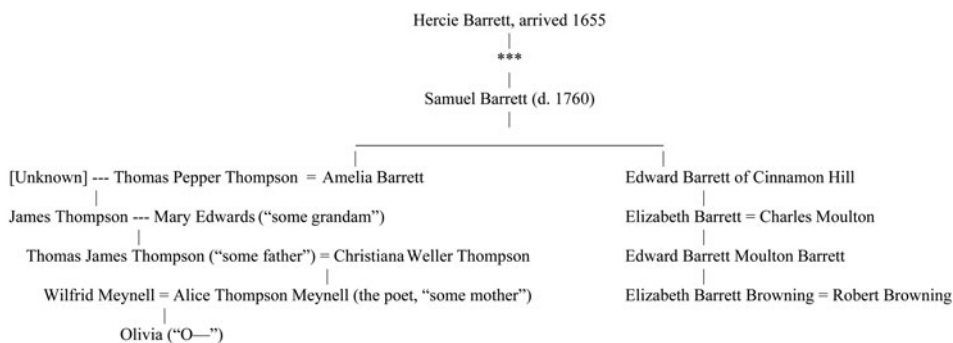


# The Transatlantic Inheritance of Alice Meynell

ASH FAULKNER 

TO remember Alice Meynell (1847–1922) within her Caribbean context is to return to the legacies of slavery at the heart of Victorian and Edwardian literature.<sup>1</sup> For example, it was to Meynell that Coventry Patmore in 1893 gave the only manuscript of *The Angel in the House* (1854–62).<sup>2</sup> But *Meynell’s actual house* at that time, 47 Palace Court, was built with money from Jamaican sugar and rum plantations owned by her father, himself the legitimated descendant of plantation owners and enslaved persons.<sup>3</sup> Here is the genealogy, cross-referenced with quotations from a related Meynell poem discussed below, “To O—, of Her Dark Eyes”:



Legend: The double line = indicates a married couple. The dotted line indicates an unmarried couple. I use these problematically unequal conventions to make visible how Meynell’s poem questions them.

It is unsurprising that Alice was to write appreciations of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, including the then-standard article on her life and work in the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. They were third cousins. Elizabeth Barrett’s great-grandfather, Edward Barrett of Cinnamon Hill, has a little sister, Amelia. Amelia Barrett marries Thomas Pepper

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Thompson.<sup>4</sup> They were to have no children. Thomas fathers a son with a now unknown woman and takes that son to Jamaica. That son, James, leaves three Jamaican children—two daughters and a son—by Mary Edwards.<sup>5</sup> James and Mary never marry. It is arresting to see the Trelawney baptismal record of their first child, Amelia, in which the clerk has accidentally given Mary a married name and then has had to emend it: “Mary ~~Thompson~~ Edwards.”<sup>6</sup>

Mary Edwards, the Creole grandmother of our poet, was not “white” under the law. In the Jamaican system, “white” was a legal status that meant you could not be enslaved. Children of various degrees of Black African ancestry could be declared by the assembly to be legally white, and some few who could afford to get their children thus classified did so. There evolved a set form of language—particular phrases and tropes—for petitioning the government for this. Brooke Newman’s *Dark Inheritance* includes verbatim examples of such petitions.<sup>7</sup> But Mary Edwards did not have to petition the government. She was able to be listed as “free mustee” in the baptismal records of her Thompson son. That term meant three things: she was in the last degree of those who were still enslaveable, but she was herself unenslaved, and her boy could be “white” under the law.

Mary Edwards had had other children with James Thompson: two girls, Amelia Thompson (namesake of her grandmother, Amelia Barrett) and Elizabeth Dorothy Thompson.<sup>8</sup> We have all three children’s baptismal records: “Amelia Thompson Daughter of James Thompson and Mary ~~Thompson~~ Edwards baptized 1<sup>st</sup> June 1808 aged 8 months.”<sup>9</sup> Her sister is a year younger: “Elizabeth Dorothy Thompson mustee daughter of James Thompson Esqre. of Vale Royal Estate and Mary Edwards a Free Quadroon woman born 1808 baptised 25<sup>th</sup> April 1810.”<sup>10</sup> And in the 1811 entry for the third child, two decisive things come to light: it’s a boy, and his father is dead: “Thomas James Thompson Illegitimate Son of Mary Edwards free mustee and the late James Thompson Esq of Vale Royal Estate born July 9<sup>th</sup> 1811 and baptized 19<sup>th</sup> Dec 1811.”

As the mother of the only surviving (albeit illegitimate) heir, Mary’s legal status has to be clear. Left undocumented, then coded as “quadroon,” her status gets rehabilitated for dynastic purposes, transformed into “mustee” so that her son can inherit. Under the notorious Devises Act of 1761, only repealed later in 1813, Jamaican law prohibited non-white persons from inheriting property.<sup>11</sup> The Devises Act was still the law of the land in 1811, and, for all anybody knew, it would never be

repealed. By the time of Thomas James's christening, at the age of five months, his father is no longer living.<sup>12</sup> His mother Mary's legal status has to be massaged so that the boy can be "white" and legally inherit.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Pepper Thompson returns to Liverpool with Mary Edwards and the boy: "Mary Edwards late of Rio Bueno but now residing with me" is left £100 per annum (payable quarterly) in the dynast's will, signed April 15, 1819 and proved December 31, 1823.<sup>14</sup>

The three Thompson children of Mary Edwards are recognized by their grandfather in the will. The boy, Thomas James—the legitimated descendant of enslaved African ancestors and father to Alice Meynell—is left £40,000 (call it \$5 million in today's money), along with several properties in England. Thomas Pepper's business partner and executor, Adam Cliff, will continue running the four Thompson plantations—Vale Royal, Maria Bueno, Lancaster, and Mount Carmel. (They're all in Trelawney Parish, except for Mount Carmel, which is in St. Ann Parish.)

