

# "All Imperfect Things": Motherhood and the Aesthetics of Ambivalence in *The Piano*

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We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters.

Luce Irigaray, "The bodily encounter with the mother" (Irigaray, 1991: 43).

"I shan't practise and I don't care. Blast and damn! Bugger her! Bloody, bloody, bugger her! Let her fall face down in boiling, bloody mud! Let a mad dog bite her till she bleeds!"

Flora McGrath, in *The Piano*.

With its compelling reworking of romantic and Gothic traditions, Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) has engendered numerous debates, relating primarily to its portrayal of female desire and creativity. While much of the critical discussion focuses specifically on Ada's sexual development and her complex relations with her husband and lover respectively, this article focuses instead on the troubled course of the mother-daughter relationship in the film. Such a focus not only takes in the relationship between Ada and Flora but also the visual and aural dimensions to the film. It exposes the deeply ambivalent nature of Campion's representations of the maternal – depicted as a force that is at once seductive and destructive – while also uncovering the complex ways in which French feminist thinking both informs and is challenged by the film.

*The Piano* is often read as a narrative which conforms to the conventions of romance. With its focus on a mute Victorian "fallen woman" who must negotiate the trials of an unwanted husband and the converse temptations of a potential lover, the film would seem to rehearse a familiar tale, charting the subjugation and eventual emancipation of the female subject – in this case, Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter). For Ann Hardy, the film is a peculiarly eclectic work, in terms of both the cultural forms and the critical trends it absorbs into itself. As Hardy summarizes:

*The Piano* dips in and out of, and borrows from, myth, fairy tale, romantic and historical fiction from the past and present, regressive melodramatic nostalgia, colonial and postcolonial discourses, and an idiosyncratic but committed brand of feminism not completely contradicted by a deep ambivalence about the possibility of women's really being able to have it all. No one of these frameworks contains the film, yet all contribute to a complexity and vitality that suggest that it will be of some interest to audiences and scholars for a long time to come. (Hardy, 2000: 62)

Despite the eclecticism Hardy discerns in it, *The Piano* possesses a structural coherence stemming largely from the idea of exchange, a motif which it repeatedly reworks. By dint of her fallen status and economic dependency, Ada is shipped, along with her illegitimate young daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), from Scotland to New Zealand, where her father has determined that she marry the colonial settler, Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neill). As Ada passes from father to husband, she is obliged to accommodate herself to life in a settler culture and landscape which she finds alien in equal measure. Her plight is both alleviated and exacerbated by the presence of the neighbouring settler, George Baines (Harvey Keitel), the man she comes to love. Baines's approach to Ada is a circuitous one, but patterned once again according to the logic of exchange. At first, he tempts the unwitting Stewart with the offer of land to be swapped for Ada's beloved piano – stranded on the beach for much of the early part of the film – and then enlists her as his music teacher, with Stewart's consent. Ada's enforced role as teacher soon takes on a more intimate dimension as her impromptu and improbable pupil offers her a secret "deal": she will be able to resume possession of the piano for which she yearns, key by key, on the precondition that she will allow Baines to satisfy his own sexual yearnings. As these processes of illicit musical and erotic exchange and coercion take hold and begin to escalate, they themselves initiate a certain counterpoint, stirring up Ada's hitherto repressed desires. In this respect, the patriarchal order, as represented by Ada's father, her husband (and to a lesser extent Baines himself), is ironically disrupted by the very woman who is so pivotal to the smooth-running of its social, economic and sexual operations.

Once she succumbs to the lure of a less conventional model of masculinity than that represented by Stewart, Ada becomes implicated in a violent exchange of her own: her refusal to relinquish Baines as lover is dramatically punished by the loss of the finger her slighted spouse severs from one of her hands with an axe. At the close of the film, Ada and Baines are finally reunited when Stewart gives up his claim to his errant wife, surrendering her because he believes Ada has managed, despite her mute condition, to articulate a desire for freedom. Heeding the telepathic voice that leads him to this sacrifice, Stewart allows Ada to make her way to the town of Nelson with her chosen lover. Yet despite the promises of freedom and fulfilment which beckon her, Ada makes a sudden and mysterious suicide attempt (she tries to drown herself) before at last resolving to begin her life anew with Baines.

This brief narrative resumé indicates some of the complex lines of conflict and desire linking *The Piano*'s three main adult protagonists, but does little to explain either the film's widespread popular appeal or the vigorous critical debates which have sprung up in its wake. In some respects, *The Piano* offers the viewer the comforts of a conventional feminist narrative, in which a woman finds voice and liberty once she discovers a reciprocal sexual relationship, trading a loveless marriage for a passionate union of equals. But this simple narrative formula is rendered much more complex, and compelling, by Campion's distinct cinematic style and the powerful repertoire of visual and aural strategies at her disposal. Even though the film appears primarily to concern itself with how women are positioned in relation to the symbolic order (and to advance a critique of this predicament) it also seeks, more subtly, to develop a cinematic language adequate to the intricacies of female subjectivity and desire. One of the principal fields in which Campion endeavours to compose this new language is the relationship between mother and daughter, Ada and Flora.

