

Bad Mothers? (Re)Writing Motherhood

Workshop for early career researchers

Motherhood encompasses a wide and often contradictory range of experiences—from giving birth to adopting a child, as well as miscarriage, abortion, or the decision to relinquish a child. Rather than constituting a stable or unified category, motherhood emerges as a complex and contested field shaped by biological, gendered, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. As such, it calls for an intersectional perspective that accounts for the multiple and often conflicting discourses through which motherhood is constructed and understood.

This complexity is reflected in the equally diverse field of artistic and literary representations, which both reproduce and challenge dominant notions of motherhood. Representations of so-called “bad mothers” abound in cultural imaginaries—from murderous mothers such as Medea in myth, to the evil stepmother of fairy tales and Disney classics, to contemporary literary and cinematic narratives that depict mothers indirectly, for instance through the daughter’s narrative voice, as absent figures, as authoritarian and socially deviant characters, or complicit in the patriarchal oppression of their daughter(s) (see e.g., Hirsch 1989). As Renate Möhrmann argues, authentic depictions of motherhood (“authentische Zeugnisse mütterlicher Existenz,” Möhrmann 6) remain marginalized in cultural and aesthetic representations. Between idealized images of the normatively “good” mother and their negative counterparts, a discursive gap emerges in which complex or ambivalent experiences of motherhood often remain invisible.

This workshop will interrogate the cultural categories and power structures that frame motherhood within the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” mothers, approaching the figure of the “bad mother” as a critical site where discursive norms, structural inequalities, and questions of epistemic (in)justice intersect.

The topic of “bad mothers” can be approached from a number of perspectives: through motherly figures who do bad things, for example—figures portrayed as violent, abusive, destructive, or neglectful; or through mothers who are labelled “bad” because they deviate from normative constructions of the good mother, as exemplified by the ideal of the caring, selfless, and unconditionally loving mother. Mothers may be considered “bad” when they resist or depart from patriarchal/gendered, racialized and classed expectations—by leaving the family, prioritizing self-care, choosing abortion, or simply do not conform to the ideal “image of the white, able-bodied, cisgender, middle-class mother who works part-time in a heterosexual, monogamous nuclear family” (Tietjen 18, OT).

Rather than treating “bad mothers” simply as deviant figures, this workshop understands them as products of and responses to the very power structures that define normative motherhood in the first place. The trope of the “bad mother” invites re-readings of motherhood that draw attention to the intersecting power structures informing its discursive formation while keeping in mind the agency—if, at times, limited—of motherly figures within and beyond the (social) role of the mother. Literary examples point to the productive and disruptive potential of re-readings that “unmask and redefine maternal roles and subjectivities” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 5) within their respective context. The trope of the “bad mother” pries open space for critical engagement with mothering practices and their implication in (re)writings of motherhood, thus participating in “the task of de-

essentialising motherhood by demonstrating that ideologies that paint women as ‘naturally’ inhabiting the role of nurturing mother work to obscure the ways in which motherhood is socially constructed, historically and geographically situated and culturally variant” (Averett 285).

Taking the notion of the “bad mother” as a starting point, this workshop aims to explore the many facets, forms and functions of motherly figures in literary and cultural contexts who do not meet the standards of or remain outside (hetero-)normative constructions of motherhood, either by force or by choice. Bringing into conversation different approaches, conceptualizations and theorizations of motherhood across linguistic, cultural and disciplinary boundaries, we want to ask:

- How is motherhood narrated in (contemporary) literature and film and by whom? How is “bad” or non-normative motherhood made “narratable”?
- How do literary and cultural texts themselves theorize or conceptualize motherhood, or provide alternative ways of thinking about motherhood?
- (How) can motherly figures be understood as epistemic subjects, that is, as “credible witness” to their own lived realities?
- How do representations of “bad mothers” relate to broader structures of violence, including their psychological, social, and potentially transgenerational dimensions?
- Which frameworks can we use or bring together to discuss motherhood and motherly figures across disciplines?

The workshop seeks to reflect on motherhood as a key site of social, ethical, aesthetic, and epistemic negotiation, and to examine how literature and film may function as an epistemic resource for understanding maternal experience. It is intended to facilitate interdisciplinary exchange, networking, and the promotion of young talent.

The workshop invites national and international early career scholars (PhD-candidates) and emerging researchers (early post-docs) to reflect on the topic through

1. brief input presentations on approaches to and/or theories on literary and cultural representations of “bad” mothers (in the morning)
2. a shared reading of theoretical texts that help establish and discuss possible methodologies, conceptualizations and theorizations of motherhood across different fields of research (in the afternoon).

While the workshop will primarily be held in English, we strongly encourage participants working on different language texts to join in the conversation.

The workshop will take place on Friday, 18 September 2026, at the University of Augsburg, Germany, accompanied by a **keynote lecture by Sarah Colvin (U of Cambridge) on “Motherhood in Kim de L’Horizon’s *Blutbuch*”** in the evening of Thursday, 17 September 2026.

Interested participants are encouraged to send a brief abstract (250 words) in which they outline their approach to the topic of (bad) motherhood in their own research, especially focussing on motherly figures in literary and/or cultural texts. The submissions need to provide a clear description of the work to be presented, its methodological framework, up to 5 keywords, and 3-5 references. Please also include a short bio (150 words).

Please submit your abstract to sabrina2.hadwiger@uni-a.de and nadine.ellinger@uni-a.de by May 15, 2026. A shared reading list will be circulated prior to the workshop to enable productive discussions. We welcome suggestions for this by participants.

Works Cited

- Averett, Kate Henley. "Queer Parents, Gendered Embodiment and the De-essentialisation of Motherhood." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2021, pp. 284-304.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Indiana UP, 1989.
- Möhrmann, Renate. Introduction. *Verklärt, Verkitschts, Vergessen: Die Mutter als Ästhetische Figur*, edited by Renate Möhrmann and Barbara Mrytz, J.B. Metzler, 1996, pp. 1-19.
- Podnieks, Elizabeth, and Andrea O'Reilly. "Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives." *Textual Mothers | Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, Wilfried Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 1-27.
- Tietjen, Julia. *Intersektionale Perspektiven auf Mutterschaft und Gleichberechtigung. Eine affekttheoretische Situationsanalyse der Erfahrungen benachteiligter Mütter*, Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2026.