by feigning that it is us who put the obstacle in its way' (*S20*, p. 65). The third stanza confirms the previous two stanzas as fantasy constructions wishing to reverse Hegelian roles of master-slave and deny the impossibility of attaining the love object. Despite the turning away of 'La Figlia' the speaker has strived to imaginatively construct an alternative dream scene whereby they can be together — if he so chooses. This is an obvious projection of the male narcissistic ego-ideal. Through poetic sublimation, 'La Figlia' is elevated by the speaker to the position of the 'impossible Thing' and immortalised as a love object, a fetish, an ornament of devotion, object (a). In this way, she can now be made ever-present or absent, kept in proximity or held at a distance. In other words, her representation or non-representation represents the guarantee of her presence or absence, respectively: that is, the guarantee of his desire.

'La Figlia Che Piange' is a *mise-en-scène* of desire with 'La Figlia' being the object (a) that both traumatises the law and mediates between the real and desire. The speaker's conscious fixation on 'La Figlia', as cause of desire, puts her forward as an unconscious projection of what Lacan calls the 'fundamental fantasy' ( $\$ \diamond a$ ). In other words, as in Eliot's chosen epigraph which discloses Venus as origin of Aeneas' attraction to the object (a), deception and distortion is at work in 'La Figlia Che Piange'. The 'fundamental fantasy' is revealed in the epigraph to be unconscious incestuous desire for the mother. Through Lacan's *nom du père* (the

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paternal symbolic), the epigraph retroactively exposes and accesses the real of the trauma (*désire de la mère*). Both 'La Figlia' and the virgin huntress in the *Aeneid* represent, in part, the mother's body as Other by engendering pre-Oedipal desire in the symbolic. Aeneas' anger and ambivalence towards the mother is due to her revealing the truth of the illusion of his desire, his subjection to the desire of the mOther, and the impossibility of being reunited with her. Venus confirms the prohibitory function of the paternal symbolic which denies Aeneas the ability to assume in reality the fantasy which orients his self-experience. We may say that the object (*a*) has been unveiled to reveal the traumatic, impossible real. By way of the epigraph, 'La Figlia' is confirmed in Eliot's poem as only functioning sexually *qua* mother. In the first stanza of the poem the speaker reconstructs his 'fundamental fantasy' through which some modicum of the real connection to the maternal body is re-found. Essentially, this is a defence against castration with 'La Figlia' as stand-in for and harbinger of lack. In the second stanza, however, there is a 'crossing over' of positions. The speaker attempts to separate from the phantasmatic partner that arouses his desire and traverse the fundamental fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) by staging symbolic castration and taking the place of 'La Figlia' as cause of desire. This is shown by his using 'La Figlia' as a plaything in the orchestration of her grief at his departure: 'So I would have had him leave, | So I would have had her stand and grieve' (8-9). From a Lacanian perspective, the speaker is trying to subjectify in fantasy the traumatic cause of his advent as a subject and assume a new position with respect to the Other as desire. This traversing, as Bruce Fink (1995) states, entails a 'repositioning of the ego as subject in this *a* in which *I* was for the Other's desire' (pp. 62-63).

In the third stanza, however, the attempt to traverse the fundamental fantasy fails as the veil of fantasy disintegrates, 'She turned away, but with the autumn weather | Compelled my imagination many days' (17-18) [my emphasis]. The previous two stanzas are shown by the speaker to be dreams of wish-fulfillment, flighty imaginings. It is insinuated that, in reality, it is 'La Figlia' who actively 'turned away,' rather than the speaker. Thus, the memory of a past meeting and separation has been reshaped and acted out in accordance with the script of the speaker's conscious and unconscious desires. Indeed, the repeated ambiguous subjunctives in the second stanza—'would have had' (8-10), 'should' (15)—indicate the speaker's great regret at how the meeting actually transpired. The control and rejection of 'La Figlia' that is exercised in the first two stanzas adheres to what Žižek calls 'false activity' (p. 149). That is, 'you think you are active, while your true position, as embodied in the fetish, is passive'. According to