Although this aspect of *The Piano* has elicited some useful analysis, it has not yet served as a sustained critical focus. The more typical concern, instead, has been with Ada and, more specifically, her sexuality and how it relates to the men who vie for her favours. This is

understandable, given Campion's emphasis on female subjectivity and expression and the triangular relationships driving the narrative. Yet the sidelining of the mother-daughter attachment leads to a curious situation in which critical perspectives precisely reproduce the stance Ada herself comes to adopt in the course of the film. For Ada's liaison with Baines leads her crucially to neglect the mother-daughter intimacy which absorbs her energies and attention prior to his advent, forsaking Flora in the name of her own sexual satisfaction. By too closely following Ada's narrative trajectory, governed as it is by a romantic impulse, critics come, in other words, to occupy the place of the desiring woman which the film itself wants to interrogate. A focus on the mother-daughter relationship thus not only provides a means of illuminating the patriarchal modes of exchange to which Ada and Flora are both subject, but also works as a corrective to the critical emphasis on the configuring and reconfiguring of heterosexual desire. More significantly, such a critical shift exposes to view a degree of maternal ambivalence within the seemingly idealized and harmonious relationship between Ada and Flora. This note of discord also resonates within the film's representation of the maternal as a whole.

### **Ocean, Music, Mother**

The actual mother-daughter relationship between Ada and Flora is accompanied and echoed by the film's symbolism and, in particular, its images of the ocean and of the eponymous piano itself. With its fluid, cyclical movements, the ocean has long been associated with the maternal and, in Campion's handling, "intimates a ... primordial link between the self and other that evokes the body of the mother as the site of the pre-linguistic, pre-oedipal, utopian fusion." (Allen, 2000: 56) The piano, similarly, does not stand simply for a culturally and historically specific form of femininity. It takes on an explicitly maternal meaning, for, in addition to acting as a surrogate voice for the silenced Ada, it is connected to a mother-loss never directly addressed by the film.

The semiotic or pre-Oedipal modes of signification with which *The Piano* engages have elicited a divided critical response. Some critics express the negative view that such signifying modes lead narrative to be sacrificed to image, while others see Campion, more positively, as the proponent of a subversive feminist aesthetic for which the ascendancy of the image over narrative is very much to the point (see Appendix One). Bennett E. Roth, for example, argues that:

the narrative seems driven by an inner logic that is often not only at odds with itself but at the same time beset with emotional power and force. From the opening sequences, there is the sense of something meaningful, impending, dangerous and unpredictable that is about to happen. Such continuous tension leaves the usual relief found in the story's end unsatisfying. (Roth, 2000: 409)

It is the vital element of this "inner logic" which transforms the romance plot into something more than itself, making it innovative and unsettling at once. While it is intangible to Roth, such a logic is grounded in Campion's maternal aesthetic, and decipherable, in particular, in those scenes where the sublime force of the ocean is pitched against the piano, or, alternatively, the piano is submerged in the water. These scenes, situated near the opening of the film and at its close, are perhaps for the viewer the most memorable and, indeed, disturbing. Amongst other things, they demonstrate how Campion's aesthetic works to undermine the culturally determined privilege accorded to romance.

The semiotic dimension to Campion's project is most visible in the images marking out Ada's initial arrival in New Zealand and her eventual leave-taking for the town of Nelson. The arrival scene, especially, has come to represent Campion's own cinematic signature, so closely associated with her film-making style does it seem:

The piano itself is the source of haunting images, none more so than when, abandoned where Ada has disembarked, it seems that its austere symmetry must be overwhelmed by the heavy ocean rollers pounding the long beach. The bizarre conjunction of the wild shore and this potent symbol of Victorian gentility invokes a sense of mystery that is enhanced when we discover that the instrument has suffered little harm from its prolonged exposure. The weird juxtaposition of piano and sea tempts the spectator to think of the combination itself as a symbol, while recalling that the sea is an archetypal image of the maternal unconscious. (Izod, 2000: 94)

The eerie surrealism of the film's opening scenes, in which the piano languishes on the desolate expanse of the shoreline, is compounded by the fact that the image is highly overdetermined. It signals, for example, Ada's precarious status, as she makes the transition from one supposed patriarchal authority to another, father to husband. At the same time, the image suggests the broader perils of the colonial enterprise, situating an artefact associated with European culture and civilization at precisely the place where they are endangered by the forces of an alien land. At still another level, the image of the piano battered by the relentless power of the waves comes to stand for the double-edged way in which the maternal is figured in the film itself. For this image is ambiguous in the extreme: if the ocean is symbolically linked to the figure of the mother, its "heavy ocean rollers" simultaneously suggest something of that figure's destructiveness. In this respect, the image communicates a terror of the maternal even as it is attuned to its seductiveness. This point is borne out when, in the film's final minutes, Ada yields to the ocean's elemental enticements and seeks out her own watery death.