Under the 1833 Emancipation Act, the government reimburses the Thompson estate for 596 enslaved persons: £11,233 17s 2d.<sup>15</sup> As heir, Thomas James Thompson has a claim too on even this additional inheritance, and is suing Adam Cliff in Chancery when a friend—Charles Dickens, later to become the great chronicler of Chancery—introduces him to Christiana Weller.<sup>16</sup> This concert pianist (whom Dickens might well have married himself, had he not been married to Kate) would go on to marry Thompson and be the mother of Alice Christiana Thompson Meynell.

Robert Browning, upon meeting Alice's husband, Wilfrid, says: "Our wives are kinswomen, I believe."<sup>17</sup> And that's surely the most precise way to put it. "Kinswomen" here means third cousins, an ocean removed.

In the pages that follow, I seek to read through the Jamaican inheritance that Meynell would negotiate throughout her work. Few writers can have been more hardworking, yet Meynell's formative experiences—from childhood memories in Italy to the building of her own family's house in Palace Court—were literally funded by a Jamaican inheritance. That inheritance, at the same time, is more than financial, as her Jamaican father and his Jamaican mother appear and reappear in powerful ways in Meynell's poetry and prose.

In looking at Meynell's genealogy, I'm extending a topic that has long been a focus of the major scholarship: maternity.<sup>18</sup> Yopie Prins puts her finger on the pulse of the bodily rhythms deployed in Meynell's poetics.<sup>19</sup> Cristina Richieri Griffin—building on the foundational work of Prins as well as that of Angela Leighton and Maria

Frawley—shows how the reverse is also true: if Meynell uses rhythms of the body in her verse, she also uses her verse to value prenatal care in ways that her era's obstetrics had not done.<sup>20</sup> But what does it mean, then, to study the poetics of Meynell in the context of Jamaican inheritance, of what is passed down through one's family line? We would rightly expect a poet to change her rhymes and alliterations, her assonances and caesurae, if she wants to teach us how her family line was enjambed across the Atlantic.<sup>21</sup> One of Meynell's last major works, the chapbook *A Father of Women* (1917), focuses on this family in detail, as we shall see.

Likewise, critics have drawn our attention, if not to genealogy, certainly to the marriage theme in and around Meynell's works. Adela Pinch shows Meynell's circle—especially Patmore—negotiating complex theological questions through the idea of marriage. Patmore liked to say, "All knowledge is nuptial knowledge." Meynell thought so, too.<sup>22</sup> But what does it mean to read Meynell's work on marriage—mystical and otherwise—if, for Meynell, marriage was always also a question of race, inheritance, freedom, legitimacy? Nuptial knowledge had been a problem under the antimiscegenation laws of Meynell's ancestral Jamaica: the mixed nonmarriages of which Meynell was a product had to be painstakingly documented, with degrees of sanguinity always recorded and, simultaneously, euphemized, rendered ambiguously "Creole," hushed up.

Meynell negotiates these concerns in the 1917 poem to her daughter Olivia, "To O—, of Her Dark Eyes." I'll spend some time with this poem and the legacies for which it serves as a hyperlink. But in analyzing Meynell's poetics, I want to contribute to the larger, ongoing project of recontextualizing Jamaica and the Caribbean as central rather than peripheral in Victorian studies and British literature. Nor should this work come at the expense of formal analysis that other disciplines can't do. Meynell's poetics, and her contemporaries', demand such attention: Meynell is nowhere more attentive to questions of identity than in her prosody.<sup>23</sup>

For instance, Prins shows that Meynell, with a sustained "meditation on 'the rhythmic pangs' of maternity . . . turns giving birth into a trope for poetic creation."<sup>24</sup> Those who have spent time with Meynell's work will agree. The death of Meynell's infant son Vivian was the immediate cause of her 1890 return to poetry, after a long hiatus following her 1877 marriage.<sup>25</sup> Meynell by the turn of the century was particularly known for her writings on children and child-rearing and had become a much-cited voice in what was called "child-study," the expertise complex being generated as pediatrics and education (and eugenics) went

about constituting themselves as disciplines.<sup>26</sup> Linda Austin points out that, just as the “convergence of prevailing views of childhood and materialist theory [was] crucial to the work of Alice Meynell,” Meynell in turn was “the leading observer of children and child development in the daily and weekly newspapers of the 1890s. Indeed, if Wordsworth was for Victorians the chief Romantic chronicler of memory, the self and childhood, Meynell was his successor.”<sup>27</sup>

But Meynell’s work in this direction, chronicling her children, was also a way for her to give a chronicle to unchronicled Jamaican ancestors. “To O—, of Her Dark Eyes,” in other words, isn’t an isolated work, nor is its larger volume, *A Father of Women*. Instead, late work like this reminds us that Meynell’s larger project of building an archive of humanistic child-study literature was, throughout her career, about honoring with that archive her own transatlantic family. The creative prosody that is always, for Meynell, a procreative pang—the “Rhythm of Life”—bespeaks, for her, a Jamaican inheritance. If the work of writing and the work of child-rearing were for her intertwined, it is not least because both continued the same legacy.

Here, then, I seek to follow Austin, Griffin, Pinch, Prins, and others,<sup>28</sup> but to include Meynell’s transatlantic inheritance. In engaging with Meynell, I’m taking up a literally kindred project of Tricia Lootens’s *Political Poetess*, with its rereading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her West Indian context. And it’s worth repeating Lootens’s pointed line: “Who made the Poetess white? No one; not ever.”<sup>29</sup>

### 1. CREOLE

In February 1915, E. M. Forster comes to stay for a few days at the family home of Alice Meynell—not out of respect for her work but only to see a couple of her tenants, D. H. and Frieda Lawrence. Forster views Meynell herself—and her progeny—as feeble, superstitious people lacking any real distinction: “a curious, ineffective race, I believe with creole blood in them: all catholicism [*sic*] and culture.”<sup>30</sup> Forster’s coding and decoding do a lot of work here, all inaccurate: Meynell does have Jamaican family (though not Catholic) on her father’s side. The (to Forster) distasteful devotion comes (as is well known) from the *other* side: Alice’s English mother joins the Roman Catholic Church, a decision followed by her then twenty-year-old daughter in 1868.<sup>31</sup> But for Forster the creole and catholicism go alliteratively together (alongside “culture,” that middle-brow refinement which makes the Meynells sound out-of-touch with

whatever might have been worth knowing of Catholic or Creole tradition; lowercase letters likewise help with the takedown).

