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# Emily and Annie: Doris Lessing's and Jamaica Kincaid's Portraits of the Mothers They Remember and the Mothers That Might Have Been

Daryl Cumber Dance

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... that is one of the reasons to outlive all the people who can have anything to say about you, not letting them have the last word. (Kincaid, *My Brother* 110-11)

In 2008 at the age of eighty-nine, Nobel laureate Doris Lessing returned to the mother who has haunted her life and her literature in order to rewrite a fictional account of the life that might have been and a biographical account of the life that she actually lived in *Alfred & Emily*.<sup>1</sup> Her efforts to finally exorcise the powerful and hated figure that has hounded her for most of her eighty-nine years call to mind similar efforts throughout the canon of fifty-nine-year-old celebrated Antiguan-American novelist Jamaica Kincaid to free herself. Both writers take advantage of and seek to find some degree of vengeance in their opportunity to have the last word about their mothers.

No two figures could be more different than Lessing's mother, Emily Maude McVeagh Tayler, and Kincaid's mother, Annie Victoria Richardson Drew, one a member of the colonizer's class, the other a member of the colonized class; one White, the other Black; one a British citizen who migrated to Southern Rhodesia, the other a Dominican who migrated to Antigua. And yet their lives are marked by unbelievable parallels, which are recorded in the oeuvre of their famous writer-daughters.

Both Emily and Annie<sup>2</sup> left home because of conflicts with their fathers, Alfred Tayler and Alfred John Richardson (Pa Chess). (The colonized, like the colonizers, named their children after the European kings, in this case the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred the Great.) Emily's father had wanted her to go to university and become a doctor. Instead she left to become a nurse, which incensed him so much that he admonished her "Never darken my doors again, . . . . I shall no longer consider you my

daughter" (*Alfred & Emily* [hereafter, *A&E*] 187). Lessing questions why her mother would have chosen to be a nurse rather than a doctor, and concludes that it was simply to deny her father the pleasure he would have felt in having her fulfill his dreams. She declares that Emily chose to "be a nurse and 'wipe the bottoms of the poor'" purely to spite her father (*A&E* 187). Annie's father too had high hopes for her and insisted that she get a good education, but she left Dominica at the age of sixteen<sup>3</sup> after violently quarreling with him "over the direction her life should take" (*Mr. Potter* 118). So incensed was he over her action that, like Lessing's father, "he made her dead in the realm of his fatherly love, he disinherited her" (*Mr. Potter* 131).

Both Emily and Annie so resented their stern fathers that they never forgave them. Emily returned to her father's house infrequently: "But I never forgave him, never, never," she would insist, eyes flashing, her hands in fists" (*A&E* 28). Annie never found it in her heart to have any sympathy for Pa Chess, no matter how grave his suffering. Long after she left home, the Annie figure in *Annie John* takes great pleasure in receiving notice in a letter from her sister that her father is so infirm that he must rely on others to help him get around; she shares the news with her husband, triumphantly declaring, "So the great man can no longer just get up and go. How I would love to see his face now!" (78). In "Antigua Crossings," the news of Pa Chess's problems is communicated by Ma Chess, who writes that Pa Chess is suffering from constipation, causing the Annie character, Victoria, to laugh, "So the great man can't shit" (50).

Both Emily and Annie were apparently unusually beautiful and popular young women. Lessing notes that the captain on the ship that brought her family to Cape Town "clearly admired her . . . . She and the captain got on famously. My father was sick in his berth. No one was ever better fitted for a sea voyage than my mother: she adored deck games and dances, and dressing up" (*A&E* 160); she was, Lessing concludes, "the belle of the ball" (160). Kincaid tells us that Annie's father was upset that when she left Dominica she was dressed in "a red dress with a big flounce skirt, . . . [looking like she] was going to a mass ball" ("Antigua Crossings" 50). In

Mr. Potter Kincaid describes a twenty-five-year-old Annie as “a whirlwind of sex and passion and female beauty” (41). The young Jamaica figure in *Annie John* is mesmerized by her mother’s beauty. She provides details of her beautiful head, her long hair, her beautiful long neck, the perfect shape of her nose and lips, her pearly teeth. Indeed so fascinated is she by her mother’s beauty that she declares she could happily look at her forever (18-19). In *At the Bottom of the River*, the girl speaks of her mother’s “wondrous beauty” and exclaims, “How I worshipped this beauty” (73).