For some critics, the intimacy between Ada and Flora represents one of the ways in which Campion allows a maternal symbiosis or a semiotic play between mother and daughter to find expression. Such intimacy takes on an additional significance when it is read in conjunction with Ada's resistance to Stewart as patriarch, if not colonizer. For Ada's revolt does not merely take the form of sexual transgression, a refusal to answer his desires and an attachment to Baines. Long before Baines comes to feature as rival, Ada's husband is already troubled by the mother-daughter relationship he witnesses and which functions so pointedly to exclude him. In a sense, Ada exploits the closeness she has with Flora, and even the young girl's presence, as a useful prophylactic against Stewart's advances, as is evidenced by the fact that it is mother and daughter, rather than husband and wife, who share a bed in Stewart's house.

While *The Piano* maps Ada's resistance to Stewart's overtures and the libidinal awakening which goes with it, the film also gives considerable space to the drama of Flora's own psychosexual development. Flora's story raises a number of pressing concerns – from the question of biological origins to the conundrum of how the girl-child is positioned with regard to the patriarch or lover. From the outset, it is apparent that Flora, like Ada, must learn to circumvent the structures dictating the development of female subjectivity. At first glance, it appears that the intimacy and strength of the bond between mother and child creates an alliance which will resist any patriarchal incursion. For until the arrival of Baines, this

relationship is notable for its unity and resilience. In one of the earliest scenes, for example, mother and daughter wait in the dusk for Stewart to collect and lead them to their new home. Ada's skirt-hoop and petticoats combine to form a makeshift tent in which the two figures shelter. Illuminated by lamplight, the shelter is in turn encircled by a moat decorated with shells. Taken together, shelter and moat form a distinctly uterine image of female defensiveness and proximity, as Flora quite literally takes refuge inside her mother's skirts. This represents one of the tenderest visual images in the film. In the intimacy of this setting, Flora declares through sign-language an adversarial stance towards the man who is to become her step-father: "I will not call him Papa," she asserts.

As if to reinforce this refusal of kinship, Flora asks to hear the more familiar story of her own father's courtship of Ada. As revived by the storyteller, Flora's father emerges as a strange figure endowed with the capacity to intuit Ada's thoughts by means of telepathy, even as his subsequent terror at this peculiar mode of communication causes him to take flight. When later Stewart finds himself briefly drawn into this mode of extrasensory exchange, his own response is rather different, allowing Ada to release herself from the marriage. This is a crucial moment, which not only removes the main impediment to the fulfilment of the romance plot but also marks a turning point in Stewart's own subjectivity, and ushers in an increased receptiveness on his part towards the voice of the other.

In the skirt-hoop scene, Flora makes her opposition towards her new father quite clear, but her defiance leaves her vulnerable, because it does not take into account the possibility of Ada's betrayal: that mother will abandon daughter in order to conduct an illicit relationship with Baines. It is this seeming desertion that produces a realignment of loyalties within the young girl. Flora stands by Stewart and reveals to him her mother's surreptitious message to Baines (a declaration of love carved into one of the keys of her piano). This kind of narrative, in which the mother fails in her regard for her daughter and the daughter responds with a treachery of her own calls into question what would otherwise appear to be a somewhat rhapsodic representation of the mother-daughter relation. At the same time, Flora's shadow-play at the opening of this scene, in which she figures herself as moth, before asking whether she will "catch fire," is premonitory, hinting at the dangers ahead. For now, however, the lambency of the scene suggests the warmth and light of the womb.

One of the consequences of Flora's betrayal or counter-betrayal of her mother is that Ada is forbidden any further access to Baines and imprisoned by the jealous husband. At this juncture in the film, it appears as if mother and daughter have exchanged roles, with Flora siding with Stewart against the wayward Ada, who, for her part, simply adopts a depressive posture: she refuses to engage with anyone and lies prone on her bed, narcissistically kissing the lips reflected in her hand-mirror. What occurs here, in other words, is a movement away from a symbiosis in which subjectivities are interblent, towards an exchange in which mother and daughter take one another's place. Flora indeed endures a double rupturing of her relationship with Ada, firstly because of Baines and then because of Stewart's response to her betrayal of her mother. Flora's decision to align herself with Stewart may suggest an Electra complex of some sort, recalling her plaintive cry on the occasion of Ada's marriage – "I want to be in the photograph!" – yet there is little evidence that Stewart is the object of her desire, or that her affection genuinely switches from mother to step-father. Instead, her support for the patriarch who seeks to control his wife has an ulterior motive, and is designed to resurrect the exclusivity of her relationship with Ada. "You shouldn't have gone up there, should you?", is how she responds to Ada's incarceration in Stewart's cabin, adding, "I don't like it and nor does Papa" and here using, for the first time, the very nomenclature which she had

originally rejected. In assuming that the patriarch will facilitate the restoration of a lost union with the mother, Flora errs greatly, of course. Yet, since Baines is Flora's true rival for her mother's affection, not Stewart, her alliance with the latter is much easier to effect than might otherwise have been the case.