It's good to remember that Alice Meynell, then nearing seventy, was being read this way—her body, her thought—because it reminds us what it meant for her to speak to her Jamaican Creole ancestry, what her Thompson family had themselves encoded one hundred years before. Not only the house in Palace Court had been bought with the proceeds (invested at compound interest in the funds) from the labor of enslaved persons on Jamaican sugar and rum plantations. The same source had also provided the education that first opened up the possibility of literary life for Alice—so that even the (by all accounts) charming life at Greatham's eighty acres shares this backstory.

Amid these whispers, late in life, in the second decade of the twentieth century, Meynell publishes the poem on the 1890 birth of her daughter Olivia, "To O—, of Her Dark Eyes."<sup>32</sup> Using seventeenth-century devices such as paradoxical conceit—Olivia's eyes are dark luminaries—Meynell formally evokes the era when families like hers and Elizabeth Barrett's first made their fortunes in the West Indies.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Meynell creates a new work that reinscribes her identity as her Jamaican father's daughter—and situates her own daughter within generations of women like Meynell's Jamaican grandmother, Mary. In the pages that follow, I look in detail at the poem for Olivia, and then, in a subsequent section, I sound out Olivia's middle name, Mary, a name whose resonances reveal the shape and the depths of Meynell's thinking about family and religion.

It's best if we start with the entire poem:

TO O—, OF HER DARK EYES

Across what calm of tropic seas,  
'Neath alien clusters of the nights,  
Looked, in the past, such eyes as these?  
Long-quenched, relumed, ancestral lights!

The generations fostered them;  
And steadfast Nature, secretwise—  
Thou seedling child of that old stem—  
Kindled anew thy dark-bright eyes.

Was it a century or two  
This lovely darkness rose and set,  
Occluded by grey eyes and blue,  
And Nature feigning to forget?

Some grandam gave a hint of it—  
 So cherished was it in thy race,  
 So fine a treasure to transmit  
 In its perfection to thy face.

Some father to some mother's breast  
 Entrusted it, unknowing. Time  
 Implied, or made it manifest,  
 Bequest of a forgotten clime.

Hereditary eyes! But this  
 Is single, singular, apart:—  
 New-made thy love, new-made thy kiss,  
 New-made thy errand to my heart.

Formally, the poem's post-Saxon alliterative verse situates us in the British Isles: cross/calm, 'neath/nights, looked/long/relumed/lights.<sup>34</sup> But the verse then revolves this Englishness around a master conceit of eclipse, Meynell's African ancestry getting "occluded by grey eyes and blue."<sup>35</sup> Another, overdetermined conceit—of inheritance, the last will and testament, bequests—will raise the legality of being and conveying property, the colonial conceit par excellence. Meynell inverts what was a civil disability under apartheid and reframes her African ancestry as an inheritance that must be preserved:

So fine a treasure to transmit  
 In its perfection to thy face.

"Thy" is doing several things here: it is an archaism—putting us in an earlier century of transatlantic traffic that produced Alice and her family. It's also a lexical item doing its ordinary work, naming the second person more affectionately than "you/your" can.<sup>36</sup> Third, it's functioning phonetically, the voiced dental fricative that turns out to be embedded in "father" and "mother" in the next line. That next line begins a spectacular penultimate stanza that, through virtuosic *internal* rhymes, makes us attend to that which is passed down *within*:

Some father to some mother's breast  
 Entrusted it, unknowing. Time  
 Implied or made it manifest,  
 Bequest of a forgotten clime.

Hereditary eyes!

“Entrust” doesn’t rhyme with “breast,” or “manifest,” or “bequest,” but it keeps the rhyme alive—hands it down, held, like a property in trust, right through that second line, right through a skipped generation where an otherwise manifest trait is just implied.

“Implied” doesn’t rhyme with “time” or “clime,” but its assonance implies a rhyme—and a rhyme is *implicated* in the folds of its initial letters, before the ply: “im.” Different, this time, “im,” not “I’m”—*im*, plying a line, and eyeing a rhyme, across Atlantic waters. Hereditary *I*s. Eyes like the eyes in your head, carried down the generations—but also the vowel, the *I*, the *I*s, carried down, through the poet’s lines—the poet’s generations.

A seventeenth-century joke, right? Wit, in the style of Crashaw—Richard Crashaw, the poet of the eyes, which is to say, of oceans. Crashaw, in a famous textbook anthology example of baroque poetics, writes of Mary Magdalene’s eyes that they are “portable and compendious oceans.” (Another Meynell daughter, the sister of Olivia, is Madeline, named for Crashaw’s saint.) Meynell had written extensively on Crashaw—a fellow English Catholic convert poet and a role model of hers. In a textbook anthology edited by Alice Meynell, *The Flower of the Mind*, Crashaw is featured, getting half the number of pages of the entire eighteenth century (an era that Meynell seems to have regarded as a generation that poetry skipped).<sup>37</sup> In this same anthology, a few dozen pages before Crashaw, we find George Herbert’s “Love”: “quick-eyed Love” famously asking, “Who made the eyes but I?”<sup>38</sup> In the poem “To O—, of Her Dark Eyes,” Meynell’s poetics point us to the seventeenth century of the extended family’s transatlantic meeting in Jamaica. This poem is the central poem—eighth out of sixteen—in the important 1917 chapbook *A Father of Women*. The last word of the poem, “heart,” is, in this sense, the heart of the chapbook, making the entire volume a kind of baroque figure-poem, with its heart in the middle. And it is, predictably, a book about blood—the blood that that heart beats, beating with the rhythm of life.

“Thy father was transfused into thy blood” is the epigraph at the beginning of the book’s first, dedicatory poem, “A Father of Women.” The transfusion line is from another seventeenth-century Catholic convert, John Dryden—and it names a seventeenth-century procedure, a “late Anatomical invention experimented by the Royal Society,” as a 1678 dictionary has it (*OED*). In the source poem, Dryden’s ode “To Mrs. Anne Killigrew,” we find a circulating complex of baroque blood conceits that we recognize from Meynell:



Thy father was transfused into thy blood.  
 So wert thou born into the tuneful strain  
 (an early, rich, and inexhausted vein).