The popularity and beauty of Emily and Annie did not fade with age. As a fifty-plus widow, Emily “had admirers, younger, sometimes much richer, who liked her energy, her humour, her flair, her impetuous way with life. She also had male admirers. . . . Now there were men who wanted to marry her, sensible, quite impressive men” (A&E 141-42). At the end of World War I, the returning young veterans enjoyed gathering at Emily’s house for meals, following which she would play the piano and they would sing for hours, always ending with “Goodnight, Sweetheart.” Of Emily the young men exclaimed to Lessing, “She’s a good sort . . . She’s a real sport, your mother” (272). Kincaid told me of being out with her mother in Antigua: “And you couldn’t walk down the street with her without someone yelling, ‘Hey, Annie!’ or ‘Mrs. Drew!’ Young men would see her even as an old woman, and say, ‘Oh, you gonna marry me’” (Dance interview).

Lessing and Kincaid remember their mothers as talented women who did not make the most of their promise. Lessing writes of Emily, “She was a very talented woman in many different ways. I have never met anyone as efficient as she was, such an organizer” (A&E 184). Emily was also musically talented and might have had a career as a pianist. Lessing concludes that women like Emily “looked at for their potential, were capable women, one or two extraordinarily so, and they should have been lawyers, doctors, Members of Parliament, running businesses” (191). As a child, Lessing recalls that she joked that if her mother had been in England “she would be running the Women’s Institute . . . or be an inspiration for the reorganization of hospitals” (A&E viii). In an interview

with me Kincaid declared that her mother's "gifts were never properly used." Lucy, ranting about her mother's difference from her and listing all the things Annie should not have done, declares, "She should not have thrown away her intelligence" (*Lucy* 123).

Despite their beauty and their promise, both Emily and Annie had to struggle to maintain families with husbands who were sick and unsuccessful. Emily's husband was a not-very-prosperous nor ambitious farmer who had lost a leg in World War I and who suffered from diabetes and post-traumatic stress disorder. As a part of the colonial power structure in a colony, Emily and her family were certainly more fortunate than the Drews, but their experience indicates that not all British people enjoyed a life of leisure in the colonies. In *Alfred & Emily* there is little made of the African servants and farm workers the Taylers had and many reminders of their deprivations, though their poverty was nothing compared to that of the Africans around them. Their daughter clearly considers her parents responsible for their relative poverty. After detailing the failure of their travels to Southern Rhodesia to find a better life, she writes:

Now it is so easy to see that nothing could go right.

It was entirely their fault. . . . My parents, on leave from Persia, were at the Empire Exhibition, and the Southern Rhodesian stall had great mealie cobs, and the invitation: "Get rich on maize." Do you mean to say those idiots believed a slogan on a stall at an exhibition? (*A&E* 173).

She goes on to note that some did indeed get rich growing maize and later tobacco, and asks: "So what was to prevent them being exactly like all their neighbours and getting rich on tobacco? It was themselves, their nature" (*A&E* 174).

Kincaid is every bit as unsympathetic in her account of her family's financial plight. Annie's husband was a much older man who suffered with heart and stomach problems. While he worked as a carpenter when he was able, he was not a very successful nor ambitious businessman. Then when he was ill (as was often the case) there was no money coming in. Kincaid often berates a mother who would marry an unattractive and

sick old man, have children they could not afford to take care of, send her away to the United States to work and send money home, and then have him die and leave her a pauper who had to borrow money to bury him (*My Brother* 14 and 141; *Lucy* 123-27).

However, whatever befell them, both Emily and Annie found the strength and determination to somehow provide comfortable homes for their families. Both women were industrious, imaginative, resolute, and powerful enough to do whatever needed to be done to care for their households. Lessing says of her mother, “when something terrible had to be done, like shooting an ill dog or drowning kittens, she did it, lips tight, face hard” (*A&E* 156). When Annie’s youngest son Devon was dying of AIDS, the seventy-five-year-old woman got up each morning and cooked special food for him, packed it, walked a mile to the hospital, a walk that involved climbing a steep hill, bathed her son, rubbed his legs, combed his hair, dressed him in clean pajamas, changed his sheets, offered him encouragements as she helped him eat his food (“Come on, man, yam up you food”), cleaned his room, emptied his bedpan, gathered his dirty clothes and bath towel, took them home to wash, and prepared to come back in the evening to care for him again (*My Brother* 15-16). Both women cared for their sick and dying husbands for fifteen or more years. Lessing describes Emily’s care of Alfred as “day and night . . . minute-by-minute vigilance” (*A&E* 256). Annie was no less conscientious in her attention to her sick husband.