### **"Like A Mood That Passes into You"**

A concern with the maternal and, in particular, the mother-daughter relationship is apparent from the opening of *The Piano*. Here, in an ironic voiceover, Ada tells the viewer-listener that, inexplicably, she has not spoken since she was six years old. She also sketches her immediate future – the plans concocted by her father for marriage to an unseen suitor in the antipodes. According to Ada herself, the words we hear at this juncture are spoken by her "mind's voice," an obscure interior instrument whose awkwardly girlish tone suggests that it perhaps belongs to the selfsame child who relinquished speech so many years ago.

The auditory confusion at *The Piano*'s outset is compounded by the uncertainties arising from the visual sequence accompanying the voiceover, a series of scenes whose focus alternates between a young girl and an observing Ada. In the first of these, for example, Ada watches from a distance as the girl and an old man seek to move a refractory pony. This creates a momentary doubt as to the identity of the child in the frame and whether she exists in the present at all or is simply a creature of Ada's memory. Since Ada's opening comments specifically allude to her own childhood, the girl might even be understood to be Ada as child rather than Flora, whose existence is, at this initial point in the film, yet to be disclosed. This brief confusion of times and identities is not resolved until a little later and the scene in which mother and daughter appear in the frame together for the first time, with the exhausted Flora sleeping on a bed while Ada removes her daughter's roller skates.

In addition to the uncertainty over the identity of the child at the film's beginning, it appears, in this subsequent sequence, that mother and daughter flout convention and decorum: Flora wears her skates while pony-riding and is then seen using them to course through the corridors of the house. When she falls asleep fully dressed with the skates still on, her mother takes a pair of scissors to the laces in order to remove them. Similarly, when Ada is first seen playing the piano and is interrupted by an apparently disapproving older woman, the intensely emotional expression on her face vanishes, to be replaced by a confrontational and defiant stare.

The potential conflation of mother and daughter introduced by the film's opening sequence is underlined elsewhere. One of the ways in which this happens is in terms of a deliberate mirroring of the two figures, as, in the film's earlier stages, Ada and Flora not only dress alike but also share the same gestures and poses. As Richard Allen notes:

Ada and Flora are doubled in many ways. They consistently echo each other in their position in the frame, and in their costume, gesture and mannerisms. Flora is roughly the same age as Ada when she went deaf [sic] and she is also Ada's voice to the outside world. Through this doubling, it is as if Ada's relationship to her own (absent) mother is reproduced in the relationship she bears to Flora. Just as Flora speaks to Ada, Ada 'speaks' through her piano of her relationship with her own mother and therefore she also speaks for Flora's relationship with herself. Ada is thus at once mother and child. (Allen, 2000:53)

For some critics, the representation of the mother-daughter duet in this way suggests something of the intimacy and rapport associated with the French Feminist vision of the pre-Oedipal. For others, however, the relationship between Ada and Flora is rather less benign. The kind of doubling Allen identifies is, in the view of Ramona Ralston, for example, a symptom of Ada's disordered psyche. As Ralston argues, Ada's subject-position seems to be regressive, narcissistic, pathological: "It appears that she has figuratively returned ... to the early pre-Oedipal stage of mother-child symbiosis, both with her ten-year-old daughter, Flora, and with the piano – both [of which] appear to be extensions of herself." (Ralston, 1997-8: 353) Yet even as Flora and the piano are thus paralleled in the film (both are the vehicles of Ada's expression), there is a clear hierarchy at work: when Ada and Flora reach *terra firma* after their difficult sea-voyage, Ada's attention is focused solely on the piano as it makes its precarious passage up the beach, rather than the bedraggled daughter who kneels and vomits in the sand.

Elsewhere, however, a more harmonious relationship between mother, daughter and musical instrument is suggested. For example, when they are stranded on the beach, Ada caresses the sleeping Flora, whose head rests in her lap, before repeating the gesture with the keyboard itself. When later Baines leads Ada back to the shore, her music inspires the exuberant Flora to an elaborate dance as she cartwheels across the sand. In this particular sequence, which seems also to ignite Baines's desire for Ada, mother and daughter together produce a harmonious display of music and movement. More easily overlooked in this scene, though, is the way in which the rapture that overtakes Ada as she plays is initially disrupted by Flora's more insistent demand that she be the object of her mother's gaze: "Mumma, mumma, look!", she exclaims. In this instance, Flora succeeds in claiming her mother's attention before Ada is transported by the music. She is, however, less successful in calling attention to herself once Ada embarks upon her affair with Baines.