A strain is a melody but also a line of descent. Descanting on descent, Dryden and Meynell both know a vein is an ore deposit—a commodity, like Jamaican sugar or rum—as well as a part of the circulatory system of the blood (first described by Harvey in the seventeenth century). Dryden hypothesizes that the great artist Anne Killigrew may have gotten her gifts from her father, that her talent is in the blood.<sup>39</sup> Meynell describes her own family in the same vein, a transatlantic transfusion with her father at the heart of the work.

It is a poem—and a book—where Meynell is not only negotiating her father's illegitimacy but rethinking how her children, like Olivia and Madeline, take up the strain of a Jamaican ancestry that, until now, has inhabited the archive only via the records of legitimation:

Come then,  
 Fathers of women with your honor in trust;  
 Approve, accept, know them daughters of men,  
 Now that your sons are dust.<sup>40</sup>

Meynell's father was only "known" by his own namesake grandfather—only acknowledged as a member of his own family—via a legitimation that included the 1823 proving of a trust.<sup>41</sup> Meynell and her sister are now the beneficiaries of that trust. It is a war poem, to be sure, but in her poetry and in her other writing on descent and on children, Alice Meynell is erecting her own family, her own children, into a new archive where their legitimacy no longer rests on British imperial regimes of approval, acceptance, acknowledgment.

Through both her baroque theology and her seventeenth-century poetics, Meynell focuses us on the era when English families colonized Jamaica, families like *the* family of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and hers.

## 2. MARY

In *A Father of Women*, Alice Meynell is thinking through what it means to be her Jamaican father's daughter. One thing it means is to be Mary Edwards' granddaughter. It is her name that Meynell has passed down to all four of her own daughters: first Monica Mary, then Madeline Mary, then Viola Mary, and finally Olivia Mary.<sup>42</sup> The name is of course

always also the name of a devotional namesake, *Mary, the Mother of Jesus* (to take the title of one of Meynell's major late prose works). I want to suggest that Meynell's writings make more sense if we see these figures together rather than trying to separate them: mother Mary and grandmother Mary Edwards are not the same, but they're not separate in Meynell's imagination. Meynell argues at length in *Mary, the Mother of Jesus* that various separate human virtues—elements of character, of subjectivity—can and should reflect aspects of Mary.<sup>43</sup> Students of Meynell know that her Marian devotion informs her daily labor: not only her way of writing but her suffrage activism and her well-documented toil for Catholic periodicals (writing, editing, translating, etc.).<sup>44</sup> In working toward a Christian world, as she understood it, Meynell was also perhaps seeking a kind of community that would not be ethnonationalist. Certainly both Marys bore children considered illegitimate under the prevailing empire and were not married to the fathers of their children.

One of Meynell's most famous essays, "The Colour of Life" (1896), features a strikingly theological description of Mary and child. A boy—like hundreds of others in what was then a common scene in London—has gotten off work and gone to Hyde Park to swim in the Serpentine. But then this happens: "Clothed now with the sun, he is crowned by-and-by with twelve stars as he goes to bathe, and the reflection of an early moon is under his feet." Where a reader might have expected the boy to be described, instead the Virgin Mary seems to appear. The language is scripture: "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelations 12:1). Has the boy appeared as the Virgin Mary? Or is he the Child in her arms? The generations are blended together, in a pattern that we already know from *A Father of Women*.

To be sure, the geography of "The Colour of Life"—one that explicitly charts skin color—does not extend to Mary's Jamaica or indeed beyond Italy: "Under Sicilian skies," we are told, the color of life pulsing through the skin can be "deeper than old ivory." But that other island, Jamaica, with the estates that funded Meynell's childhood trips to Italy, is not in evidence here. The boy's English skin is, we are told, "delicately flushed as the paler wild roses," and the "colour of life" is the color of red blood seen through that pale rose. The text is anxious that blood not get out:

Red has been praised for its nobility as the colour of life. But the true colour of life is not red. Red is the colour of violence, or of life broken open, edited, and published. Or if red is indeed the colour of life, it is so only on condition

that it is not seen. . . . The true colour of life is the colour of the body, the colour of the covered red, the implicit and not explicit red of the living heart and the pulses.<sup>45</sup>

In “To O—,” Meynell is doing some breaking open, editing, and publishing. And “To O—” reminds us that the pulse of Alice Meynell was also—importantly, to her—transfused with her father’s blood. What was read as her whiteness at the heart of Victorian and Edwardian England was always also Jamaican and Creole.

But that’s not on display in “The Colour of Life.” Riffing on Luke 19:20, Meynell says of the red of blood, “It is one of the things the value of which is secrecy, one of the talents that are to be hidden in a napkin.” “The Colour of Life,” in other words, isn’t just *about* a secret. “The Colour of Life” *has* a secret.<sup>46</sup> And to hear that secret is to realize not just that the white skin of the London establishment is always perhaps Jamaican. It’s also to remember that much of the Victorian establishment has literally been funded by the government buyout of slaveholders in the 1830s, taking wealth (or illth) that had been tied up in sugarcane and human beings and releasing it as cash to families in London and Liverpool. “Secretwise” rhymes with Olivia’s “eyes.”

Still, even when she isn’t telling the secret, Meynell finds resources in the Marian tradition for more capacious understandings of legitimacy and family. Regimes of sanction prevented Mary Edwards from marrying and policed the legitimate and illegitimate births in Alice’s family. So it is with such nativities in view that Meynell turns to *the* Nativity. Meynell, the mother of Olivia Mary and the granddaughter of Mary Edwards, writes about legitimacy, family, and inheritance by writing about that other Mary.

