
Dara Rossman Regaignon. 2021. *Writing Maternity: Medicine, Anxiety, Rhetoric, and Genre*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, xvi + 186 pp., 2 figures, \$ 69.95.

Reviewed by **Sabine von Rütte**, University of Bern
E-Mail: sabine.vonrueette@ens.unibe.ch

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2022-0026>

Worrying about one's children seems to most mothers – and most parents, for that matter – like the most natural, intuitive affective mode. However, as Dara Rossman Regaignon argues in her latest publication *Writing Maternity: Medicine, Anxiety, Rhetoric, and Genre*, such maternal worrying is neither completely natural, nor entirely new to the twenty-first century. Indeed, Regaignon argues that its rhetorical and affective origins may be traced back to Victorian England, more precisely, to the period from 1800 to 1840. Regaignon's study presents an intriguing investigation of the history of maternal anxiety. Regaignon convincingly argues that (maternal) anxiety and the ideology of nurturing motherhood are essential affective components of patriarchal capitalism in industrializing Victorian Britain. In her analysis of early nineteenth-century child-rearing advice literature, Regaignon identifies a rhetorically constructed anxious affect that is held up as an ideal of (white, middle class) maternal care to this day. Drawing on affect studies and rhetorical genre theory, the book maps out a 'genre ecology'¹ of child-rearing advice literature, contemporary autobiographical maternal narratives, as well as the domestic fiction of Charles Dickens, Mary Gaskell, and the Brontë sisters

¹ Regaignon adapts the term 'genre ecology' from rhetorics scholar Clay Spinuzzi, whose work on workplace genres emphasizes the way speakers use, connect, and react to genres in unusual ways. Spinuzzi's notion informs Regaignon's approach to look at the relationship between a range of genres in terms of larger constellations and how those genres work together to elicit specific up-takes and affective reactions in readers.

among others. This genre ecology, Regaignon argues, serves to create and uphold an ideal of maternal anxiety that is essential for Britain's project of patriarchal, imperial capitalism: not only is it clearly delineating women's place within the patriarchal structure, the anxious care of a mother is critical for the future of the nation (and the wellbeing of its sons).

Regaignon, an Associate Professor of English and Director of Expository Writing at New York University, fused her research interests – nineteenth-century British literature, culture and rhetoric, and writing studies – in her first monograph that approaches maternal anxiety and Victorian advice literature from a rhetorical perspective. With *Writing Maternity*, Regaignon situates herself among a growing body of scholarship on the rhetorics of motherhood, pregnancy, and (child-)care work, such as the volume *Mothers Who Deliver: Feminist Interventions in Public and Interpersonal Discourse* (2010), edited by Jocelyn Fenton Stitt and Pegeen Reichert Powell, or more recently, "Mothering Rhetorics" (2017), a special issue of *Women's Studies in Communication*, edited by D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein. With its intersectional lens, Regaignon's study shares an affinity with Jessicha Enoch's *Domestic Occupations* (2019) which offers a feminist history of nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries spatial rhetorics of women's work in and beyond the home. Similar to Regaignon's present study, Marika Seigel's *Rhetoric of Pregnancy* (2013) offers a detailed rhetorical analysis of twentieth-century pregnancy manuals. As such, *Writing Maternity* offers a kind of companion to Seigel's work, expanding the focus beyond pregnancy to motherhood and child-rearing, and extending the historical perspective. However, unlike Seigel, whose contemporary perspective allows her to offer concrete recommendations on how to revise and improve communication about pregnancy and prenatal healthcare, Regaignon sticks to a historical, rhetorical, and literary analysis.

In her introductory chapter, Regaignon maps out the structures and rhetorical origins of maternal anxiety, tracing it back to an increase in child-rearing advice literature published between 1800 and 1840. The claim that maternal anxiety's origins lie in the Victorian age might seem somewhat outrageous at first glance. However, according to Regaignon, it is during this period that the ideal of motherhood shifts from an ideal of maternal *care* to one of maternal *anxiety*. That is not to say that mothers before this period did not worry. Nevertheless, Regaignon argues, this particular anxious sensibility is inherently connected to the changes brought about by Britain's project of imperial capitalism and industrialization: with the emergence of a middle class and the concept of the 'nuclear family', the maternal role is simultaneously imbued with more (and less shared) responsibility and denied expertise – and, therefore, in desperate need for the expert advice in child-rearing literature.

Regaignon outlines her own understanding of anxiety by drawing on Sigmund Freud, Søren Kierkegaard's notion of 'dizziness', and Sara Ahmed's emphasis on the 'adhesive quality' of anxiety. Her concept of anxiety thus emphasizes the structural nature of the emotion that emerges from and in turn generates triggering and supposedly dangerous situations. Furthermore, she points to the distinctive temporality of anxiety that is repetitive, as well as forecasting *and* recollected. While this introductory methodological chapter may be an easy read for experts of rhetorics and genre theorists, some readers may have benefitted from more elaboration on the theories of genre and rhetorics that Regaignon bases her study on.