Despite financial conditions that ranged from borderline-poverty to destitution (especially in the case of the Drews), neither Doris nor Jamaica grew up feeling poor. Indeed their mothers gave meaning to the term “genteel poverty,” always insisting on a certain refinement and elegance in their households, whatever the actual situation of their finances. Both women did whatever was necessary, including making clothes, spreads, curtains, and other items to make their homes and their children presentable. Lessing looks back with amazement at the “extraordinary house my mother created, back there in 1924” (*A&E* 220) with Persian rugs, cushions and hangings, a copper basin and jug, orange

curtains, and varied other touches that belied the bumpy floors and mud walls of their “shambling house” (*A&E* 212). Though many foods to which the Taylers were accustomed were not available in Africa, Emily grew what they liked in a garden; she raised chickens and rabbits; she made cheeses, jams, and jellies. She at first provided the “heavy Edwardian meals” (*A&E* 236) that were the legacies of the British Empire until she became more aware of the benefits of lighter and healthier meals; then she emphasized fruits and vegetables and banished sugar. Though Jamaica’s family lived in a one-room shack (*My Brother* 111), Annie made sure they had good healthful food, beautiful clothes (she was an expert seamstress), nice sheets, beautiful plates, and an immaculate home. In the household, they ate on fine china, spoke perfect English, displayed good manners, and their mother was, in Kincaid’s words, “grand in every gesture” (*Cudjoe* 220). Kincaid has declared that she didn’t realize they were poor when she was growing up.

Both mothers also spent much of their energy helping others. Emily had worked as a nurse during World War I, caring for the wounded soldiers; and in Southern Rhodesia she held daily “clinics” in her kitchen where she provided medical care (at her own expense) to the Africans in the community. Annie attended the sick, dying, and dead in her community, having at least two neighbors die in her arms. She prepared for burial the body of a child whose mother was too distraught to manage.

These hard working women are the mothers Doris and Jamaica knew. The dashing young belles of the ball they knew only through their mothers’ stories.

Both Emily and Annie began their families at rather late ages for their time. Doris was born when her mother was thirty-five years old; Jamaica was born when her mother was four months short of thirty (Kincaid usually says her mother was in her thirties when she was born).

Lessing usually pictures her mother as rather cold and uncaring to her. Doris found it very painful to hear her mother frequently tell her

friends of her disappointment at not having the son she desired and in her difficult and irritating daughter. Much of Doris's care was presumably left to nursemaids, especially after Emily's beloved son was born. Lessing was undoubtedly revealing the impact on her of her mother's treatment in *Love, Again*, where she has sixty-five-year-old Sarah Durham see a small girl seeking a loving response from a mother who treats her cruelly while adoring her baby son, and recalls her own pain at her mother's rejection. Yet, in *Alfred & Emily* Lessing informs that she chooses to wipe out the "difficult things" in her youth and "remember better a delight of my childhood" (A&E 163), her mother's telling them stories:

"More . . . More, please go on . . . more, please." She made whole epics out of the mice in the storeroom, the rats, the cats, the dogs, the chickens in the fowl run. . . . What a wonderful storyteller she was. She read to us too, and they were wonderful tales, but nothing would compare with her stories. (A&E 163-64)

Their house was full of books. Lessing notes that her mother packed books to take with them to Africa and weekly ordered books and magazines from England for the family, some specifically for Doris. She lists almost three pages of books that they had, and concludes, "So this stream of books for children came pouring through our house and sometimes out again, for my mother complained, but was pleased about it, that people saw her as a kind of library" (A&E 169). Lessing acknowledges, "I owe to her, my mother, my introduction to books, reading—all that has been my life" (A&E 184). Clearly the stories her mother told Doris of her (Emily's) father and stepmother, of the wounded soldiers she nursed (including Alfred), and of her social life in London, as well as the anecdotes treating their lives in Southern Rhodesia, provided the basis for much of Lessing's own writing.

Kincaid often recalls the pleasure she experienced as a young child doing everything with her mother: bathing, doing the household tasks, shopping, selecting fabric for their dresses, swimming in the sea, etc., etc.

There was nothing her mother would not do for her, including chewing her food for her if it were too tough or even sucking the mucus from her nose if she had a cold. In *Annie John* Kincaid ends her description of the pleasurable life the Jamaica character experienced as a child ever in the company of her mother: "It was in such a paradise that I lived" (25). In "In the Night" the Jamaica character dreams of marrying a woman who is obviously Annie and living with her near the sea in a hut with two of everything. They would be alone together, running off anyone who threatened their privacy. The girl would sing to the woman and the woman would never make her cry: "Every night, over and over, she will tell me something that begins, 'Before you were born.' . . . I will be completely happy" ("In the Night," *At the Bottom of the River* 12). In our interview Kincaid fondly recalled that "a wonderful moment when I loved her most would be her swimming with me on her back and I could hear her heart beat."