The mirroring between Ada and Flora which is so distinctive a feature of *The Piano* calls forth very different critical perspectives on the question of female subjectivity. While the kind of symbiotic ideal which the mirroring betokens might seduce some (including Baines), it simply bespeaks a damaged psyche to others. Such conflicting visions of the maternal are themselves already played out in Campion's film. For, alongside the idealized portrayal of the mother-daughter bond in the earlier sections of the film, there is a more aggressive, demanding and potentially destructive orientation towards the mother manifested by Flora. While such an orientation appears most explicitly in the scenes occurring after Ada has commenced her relationship with Baines, it also features at earlier points to suggest that the ostensible harmonies between mother and daughter are less stable than might be supposed. The first real signs of this come with the question of voice.

If the mirrorings between Ada and Flora emphasize the dyadic structure of their existence, they are themselves reflected in the acts of ventriloquism which also sustain their relationship. On the occasions when Flora acts as Ada's translator, she not only transforms sign-language into a verbal medium, but also adopts a voice marked with adult inflections, expressing Ada's disgust, anger and disregard for convention at various key points in the film. In the opening beach scene, for instance, Flora's verbalization of Ada's gestures – "She says she'd rather be boiled alive by natives than get back into your stinking tub" – almost brings about a punitive response from the offended sailor, who takes Flora and her "puppy gob" as his target, rather than Ada with whom the words originate. At this juncture, Flora retreats behind Ada's protective presence, allowing her mother to shield her from the consequences of speaking out of turn. This mother-daughter configuration – in which Flora hides behind her

mother – is itself symbolic of Flora's role as translator. As she gives voice to her mother, Flora can, in some sense, be said to enjoy a degree of liberation from the strict etiquette that regulates the speech of the Victorian child. Ada is at once her protector and enabler in this enterprise.

This pattern is duplicated when Flora transmits to Aunt Morag and Nessie the words she knows her mother ought not to utter: "Actually, to tell you the truth, Mama says most people speak rubbish and it's not worth the listen." The affronted response of the two women to this reported opinion meets with Flora's follow-up that, "Ay, it's unholy." Such a process of repetition, in which the daughter relays her mother's words, and the subsequent distancing established by this second more judgemental utterance, work to ensure that Flora can articulate her mother's transgressive sentiments while disowning them at the same time. She can take on the unruly voice of the mother but also, and crucially, echo the moralistic critique levelled against it. While Flora's disclaimer is designed to dissociate her from her mother, it is clearly far from heartfelt. Flora appears, in this instance, simply to go through the motions, her face a stoical mask as she apparently chastizes her mother in order to protect herself.

It is, paradoxically, in her dealings with Aunt Morag that the complexity of Flora's positioning with regard to her mother becomes clearer. In direct opposition to her mother's instructions, Flora regales her aunt with the fabricated story of Ada's past, combining the genre of a highly improbable romance with melodrama. While Flora's narrative focuses on the grand passion her mother once shared with a German composer, its subtext answers the question of Flora's illicit conception as well as resolving the mystery of Ada's silence. According to the tale, it is the intensity of the bond between Ada and her lover which leads the two to disregard convention, marrying "in an enormous forest, with real fairies as bridesmaids, each holding a little elf's hand." Realizing that this particular flight of fancy is too extreme even for the over-embellished yarn she is spinning, Flora quickly adjusts her story to satisfy her only partly credulous listener:

One day when my mother and father were singing together in the forest, a great storm blew up out of nowhere. But so passionate was their singing that they did not notice, nor did they stop as the rain began to fall, and when their voices rose for the final bars of the duet a great bolt of lightning came out of the sky and struck my father so that he lit up like a torch... And at the same moment my father was struck dead my mother was struck dumb! She – never – spoke – another – word.

In Flora's fiction, the loss of the father to "a great bolt of lightning" produces the mother's muteness. This story is clearly offered in order to satisfy Aunt Morag's curiosity about Ada's mute condition and to break the silence pertaining to the circumstances of Flora's birth. In Flora's version of her mother's narrative, Ada features less as a woman for whom desire is merely sublimated through solitary piano-playing than as one who has, in the past at least, shown an ability to connect – both musically and sexually – with another. Whether this rendition of Ada's history is any less fanciful than the "fairies" inhabiting Flora's "enchanted forest" is, however, open to question.

Flora's story alternates with scenes depicting the post-nuptial debacle of the photographs taken at Ada's wedding to Stewart. Refused a place in the photograph, Flora exploits the freedom this gives her in order to continue with her forbidden story. The tempest she conjures with her words is intercut with the storm taking place outside the hut where a rain-soaked



Ada and Stewart pose before a fake pastoral backdrop. The way in which this scene is linked to Flora's fanciful rendering of Ada's first love ensures that Flora's words carry an additional resonance beyond the fantasy they shape. In addition to showing Flora's awareness of the links between music and passion, her story represents an ironic commentary on the charade that constitutes Ada's new partnership. At the same time, the grandeur and extravagance of the story suggest both the attraction and absurdity of the romance plot.

