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Chapter 6

DEBUNKING MOTHER LOVE

American Mothers and the Momism Critique
in the Mid Twentieth Century

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Almost 19 years ago, on my 25th birthday, I gave birth to a son. I remember lying in the hospital bed and thinking what a terrible responsibility that was. Projecting myself forward, I saw myself at forty: one of those white haired, charming, terrible octopus women in a smart lilac colored suit, violets, and immaculate gloves. I was sitting in a fashionable restaurant with a handsome young man, and we were celebrating “our” birthday. That vision frightened me. I saw how easily I could forge a chain out of the accident of these simultaneous birthdays. I imagined how he could be summoned from school, from his job, and later from his own family, because it was “our birthday, and we have always celebrated it together.” And I made a quiet vow there and then that where ever else I succeeded or failed in motherhood, this was one tragedy I would not bring about.¹

In 1957, Mrs. O. of Napa, California, recollected the thoughts that had passed through her mind after giving birth to her son in the 1930s. Contemplating her new role, she had immediately envisioned an image of the type of mother that she did *not* want to become. That image was vivid in details: a middle-aged woman who relied on the accessories of respectable femininity—violets and white gloves—to conceal her “terrible octopus” nature. Such a woman would regard her handsome young son as but another accessory, and she would exploit the fact that they shared a birthday to strengthen her hold over him. To be a truly good mother, as opposed to the type of mother that society lauded, Mrs. O. believed that she would need to resist the temptation to cultivate an intimate relationship that might prove gratifying for her, yet detrimental to her son.

Why was a new mother in the late 1930s haunted by the fear that her love for her helpless newborn would one day prove harmful? Or, granting the sug-

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gestible character of memory, why did a middle-aged mother in the late 1950s recall having had such ominous postpartum reflections? The historical specificity of Mrs. O.'s account appears in sharper focus when contrasted with that of Sarah Huntington, a middle-class Bostonian who wrote the following diary entry after giving birth to her first child in 1820: "Deeply impressed with a sense of the vast importance of a mother's duties, and the lasting effect of youthful impressions, I this day resolve to endeavour, at all times, by my precepts and my example, to inspire my children with just notions of right and wrong, of what is to be avoided and what pursued, of what is sacredly to be deserved and what unreservedly depreciated."² Although both women experienced an overwhelming sense of responsibility upon becoming mothers, their fears as to how they might fail their children could scarcely have differed more. Sarah Huntington, anxious that she would not be mother *enough*, pledged to follow a course of self-vigilance and intervention, molding her newborn and future children into virtuous adults. Mrs. O., fearful that she would mother *too much*, vowed to practice self-restraint, lest she stymie her son's ability to function as an unfettered and autonomous adult.

The striking difference between these two women's reflections points to a dramatic transformation in the cultural construction of maternal affectivity that significantly influenced middle-class mothers' behavior and emotional lives. In the wake of the First World War, the ideal of mother love that had taken root in Sarah Huntington's day came under vigorous assault.³ Cultural critics and psychological experts rejected three tenets of moral motherhood with special vehemence: the conviction that mother love was the purest of all human sentiments, entirely unrelated to sexual desire; the notion that motherhood entailed tremendous self-sacrifice and that children incurred debts to their mothers that could never be repaid; and the belief that mothers should forge emotionally intense relationships with their children to keep them on the path of virtue.⁴ By the 1940s and 1950s, these views had been all but inverted. Recasting motherhood as the pinnacle of "feminine fulfillment," psychological experts and their popular exponents jettisoned the concept of maternal self-sacrifice and reversed the trajectory of indebtedness between mother and child. They warned that maternal attachment could be narcissistic, and that women's unmet sexual desires could easily—and disastrously—become misdirected toward their children, especially their sons. Finally, they insisted that, after a period of intense attachment during the child's first few years, mothers should restrain their maternal impulses in order to encourage separation and emotional independence. Particularly in the two decades following the Second World War, commentators and experts betrayed a wariness of mothers and maternal influence that Victorian Americans could scarcely have fathomed.

It is difficult to reconcile the extent and intensity of postwar mother-blaming with standard views of the era as one that glorified suburban domesticity and motherhood. Until recently, women's historians have portrayed the domestic ideology that flourished after the Second World War as a virtual resurgence of Victorian gender ideals, updated to reflect contemporary sexual mores. "Women

were directed right back to where they had been a century earlier—in captivity of the cult of motherhood,” historian Mary Ryan wrote in 1983. “All the sophisticated involutions of clinical and popular psychoanalysis only served to direct the American woman back to familiar roles, exiling her not only to the bedroom and the maternity ward, but to the kitchen, nursery, and dressing table.”⁵ Historian Joanne Meyerowitz and others subsequently challenged this narrative by arguing that all women were “not June Cleaver” and that popular culture in fact frequently lauded women’s “nondomestic activity, individual striving, and public success.”⁶ But scholars have yet to recognize how radically the postwar maternal ideal itself departed from the past. Not only was domestic ideology less hegemonic than previously assumed, it also promoted a strikingly new view of motherhood premised on a rejection of past ideals and practices. Rather than an era that resurrected Victorian ideals of motherhood, the 1940s and 1950s should be seen as a period in which the demystification of mother love achieved dominance in mainstream American culture.

I advance this argument through a new interpretation of the “momism critique”—a curious mixture of psychological diagnosis and cultural analysis first articulated by the popular writer Philip Wylie in his sensational bestseller of 1942, *Generation of Vipers*.⁷ Employing a style that veered between biting satire and apocalyptic jeremiad, Wylie warned that maternal dominance was eroding American individualism and masculine fortitude, leaving the nation vulnerable to external threats and internal decay. Though modernist writers and psychological experts had been railing against overbearing mothers since at least the 1920s, Wylie’s critique stood out for its extraordinary venom and for the linkages that he drew between momism and other “isms” that threatened the nation’s democratic order, namely fascism and communism.⁸ Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, “momism” remained an influential diagnosis of the white, middle-class American family—a term that conjured up images of domineering and shrewish mothers, henpecked fathers, and maladjusted children who drifted toward homosexuality or juvenile delinquency.⁹