Annie, like Emily, loved books and encouraged her daughter's love of reading. She taught Jamaica to read when she was three and one-half, and took her to the library every Thursday night. She was so pleased with Jamaica's reading that when she was seven years old, she gave her a copy of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, in which she presciently wrote, "To My Darling Daughter, who will one day make me proud of her" ("Jamaica Kincaid's New York" 72). Jamaica was so proud that she took it everywhere with her; she told Vanessa Jones that she read the dictionary like a book, declaring, "I'm hopelessly in love with language" (D-1).

Annie, like Emily was also a remarkable story teller. One of Kincaid's fondest memories is of her mother regularly going through her trunk in which she had carefully packed mementoes of her daughter's life: the beautiful clothes she had made for her, the photographs she had had made, the school report cards and certificates of merit, etc. The Jamaica character in *Annie John* observes, "No small part of my life was so unimportant that she hadn't made a note of it, and now she would tell it to me over and over again" (22). That this was instrumental in the formation of the author is emphasized over and over by Kincaid, who,

when asked at a reading at Queens College (City University of New York) how much of her writing is autobiographical, responded that all of it was autobiographical, “even the punctuation” (“In the Main Ring”).<sup>4</sup> Kincaid told me that this unpacking of the trunk not only provided the subject matter for much of her writing, but also the style: “That was one of the main connections I had to her [Annie]- -a most profound experience, . . . a literary experience—I think it contributes to a lot of the ways in which I go about writing. It’s an unpacking and a repacking” (Dance interview; emphasis is Kincaid’s). Her mother’s favorite anecdotes (of her brother John’s death, of her confrontation with a monkey, of the snake in the basket on her head, of leaving Dominica and sailing to Antigua, of Mr. Potter’s desertion, of the efforts of one of the women who had borne a child for Mr. Drew to kill them [Annie and Jamaica], of Jamaica’s bedwetting, and of countless other events in Jamaica’s life) appear over and over in Kincaid’s fiction. During an interview with Selwyn Cudjoe, Kincaid recounted a story her mother had told her, concluding, “If I haven’t [written about it], I will have to write about it” (230).

Kincaid, like Lessing, acknowledges her mother’s influence on her. She has declared, “The way I became a writer was that my mother wrote my life for me and told it to me” (O’Connor 6). And she told Cudjoe, “the way I am is solely owing to her” (219); “the fertile soil of my creative life is my mother” (222).

The end of Doris’s and Jamaica’s delightful memories of childhood was marked by the appearance of a new baby brother. Each recalls, rightly or wrongly, that she was immediately replaced in her mother’s affection by the usurper. Lessing notes, “I hated my mother. I can remember that emotion from the start, which it is easy to date by the birth of my brother” (A&E 179). She recalls, “My brother, when he was born, was her heart’s delight, and of course I knew it” (A&E 178). Doris is outraged when, after suffering a heart attack, her mother tells her, “You must look after your little brother” (A&E 158). She explains, “looking after my little brother had been my burden, my task, my responsibility, my pride always” (A&E 158). Her battles with her mother began at this point, and

she began plotting her escape from her.

The first of Jamaica's three brothers was born when she was nine years old. She too was disturbed to be expected to help with the care of these brothers: "I was always being asked to forgo something or other . . . to take care of these small children who were not mine. . . . I did not like this" (*My Brother* 128). She too suffered her parents' preference of these brothers: the pain is still obvious on her face when she recalls her parents' plans to send their first son, and then their second, and finally their third to study in England to become, as Lucy, the Jamaica character, recalls in *Lucy*, "someone who would occupy an important and influential position" (130). She continues, "whenever I saw her eyes fill up with tears at the thought of how proud she would be at some deed her son had accomplished, I felt a sword go through my heart, for there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her only identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation. To myself I then began to call her Mrs. Judas" (130). Upon the appearance of her first brother, Jamaica began her bitter battles with her mother and started dreaming of escaping to New York.

Doris, who was only two years older than her brother, did have some relationship with him growing up. As young children, they ran, biked, played, and shot game together. However, they drifted apart in adulthood and, as is clear in *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe*, despite their efforts to relate to each other when Lessing visited Africa in her sixties, they found they were irredeemably alienated from each other.

Kincaid who was nine, ten, and twelve years older than her brothers, insists that she never related to or interacted with them at all during her childhood in Antigua; she never even thought of them as her brothers, but rather as her mother's children. After they grew up, she got to know them a little better, especially the youngest, Devon, whom she frequently visited when he became ill with AIDS. She still does not speak to her oldest brother, Joseph, suggesting that they don't know each other well enough to know what to talk about (Dance interview; see also *My Brother* 81).

Both Lessing and Kincaid also remain furious with their parents for sending them to live away from home at periods during their childhood. Lessing, sent away to live with a family for school and then to a convent, concludes with quiet anger that “Children should not be sent away from home aged seven. It does them no good at all” (A&E 163). When she was away, she longed for her mother, and “savoured every minute of the holidays” when she returned home (A&E 181); “yet,” she continues, “I was in continual fights with my mother” (A&E 181).