Aunt Morag provides a receptive audience for Flora and confidante for Stewart, who is increasingly baffled by his new wife's idiosyncrasies. At the same time her relationship with Nessie provides a grotesque mirror-image of Ada's to Flora. Aunt Morag's conventional pronouncements on events in the isolated community where *The Piano* is set are repeatedly echoed by Nessie, who, it seems, has developed a reflex whereby she imitates her benefactress. As Feona Attwood puts it:

While a certain mirroring of looks and speech of and between the women in the film suggest the difference and marginalisation of women's language and culture, they also suggest tensions within and between woman. Ada and Flora often mirror one another, they speak, look and move as one; when Ada takes Flora to visit Baines for the first time their looks and movements are very obviously and precisely synchronized. Similarly, Nessie's voice is often an echo of Aunt Morag's and their Maori servant girls sing the national anthem in unison. Visually, aurally and physically, then, the women in the film often appear as pairs or doubles. But these doubles are unhappy and trapped; Nessie's echoing of Morag shows her to be a pale and dominated shadow of her aunt, the Maori servant girls sing an anthem which is not their own. If Ada inhabits a female realm which resists patriarchy, it nevertheless leaves her sealed up, separate, unable to act on her desires. (Attwood, 1998: 91-2)

Yet as much as the Maori girls are subject to the controls of Aunt Morag, imperiously exhorting them to silence when their singing disturbs her tea-time conversation, it is clear that their rendition of the National Anthem is uniquely their own – not least because it is inflected with their own understanding of the lyrics. By the same token, Flora's function as translator of her mother's words also enables a certain creativity and artistic licence. Her mimicry is never just that and does necessarily denote the erasure of subjectivity and agency. Even though Flora is expected to repeat her mother's words, her own desire, and in particular, the desire to flout convention, is not eradicated in the process.

This model of repetition with a difference can, in turn, be traced back to Ada and one of the strategies she adopts in order initially to repel Baines. Claudia Gorbman offers insight into how this works:

Ada occasionally uses music, or its sudden cessation, as a language. For example, in one scene she has been playing a melody that begins with an upward leap of a sixth. Baines then makes an impertinent gesture, and in response she suddenly shifts into a loud and mechanical rendition of a Chopin waltz that begins with a similar leap. The move from her own musical voice to that of Chopin mimics verbal irony or sarcasm; for the moment, at least, it puts Baines in his place. (Gorbman, 2000: 42-3)

Although these comments relate to Ada rather than Flora, they suggest one of the ways in which Flora's equally subversive vocal strategies operate: Flora's agency, and especially her rebellious tendencies, find expression not only through the repetition of some of her mother's "unholy" words but also in the more extravagant revisions she can make to them. In the case of the story she tells to Morag, Flora's authority is predicated upon her insider status – she has an intimate knowledge of Ada's history and, it seems, is quite prepared to reveal it to the listener. At this juncture, Flora is more than willing to exploit a fascination with Ada's difference – her muteness and unknown past – in order to enhance her own power and standing. Her embellished and expansive history suggests a willingness to flout Ada's injunction to silence and to make her way in the community on her own terms. In order to effect this transition from Ada into that community, Flora uses Ada's past in order to captivate her listeners with an unlikely tale. Later on, she also uses her skill as translator of signs to initiate Aunt Morag and Nessie into what is, for them, an incomprehensible language. It seems that Flora's familiarity with signs and the fluidity of her hand movements confound the women almost as much as the voiceless condition that those very signs are designed to circumvent.

Flora's narrative of origins – her own and Ada's – is one in which the substitution of music for passion is made apparent and provides a telling allegory for the film overall. Later, it is not so much the question of origins which preoccupies Flora as the resurfacing of passions otherwise subdued. Excluded from Ada's newfound relationship with Baines, Flora's rage is demonstrated through the tensions that begin to emerge between herself and her mother. The mother-daughter dyad, a privileged and exclusive space, begins to break down.

While Flora appears at the outset to imitate or mimic her mother, it is clear that she is also able to deviate from the maternal role-model. This deviation and Flora's expression of dissatisfaction at the temporary withdrawal of her mother become more pronounced as the film progresses. The relationship between Flora and Baines forces the girl to occupy a liminal space: time and again, she must wait outside Baines's hut for the transactions taking place inside to be complete. Initially, Flora is content to express her disaffection with her marginalized station via Baines's dog, whom she alternately torments and then nurtures as if it were her own child. This playing out of her ambivalence towards her mother is equally represented through doll-play, which is similarly marked by a fluctuating movement of persecution and love. In both of these examples, Flora herself chooses to assume a maternal role. While she thus takes back some of her lost power by occupying Ada's own position (at least symbolically), it is not simply in the realms of play that Flora seeks to take the mother's place.