Scholars have often viewed the momism critique as a byproduct of, or a kind of counter-reaction to, a more dominant gender ideology that glorified motherhood. In contrast, I argue that it helped to establish the narrow limits within which maternal influence could be unequivocally celebrated.¹⁰ To be sure, leading child-rearing experts in the 1940s and 1950s, including the phenomenally successful Benjamin Spock, perceived maternal care as absolutely essential to healthy development.¹¹ However, they did not praise mothers for acting as vigilant moral guardians of their children’s souls, as in Victorian times, nor for conscientiously following rigid schedules, as in the immediately preceding decades. Instead, psychological experts of various schools urged women to follow their “natural” instincts by gratifying infants’ needs and desires. Only constant and loving maternal care in infancy and early childhood, they repeatedly stressed, could instill the sense of “security” that would allow children to develop into autonomous adults and democratic citizens. As scholars have noted, this new permissive child-rearing

ideology intensified maternal obligations by tethering mothers closely to young children and by enhancing their responsibility for psychological as well as physical development.¹² What has been less recognized, however, is that the very same prescriptions simultaneously delimited the maternal role. Not only did experts portray the benefits of maternal care as concentrated in the very earliest years of life, they also demoted “mother love” to “maternal instinct”—a powerful psychological drive. By stigmatizing prolonged mother-child (especially mother-son) intimacy as pathological, they urged women to adopt a more self-conscious and wary stance toward their maternal feelings and impulses.

The momism critique comprised only a single chapter of *Generation of Vipers*—a mere nineteen pages—but reviewers and many readers singled it out as the most provocative and compelling part of the book.¹³ The chapter resonated in large part because Wylie infused a familiar caricature—the priggish and provincial American matron—with new and sinister meaning. “Never before,” he thundered, “has a great nation of brave and dreaming men absent-mindedly created a huge class of idle, middle-aged women.”¹⁴ Whereas previously, mom had “folded up and died of hard work somewhere in the middle of her life,” she now emerged from her childbearing years with prodigious energy, which she poured into shopping and a host of meddling activities.¹⁵ Wylie’s attack on “moms” did not focus exclusively, or even primarily, on their behavior as parents, for he also decried their influence as clubwomen, citizens, and consumers. At base, he challenged the idea that women should be seen as entitled to special influence and prerogatives, in either the public or the private realm, because of their status as mothers.¹⁶ Once psychiatrists and social scientists began appropriating the term in works of their own, however, “momism” came to be understood more narrowly—as a quasi-diagnosis of a certain type of pathogenic mother.

Though the momism chapter reads more like a satirical sketch than a fully developed argument, Wylie leveled several damning accusations at moms in their capacity as child-rearers. First, he insisted that maternal “self-sacrifice” was in truth a selfish and manipulative strategy designed to keep children trapped in emotional bondage. Second, he claimed that the resulting infantilization prevented sons from redirecting their affective energies away from their mothers, which in turn rendered them incapable of forming mature, heterosexual relationships. As he scathingly wrote in *Generation of Vipers*:

“Her boy,” having been “protected” by her love, and carefully, even shudderingly, shielded from his logical development through his barbaric period, or childhood ... is cushioned against any major step in his progress toward maturity. Mom steals from the generation of woman behind her (which she has, as a still further defense, also sterilized of integrity and courage) that part of her boy’s personality which should have become the love of a female contemporary. Mom transmutes it into sentimentality for herself.¹⁷

And finally, Wylie alleged that, in order to establish and maintain an exclusive mother-son dyad, moms purposefully undermined paternal authority. To illus-

trate this process, he described how a seemingly prosaic domestic scene became laden with fateful overtones:

Thus, the sixteen-year old who tells his indignant dad that he, not dad, is going to have the car that night and takes it—while mom looks on, dewy-eyed and anxious—has sold his soul to mom and made himself into a lifelong sucking-egg. His father, already well up the creek, loses in this process the stick with which he had been trying to paddle. It is here that mom has thrust her oar into the very guts of man.¹⁸

According to Wylie, a boy could become a man only by first submitting to paternal authority and identifying with his father; if he rejected his father's authority prematurely, he not only unmanned his father, but also unwittingly effeminized himself. Thus, when moms declined to support their husbands and allied with their sons, they poisoned the father-son relationship and barred the path to mature manhood.

Although Wylie's language was extreme, the charges that he leveled were hardly new. By the time he published his critique, anxieties about overweening mothers and ineffectual fathers had been a dominant theme of child-rearing literature for at least two decades.¹⁹ As historian Kathleen Jones has shown, psychoanalysts and behaviorists alike developed a "stinging critique of American motherhood" in the 1920s that practitioners within child guidance clinics readily embraced.²⁰ Scholars have linked the growing attacks on mothers to an array of developments, such as the professionalization of social service work, the backlash against maternalist reformers, and the modernist repudiation of Victorian sentimentality.²¹ But what seems indisputable is that emotionally intense "mother love" came to be widely viewed as pathological in the aftermath of the First World War. Psychological experts of various theoretical orientations routinely indicted a certain type of woman: the "over-protective" or possessive mother who stymied her son's psychological development while relegating her husband to the sidelines. Behaviorists, who dominated child-rearing advice in the 1920s and early 1930s, believed that the solution resided in strict, scientific schedules that introduced an element of distance and rationality into the mother-child relationship.²² (As the psychologist and early childhood educator Ada Hart Artlitt put it, the home should be governed not by "mother love," but rather by the "kitchen time-piece."²³) In contrast, psychoanalytically oriented experts tended to emphasize the need to rectify imbalanced relationships between husbands and wives, for according to the Freudian model, a boy had to repress his desire for the mother and identify with his father in order to successfully negotiate the momentous Oedipal complex—a developmental feat that proved difficult if the father was too weak or too forbidding, or if the mother's influence proved overwhelming.