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Zizek, fantasy belongs to the ‘bizarre category of the objectively subjective – the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don’t seem that way to you’ (p. 155). In ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ the epigraph maps out the fundamental fantasy which structures the fundamental passivity of the male protagonist in subservience to the mOther’s desire. The mother is shown to be the elementary factor co-ordinating both Aeneas’ and the speaker’s desire. To reverse the poles of this Hegelian master-slave dialectic and assume power over that which determines him and his desire (the mOther) the speaker must become truly active in subjectifying otherness. In this way, Lacan explains, desire can become more attuned to drive ( $\$ \diamond D$ ).<sup>35</sup> In the first stanza, the poem proceeds to try and reconfigure desire through a sadomasochistic fantasy of omnipotence (a fantasy repeated more obviously and brutally in ‘The Love Song of Saint Sebastian’). In the second stanza, the speaker imagines traversing, undoing, and thus separating from the fundamental fantasy. Nonetheless, all this work falls down with the statement in the third stanza: ‘And I wonder how they should have been together!’ (21): to rephrase, ‘And I wonder how I should have been together with mOther!’. Here the renunciation of *jouissance* imposed by the reality principle (the law) becomes incommensurate with its function. The turning away of ‘La Figlia’ is shown to merely defer and sustain the movement of desire. The speaker shows a wish to take back the *jouissance* he has given over to her. The circuit of desire continues thus: the speaker wanted ‘La Figlia’ as object (a), did not get her, so fantasised about getting her, controlling her and leaving her so as to try and separate from the cause of desire which controls him. This is what Anne Dunand (1995) calls ‘a kind of built-in turning around against the object’ (p. 248) enacted by the subject in attempt to sacrifice what is pathological. As shown in the lines:

So I would have had him leave,  
 So I would have had her stand and grieve,  
 So he would have left (8-10)

At this point, the speaker is trying to act out in the place of the object (a). Nonetheless, the final stanza indicates that the speaker is not able to fully accept loss and so in her absence ‘La Figlia’ continues as the lure that gives rise to his desire. Despite his efforts to reposition himself as cause of the Other’s desire, the dominance of ‘La Figlia’ over the subject remains and he is fated to repeat past events, behaviours, fantasies and a narcissistic brand of love. There has been a sudden reversal in trajectory from an attempted traversal ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) in the

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second stanza back to the fundamental fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) in the third. The object (a) has not been subjectified or separated from as cause and remains in the place of the ideal. Fantasy has in no way been traversed. Castration has in no way been accepted. Desire has in no way been renounced. By staging desire 'La Figlia Che Piange' gives us the co-ordinates of the speaker's desire and his position in relation to the Other. By the end of the poem, desire is not satisfied but reproduced: 'Sometimes these cogitations still amaze' (23).

What is remarkable about Eliot's epigraph to 'La Figlia Che Piange' is the fact that it hints at knowledge of the disavowed real and the truth of unconscious desire for the mother that underlies the explicit texture of the poem and the fantasy scene of the speaker's ruminations. It alludes to comprehension of the object (a) being related to the mOther and the subject's impossible relation to the object (a). The poem is both a recognition of what is truly impossible and an affront to what is impossible in this impossibility (the mOther) being written. In this transgression of the gap of impossibility lies the *jouissance* of the poem. 'La Figlia' is, as Lacan states, a 'mirage-like trace and path' (*S20*, p. 145) to what both cannot be and cannot cease to be written. It is the oblique drama of mother-son love, ambivalence and separation that imbues the poem with its erotic charge. Just as Venus removes her veil as huntress to reveal herself to Aeneas and expose the deception of love so does 'La Figlia'—but less obviously—to the speaker of the poem and its readers. Venus reveals the truth of Aeneas' ignorance of the root of his desire and self, and so puts his ignorance to work. Exactly the same scenario follows in 'La Figlia Che Piange'. The speaker's experiential, instinctual knowledge of desire catalysed through the encounter with 'La Figlia' as signifier inscribes that which in desire cannot be named: the mOther as locus of desire. This may be in part the experience of those who read and are entranced with 'La Figlia Che Piange'. The poem asks inferentially: 'How can I maintain the reverie of the feeling of togetherness I originally felt with the object I have lost?', 'How can I be a law unto myself?', 'How can I be both paradoxically united with and separated from the mOther that is the cause of my desire?'. The answer it seems is by the disguise of the written. As Moody states of the poem's lovers: 'it is their very parting that unites them, and the images of that moment which remain to him become a satisfying expression of his love' (p. 39).