As Ada becomes more preoccupied with Baines and less attentive towards her child, Flora increasingly adopts the speech and mannerisms of an exasperated mother seeking to control a wayward charge. In other words, she implicitly promotes a certain submissiveness, rather than embracing the more rebellious femininity which Ada both represents and performs, so that when Stewart decides to confine Ada to the house, Flora is keen to help him with the process of boarding up the windows. Flora's protest against her mother's adulterous actions and her attempt to normalize their relationship in the end have little effect, since Ada has withdrawn herself from all except Baines. Indeed, it could hardly be clearer, at this juncture, that there can be no adequate substitute for the man whom she desires. When Ada sleepily caresses her daughter, believing Flora to be Baines, and then seeks a more acceptable substitute for her absent lover in Stewart, she is repelled by his attempts to reciprocate her physical advances, retreating once more to the piano.

## **"I clipped your wing"**

While the mother-daughter relationship and the maternal, in particular, would appear to be figured somewhat rhapsodically in *The Piano*, Campion's film is ultimately less naïve than this. From the first, the mutual intimacy in which Ada and Flora bask and bathe conceals moments of disturbance and dissonance. This element of conflict increases as the narrative progresses, transforming Flora from the innocent bystander her mother wishes her to be into an active impediment to the consummation of Ada's desire for Baines.

Given the kinds of doubling which occur in the film, it is significant that Baines and Flora are only seen to occupy the same psychic space insofar as they both compete for Ada's attention and affection. Flora and Stewart, on the other hand, more readily occupy a shared space. They both bear witness to Ada's love-making, Flora curiously peeking through the gaps in the hut in order better to comprehend what keeps her mother within, while Stewart is mesmerised by the erotic display to which he in turn becomes privy. Flora's own response to this spectacle is to take her newfound knowledge and, along with the Maori children, rehearse her own version of sexual coupling – with the trees. Stewart's reaction to this collective display sees him single out Flora, whom he manhandles away from the other children in order to berate her for her actions. The shame he associates with her behaviour is such that it contaminates the very trees themselves and, by way of atonement, Flora is soon after seen washing their trunks with a bucket of soapy water.

This scene is noteworthy for a number of reasons, not least because it is the first time that Flora has come into direct conflict with her step-father. Flora's response to the punishment meted out to her is telling: she confides to Stewart the unspoken secret of why Baines is so slow to learn the piano: "She just plays whatever she pleases, sometimes she doesn't play at all." In disclosing this secret, Flora not only hints at the illicit activity in which her mother is engaged (or indeed inactivity), but also offers Stewart the first sign of an overt disloyalty towards her mother. At the same time, she turns his attention back towards Ada, as the sin for which Flora is punished – a creative simulation of her mother's actions – is eclipsed by its prototype. In effect, Flora returns his gaze to the one who inspired her own transgression, identifying her mother rather than herself as the true culprit.

When Flora lets slip the truth of her mother's wilfulness, she ensures the revelation of more damning offences and so plays a pivotal role in the escalating conflict between Ada and Stewart. This point is reinforced by the dramatic events set in train as a direct consequence of Flora's disclosures. These events begin when Flora surrenders to Stewart the declaration of love Ada has asked her to take to Baines. This re-routed message constitutes for Stewart the material proof of his wife's deceit, although, crucially, it is not Ada's infidelity which incites Stewart's rage because he has already sought to confine her for this particular transgression. Instead, Ada's offence is to break Stewart's trust by renewing contact with Baines.

The violent amputation of Ada's finger is deemed by Stewart to be a necessary act: "I clipped your wing, that's all," he tells his wife, in a statement as "clipped" as the deed it purports to explain. While Stewart believes that this act will prevent Ada's literal and/or metaphorical flight, his words do not simply provide a chilling insight into his attitude towards his wife and the violence he has perpetrated upon her, but also invoke the angel wings Flora wears throughout the latter half of the film. These heavenly accessories are props left over from the entertainments staged by the community in the course of the film. They are also a visual reminder that appearances can deceive and that the seeming innocence traditionally

associated with the child is an ideal which demands to be challenged: besplattered with blood and mud after Ada's punishment, the wings come to signify both the desire to idealize and the inevitable thwarting of that desire. At the same time, they underline Flora's complicity in her mother's fate. This point is suggested earlier in the film when the Reverend rehearses his part as the axe-wielding Bluebeard, while also adorned with angel wings.