Although Wylie clearly echoed interwar experts who condemned sentimental mother love, his momism critique also represented a new departure, in that he connected the dangers of widespread maternal pathology to the political and military threats facing the nation. As historian Mari Jo Buhle has shown, his book in key respects resembled more scholarly works associated with the "national

character” school of anthropology, which sought to explain how particular child-rearing practices and attitudes generated distinctive character types that in turn produced particular political cultures.²⁴ In the 1940s and 1950s, both American and European-born experts helped to construct a portrait of the American mother as a national type that reflected the nation’s unique historical trajectory; indeed, it is striking how many prominent émigré psychoanalysts lent support to an exceptionalist view of the American family. “If it is true that in Europe the authoritative father is the main psychological problem of the family,” the psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichmann asserted in 1940, “it holds that the corresponding family problem of this country is the child’s fear of his domineering mother.”²⁵ Likewise, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson characterized the American “mom” as a powerful cultural “prototype,” akin to the authoritarian German father.²⁶ Such arguments surfaced in the popular press as well: in 1945, an article in *Better Homes & Gardens* informed readers that a nation’s behavior could be attributed to the “relative degree of mother or father influence” and asserted, “In this country . . . the growing domination of American mothers of the ‘mom’ type is the more immediate menace to our security.”²⁷

The notion that American moms emasculated the nation’s men and threatened its security seemed confirmed in the immediate postwar period, when revelations concerning the high incidence of psychological problems among American draftees and servicemen began to circulate widely in the press. Censored for most of the war, statistics showed that the Selective Service had rejected over 12 percent of all recruits on neuropsychiatric grounds, and that an astonishing 49 percent of all medical discharges had been for neuropsychiatric reasons.²⁸ To explain this phenomenon, Edward Strecker, chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania and one of the nation’s most prominent psychiatrists, appropriated the concept of momism in a bestselling book, *Their Mothers’ Sons: A Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*.²⁹ According to Strecker, “moms” who had “failed in the elementary mother function of weaning [their] offspring emotionally as well as physically” could be blamed for a large percentage of “immature” men rejected or discharged from service.³⁰ Though he wrote for a popular audience in a style almost as sensational as that of Wylie, Strecker’s work lent the momism critique a new degree of professional credibility. Even an article that criticized commentators who “rant against ‘momism’” bowed before the psychiatrist’s authority by conceding, “Still, you can’t laugh it off . . . Not when Dr. Edward A. Strecker . . . points to the 2 million men rejected or discharged from the services for neuro-psychiatric reasons and says they’re Mom’s handiwork.”³¹ Well into the 1950s, commentators continued to cite Strecker’s “findings” as evidence that the nation suffered from faltering masculinity and widespread maternal pathology.³²

Yet even as experts continued to caution against overprotection, they also increasingly decried the effects of “maternal rejection” and “deprivation.” In the wake of fascism, the behaviorist view of infants as blank slates to be molded by all-powerful parents no longer appeared as a positive good—an opportunity to

engineer a modern society freed from the inhibitions of the past. Instead, postwar psychological experts invested their hopes for the future in a view of the infant as a nascent individual who would naturally develop into a reasonable, democratic citizen, provided that his or her earliest needs were lovingly met. The withholding of maternal solicitude, which had been widely regarded as a sound approach to the irrational impulses of mother and child alike, thus came to be perceived as a denial of a legitimate need—a denial that actually produced the dependent tendencies that it sought to prevent. The dilemma that presented itself was this: How could experts prescribe a style of mothering that allowed for infantile bonding, without reverting to a sentimental and moralistic notion of mother love?

For most, the solution resided in a notion of maternal instinct that effectively naturalized maternal love by envisioning it as a physical substance—one that was all but secreted from the mother's body.³³ "Mother love is a good deal like food," the psychoanalyst Margaret Ribble explained in 1943. "It has to be expressed regularly so that the child expects it; a little at a time, and frequently, is the emotional formula. When it is given in this way, independence, rather than dependence, is fostered."³⁴ Or as Dr. Spock patiently explained, "Every baby needs to be smiled at, talked to, played with, fondled—gently and lovingly—just as much as he needs vitamins and calories." Only through a nourishing relationship to the mother, experts agreed, did the child acquire the "security" that allowed him or her to develop into an autonomous being. According to their formulations, loving physical care during infancy and early childhood was the only reliable antidote to the serious political dilemmas of the modern era

Scholars of postwar child-rearing literature have often argued that, in the wake of wartime studies about the consequences of maternal deprivation, motherhood came to be conceptualized as an all-consuming role. Yet while psychiatrists did indeed emphasize the need for intensive maternal care and mother-child bonding in the very young years, thereafter they regarded maternal influence as highly problematic. In essence, they urged mothers to refrain from attempting to mold their children and to serve instead as a loving, yet blank background against which children could define themselves. The extent to which motherhood came to be defined negatively is well illustrated by a passage from Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham's 1947 bestseller, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, an anti-feminist polemic that presented motherhood as the pinnacle of female accomplishment. Women's historians have often cited this book as a classic articulation of the postwar "feminine mystique," yet they have not noted how radically the maternal ideal that its authors advocated differed from prior conceptions. Consider how Farnham and Lundberg described the ideal, truly "feminine mother":

Is she so very wise? No, hers is not wisdom in the sense of intellectual knowledge. She just likes her children ... Being in balance, she feels no need to inquire into every detail of their lives, to dominate them. Instead, she watches with somewhat detached interest to see what each one takes ... She can tell, without reading books on child care, what to do for the children by waiting for them to indicate their need. This method is infallible. She does not fuss over them. If they are too cold, too hot, too wet, hungry

or lonesome, they let her know it and she meets the need. Otherwise she leaves them pretty much to their own devices, although keeping a watchful eye on them.³⁵

Here, the mother emerges as a curiously affect-less figure, the very antithesis of the Victorian matron who sought to bind her children with “cords of love” in order to scrutinize the state of their souls. In fact, Farnham and Lundberg seemed determined to avoid all reference to maternal “love”: their ideal mother merely “liked” her children and offered them “reassuring support” in infancy and early childhood, thereafter viewing them with greater emotional detachment. She followed her children’s lead, making herself available to meet their physical and emotional needs, but otherwise remaining in the background.³⁶