Jamaica was sent to Dominica on occasion to spend time with her grandmother. In “Antigua Crossings,” Mignonette (the Jamaica character) said she was sent five times “because my parents think I am an overly troublesome child and that my overly troublesomeness comes about because enemies of my family [the women by whom her father had children] are working obeah on me” (49). In *My Brother* she suggests she was first sent because the mother of a girl Annie had thrashed for beating Jamaica threatened to set evil spirits on Jamaica, and it was known that evil spirits could not cross water and that Dominican Obeah was superior to Antiguan Obeah (77-78). On Mignonette’s first trip when she was nine, the stern mother who had made this decision (in consultation with Ma Chess) is so pained at her child’s leaving that she doesn’t think she can go to the boat to send her off; the rebellious child is moved to apologize for all of her infractions and beg to stay with her family that she loves. Neither of these adversaries will express to the other her true feelings, however (“Antigua Crossings” 50).

In *My Garden (Book)* Kincaid tells of being sent to her mother’s friend in the country—she doesn’t say why.<sup>5</sup> This woman had some unfriendly animals, “not like animals in a picture book at all” (150)--guinea hens, pigs, chickens; she also grew cotton. At Harvest time (July and August) when Jamaica was out of school, she sometimes “was asked to reap it and . . . to separate the cotton from its pod and then from its seed.” Jamaica “came to hate this period in my young life” (150) because she hated being away from her family, she did not like the animals, and she hated separating the cotton.

From the time of the births of their brothers, Doris's and Jamaica's lives were ones of constant conflicts with Emily and Annie, in which they intentionally caused as much pain as they could to their mothers. On the ship to Southern Rhodesia, five-year old Doris, furious that each night after dinner her mother would dress up in one of her best gowns, put her brother and her to bed, lock the cabin door, and go off to dance and socialize, took out the scissors and cut holes in one of her mother's favorite gowns (Klein 21). In "Mariah" Kincaid informs that she intentionally hurt her mother: "I . . . couldn't bear to see her face when I had caused her pain, but I couldn't stop myself" (33). Throughout her life after the break with her mother, Jamaica or the Jamaica figure tortured her mother by misbehaving in school, lying, stealing, befriending children her mother forbade her to see, playing marbles, back chatting her mother, wishing her mother dead, wetting her bed, refusing to care for her brothers (even dropping one as a baby), and acting up at homes where she was sent to be taught music, etiquette, and sewing; by, in short, doing "exactly the opposite of whatever she desired of me" (*Annie John* 61).

When Doris was fourteen she dropped out of school, much to her mother's dismay, and though she returned to the farm, she writes, "it was only a question of when I would leave it. . . . I had to get free. My battles with my mother were titanic. . . . All her talents, her energy were narrowed down to one graceless, angry girl who had only one idea, which was to leave her" (*A&E* 183-84). Lessing finally left home to take a job as an au pair.

When Jamaica was fourteen or fifteen (according to my calculations)<sup>6</sup> her education also ended. With the birth of her third brother, the family's situation became so desperate that Jamaica was taken out of school and sent to the United States when she was sixteen to work, like Lessing, as an au pair.

After leaving home on journeys that both writers recognize reenacted their mothers' flights from hated parents, Doris and Jamaica realized that achieving their oft-dreamed goals of escaping the homes of those mothers does not truly free them. They continue to be haunted by Emily

and Annie. After Lessing left home, her mother wrote “dreadful” letters to her, accusing her, among other things, of “embarking on the career of a prostitute” (A&E 186). Lessing tore up the letters as they arrived.

Kincaid, whose mother often cautioned her against growing up to be “the slut you are so bent on becoming” (“Girl,” *At the Bottom of the River* 3), writes in *Annie John* about her response to having her mother call her a slut when she found her talking to some boys on the street: “The word ‘slut’ (in patois) was repeated over and over, until suddenly I felt as if I were drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with water it was filled with the word ‘slut’” (102). Soon after arriving in the United States, Jamaica stopped opening the letters from her mother. Recognizing how futile it was to say she didn’t want to be like her mother, because “I was my mother” (*Lucy* 90), she recalls her mother saying, “You can run away, but you cannot escape the fact that I am your mother” (*Lucy* 90), a statement which she saw as “a sentence for life in a prison whose bars were stronger than any iron imaginable” (*Lucy* 90-91). She dared not even go near the letters: “I knew that if I read only one, I would die from longing for her” (*Lucy* 91). Finally she burned the unopened letters.