Mary brings us back, also, to the Patmore in the house. Patmore and Meynell were of course major influences on each other, and not least in their shared interest in Marian devotion. If Amanda Paxton contextualizes Patmore’s thought within the broad and deep tradition of nineteenth-century bridal mysticism—which in turn drew from the Victorian recovery of medieval and baroque textual traditions—Meynell was writing back to that tradition, influenced by her kinswomen. In a typical passage in *Mary, the Mother of Jesus*, Meynell argues, citing Patmore, that Marian liturgy reinforces women’s rights because it influences how richly women characters are written in secular poetry and drama.<sup>47</sup> Meynell in several places specifically takes up Patmore’s bridal mysticism in detail. Her substantial corpus of devotional writing hinges on the life

of the Virgin Mother, not least as bride of Christ. And if we revisit Meynell's theological work from across the Atlantic, where Mary's Jamaica is, Meynell's theology takes on new resonance in the context of that inheritance.

It will illustrate the point to look at two examples of Marian tropes important to Meynell: read as Spouse of her Son, Mary cannot be accounted for neatly in the ledgers of inheritance. And read as the "dark but fair" bride of the Song of Songs, Mary is not straightforwardly white.

In her 1901 introduction to Venturi's *Madonna*, Meynell goes out of her way to praise specific Victorian and fin de siècle poems on Mary the Spouse of Christ.<sup>48</sup> The key nuptial verse expanded on in these works is "his left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me" (Song of Songs 2:6). Meynell quotes what she considers exemplary verses from Dante Gabriel Rossetti that, addressing Mary as the bride with language from the Song of Songs, use bridegroom terms to describe her Child:

What human thought can apprehend  
That mystery of motherhood  
When thy Beloved at length renewed  
The sweet communion severèd—  
His left hand underneath thine head  
And His right hand embracing thee?<sup>49</sup>

In Meynell's text, these lines from Rossetti's "Ave" follow a longer quote from Francis Thompson's "Assumpta Maria." Here the Virgin speaks in the first person:

Lo! He standeth, Spouse and Brother . . .  
To my Bread myself the bread is,  
And my Wine doth drink me: see,  
His left hand beneath my head is,  
His right hand embraceth me!<sup>50</sup>

Meynell's recurring interest in this scene of the bridegroom/Christ child nursing takes on a particular significance in the context of her own transatlantic family, including the antimiscegenation laws that had governed them as recently as the birth of Meynell's father to his mother, Mary, in Trelawney. In the icon of the Eucharist at the breast, an originary transfusion—flowing not one way but in a circuit, like an ocean current, pouring across generations and genders—the mother provides for her

child, and the child nourishes its nurse. Meynell's father is transfused into her blood. And so is her daughter.<sup>51</sup> All three participate in an unquantifiable mixing, human, transcendent, immeasurable, Marian.<sup>52</sup> Meynell points us to Patmore's "The Child's Purchase," in which the poet, all in the same breath, prays to Mary as "Spouse blissful, Daughter, Sister, milk-sweet Mother."<sup>53</sup> Motherhood and marriage here get swept up in the tide of an overwhelming, circuitous litany that mystically fuses relationships that we (and the law) might have thought distinct.

In *Mary, the Mother*, Meynell directs us to the poem "Aishah Shechinah" by the priest and poet Robert Hawker.<sup>54</sup> The mystical title is at once instinct with meaning and pure, nonlexical, incantatory sound. Like a salutation from a litany, its breathy fricatives and diphthongs fill the flesh of the mouth and come out in words that signify something like "unfallen mother of God."<sup>55</sup> Mary's beating heart is the intersection of the earthly and celestial, and in the communion of the child/spouse nursing is, for Meynell as for Hawker, the redemption of the world: "The Zone where two glad worlds forever meet / Beneath that bosom ran" (ll. 21–22). In his final two lines, Hawker reveals the full scene, not as a grammatical sentence, not as a proposition to be comprehended, but as a freestanding icon to be felt: "Her God upon her lap, the Virgin Bride, / Her awful Child, her Son!" (ll. 21–22, 27–28).<sup>56</sup> This is why the poem could be included in the *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse* (1917).<sup>57</sup> It offers not a lesson to be read but an identity to be inhabited.

In the Song of Songs, the bride begins by saying, "I am dark but fair" (Song of Songs 1:5). In Meynell's language: "I am dark but fair, / Black but fair." She quotes it in her poem "The Moon to the Sun," which is subtitled, "The Poet Sings to Her Poet." As Emily Harrington reminds us, here "the sun represents the poets of the past while the moon represents the poets of the future"—and also the poet of the present. Meynell is speaking very much in the *first*-person singular, too. She makes a point of quoting, on more than one occasion, Francis Thompson's salute to Mary the dark and fair: both in the Venturi introduction and in *Mary, the Mother*, Meynell gives Thompson's lines, with their astonishing compression of Marian tropes, including the nursing mother and the bride both dark and fair:

See in highest heaven pavilioned  
Now the maiden Heaven rest,  
The many-breasted sky out-millioned

By the splendours of her vest.  
 Lo, the Ark this holy tide is  
 The un-handmade Temple's guest,  
 And the dark Egyptian bride is  
 Whitely to the Spouse-heart pressed.<sup>58</sup>

This, too, is, in the words of Olivia's poem, "some mother's breast." It's Mary's.

Nor is it accidental that Meynell herself enjoys anthologizing, quoting, and mixing these different writers in a method of collage or pastiche. In *Mary, the Mother* and the introduction to *Madonna*, Meynell adopts exactly this compositional method, making her text out of a tissue of citations from poets and writers whose own works are themselves highly allusive. In so doing, Meynell creates a particular subjectivity, in which the readerly "I" is caught up in becoming other—becoming Mary, becoming mother, becoming bride. This technique, borrowing from medieval methods of textual composition, has the effect of bending time, fusing the present and past, across generations.<sup>59</sup> The granddaughter of Mary, Meynell is at pains to build a world outside the models of generational descent like those that underwrote her ancestral Jamaica's apartheid.