The notion that the woman who mothered least mothered best surfaced even in an article that sought to counter the barrage of hostile attacks on American mothers in the postwar press. Published in *Better Homes & Gardens* in 1947, the article featured 72-year-old Janette Murray, a “kindly but unsentimental” woman who raised five successful children while contributing to a wide array of maternalist initiatives.³⁷ As the writer approvingly noted, Murray “never had time to bind her children in emotional coils.” Instead, she earned praise because she acted as a constant but unobtrusive presence; in her daughters’ words, she was “always there, in the background, to help out in an emergency, to greet our friends, or to set out breakfast for the school friend who stayed overnight.” Describing the Murrays’ child-rearing philosophy, the writer succinctly articulated what one astute commentator would dub the new “fun morality”: “They shared their lives with their children in whatever they did. It was no sacrifice. It was just more fun.”³⁸ Interestingly, Murray herself struck a rather different note, as evidenced by one of the few passages that quoted her directly: “Love your children and share your life with them, and they’ll come out all right,” she advised. “Share the work, the sacrifices, the burdens and the joys—everything—and you won’t have to worry.” In other words, although Murray spoke an older language that recognized “sacrifices” and “burdens” as an inevitable part of motherhood and family life, the article transformed her into an exemplar of the new child-rearing ideology, in which notions of maternal self-sacrifice had little or no place.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, experts repeatedly condemned “self-sacrificing” mothers by portraying them as misguided worriers at best, attention-seeking neurotics at worst. “The mother who devotes herself exclusively to her child may have the satisfaction of playing the martyr,” warned the psychiatrist David Levy, “but she may dangerously handicap her offspring.”³⁹ Similarly, in *Their Mothers’ Sons*, Strecker argued that those women whom the “community lauds and smiles upon” should be regarded with skepticism: although they were “spoken of as ‘giving their lives’ for their children,” in truth they demanded “payment in the emotional lives of their children.”⁴⁰ Writing for *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1950, the psychiatrist Herman Bundesen singled out one such a mother—a woman “known as an unselfish, devoted parent,” whose neighbors would frequently comment, “‘She gives her whole life to that boy!’” But according to Bundesen,

this seemingly selfless mother was in fact responsible for her son's myriad behavioral problems. "It is typical of the overprotective mother," he remarked, "that she denies herself many normal interests and relationships in order to devote herself unstintingly to the child."⁴¹ These and other psychological experts disparaged maternal "self-sacrifice" in large part because they no longer perceived it as genuinely selfless: what appeared to be self-sacrificing behavior, they suspected, actually represented the mother's attempts to fulfill her own unmet emotional needs.

To ensure that women did not end up directing their frustrated desires toward children, psychological experts and popular writers urged women to cultivate identities beyond that of "mother."⁴² Psychologist Anna Wolf, for example, argued in 1941 that the woman with a "strong" personality needed "larger worlds to conquer than her home and family," if only because "[h]er energies need deflection."⁴³ Similarly, Zuma Steele, writing for *Good Housekeeping* in 1945, alerted readers that confining women's interests to the home could lead to "inbred and unhealthy love." "The woman who gives up everything for her home is doing herself and her home a disservice," she stressed.⁴⁴ In 1956, a psychoanalyst quoted in the middlebrow publication *American Weekly* went so far as to suggest that, if a mother felt confined by homemaking, she should seek full-time employment. "If staying home is depressing her and failing to stimulate her creatively, then I believe her husband and children are better off if she gets herself a job outside the home for eight hours a day," Ruth Mouton asserted. "She can't try to please friends, neighbors or relatives. She has to please herself *first*, then try to please others."⁴⁵

As these sources suggest, many writers and experts in the 1940s and 1950s advised women that they should *not* focus solely on their children and their homes. This is not to imply, however, that the postwar cultural climate should be regarded as more favorable for women than feminists and scholars have previously suggested. Rather, what such sources indicate is that the widespread discontent among middle-class women cannot be attributed solely to a "feminine mystique" that exiled women to the domestic realm. Instead, the dilemma that such women confronted is better understood as a vicious double bind. Still largely barred from constructing their identities as autonomous individuals, able to compete on equal terms with men in the public realm, they were also discouraged from constructing their identities as selfless nurturers, entitled to emotional rewards for their sacrifices. Rather, experts and popular culture urged women to embrace the dominant therapeutic ethos by insisting (somewhat paradoxically) that motherhood allowed women to achieve self-fulfillment as *individuals*. Thus, when *Life* celebrated "the American Woman" in 1947, it praised the outlook of a young, middle-class mother of three young children as follows: "Because as an individual she likes the job that she does, she has no problem right now. Like most busy housewives, however, she gives little thought to the future—to satisfactory ways of spending the important years after her children have grown up and left home."⁴⁶ No longer a sacred calling, homemaking had become a

“job” that would ultimately end. Of course, the problem with this view was that motherhood and homemaking remained very different from other jobs, not least because the homemaker performed unremunerated labor. In truth, the demands of caring for a family often did require mothers to subordinate their own interests and desires, yet they were increasingly prohibited from seeking recognition for their sacrifices, or even from viewing them as such.

The large collection of letters that Philip Wylie received from readers provide insight into how one group of women—primarily white, middle-class, and favorably disposed to the psychological expertise—responded to the demystification of mother love.⁴⁷ Some women hotly contested Wylie’s portrait of American mothers, and many others objected to his tone. Yet from a contemporary vantage point, what is most striking about these letters is how seriously women readers took Wylie’s screech, and how many of them conceded that domineering or over-protective mothers constituted a genuine problem. Indeed, many who wrote to Wylie viewed his diatribe as entirely compatible with the new, permissive child-rearing methods promoted by Spock and others. Such women read *Generation of Vipers* as if it were an advice book that could sit comfortably alongside *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*: whereas the latter outlined a positive model to emulate, the former held up a negative model to avoid.

Young women tended to be particularly enthusiastic about the momism critique, for they correctly interpreted it as an indictment of their mothers’ generation rather than their own. One young woman, who signed her letter “Daughter-in-law of a Mom,” wrote in 1950, “I am striving to be worthy of being included in your category of young women starting out in Motherhood, who have observed Momism [*sic*] in action have sworn the holy oath [to avoid becoming moms]!”⁴⁸ Other youthful readers interpreted the momism critique as lending support to central tenets of postwar domestic ideology, such as the benefits of large families, more engaged fathers, and cooperative marriages. For instance, a 25-year-old mother attributed the phenomenon of momism to the low birth rates of the 1920s and 1930s, when “it was fashionable as well as an economic necessity to have only one or two children and women, who should produce children, mothered what they did produce almost out of existence.” Continuing, she explained: “I have, so far, one son and every day of his seven months I have prayed that I will have the strength to allow him his independence. I think the answer is to have a huge family which we are going to do.”⁴⁹ Similarly, a 23-year-old mother of two expressed her sense of belonging to a new generation of mothers, determined to avoid the failures of their predecessors: “We’re doing our best, my husband and I, together, to bring our children up to be good citizens, reliable and independent ... When the children attend school all day, I hope to do part-time work, not for bringing in money principally but so I will not become stagnant and dowdy and most of all, complacent, like so many older mothers I’ve met.”⁵⁰