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## Abbreviations

<b>CP</b>	<i>The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot</i>
<b>D</b>	<i>Dante Pamphlet</i>
<b>É</b>	<i>Écrits</i>
<b>FF</b>	<i>The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis</i>
<b>LTSEI</b>	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1</i>
<b>LTSEIII</b>	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 3</i>
<b>OPP</b>	<i>On Poetry and Poets</i>
<b>S2</b>	<i>The Seminar, Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis</i>
<b>S8</b>	<i>Le séminaire, livre VIII: Le transfert</i>
<b>S20</b>	<i>Le séminaire, livre XX: Encore</i>
<b>SE</b>	<i>The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud</i>

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot, 'La Figlia Che Piange' (*The Complete Poems and Plays* 1969, p. 34). The poem was composed in the summer of 1911 and completed in the November of the same year. It was first published in *Poetry* in September 1916 along with 'Conversation Galante', 'Mr Apollinax', and 'Morning at the Window'. Later, it was added to Eliot's first volume of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, which was published in June 1917. For the chronology of the writing and publication of 'La Figlia Che Piange', see Eliot and Ricks, pp. xl-xli.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Jepson's hyperbolic review of 'La Figlia Che Piange' is found in his article 'Recent United States Poetry' in *English Review* (Grant, pp. 91-92).

<sup>3</sup> Gordon (p. 85) states 'it is possible to connect the idealised Figlia, on the highest pavement, with the pure and remote lady on the stair in the love-starved song of St. Sebastian and with the divine Lady in *Ash-Wednesday* [. . .] La Figlia was to become a pervasive figure in Eliot's work'. Likewise, Moody (p. 40) states 'though *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* come between "La Figlia Che Piange" and *Ash-Wednesday*, the later vision of the love which makes perfect has its seed in the earlier. Moreover, the poet-lover's visionary experience in the hyacinth garden is an essential stage in its germination'.

<sup>4</sup> In the second canzone of the *Vita nuova*, Dante tells of his first meeting with Beatrice 'dressed in the most noble of colours, a subdued and decorous crimson' (II. 9-10) when he was only nine years old. As in 'La Figlia Che Piange', from the moment of this meeting Dante describes how the image of Beatrice 'remained constantly with me' (35-36). The rest of the *Vita nuova* recalls Dante's lifelong obsession with Beatrice from this first meeting to her death and its aftermath. For an excellent detailing of the *Vita nuova*, see Reynolds, pp. 18-32.

<sup>5</sup> See Bergonzi, p. 21; and Roper, pp. 222-234.

<sup>6</sup> For F. R. Leavis' late re-assessment of Eliot's work see his essay 'Eliot's Classical Standing' (Leavis and Leavis, p. 40).

<sup>7</sup> Gordon's biographical study of T. S. Eliot puts forward Emily Hale as the muse of Eliot's works (pp. 232-282).

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<sup>8</sup> For thorough explanation on the composition of 'La Figlia Che Piange', see Murphy, pp. 184-187. He states:

There is a story about the genesis of this poem, and it is one of the few times, perhaps that a story about an Eliot poem's origins may shed some useful light on such an intriguingly puzzling text. The story goes that while Eliot had been staying in Paris in 1911, he made a tour of northern Italy and was told by a friend that he simply had to visit a particular museum to view a *stèle* or bas relief called 'La Figlia Che Piange.' Eliot subsequently visited the museum but was never able to locate and, so, view the piece of statuary, apparently a work of funereal art depicting either a literal or figurative mourner with flowers in her arms. From that episode, the unseen carving of a grieving daughter became the stylized scene depicted in the opening stanza of the finished poem, and the epigraph from the Aeneid becomes Eliot's acknowledgement that though he now will never know this grieving young woman, he wishes that he may have been allowed to remember her.