Chapter 2 sets out to examine a few examples of Victorian child-rearing advice literature. Namely, Regaignon focuses on two examples of advice books written by male medical professionals – “medical men” (29), as she calls them – and two advice books by lay female authors. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and rhetorical genre theorist Anne Freedman, Regaignon interrogates the rhetorical ‘uptake’ the genre of child-rearing advice literature generates. The genre, Regaignon argues, is “shaped [...] by its uptake affordances, by the responsive stance it enacts for an audience in relation to the text itself” (32). The relationship between the advisory text and the maternal reader, according to Regaignon, is a hierarchical one, representing the discrepancy in authority and expertise between expert author and inexperienced, helpless mother. Regaignon turns her attention to the texts authored by so-called ‘medical men’, who – as doctors and physicians – claim a scientific authority that is considered superior to the intuitive and generational knowledge of its maternal readers. This hierarchy, Regaignon adequately points out, is decidedly gendered, favoring medical (meaning male) knowledge above experiential (meaning female) knowledge. The genre rhetorically constructs mothers as inexperienced, in constant danger of inadvertently harming their child and therefore in dire need of instruction. Regaignon thus convincingly shows how Victorian child-rearing advice literature infantilizes mothers and denies them authority.

Chapter 3 focuses on how the genre ecology evokes the looming threat of the child's premature death. Alongside child-rearing advice literature, Regaignon reads Charles Dickens' serial novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1841), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) – both texts that feature deaths of children – as well as maternal grief memoirs such as Mary Martha Sherwood's *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* (1854) and Catharine Tait's *Catharine and Craufurd Tait* (1879) to demonstrate how the statistical, experiential, and narrative likelihood of child death engender and shape maternal fears. Thereby, Regaignon argues, the distinctive temporality of anxiety assumes particular significance: the probability of child death and the fear of it is experienced as “moving toward the subject and yet always in

the future” (91). The serial publication of Victorian novels like Dickens’ *Old Curiosity Shop*, Regaignon suggests, further underlines this looming quality. Although a statistical reality (infant and child mortality rates at the time were extremely high), child-rearing advice literature cultivates fear through disproportionate repetition, “keep[ing] readers [...] ‘constantly haunted’” by invoking “the perpetual *likelihood* of a deadly threat that only periodically appears” (79; original emphasis).

Chapter 4 introduces questions of employment, race, and class. More precisely, this particularly persuasive chapter focuses on the anxiety-inducing ambiguity of the Victorian white middle class household and its reliance on domestic staff. Regaignon juxtaposes child-rearing advice with maternal autobiography and three novels that thematize the issue of domestic care workers: Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* (1847), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848). As Regaignon describes, with the emergence of the bourgeois nuclear family, middle class households become increasingly dependent on outside help, such as wet nurses, caregivers, and governesses. The ambiguity of this intimate but professional relationship, Regaignon argues, contributes massively to middle class maternal anxiety as “the hierarchies of gender, class, and race collide over the work – symbolic but also physical – of childcare” (95). In a convincing passage, Regaignon reads *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* in tandem with advice literature to trace the anxious uptake created by the genre ecology in relation to the ‘Other’ present in the household as paid caregivers. The white middle class mother is in charge of overseeing and controlling but also ceding some of her authority to the hired help. This, Regaignon argues, becomes especially anxiety-laden in the imperial context of the Indian colonies where the brown woman caregiver entering the bourgeois household is not only a class, but also a racial ‘Other’.

Chapter 5 explores one particular substance which merges all of the worries and concerns Regaignon has laid out: opium. Advice literature and its accompanying genre ecology is filled with warnings about servants and paid caregivers secretly dosing their infant charges with opium. As Regaignon convincingly argues, the substance is fraught with classed, racialized, and colonial connotations: its abuse – though widely occurring among all social classes – associated with the poor and working classes, its production and trade closely associated in the contemporary British imagination with India. Simultaneously, opium plays an important part in the British imperial economy, circulating as a commodity from its ‘oriental’ cultivation sites to the medical cabinets of Victorian middle class homes. Again, Regaignon substantiates her argument by reading the advice literature’s warnings alongside narrativized episodes of infant-dosing in both *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* and Charlotte Mary Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain; or, Aspirations*,

A Family Chronicle (1856). The case of opium neatly illustrates what Regaignon means by the stickiness of anxiety: fears about the caregiver's alterity – be it through class or race – attach themselves to the substance and fears about the deadly effects of the drug adhere to the paid caregivers, regardless of whether or not there is any truth to the concern. Anxieties about opium thus reveal the inherent anxieties in an unequal society such as Victorian Britain.

In conclusion, *Writing Maternity* offers an intriguing exploration of the Victorian (maternal) affect and how the genre ecology of child-rearing advice literature, maternal memoirs, and domestic fiction encourages such anxious uptake in its maternal readership. Regaignon convincingly exposes maternal anxiety as a historical construct that is deeply rooted in patriarchal capitalism and imperialism. Although in the preface Regaignon sets out to historicize and connect contemporary forms of maternal anxiety to what she claims as their Victorian origins, her focus remains explicitly and steadfastly in the nineteenth century – a fact that could have been reflected more explicitly in the book's title, so as to avoid misleading potential readers. Regaignon's application of rhetorical genre theory – and the notion of genre ecology in particular – however, provides an innovative approach to reading different genres in tandem to explore the affective landscape her subject has to offer. In doing so, Regaignon never confuses the anxious uptake affordances her primary materials propose with the actual emotional realities of Victorian middle class mothers. Especially her analysis of maternal memoirs cogently reveals how Victorian anxieties about the classed and racialized 'Other' stick to specific caregiving situations (the bourgeois nuclear family), specific people (paid caregivers), and materials (opium). Thus, *Writing Maternity* provides innovative scholarship not only to the fields of Victorian studies or genre theory, but, importantly, also to motherhood studies and the study of maternal narratives.