In contrast to these readers, women who felt less confident as to whether they could exempt themselves from Wylie’s critique scrutinized their attitudes and behaviors for traces of momism. “I am not so much of a ‘mom’ as some, but I

could detect a trace here and there,” wrote a mother of four children in 1944. “However,” she added, “both of my sons are married and in far-away cities, so I cannot do them much harm now.”⁵¹ In 1946, a woman who had “laughed and gasped” upon first reading the momism chapter grew more sober after rereading it “paragraph by paragraph” to determine if it applied to her. “Alas, it did!” she confessed. “Thereupon I set about trying to eradicate those characteristics, with what success time will tell.”⁵² Another woman reported that Wylie’s book had given her pause, “which was all to the good, since I have three sons. I hope your diatribe against ‘Moms’ kept me from smothering them entirely.”⁵³ Anxious to dissociate themselves from such an unflattering caricature, and fearful of damaging their children, these women vowed to be more self-reflective and self-policing in fulfilling their maternal role.

Some women who concurred with Wylie’s charges made a point of disavowing the notion that motherhood guaranteed women a special place in their children’s hearts. Rather than expecting love and affection as a matter of course, they stressed their determination to win their children over through their personal attributes and actions. As one 25-year old woman wrote: “I’m trying to give my children a better deal all the way around. I figure that they had nothing to do with me being their mother. They didn’t pick me out. Therefore it is up to me to earn their love and respect.”⁵⁴ Other women expressed similar views by emphasizing their willingness to be judged by their children. “I am the mother of a fourteen year old son, not a Mom, I hope,” wrote one woman. “At any rate, I want him to read your book, when he is older, and make up his own mind.”⁵⁵ These women disliked the notion that the mother-child relationship should be structured according to proscribed roles that reflected a generic view of maternal duties and children’s needs. Instead, they preferred to think of themselves and their children as individuals who interacted according to their unique personalities.

One woman who shared this view found the cultural ideal of “Mother” so distasteful that she attempted to recast her relationship with her three sons in alternative ways. As she explained to Wylie:

I started weaning my sons at the instant of birth. I was bitterly afraid of “mother love,” though God knows how I love them. They are now as completely independent of me as humanly possible. They enjoy my ideas, regard me as a useful encyclopedia, and like me as a friend. They make up their own decisions, minds, act on their own decisions, even if completely opposite to my expressed opinion, knowing I won’t bat an eye, cheerfully telling me later if I happened to be right ... But what now for me? I’ve done my job, and done it well. But it’s done. I can do nothing further for my sons but mess into their lives and fiddle with their souls. Actually they have absolutely no need for me.⁵⁶

Alert to the debilitating effects of “mother love,” this woman preferred for her sons to regard her as a “friend” or even an inanimate “encyclopedia” than as a mother. Her entire parenting philosophy centered on the idea that she should strive to make herself unnecessary as early as possible—a goal that she believed

had been achieved. But now, although her youngest son was still a ten-year-old child, she could no longer foresee a positive role for herself as a mother. Her maternal interest and concern, she feared, would henceforth prove irritating if not dangerous.

Like this respondent, many mothers felt the full force of the momism critique only as their children grew more independent and they themselves approached middle age. Women who had heartily endorsed Wylie's critique in their youth, often in rebellion against their own mothers, sometimes found themselves having second thoughts as their lives progressed. In 1958, one such woman sent Wylie an unpublished essay, entitled "What Philip Wylie Really Thinks about Women," recounting how her views had evolved since 1942, when she first encountered *Generation of Vipers*. At the time, she was "single and childless, a young woman just graduated from the Smith School of Psychiatric Social Work, full of professional jargon, in the midst of my own analysis." Her job at the Children's Bureau, where she counseled "disturbed" and "inadequate" mothers seeking child guidance and foster home placement, combined with her "hostility" toward her own mother, "which is always present in the midst of one's own analysis," made her receptive to Wylie's critique: "I embraced Mr. Wylie's philosophy regarding our cannibalistic matriarchy avidly, in my youthful unsophistication taking all that he said as a literal condemnation of motherhood in its entirety." But after she married, gave up her career, bore four children in four years (including a set of twins), and found most of her contacts "limited to other moms," she began to "re-evaluate" her views and to resent "the ever increasing hostility towards American mothers exhibited by most males." Attributing her initial enthusiasm for the momism critique to her youthfulness and her immersion in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, she now believed that her fluency in psychoanalytic "jargon" had allowed her to adopt a harshly critical attitude toward American mothers that, in retrospect, struck her as misguided and unjust.

This writer ultimately faltered, however, in her attempt to articulate a critique of anti-maternalism. As she went on to explain, she had approached the editors of a national magazine, who encouraged her to pursue her idea for an article entitled "In Defense of American Women." But she could not bring herself to finish the piece. Instead, she did a remarkable and self-defeating thing: she turned her material over to the very man whose ideas she hoped to challenge. "Mr. Wylie started the thing, I thought. He had the reputation, the experience, the male point of view," she wrote in the essay that she sent to Wylie. "People listen to him and care what he thinks." Her defense of American womanhood thus collapsed into an appeal for exoneration, as she implored Wylie to assure her cohort of mothers that they had succeeded where their own mothers had failed: "I had to see for myself what a man of his great literary gifts and powers of perception really thinks about American women as a whole. Are we to him a lost cause?"⁵⁷ Sadly, this woman seemed unable to challenge Wylie's "expert" authority, even though she possessed the professional accreditation that he lacked. Because anti-maternalism was so closely associated with the rejection of Victorian sentimentality and

moralism, women who avidly embraced the tenets of the dominant therapeutic culture had difficulty articulating their opposition to the momism critique, even when it left them discomfited. The fact that Wylie seemed happy to oblige such women, reassuring them that they were not “moms,” did not diminish the pernicious influence that his critique continued to exert through the 1950s and into the 1960s.⁵⁸

Conclusion

During the 1960s and 1970s, the momism critique gradually waned.⁵⁹ Its decline can be attributed in part to the easing of cold war tensions, which rendered the critique’s animating concerns about male effeminacy and national weakness less pressing, as well as the emergence of new social movements that challenged the gender ideals of the 1940s and 1950s. In her groundbreaking 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan drew out the feminist implications that had been lurking within the momism critique all along.⁶⁰ Although certain passages of her book conveyed skepticism about psychiatric studies of maternal pathology, Friedan did not dispute the notion that pernicious mothering had become endemic within the American middle class. Instead, she used the findings of psychiatrists like Edward Strecker to support her claim that women needed to lead full and self-realized lives, beyond the narrow confines of the home. Such feminist appropriations, which shifted the focus of attention from children’s to mothers’ well-being, pointed to the broader cultural and political changes that would render the momism critique an anachronism.