In closing, I would like to suggest that remembering Meynell's Jamaican family nuances our readings of her other texts, too. At the time of *A Father of Women* in 1917, Meynell is a grandmother herself. Olivia, for instance, her youngest daughter, is twenty-seven, married, and the mother of a child of her own. "To O—" is a prequel, written as though it were still the 1890s, as though Olivia were "new-made," and as though all of Meynell's famous work on children and child-rearing is yet to come. In this regard, "To O—" and its book invite us to revisit, reread, and rethink all of Meynell's earlier writing on childhood in light of her ancestral lights and grandmother Mary. For instance, in Meynell's essay "The Child of Tumult" (1897), we see Olivia keeping tabs on her younger brother Francis. Francis (at six years old, not yet knighted) is the title character. But calm even at seven—"across what calm of tropic seas"—Olivia steals the show, "observ[ing] the boy's brief frenzies as a citizen observes the climate. Her equanimity has never been upset." Urbane in the cloudburst, Olivia is the reader, and Francis just a text.<sup>60</sup>

Or we turn to the poems, and we find "To O—" to be a pendent to "The Modern Mother" (1900). A well-known poem, noticed by Angela Leighton and others, "The Modern Mother" was inspired by a kiss

from Francis, nine years old in 1900 (a year younger than Olivia). Put the last lines of “To O—” before the first lines of “The Modern Mother”:

But this  
Is single, singular, apart:—  
New-made thy love, new-made thy kiss,  
New-made thy errand to my heart. (“To O—,” ll. 21–24)

Oh what a kiss  
With filial passion overcharged is this! (“The Modern Mother,” ll. 1–2)

These two stanzas kiss. And by the time we get to the last verses of “The Modern Mother,” we are not light-years away from Olivia’s rekindled celestial lights: “O filial light / Strong in these childish eyes, these new, these bright / Intelligible stars” (“The Modern Mother,” ll. 16–18).

My hope would be that as work on Meynell and her contemporaries continues, we can combine the historical analysis enabled by the UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership project and the Jamaican parish records, alongside the kind of formal analysis that our discipline knows how to do with poetry and prose.<sup>61</sup> The mastery of words that Meynell is known for—and all metaphors of mastery handed down through English literary criticism—are implicated in a history of slavery and its bequests.<sup>62</sup>

#### NOTES

I have benefited from the wisdom of Kiera Allison, Keith Cartwright, Linda Howell, Kadesh Lauridsen, and Paige Perez.

1. Such a reassessment is aided by an achievement of the digital humanities, the University College London project on the Legacies of British Slave-ownership. This biographical database often provides more detail than the *DNB* and is also, as its name suggests, a powerful *legal* database, with the text of wills and the dates when claims went into Chancery. It can be searched as a genealogy or by plantation.
2. Pinch, *Thinking about Other People*, 113.
3. Alice Meynell’s father, Thomas James Thompson (July 9, 1811–May 11, 1881), settled £10,000 pounds on her upon her marriage, April 16, 1877. See Francis Meynell, *My Lives* (18).
4. Still immensely valuable is David Paroissien’s 1972 article, “Charles Dickens and the Weller Family,” cited also by Badeni. Paroissien had interviewed Olivia.

5. Badeni, *The Slender Tree*, 1.
6. This is the baptismal record of Amelia Thompson, discussed subsequently. These handwritten baptismal records have been scanned online and can be viewed at familysearch.org. The Trelawney volume containing Mary Edwards's children's records is dated by its inscription: "I William Fraser Rector of the Parish of Trelawney in the County of Cornwall do swear that the writing hereunto annexed purporting to be a copy of the several entries contained in the Register Book of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials of the Parish of Trelawney from the 1<sup>st</sup> day of January 1771 to the 24<sup>th</sup> day of April 1826 is a true copy of all the several entries in the said Register Book from the said 1<sup>st</sup> day of January 1771 to the said 24<sup>th</sup> day of April 1826, and that no other entry during such period is contained therein to the best of my knowledge or belief. So help me God. W. Fraser, Rector. Sworn before this 12<sup>th</sup> June 1826. Geo. Hine." The witness, George Hine, was a justice of the peace in Trelawney Parish. For consistency throughout (and to avoid "*sic*" in transcriptions), I spell "Trelawney" as the nineteenth-century archival sources do. The district today is spelled Trelawny, with one "e."
7. Colonial Jamaican family law and family structures present many such features, distinct or unique within the Atlantic world. In *A Dark Inheritance*, Brooke Newman chronicles the forms, rights, and depictions of Jamaican families prior to emancipation. For the later nineteenth century after emancipation, see Jemmott, *Ties That Bind: The Black Family in Post-Slavery Jamaica, 1834–1882*.
8. "Dorothy Elizabeth Thompson" is so named, with her sister, in the will of Thomas Pepper Thompson (q.v. in UCL's Legacies of British Slave-ownership database). The same person appears with her Christian names in another order, "Elizabeth Dorothy Thompson," in the Trelawny Parish register of baptisms, April 25, 1810.
9. "Amelia Thompson."
10. "Elizabeth Dorothy Thompson."
11. See Newman, *A Dark Inheritance*. The full title of the legislation is: "An act to prevent the inconveniences arising from exorbitant grants and devises, made by white persons to negroes, and the issue of negroes; and to restrain and limit such grants and devises." It became law December 19, 1761, and was repealed December 4, 1813.
12. Atkinson states that "Thomas James Thompson was born in Rio Bureno [*sic*], Jamaica" and "came to England on the death of his



father.” It is Rio Bueno, and the boy’s father was dead by the time of the five-month-old’s Trelawney christening.