<sup>9</sup> See the chapter 'T. S. Eliot: Getting out of the Picture' (Dickey, pp. 76-112).

<sup>10</sup> Murphy notes a 'frothy subtext' (p. 186) of mother-son love provided by Eliot's choice of epigraph for 'La Figlia Che Piange'. However, he does not investigate further the full implications of this observation.

<sup>11</sup> In 1955, Lacan drew a distinction between 'the little other' ('the other') and the 'big Other' ('the Other'). This distinction continued throughout his work and was altered and elaborated on continuously. Lacan designates these two conceptions through algebraic formula with 'the little other' marked *a*, and the 'big Other' marked A. For further explanation of Lacan's development of the object *a*, see the entry *objet (petit) a* in Evans, pp. 128-129.

<sup>12</sup> Borrowed from Bruce Fink, the term 'mOther' is used to indicate both the child's initial alienation from the mother and continuing relation with the Other. See Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>13</sup> For highly regarded biographical readings of T. S. Eliot's relationship with his mother, see Howarth; Ackroyd; and Gordon. For fuller assessment of the mother's place in T. S. Eliot's emotional and creative development, see Elisabeth Däumer's two excellent articles 'Charlotte Stearns Eliot and *Ash-Wednesday's* Lady of Silences' and 'Vipers, viragos, and spiritual rebels: women in T. S. Eliot's Christian Society Plays'.

<sup>14</sup> The third volume of Eliot letters released in 2012 contains a compelling letter by Eliot addressed to his mother that suggests that he took his work to be a protraction of his mother's own work and desires. I quote at length:

I believe that you and I understand each other and are like each other perhaps more than we know, and that we shall surely meet. And whenever I have done anything that the world has thought good, or that the world is likely to think good for a generation or two after I am dead, I have always felt that it was something that you and I did together, or even something that you had dreamt of and projected before I was born. I often feel that I am merely a continuation of you and Father, and that I am merely doing your work for you. (*LTSEIII*, p. 648)

<sup>15</sup> For detailing of Eliot's time in Paris, see Jain, pp. 40-59; Hargrove; Marx, pp. 25, 32; and Miller-Jr., pp. 115-160.

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<sup>16</sup> See the postscript to D. W. Winnicott's first collection of broadcast talks published under the title *The Child and the Family* (1957). Winnicott makes it clear in the postscript that he had a 'driving propulsion' to speak to mothers, in particular, largely because the mother's contribution to society was only just being recognised.

<sup>17</sup> Eliot would have read Virgil's *Aeneid* in the Latin. For all quotations in English I refer to John Dryden's 1697 English translation which Eliot was no doubt familiar with.

<sup>18</sup> See Eliot, *OPP*, pp. 138-145. The essay 'Virgil and the Christian World' was first delivered for a BBC radio address in 1951 and then published in *The Listener*, the broadcaster's magazine. It was later reprinted in *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). A fourteen page typescript featuring manuscript corrections is held in 'The Papers of the Hayward Bequest of T. S. Eliot Material' archive collection at King's College, Cambridge. It is in this typescript draft that the word 'humiliating' is crossed out by Eliot and replaced with 'awkward' (9-10).

<sup>19</sup> See Shapiro, p. 12; Hardie, p. 188; and also Oliensis, p. 306. In her essay 'Virgil Stuff', Shapiro comments on Aeneas' meeting with his mother in disguise:

Venus appears before Aeneas at once as a mother and as a potential love partner [. . .] The point is that Venus presents herself to her son in the guise of a marriageable girl. The incestuous undertones are amplified as if all heterosexual desire were incestuous, a recursive movement in time and space.

<sup>20</sup> OED entry 3 for 'epigraph, n.'

<sup>21</sup> Freud makes a distinction between three phases of repression ('primal repression', repression proper, and the 'return of the repressed') in his article 'Repression' (1915) to be found in *Standard Edition, Volume 14*, pp. 146-158.