However, the decline of the momism critique cannot wholly be attributed to political developments, for it also reflected changes in the way that middle-class women structured their lives and mothered their children. In 1940, fewer than 10 percent of all American mothers with children under the age of six worked outside the home; by 1975 that number had risen to 39 percent.⁶¹ As more mothers entered the workforce and anxieties came to center on a perceived *lack* of maternal involvement, attacks on cloying and overbearing mothers appeared increasingly misplaced. Moreover, though much harder to measure, it seems clear that maternal attitudes and practices also changed. As middle-class mothers absorbed the lessons of the therapeutic culture, they focused less on molding children into virtuous characters whose appreciation of maternal sacrifice kept them bound tightly to family and home. Instead, the “modern” mothers of the mid-twentieth century focused more on equipping children with a sense of emotional “security” by providing them with unconditional love, particularly in their earliest years. During the 1940s and 1950s, many readers had embraced the momism critique because they felt that they actually knew “moms”—women who viewed motherhood as an exalted and noble state, talked openly about their suffering and sacrifices, or intervened without hesitation in their adult children’s lives. But by the 1970s, Wylie’s caricature no longer elicited widespread recogni-

tion as an essentially accurate, albeit overdrawn and mean-spirited, portrait of a certain type of American mother.

Middle-class women who raised families after the Second World War did so in a cultural climate that vehemently repudiated sentimental ideals of motherhood and regarded maternal impulses with deep suspicion. In the 1940s and 1950s, the fear of pathological “mother love” grew so pronounced that the ideal mother was often defined negatively, with the emphasis falling on her ability to refrain from certain objectionable behaviors: she did not undermine her husband’s authority, guilt-trip her children, pry into their personal lives, or look to them to meet her emotional or physical needs. As a result, even the mother who managed to raise successful, “mature,” and well-adjusted children might be left with little sense of personal accomplishment. For if she believed the experts, once she had equipped them with a sense of “security” during their very earliest years, her most important contribution had been to stay out of their way.

Notes

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1. Mrs. O. to Philip Wylie, 16 May 1957, Fldr. 7, Box 245, Philip Wylie Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton, New Jersey (hereafter PWP).
2. Quoted in Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1983), 117.
3. Historian Peter Stearns has argued that “Victorian motherlove died . . . during the 1920s and 1930s.” Stearns connects the repudiation of sentimental “motherlove” to a much broader shift in the history of emotions that occurred in the second quarter of the twentieth century—a shift marked by a “growing aversion to emotional intensity” and the imposition of new forms of emotional restraint. Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York, 1994).
4. For discussions of the sentimental idealization of motherhood that began in the late eighteenth century and flourished in the nineteenth century, see Ruth H. Bloch, “American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1790–1815,” *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 100–126; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, 1977); Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Private Matters: American Attitudes toward Childbearing and Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800–60* (Urbana, 1989); Jan Lewis, “Mother’s Love: The Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Social History and Issues in Human Consciousness: Some Interdisciplinary Connections*, ed. Andrew E. Barnes and Peter N. Stearns (New York, 1989), 209–229; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge, 1981) and Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity* (New York, 1982).
5. Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1983), 266. Likewise, in her history of the concept of maternal bonding, Diane Eyer argued that the Victorian “hearth angel” ideal “reemerged” in a new guise after the Second World War,

- transformed by Freudian psychology into the “feminine mystique.” Diane Eyer, *Mother-Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction* (New Haven, 1992), 9.
6. Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946–1958,” *Journal of American History* 79 (March 1993): 1455–1482; and Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America* (Philadelphia, 1994). Other important revisionist accounts of postwar domesticity and gender roles include Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom and Social Change* (Chicago, 2000); Eva Moskowitz, “‘It’s Good to Blow Your Top’: Women’s Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8, no. 3 (fall 1996): 66–98, and Eva Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America’s Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore, 2001), chap. 5; and Susan E. Myers-Shirk, “‘To Be Fully Human’: U.S. Protestant Psychotherapeutic Culture and the Subversion of the Domestic Ideal, 1945–1965,” *Journal of Women’s History* 12 (spring 2000): 112–136. For an earlier, highly influential of postwar domesticity, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988).
 7. Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York, 1942). In 1955, to mark the twentieth printing, Wylie published a new annotated edition of *Generation of Vipers*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1955), in which he linked momism to McCarthyism.
 8. For an account of literary modernists who attacked the “late Victorian matriarch” in the 1920s, see Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York, 1995), chaps. 1 and 6.
 9. For an astute analysis of the racial politics of mid-century mother-blaming, see Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965* (Ithaca, 2000). Other important works that discuss the momism critique in relationship to psychiatric and social scientific literature include Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, 1998), chap. 4; and Jennifer Terry, “‘Momism’ and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals,” in *“Bad” Mother: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York, 1998), 169–190.
 10. In particular, my interpretation differs from that of Michael Paul Rogin. In an influential essay on cold war cinema, Rogin proposed that the momism critique should be viewed as “the demonic version of domestic ideology.” By encouraging “maternal surveillance,” he argued, postwar domesticity heightened anxieties about “boundary invasion, loss of autonomy and maternal power”—anxieties that then became manifested in demonic representations of mothers. In developing this interpretation, Rogin portrayed postwar domestic ideology as a continuation or extension of Victorian domesticity, which centered on the moral mother who “entered the self, formed it, understood its feelings, and thereby at once produced it and protected it from corruption.” The problem with this formulation is that postwar experts, in marked contrast to their Victorian forebears, strongly *discouraged* “maternal surveillance,” emphatically insisting on the need for psychological boundaries between mothers and their children, especially sons.
- Michael Paul Rogin, “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies,” *Representations* 6 (spring 1984): 1–36.
11. For an overview of the psychological professions and psychological thinking from 1940 through 1970, see Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of the Experts* (Berkeley, 1995). On the rise of psychoanalysis in particular, see Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917–1985* (New York, 1995); and John C. Burnham, “The Influence of Psychoanalysis Upon American Culture,” in *Psychoanalysis: Origins and Development*, ed. Jacques M. Quen and Eric T. Carlson (New York, 1978), 52–69.
 12. Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York, 1946), revised and reissued in 1957 and subsequent years, was by far the most influential child-rearing manual in the postwar years. Insightful discussions of the book and its impact appear in Nancy Pottishman Weiss, “Mother, the Invention of Necessity: Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care*,” *American Quarterly* 29 (winter 1977): 519–546; Michael Zuckerman, “Dr. Spock: The