13. This is my proposed solution to Mary Edwards’s quadroon/mustee discrepancy, which was raised—I believe, for the first time—by Laurence Westgaph in an online discussion group devoted to “Liverpool and Slavery.”
14. The original will is downloadable from the National Archives and is most easily found by its catalog number, PROB 11/1679/272. Key details are summarized in the “Thomas Pepper Thompson” entry in the UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership website.
15. This is the sum of the separate valuations of the four Thompson plantations on the UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership site, which in turn are taken from Chancery records of the case of *Adam Cliff v. T. J. Thompson*. The amounts are:
  - For Lancaster and Maria Bueno (combined in the Chancery records), 1 Feb 1836, 234 Enslaved, £4378 13s 6d.
  - For Mount Carmel, 1 Feb 1836, 99 Enslaved, £1881 19s 7d.
  - For Vale Royal, 1 Feb 1836, 263 Enslaved, £4973 4s 1d.
16. See Paroissien, who also notes, citing the editors of Dickens’s letters, another important Dickens connection to the Thompsons of Jamaica: “Dickens had known [Thomas James] Thompson from about 1838 having met him, as seems likely, through Charles Smithson, Dickens’ solicitor, who had married Elizabeth Dorothy Thompson, one of Thompson’s sisters” (“Charles Dickens,” 9).
17. Viola Meynell, *Alice Meynell*, 7 (note).
18. The best early scholar of Meynell’s work is Tuell, whom Meynell herself endorses in a long letter (*Selected Letters*, 417–20). But Meynell scholarship today is the product of a recovery effort that began in the 1990s with an examination of her thought on maternity (Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, 244–265) and of her poetry on the First World War: Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man’s Land*, 2:281–82; and Khan, *Women’s Poetry*, 49–50. Smulders, in a study of Meynell’s prosody in 2000, could still say: “Sadly, despite the challenges posed in her writing, Meynell has herself all but disappeared into the ‘dark and indescribed’ spaces of literary history” (“Looking,” 36). Talia Schaffer changed that with *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* (2000). And though Smulders’s point—with its quoted phrase about the “dark and indescribed” (from Meynell’s prose appreciation of Arabella Stuart, “A Modern Poetess”) appears again as late as 2009 in Peterson’s *Becoming a Woman of Letters* (206)—such a

line could not be written today in the midst of the major Meynell scholarship of recent years.

19. Prins, "Patmore's Law," 272.
20. Griffin, "Writing the Rhythms," 229.
21. For a very different geographical reading of Alice Meynell, see Ana Parejo Vadillo, "Alice Meynell: An Impressionist in Kensington," a compelling contextualization of Meynell's work at the scale of her London neighborhoods. With GPS accuracy, Parejo Vadillo traces Meynell's paths through her city, her parish, local businesses, at the intersection of urbanization, gendered consumer culture, and religious critiques of city life.
22. Pinch, *Thinking*, 112–13. Pinch's extended analysis and incisive notes must be read in full for the context they give to the theological and philosophical work that Victorians talked about when they talked about marriage, as well as for Pinch's attention to the role of prosody in that work. A brief quotation will suffice to intimate Meynell's place in Patmore's story: "One of Patmore's favorite aphorisms was 'All knowledge, worthy of the name, is nuptial knowledge.' The contexts of the aphorism, and the book in which it appears, *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*, published in the year before Patmore's death in 1896, include both the religious and the erotic preoccupations of Patmore's life. It stems from his increasingly anti-clerical, Swedenborg-inflected, mystical Catholicism. It was also written during the year of the painful waning of the married, elderly Patmore's intensely romantic friendship with the much younger, and also married, Alice Meynell. Meynell's poetry was intimately tied to Patmore's poetics; they were excellent readers of each other's work."
23. Speaking of attention to form, I must point out an error that has always attended discussions of Alice Meynell. People say her name wrong. "The y is silent, as in Reynolds." That was Alice's way of putting it. It rhymes with "fennel." Her son Sir Francis Meynell, founder of the Nonesuch Press, explains this in his wide-ranging memoir *My Lives*: "My father was born a Mennell, so spelt, and he and two of his brothers reverted to Meynell. . . . The change has its inconveniences, since one has so often to explain its pronunciation or spelling" (15).
24. Prins, "Patmore's Law," 262, quoting Meynell's essay "The Rhythm of Life."
25. Badeni, *Slender Tree*, 74–75.

26. Readers of these pages will know the intricate ways in which eugenics is braided into the aesthetics of the period, as shown for instance by Sara Lyons, "Thomas Hardy and the Value of Brains." See also Ash Faulkner, "Christ among the Doctors."
27. Austin, "Self against Childhood," 249.
28. I think also of Amanda Paxton's *Willful Submission*. Meynell herself is named only once in Paxton's book, as an early defender of Patmore's complex odes on mystical marriage, *The Unknown Eros* (140). But at the same time, Meynell is present on every page. For instance, when Paxton links Patmore's work to the writing of younger Catholic poets Francis Thompson and Katharine Tynan—and points out how all of them drew from seventeenth-century writing (Herbert, Crashaw) on mystical marriage (186)—Meynell is there as the central figure connecting all three of her contemporaries.
29. Lootens, *Political Poetess*, 7, 10, 22, et passim.
30. Forster, *Selected Letters*, 1:218.
31. Badeni, *Slender Tree*, 26, 35.
32. Olivia Mary Katherine Meynell was born March 9, 1890 (Meynell, *Selected Letters*, 10). Her godmother, and one of her namesakes, is Alice's great friend, the writer Katharine Tynan (Badeni, *Slender Tree*, 84). Those researching Olivia's life will find her named also as Olivia Katherine Mary Meynell. She weds Thomas Murray Sowerby on June 23, 1913 (Meynell, *Selected Letters*, 337), so she is also in the archive simply as "Mrs. T. M. Sowerby," etc. For details of her later life, see Raymond MacKenzie's exemplary study of her sister, *A Critical Biography of English Novelist Viola Meynell*. Olivia dies at Greatham January 5, 1975.
33. A "small seventeenth-century farmhouse called Humphrey's Homestead" at Greatham rhymes, coincidentally and oddly, with an "estate in Lancashire called Humphrey Head" that Thomas Pepper left to Thomas James (Badeni, *Slender Tree*, 204; "Thomas Pepper Thompson").
34. The name "Olivia" always also cites an earlier seventeenth-century work, *Twelfth Night*. Olivia Meynell, like her older sister Viola, is named for a character in Shakespeare. And Olivia in 1914 will name her own daughter "Hermia," taking us from one luminous night to another, the anchors of the year: *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Another dedicatory poem in *A Father of Women* is "To Shakespeare." In it, Meynell asks how it can be possible that she has now lived longer than the Bard. She equates herself with

the transoceanic equator, the Line, a global O: “The Line, / That is not, with the world within its hold? / So, days with days, my days encompass thine.”