Both of the runaways went on to become successful and highly renowned writers, much of whose canons has been inspired by their efforts to free themselves from their mothers. Both see their writing as a kind of salvation. Doris Lessing provides this analysis: “So much has been written about mothers and daughters, and some of it by me. . . . *Martha Quest* was, I think, the first no-holds-barred account of a mother-and-daughter battle. It was cruel, that book. Would I do it now? But what I was doing was part of the trying to get free” (A&E 178). Kincaid writes in *My Brother*, “When I was young, . . . I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life” (196).

Despite the personal nature of their writings, both Lessing and Kincaid might also be viewed as political writers. Amber Haq’s declaration, “Lessing has never hesitated to speak her mind” applies equally to Jamaica Kincaid. Lessing was at one time banned from South Africa for her harsh critiques of the political situations in her homeland. Kincaid’s harsh

critique of her native land, *A Small Place*, was banned in Antigua; and though there was no formal banning of the author, she dared not go to Antigua, noting, “the government at the time being what it was, I thought I could be murdered!” (Dance interview).

As the years passed, both Lessing and Kincaid married and started families, Lessing twice, having two children with her first husband and one with her second. They continued, nonetheless, to be traumatized by those dreaded mothers whose power over them was in no way dissipated by distance, time, aging, marriage, and great literary success. When Lessing’s mother came to London to help her with her child, Lessing was so distraught that her mother took over her household and she could not say no to her that she was driven to go to see a therapist (*A&E* 190-91), a situation she fictionalized in *The Four-Gated City*. Though Kincaid wrote in “Jamaica Kincaid’s New York” in 1977 that she had never seen a psychiatrist (“I don’t want to know why I hate my mother so, and why I love her so” [73]), after Annie’s first visit to her in the United States in 1987, Kincaid was so traumatized that she too had to seek psychiatric help (*My Brother* 28).

Lessing and Kincaid both saw their mothers as attempting to undermine them after they left home and formed new relationships. Lessing complains that her mother bad-mouthed her to her friends behind her back: “If I met someone new, made a friend, . . . she somehow got to know, and either made a friend of this person herself, or went to see them to say things about me” (*A&E* 266). When Lessing got a good job, her mother told her boss that she was “a danger and a threat to public order” and a communist (*A&E* 265-66). Kincaid similarly notes that if her mother knew she was particularly fond of a friend, “she would try to get to know the friend very well and undermine—she would say bad things behind my back to my friends” (Dance interview).

After all the years of fictionalized and autobiographical accounts of her mother, Doris Lessing has now attempted in one book two approaches to dealing with this mother for, she insists, the last time (Haq). The first part of this “biography” is a fictionalized account of the lives of her

parents, where she imagines lives for them more in keeping with their dreams and desires. Emily had been a socialite in London, whereas her father had remained in the country. Lessing's envisioning of Emily's social life is inspired by moth-eaten gloves, feathers, hats and elaborate dresses, mementoes of her other life that Emily kept in a trunk in Rhodesia. Though she married the poor and injured farmer with the wooden leg, Emily always fantasized about the eminent doctor, who was, Lessing informs, "My mother's great love" who "drowned in the Channel" (A&E vii). Doris had only seen a newspaper picture of the doctor her mother fondly, even obsessively, recalled, and she thought, "I would look at that face and think, Well, you wouldn't have had much fun with that one" (A&E 141). In the first part of *Alfred & Emily*, Lessing has her marry him and live the life of a wealthy socialite in London. However, it is a loveless match: "Her husband was not a loving man and there was certainly no fun in bed" (A&E 55). Despite the beautifully decorated home, the numerous servants, and the celebrated "musical evenings" she hosted, Emily weeps constantly, is "irritable and often unreasonable" (A&E 50), is, in short, "so unhappy she could die" (A&E 53). After ten years of marriage, Emily is left a very wealthy, very lonely, and childless widow.

It is interesting that in Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* and Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, both angry daughters revise their mothers' lives so that they are childless and loveless, an appropriate punishment for their failure to be proper mothers to their actual children. When I told Kincaid that I was writing about her mother, she declared bitterly that she was a "horrible" person who should never have had any children (telephone conversation, August 5, 2008); the same sentiment is repeated in *Lucy* 123), echoing Lessing's insistence that women without maternal instincts "should never have had children" (A&E 192). The novelists' revision of their mothers' lives is clearly retributive.

Kincaid's Xuela (an Annie figure) marries a White British doctor who was not someone she could possibly love or enjoy sexually. This marriage makes her to some degree a member of an upper class, though, as she notes, his former White British wife is a lady whereas she is a woman:

“I married her husband, but this is not to say that I took her place” (*The Autobiography of My Mother* 160). Xuela is also motherless, further punishment Kincaid visits upon her Annie figure: in Kincaid, nothing is more reprehensible than to be motherless. When the mother of Sonia, one of the best friends of the Jamaica figure in *Annie John* dies, she could never speak to her friend again: “She seemed such a shameful thing, a girl whose mother had died and left her alone in the world” (8).