- Confidence Man,” in *The Family in History*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (Philadelphia, 1975), 179–207; William Graebner, “The Unstable World of Benjamin Spock: Social Engineering in a Democratic Culture, 1917–1950,” *Journal of American History* 67 (December 1980): 612–629; Henry Jenkins, “The Sensuous Child: Benjamin Spock and the Sexual Revolution,” in *The Children’s Culture Reader* (New York, 1998), 209–230; Julia Grant, *Raising Baby by the Book: The Education of American Mothers* (New Haven, 1998), chap. 7; Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2006), chap. 5; and Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children* (New York, 2003), chap. 8.
13. The review in *Time*, for example, devoted seven of its nine paragraphs to a discussion of “Mom” and her younger counterpart, whom Wylie dubbed “Cinderella.” *Time* 41 (18 January 1943): 100.
 14. Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*, 187.
 15. *Ibid.*, 186.
 16. For a more detailed analysis of Wylie’s critique as a whole, see Rebecca Jo Plant, *The Repeal of Mother Love in Modern America* (Chicago, forthcoming, 2009), chap. 1.
 17. Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*, 196.
 18. *Ibid.*, 197.
 19. Historian Julia Grant has convincingly argued that such fears first emerged in the 1890s and grew pronounced in the 1920s, when psychologists and psychiatrists came to view childhood, rather than adolescence, as the period during which boys acquired their sexual orientation and “masculine characteristics.” Julia Grant, “A ‘Real Boy’ and not a Sissy: Gender, Childhood, and Masculinity, 1890–1940,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 4 (2004): 829–851. According to historian Maxine Margolis, “The major tenet of child-rearing literature in the 1920s and 1930s was that mothers are dangerous, dangerous to the health and well being of their children and ultimately to society at large.” Maxine L. Margolis, *Mothers and Such: Views of American Women and Why They Changed* (Berkeley, 1984), 56.
 20. Jones traces the “professional history” of mother-blaming by highlighting its functions within child guidance clinics, where clients were overwhelmingly mothers and children. She argues, “Mother-blaming came to dominate the field of child mental health because, along with its availability in the research literature, its appeal to psychoanalytically oriented practitioners, and its ‘fit’ with larger cultural concerns, it seemed to work in the clinic.” Kathleen W. Jones, *Taming the Troublesome Child: American Families, Child Guidance, and the Limits of Psychiatric Authority* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), chap. 7 (quotations from 175, 186–187).
 21. For the rise of psychiatric social work, see Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890–1945* (New Haven, 1993). For the backlash against maternalist reformers in the 1920s, see Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1930* (Urbana, 1994); and Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (New York, 1991). The decline of a sentimental emotional culture is discussed in John C. Spurlock and Cynthia A. Magistro, *New and Improved: The Transformation of American Women’s Emotional Culture* (New York, 1998), chap. 5; and Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*.
 22. Childrearing experts in the Progressive era had also advocated strict schedules, but behaviorists in the 1920s and 1930s tended to view the figure of the mother in a more antagonistic manner, as “an impediment to the scientific upbringing of the young, and even worse, a potential threat.” Weiss, “Mother, the Invention of Necessity,” 530.
 23. Quoted in Jenkins, “The Sensuous Child,” 213–214.
 24. As Mari Jo Buhle has noted, the study of national character had roots in the Culture and Personality school of the 1920s and 1930s. However, whereas earlier works by anthropologists like Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir focused generally on child-rearing and “cultural conditioning,” the national character studies of the 1940s concentrated more intensively on maternal behavior and attitudes. Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents*, 140–146.

25. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, "Notes on the Mother Role in the Family Group," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 4 (1940): 132–148.
26. Erik Erikson acknowledged that professionals' assessments of mothers often lacked an objective, scientific tone: "There is in much of our psychiatric work an undertone of revengeful triumph, as if a villain had been spotted and cornered. The blame attached to the mothers in this country ... has in itself a specific moralistic punitiveness." Nevertheless, he proceeded to elaborate upon the momism critique by enumerating the unpleasant characteristics of the composite American "mom" and tracing her historical evolution. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1950), 247–256. See also Geoffrey Gorer, *The American People: A Study in National Character* (New York, 1948), 50–51.
27. Amram Scheinfeld, "Are American Moms a Menace?" *Ladies' Home Journal* 62 (November 1945): 135, 138.
28. While 163,000 of these men were dishonorably discharged for reasons such as drug addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, and psychopathic personality traits, 386,000 received honorable discharges under a variety of diagnoses, the most common being "psychoneurotic." For a more detailed discussion of statistics regarding neuropsychiatric rejections and casualties, see Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology*, 88–99. See also Hans Pols, "War Neurosis, Adjustment Problems in Veterans, and an Ill Nation: The Disciplinary Project of American Psychiatry During and After the Second World War," *Osiris* 22 (2007): 72–97.
29. Edward A. Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons: A Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem* (New York, 1946). A lengthy excerpt of the book ran in advance of publication: "What's Wrong with American Mothers?" *Saturday Evening Post* 21 (26 October 1946): 14–15, 83–104. For background on Strecker, see Lauren H. Smith, "Edward A. Strecker, M.D.: A Biographical Sketch," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 101 (July 1944): 9–11; and "Dr. E. A. Strecker, a Psychiatrist, 72," *New York Times*, 3 January 1959, 17. The most detailed analysis of Strecker's work appears in Terry, "Momism' and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals."
30. Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons*, 13.
31. Walter A. Adams, "You Can't Talk That Way about Mother!" *Better Homes & Gardens* 25 (June 1947): 45.
32. Strecker's book was widely reviewed and cited. See, for example: "Mama's Boys," *Time* 48 (25 November 1946): 80; and "Nervous in the Service," *Newsweek* 28 (26 November 1946): 64–65.
33. For an excellent study that traces changing scientific conceptions of maternal instinct, see Marga Vicedo, "The Maternal Instinct: Mother Love and the Search for Human Nature" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2005).
34. Margaret Ribble, *The Rights of Infants: Early Psychological Needs and Their Satisfaction* (New York, 1943), 14.
35. Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York, 1947), 320.
36. *Ibid.* Nina C. Leibman has argued that 1950s television programs relegated mothers to the periphery of the family circle and "solve" the 'problem' of mothers' all powerful and harmful influence ... by decisively reconfiguring the father as *the* crucial molder of his children's psyches." See Leibman, "Leave Mother Out: The 50s Family in American Film and Television," *Wide Angle* 10 (1988): 24–41 and *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin, 1995), chap. 6.
37. Adams, "You Can't Talk That Way about Mother!"
38. Martha Wolfenstein, "Fun Morality: An Analysis of Recent American Child-Training Literature," in *Childhood in Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein (Chicago, 1955), 168–179.
39. David M. Levy, "Clinical Evidence of Changing Parenthood," n.d., Fldr. 10, Box 6, David M. Levy Papers, Oskar Diethelm Library, Weill Medical College of Cornell University, New York.
40. Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons*, 160.

