CHAPTER 5

Complementary Cousins: Constructing the Maternal in the Writing of Elizabeth von Arnim and Katherine Mansfield

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It is well known that the novelist, Elizabeth von Arnim, was the elder cousin of Katherine Mansfield. Critics, including Claire Tylee, observe, for instance, that “Mansfield seems to have been inspired by the example of her aunt, the successful author”.

Recently, Jenny McDonnell points out that Mansfield’s first collection of stories, In a German Pension (1911), echoes the genteel title of von Arnim’s first novel, Elizabeth and her German Garden (1898). Kathleen Jones also notes in her biography that Elizabeth was Katherine’s “role model”, adding that by 1906 Elizabeth was something of a literary “celebrity” who, like Katherine, was “gifted in both music and literature”. And, as Jones rightly speculates, von Arnim’s writing “may have had a considerable influence” on Mansfield’s “early work”.

These welcome comments help establish significant familial and artistic associations that have been largely unacknowledged until recently. The intention of the discussion here is not to trace the influence of one writer on another, however, as I do in Elizabeth von Arnim: Beyond the German Garden (2013), but to bring into clearer focus the connections that existed between von Arnim

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1 Katherine Mansfield was the daughter of Elizabeth von Arnim’s first cousin, Harold Beauchamp.
3 Katherine Mansfield, In a German Pension, London: Stephen Swift, 1911.
6 Ibid.
and Mansfield on the topic of motherhood. Certainly, narrow literary classifications have tended to obscure the links between the writing of these cousins. Von Arnim, for instance, has sometimes been considered a “middlebrow” author,8 or at least not “modern”, while Mansfield is often regarded as an avant-garde writer, a modernist immersed in the artistic ideals of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes, her work frequently appearing in experimental journals. And, while the significance placed by critics on literary “movement” is important, this can also render opaque those thematic and textual similarities that are the most illuminating and unexpected. This is particularly the case for von Arnim and Mansfield, especially in their shared representation of motherhood in Mansfield’s, *In a German Pension*,9 and in von Arnim’s novel, *The Pastor’s Wife* (1914),10 both of which were written as the First World War approached.

Taking account of the biographical connections between these women, as Jennifer Walker does in her recent biography of von Arnim,11 augments the unexpected similarities displayed in their writing. More importantly, reading contextually demonstrates that, irrespective of genre and stylistic considerations, von Arnim and Mansfield challenge the prevailing mood of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with their increasing emphasis on the social value of “the mother”. Both writers frequently enlist irony and reject sentiment when discussing pregnancy, for example, concentrating instead on portraying female suffering and bodily distortion. Von Arnim and Mansfield are also startlingly candid for the time since their work associates motherhood with mindless drudgery and alienation. In addition, both writers contrast the British and German perceptions of maternity at the beginning of the twentieth century, situating motherhood, loosely, within the discourse of British anti-invasion literature12 by constructing caricatured oppositions depicting entrenched (and,

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11 Jennifer Walker, *Elizabeth of the German Garden: A Literary Journey*, Brighton: Book Guild, 2013. In this illuminating biography of Elizabeth von Arnim, Walker discusses the relationship between Mansfield and von Arnim and argues that the two women were “kin-dred spirits” (293). She also suggests that von Arnim’s work influenced that of Mansfield.