Kincaid, who has never forgiven her mother for attempting to abort her,<sup>7</sup> applies the screws to Xuela for her abortions. Xuela says the account of her life is the account of the life of the mother she never knew and of the children she herself did not have: “In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me” (227-28).

Lessing also uses the occasion of *Alfred & Emily* to avenge Alfred for Emily’s failure to love him. In *A&E* Lessing allows Alfred a marriage to a woman who is happy with him as a farmer, a woman based on a Danish woman who visited the family in Rhodesia, of whom Lessing notes: . . . and I remember to this day sitting as a small girl on her lap, in her arms, thinking, She likes me, she likes me better than my mother does. And my father most certainly did like her. I enjoyed giving him someone warm and loving. (*A&E* 140)

In the fictional account Alfred and his wife Betsy have two sons, and he is a loving and attentive father to his sons.

Another apparent act of vengeance upon Emily centers upon her name. When Emily went to Persia, she dropped her first name Emily, which she never liked, and began using her middle name Maude, which she found appealing because of the Tennyson poem “Maud” (Klein 10). She also insisted that her husband replace Alfred with the name Michael. It was by these names that the couple was known in Persia and Southern Rhodesia. Lessing ignores her mother’s preferences and uses Emily and Alfred in *Alfred and Emily*, thus asserting her power of “not letting them have the last word.”<sup>8</sup> Even earlier she had dubbed the character based

on her mother Martha Quest in *The Children of Violence* series.<sup>9</sup> The pleasure of this power of controlling naming is reinforced by Kincaid: speaking of the names by which her father was known, she concludes, “Mr. Potter, . . . the name by which I know him [,] is the way he will forever be known, for I am the one who can write the narrative that is his life, the only one really” (*Mister Potter* 87).

Lessing’s treatment of her mother’s London life and possibilities leads us to question whether Emily had embellished her stories a bit. When Doris was growing up in Southern Rhodesia, Emily would never let her touch the items in her trunk nor play with them as the inquisitive child always begged to do—and then one day she changed her mind. Emily opens the trunk and she and an excited Doris pull out satin evening frocks, dinner dresses, ball dresses, garden-party dresses, clothing designed and purchased for events that Doris couldn’t imagine. Finally accepting that her socializing is over, Emily, in tears, gives the disintegrating and moth-eaten garments to her daughter. Several of them had never been worn, suggesting that Emily’s social success may have been partially dreams. (*A&E* 201-205). It seems odd too that the only picture Emily has of her eminent physician fiancé is from a newspaper clipping rather than a portrait (*A&E* 140).

In Lessing’s fictionalized account of her mother’s death, Emily has a heart attack brought on when she was remonstrating with some boys who were tormenting a dog. Lessing concludes: “Hundreds of people came to her funeral” (*A&E* 138), reminding me of Kincaid’s account of her mother’s death: Annie got into a fight with animals in her yard, and in her fury fell and apparently had a heart attack. Her funeral too was attended by many people, including the Prime Minister (Dance interview). Both mothers remained active until their deaths and, in their daughters’ accounts, died in an effort to control and chastise others, an end that their daughters very likely consider poetic justice, just desserts, acts of divine retribution.

Despite the fact that over and over, Lessing and Kincaid have had the last word, it is still debatable that they have in any way resolved their

conflicts with the hated mother figures who dominate their fiction. I don't find that Lessing is as compassionate towards her mother in *Alfred & Emily* as several reviewers suggest.<sup>10</sup> Jamaica Kincaid told me in a telephone conversation, "Lessing could find it in her heart to forgive her mother. I can never forgive mine" (August 5, 2008). There is no doubt that Lessing's treatment of her mother has mellowed a bit and she shows much more empathy than Kincaid: "It took me years – and years – and years – to see it: my mother had no visible scars, no wounds, but she was as much a victim of the war as my poor father" *A&E* (172); and she says she had "not known my mother, as she really was, either. The real Emily McVeagh was an educator, who told stories and brought me books. That is how I want to remember her" (*A&E* 192). Perhaps Lessing has gotten a little less bitter in later life, but ultimately the mother figure in *Alfred and Emily* is not portrayed as a loving mother by her daughter.