<sup>22</sup> See Felman, pp. 19-44. Felman uses the term *screen-woman* to describe the rhetoric of sexuality present in Balzac's short novel 'The Girl with the Golden Eyes'. A *screen-woman* is a positive 'active discretion' covering men's narcissistic, incestuous fantasies.

<sup>23</sup> The influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti on Eliot can be seen in the aestheticism of early poems such as 'Circe's Palace' (1910). Frances Dickey states how 'La Figlia Che Piange' 'remains within the parameters and language of Rossettian ekphrastic portrait while violently refusing its implications' (p. 91).

<sup>24</sup> For a Lacanian discussion of issues of divided subjectivity and the mediation of desire in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, see Waldman.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek writes in *The Plague of Fantasies*:

Contrary to the *doxa*, the fetish (or the perverse ritual which stages the fetishist scene) is not primarily an attempt to disavow castration and stick to the (belief in the) maternal phallus; beneath the semblance of this disavowal, it is easy to discern traces of the desperate attempt, on the part of the perverse subject, to *stage* the symbolic castration – to achieve separation from the mother, and thus obtain some space in which one can breathe freely. (p. 88)

<sup>26</sup> The idea that the mother is behind Dante's infatuation with Beatrice was expressed by William Arensberg in *The Cryptography of Dante* in 1921. Arensberg views the allegorical meaning of Dante's *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia* as indicating the wish of a son to return to the mother. He believes the Beatrice of Dante was not Beatrice Portinari but identifies 'the Beatrice of Dante with Bella, the mother of Dante' (p. 22).

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<sup>27</sup> Two so-called 'screen ladies' episodes are described in chapters V-XI of Dante's *Vita nuova*. These women are used by Dante to conceal the identity of his true love.

<sup>28</sup> Lacan's notion of the object (a) assumes its final form in 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' (*É*, pp. 671-702).

<sup>29</sup> For examination of the link between written texts, woven textiles, and the maternal body, see Sullivan-Kruger.

<sup>30</sup> See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 1-58; and Lacan's essay, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' (*É*, pp. 197-269). Evans explains how Lacan views the *Fort!/Da!* game as 'a primitive phonemic opposition representing the child's entry into the symbolic order' (p. 1). The two words made by the child are 'a pair of sounds modulated on presence and absence' (*É*, p. 228), and these sounds are related 'to the presence and absence of persons and things' (p. 268, n. 46).

<sup>31</sup> Lacan's theory of the 'gaze' came to fruition in 1964 alongside his development of the concept of the object (a). See his four essays ('The Split between the Eye and the Gaze'; 'Anamorphosis'; 'The Line and Light'; and 'What is a Picture?') from his eleventh seminar concerned with optics 'Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*' (*FF*, pp. 67-122). For explanation of the 'gaze', see also Evans, pp. 73-74.

<sup>32</sup> Eliot, 'Ash-Wednesday' (*CP*, p. 91):

Lady of silences  
 Calm and distressed  
 Torn and most whole  
 Rose of memory  
 Rose of forgetfulness  
 Exhausted and life-giving  
 Worried reposeful  
 The single Rose (25-32)

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Fink states how 'dialectize' is the term that Lacan uses 'to indicate that one tries to introduce an outside'. See Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> See Lacan, 'Tuché and Automaton' (*FF*, pp. 53-66). Lacan aligns the real with *tuché*. He states: 'the real is that which always lies behind the automaton' (pp. 53-54). Thus, Lacan's *tuché* refers to the intrusion of the real into the symbolic order: unlike the *automaton* which is affiliated with repetition and Freud's pleasure principle. *Tuché* is purely arbitrary, beyond the determinations of the symbolic order.

<sup>35</sup> In 1957, in the context of the graph of desire, Lacan proposed the formula ( $\$ \diamond D$ ) as the *matheme* for the drive. This formula shows the barred subject  $\$$  in relation to demand. See Lacan (*É*, p. 698).

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