41. Herman N. Bundesen, "The Overprotective Mother," *Ladies' Home Journal* 67 (March 1950): 243–244.
42. As Kathryn Keller has shown, in the 1950s popular culture for the first time began to condone mothers' employment outside the home on the grounds that it would benefit children. Keller identified three versions of this basic argument: "Children are more independent as a result of the mother working; mothers who are satisfied with their jobs are happy and raise happy children; and children need the companionship of other children, which they could attain if they went to day care." Kathryn Keller, *Mothers and Work in Popular American Magazines* (Westport, 1994), 21.
43. Anna W. Wolf, *The Parent's Manual: A Guide to the Emotional Development of Young Children* (New York, 1941), 285.
44. Zuma Steele, "Love and Let Me Go," *Good Housekeeping* 120 (February 1945): 37, 76–79.
45. Maurice Zolotow, *American Weekly* (2 September 1956): 10.
46. "The American Woman's Dilemma," *Life* 22 (16 June 1947): 105.
47. In 1945, Wylie reported that over 5,000 people had written him in response to *Generation of Vipers*; by 1955, he was claiming to have received between 50,000 to 60,000 letters. Other evidence in Wylie's papers suggests that both these estimates are likely inflated. However, there are roughly 1,000 surviving letters in the Philip Wylie Papers from the years 1942 to 1946 alone. Wylie's correspondents did not represent a cross-section of the American public, for they were overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and relatively well educated. In general, they appear drawn from that segment of the population most likely to read child-rearing literature and embrace contemporary psychological theories, at least in popularized forms. Most appear to have been Protestant or from Protestant backgrounds, though a small number identified themselves as Jewish. While nearly two thirds of Wylie's correspondents were men, the majority of letters referring to the momism critique were written by women, for women were more than twice as likely as men to refer to this particular issue. (Roughly a third of all the letters from women discussed the momism critique.) In addition to the letters Wylie received in response to *Generation of Vipers*, I have also cited letters written in response to popular articles on momism that Wylie published in the 1950s. For a more extensive discussion of the Wylie's fan mail, see Rebecca Jo Plant, "The Repeal of Mother Love: Momism and the Reconstruction of Motherhood in Philip Wylie's America," (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2001).
48. N.a. to Wylie, 9 November 1950, Fldr. 2, Box 240, PWP.
49. M.J.S. to Wylie, n.d., Fldr. 7, Box 6, PWP.
50. Mrs. J.A.S. to Wylie, 11 November 1950, Fldr. 2, Box 241, PWP.
51. M.D.G. to Wylie, 22 February 1944, Fldr. 9, Box 231, PWP.
52. Name illegible to Wylie, 28 June 1946, Fldr. 5, Box 235, PWP.
53. Mrs. W.J.A. to Wylie, 7 July 1949, Fldr. 5, Box 240, PWP.
54. B.I. to Wylie, 9 December 1944, Fldr. 1, Box 233, PWP. Wylie replied, "You are obviously one of the non-vipers, and I suspect your children have picked the right mother after all." Wylie to B.I., 26 December 1944, Fldr. 1, Box 233, PWP.
55. L.R.O. to Wylie, 31 August 1943, Fldr. 4, Box 232, PWP.
56. E.B.M. to Wylie, 18 November 1946, Fldr. 6, Box 235, PWP.
57. N.a. to Wylie, Fldr. 2, Box 156, PWP.
58. In 1957, Wylie published an article in which he argued, "Mothers *are* growing less liable to 'momism'—by millions—in all parts of the nation ... For the *modern* young mother ... knows that if she truly loves her children, her aim will be, not to make them ultimately mere mirrors of a fatuous, reciprocal adoration, but *independent, self-confident, detached individuals*. She knows her job is essentially, to bring them up in such a fashion that they can live perfectly *without her* and without 'dad.'" Magazine clipping, Wylie, "Mom Is Improving," *This Week Magazine* (n.d., 1957), Fldr. 27, Box 132, PWP.
59. The last serious discussion of momism as a social problem appears to have been the psychologist Hans Sebald's study, *Momism: The Silent Disease* (Chicago, 1976). In 1977, historian Christopher Lasch depicted momism as an obsolete phenomenon. "Recent evidence," he

- argued, “suggests that American children, far from becoming overly dependent on their mothers, form strong attachments to neither parent.” Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York, 1977), 74–75.
60. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), 189–205. Friedan did not explicitly refer to Wylie, but she used the term “momism” and quoted Edward Strecker and other psychiatrists at length. For a more extensive discussion of Friedan’s appropriation of the momism critique, see Plant, *The Repeal of Mother Love in Modern America*, chap. 5. The parallels between Wylie and Friedan are discussed in Robin Keehn, “Dialectics of Containment: Mothers, Moms, Soldiers, Veterans and the Cold War Mystique,” (PhD diss, University of California, San Diego, 1998), chap. 1; and Christy Erin Regenhardt, “The Psychology of Democracy: Psychological Concepts in American Culture,” (PhD diss, University of Maryland, 2006), chap. 4.
61. F. Ivan Nye and Lois Wladis Hoffman, *The Employed Mother in America* (Chicago, 1963), 8; and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Mothers in the Labor Force, 1955–2004,” <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0104670.html>, accessed 13 March 2010.