35. Here, the poem aligns with another dark star of *A Father of Women*, Tintoretto. Meynell praises the painter in a dedicatory poem earlier in the volume, “To Tintoretto in Venice,” celebrating how that painter pioneered in gazing straight toward the sun, making “Art” for “the first time / therefore face the shadows, mystical, / Sombre, translucent, vestiges of night.”
36. See also, of course, Meynell’s essay “The Second Person Singular,” in praise of “thou,” and Emily Harrington’s study of the same name.
37. Sometimes Meynell was working on Crashaw and Elizabeth Barrett Browning at the same time or alternately, as we hear in George Meredith’s letter to her, December 6, 1897: “Your gathering of our ‘Mind’s Flowers’ was thankfully received, approved in its exclusions. I swallow the spoonful of Cowley and Crashaw, and hope I am the better for it. . . . Your column on the married life of the Brownings was admired by all to whom I showed it” (Meredith, *Letters*, 53).
38. Francis Thompson’s “Poems on Children” were written for the Meynell children. One critic would later write, “Small precedent outside the baroque can be found for ‘The Making of Viola’” (Perkins, *From the 1890s*, 21). Thompson’s poem is a clear influence on the Alice Meynell of “To O—.”
39. Meynell, in turn, dedicates her book to her sister Elizabeth, Lady Butler, the military painter. A parallel article could be written about Lady Butler and her husband, Sir William, the “radical general” (and children’s novelist) who resigned as military commissioner in South Africa rather than preside over British violence against the Boers. An impressed William Schreiner would write to his sister, Olive: “I am glad, for his sake . . . but it is bitter hard to feel it is a crime to have fair human sympathy” (McCourt, *Remember Butler*, 230). The most recent biography is Ryan’s *William Francis Butler*.
40. Alice Meynell, “A Father of Women,” *Poems*, ll. 25–28.
41. See the “Thomas Pepper Thompson” article, including the language of his will, at the UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership site.
42. Alice Meynell, *Letters*, 10.
43. Alice Meynell, *Mary*, 82–84.
44. Philip Waller’s “Roman Candles” offers an insightful, Stracheyesque sketch of Meynell, her family, and their publishing work. Among

- Waller's points: "The Meynells' centrality in late Victorian and Edwardian Catholic literary life is unmistakable" (210).
45. Alice Meynell, *The Colour of Life*, 1.
  46. One thinks here of course of D. A. Miller's classic description of the open secret in *The Novel and the Police*.
  47. Alice Meynell, *Mary*, 83–84.
  48. This was *La Madonna*, a major work by Italian art historian Adolfo Venturi (originally published 1900), running to some four hundred pages, with illustrations. Meynell worked hard on the translation and was changed by it. See Faulkner, "The Coronation of the Virgin."
  49. Alice Meynell, *Madonna*, xiii.
  50. Alice Meynell, *Madonna*, ix. Brigid Boardman's edition of Thompson includes invaluable apparatus on the baroque inspirations here (Cowley, Crashaw), on Thompson's correspondence with Alice Meynell about the poem, and on the hymn of St. Nerses that was the poet's immediate source for the "titles of Mary" (Thompson, *Poems*, 133–37).
  51. Here I'm specifying one operation of something Maria Frawley points out. In Meynell's poetry we see a "commitment to representing the complexities of subjective experience and the multidimensional qualities of personal utterance"—including "transsubjective" possibilities ("Tides of the Mind," 67). One of the places where that commitment works itself out most strongly is in Meynell's poetry—and prose—on maternity (as Frawley explores in "Modernism and Maternity").
  52. Leo Steinberg famously recommenced the mapping of the complex erotic depictions of the nursing Christ child in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. See Paxton, *Willful Submission*, for a review of the robust medieval studies literature—including Lochrie et al.—that has evolved on this in the decades since.
  53. Alice Meynell, *Madonna*, xi.
  54. Alice Meynell, *Mary*, 92. Hawker was the Anglican vicar of Morwenstow. He converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed in 1875. The standard biography is Brendon, *Hawker of Morwenstow*.
  55. Brendon includes a long note about the title (*Hawker* 162–63).
  56. Alice Meynell, *Mary*, 95.
  57. Meynell herself appeared, too, in the mystical anthology. Its Oxford University Press editor, Charles Williams, the Inkling, had gotten his first "break" when the Meynells published his chapbook on mystical

- love, *The Silver Stair* (1912). The story of Williams's introduction to the Meynells is told by Lindop in his landmark biography, *Charles Williams*, 34–38.
58. Quoted in *Madonna*, ix; *Mary the Mother*, 90.
  59. For an introduction to how this kind of invention fueled the development of English vernacular literature, starting (but not ending) in the late Middle Ages, see Ryan McDermott's *Tropologies*.
  60. Many years later, Francis was still complaining about this period of his mother's writing, that he didn't care to be "made a character"—"an article, instead of being a son" (quoted in Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, 175).
  61. Further research in this direction may illuminate an interesting question. Meynell's "To O—" has some resonances with *The Woman of Colour*, an 1808 Jamaican novel, almost certainly by a woman of color, depicting the journey of another Olivia. (Lyndon Dominique edited the first critical edition for the novel's bicentennial in 2008.) Olivia Fairfield, the illegitimate daughter of a Jamaican planter and an African mother, sails—as a condition of her father's bequest—to what she calls a "new world," England. Olivia has one comforting thought during the crossing: she remembers her mother's eyes. "The soul of my mother," she says, "shone celestial in her sparkling eyes" (Anonymous, *Woman of Colour*, 53). Did Meynell know the book?
  62. Meynell does cross the Atlantic for a seven-month lecture tour in 1901–1902 from New York to Santa Barbara, California. I think these transatlantic circulations are important. Atkinson has the dates: Meynell "sailed from Southampton on 7 September 1901 on the *Saint Paul* arriving in New York on 14 September" (Alice Meynell, *Letters*, 157) and "on the Cunard Line *Lucania* from New York on 12 April arriving at Liverpool on 19 April 1902" (Alice Meynell, *Letters*, 187). See also Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations*, for a careful itinerary of Meynell's North American lectures, pieced together from the letters (594–97). Viola Meynell has a chapter on Alice called "In America" (*Alice Meynell*, 169–94). Alice traveled with a friend, Agnes Tobin, who was to be the dedicatee of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* (1911).

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