In the end, both authors don't so much hate their mothers as hate the idea that their mothers don't love them and appreciate their achievements, a painful conviction that continues to haunt them. Lessing has insisted that her mother "didn't like anything I wrote" (Roberts 207). Kincaid did not speak to her mother during the last three years of her life because her mother had told her that her "accomplishments . . . did not amount to very much, that the life I lived was nothing more than a silly show" ("The Estrangement" 40).<sup>11</sup> The anger Kincaid nurses from this last of what she views as many rejections causes her to declare, even now in 2008, "I would rather be dead than spend eternity with her" ("The Estrangement" 43). Clearly the fifty-nine-year-old Kincaid still seeks to win again the approval of her mother that the Jamaica character blissfully recounts in *Annie John*: after the five-year-old girl returns from her first trip alone to the store to purchase three items, she tells us,

my mother[s] eyes filled with tears and she swooped me up and held me high in the air and said that I was wonderful and good and that there could never be anybody better. If I had just conquered Persia, she couldn't have been more proud of me. (139-40)

Whether Lessing and Kincaid are fluctuating between the poles of

a treasured remembrance of an early Edenic experience or the more frequent pain, sadness, anger and bitterness of the countless conflicts they had with their mothers, the sad fact is that at this point in their lives they are still desperately seeking freedom, a freedom they are not likely to secure from the “sentence for life in a prison whose bars were stronger than any iron imaginable” (*Lucy* 90-91). Lessing introduces *Alfred & Emily* by noting:

“And here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free.”

And Kincaid concludes “The Estrangement”:

I am always thinking of my mother. . . I will not speak to her again in person, of that I am certain, but I am not sure that I will never speak to her again. For in eternity is she in me . . . ? I do not know, I do not know” (43).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lessing, born October 22, 1919, had not reached her eighty-ninth birthday when *Alfred & Emily* was published on June 5, 2008, but since she would turn eighty-nine in the year the book was published and some reviews noted that she would be ninety “next year,” I have used the age of eighty-nine in my discussion. I have used the age that Kincaid (born May 25, 1949) was at that time as well, fifty-nine.

<sup>2</sup> Following Lessing’s lead in her title, I shall refer to Mrs. Tayler and Mrs. Drew by their first names in this paper. I shall refer to Lessing and Kincaid by their first names when speaking of them as children, and by their last names when referring to them as adult authors. Though Kincaid did not change her original name (Elaine Potter Richardson) to Jamaica Kincaid until she moved to the United States, I shall refer to her as Jamaica or Kincaid throughout this study.

<sup>3</sup> The age ranges from sixteen to twenty-one in varied accounts: “I pointed out to her that she changed her age everytime [sic] she tells this story” (“Antigua Crossings” 50). However the age that is most frequently given and the one that Kincaid confirmed in our interview is sixteen.

<sup>4</sup> Similar assertions about the autobiographical nature of her writing may be found in Ferguson, “A Lot of Memory,” 176; Cudjoe 227; Leigh 213; and Muirhead 45.

<sup>5</sup> In our interview she said her mother was always sending her to this friend’s house “to see things,” by which I assume she meant to get a sense of rural life.

<sup>6</sup> I don’t believe she ever tells us the exact age. In *My Brother* she only says that she was taken out of school before she took exams that she would have taken when she was sixteen (74). However, she also tells us that her youngest brother was two, and he was

born twenty days before she turned thirteen.

<sup>7</sup> Kincaid writes of her mother's efforts to abort her in *Mr. Potter* (136). However, she told me in our interview that her mother didn't actually tell her she attempted to abort her, but that she (Kincaid) could glean it from conversations with her mother. She also notes that her mother attempted to abort her last son (*My Brother* 174).

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is from the epigraph to this paper: ". . . that is one of the reasons to outlive all the people who can have anything to say about you, not letting them have the last word" (Kincaid, *My Brother* 110-11).

<sup>9</sup> This series includes *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked*, and *the Four-Gated City* (1969).

<sup>10</sup> One example is Amber Haq, who writes "the novelist chose to pen her last words by returning to her mother in a final act of compassion. Lessing has righted the wrongs of her parents' lives, and in the process, put her own demons to rest."

<sup>11</sup> Kincaid and her mother often went through periods when they did not speak. There are several references to twenty years of silence between the time Jamaica left Antigua in December 1965 and returned in January 1986; however, there were periods of some communication during those years, and she and her mother did not truly have the twenty years of silence that Lessing says she wrote about in one of her many tales of "mother-and-daughter enmities," where the daughter is forced to care for her helpless mother who has had a heart attack, but never said one word to her during the twenty years she lasted (A&E 267).

A similar refusal of the mother-daughter combatants to acknowledge the achievements of the other is suggested in Lessing's account of a little girl who knew her mother only as her mother, a housewife; when she was taken to see her mother in her other life as a glamorous leading lady in a play and asked afterwards if she were proud of her mother, the child replied, "Oh, she wasn't anything, she wasn't much, she isn't anything *really*" (A&E 179).

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