Conversely, the besmirching of Flora's wings, taken in conjunction with Stewart's words, suggests a realignment of mother and daughter, with both forced to confront the full extent of Stewart's fury and the lengths to which he will go in order to guarantee marital fidelity. Yet it is one of the most striking aspects of the scenes with which the film closes that a reunion between Ada and her daughter is not portrayed to any significant degree. Perhaps one reason for this is that Baines takes on a maternal role in relation to Flora. He lets her sleep beside him in his bed and, when Ada finally re-emerges from her illness, stands protectively beside Flora, as the mother makes her unsteady way back into the sunlight. The brief look Ada gives in Flora's direction and the return of her daughter's uncertain and abashed gaze is all that exists in terms of a reconciliation between them at this juncture. As if to underscore the point, the camera pulls back from Ada here in a way which merely demonstrates the sense of distance between mother and child, enlarged, in its turn, by the bodies which mill about and traverse the space between the two figures. Later, Flora will carefully tend to her mother's hair while they wait on the beach, but this is done wordlessly, and shown only from afar.

Significantly, the first signing performed by Ada after Stewart's attack comes when she, along with Flora, Baines, and the piano itself, sail away from Stewart's domain, ostensibly to begin their new lives together. However, although it appears that the film is moving towards a romantic denouement, Ada herself resists this course. Pulling away from Baines's grasp, she refuses the comfort and protection he offers, not least because the means by which he conveys his concern – an attempt at hand holding – inadvertently curtails Ada's own ability to communicate. Ada's address to Flora at this key point takes the form of an instruction, to be passed onto Baines and then the Maoris, that the piano should be thrown overboard. Misunderstanding Ada's desire, Baines tries first to reassure her that the canoe will not capsize because of its precariously balanced load. Ada's explanation that the piano is spoiled is countered by another reassurance, that the piano can be mended. Only when Ada addresses Baines directly with her mime, and tries herself to untie the piano, does she ensure that her wishes are met. At the same time, Flora's increasing panic at both her mother's agitation and the rocking of the boat it causes is also conveyed by the shout with which she amplifies her mother's desire: "She doesn't want IT!" With these words, Flora chooses, emphatically, to become the medium through which her mother makes herself heard. There is, of course, a certain irony to this moment in which Flora once more assumes the role of Ada's translator, speaking the mother's desires. For while mother and daughter share the same purpose here, the action they wish to see performed will consign the piano to the depths of the ocean. On a psychic and symbolic level, this suggests that even as Ada and Flora resume their mother-daughter intimacy, Ada herself is ready to cast away the instrument that, for so long, has itself resonated with her own maternal longings. This point, of course, must be qualified, since, almost immediately, Ada chooses, quite literally, to succumb to the pull of the piano, regardless of the deathly consequences. However, by stepping into the coils of rope to which the piano is attached Ada is essentially performing another act of abandonment, this time of Flora and the role of mother to the girl. This point is easily overlooked, not least because when Ada refuses death by drowning, the moment at which she resurfaces is also the one at which her voice returns. With the resumption of the voice-over with which the film opens, Flora's role as translator is simultaneously made redundant.

In the subsequent scenes, narrated by Ada, the romantic trajectory of the film – suspended only briefly by Ada's underwater interlude – seems to be resumed. The newly forged family has relocated to Nelson where Baines has fashioned an artificial finger for Ada and she now teaches piano. Ada's reintegration into the world and, in particular, the symbolic order, is further suggested by the scene in which she practises and experiments with her newly-recovered voice. As she does so, it seems that romantic and indeed mother-daughter ideals reappear once more in the film. Flora cartwheels across the lawn in her bodice, just as she had done on the beach. This repetition, suggestive as it is of a kind of mother-child reunion is, like the rejoining of Ada and Baines, no sooner posited, however, than it is called into question once again by the film's closing moment.

In this scene, itself a repetition of Ada's earlier attempt at suicide, the image of the sunken piano is viewed with the body of Ada floating above it. Attached to the piano by the rope which has pulled her into the depths, Ada is a strangely amorphous figure here, her skirts billowing up. The effect is foetal, amniotic, as if Ada were somehow linked to the piano through an umbilical cord. This provocative tableau closes the film and is accompanied by Ada's voiceover, in which she identifies the image with the private reveries which preoccupies her at night. At once suggestive of semiotic connection and deathly submersion, the "ocean grave," its silence and stillness, take on an additional maternal dimension, working to soothe and sedate. Settling Ada into sleep as her voice fades away, the image assumes the status of a composition over which Ada can claim ownership: "Down there everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby and so it is; it is mine."

While the scenes with which *The Piano* ends – an attempt at drowning followed by an unexpected, last-minute resurfacing and then an imaginary return to the depths – have perplexed critics, it is clear that Campion eschews the romantic idealism which would otherwise offer a more predictable cinematic completion. Not only does she have Ada choose suicide after she has been released by Stewart, but also adds to this equivocal narrative twist the spectral image which comes to form an integral part of Ada's nocturnal rituals. This image even has a metonymic counterpart in the veil she wears when performing her vocal exercises. Before his kiss can be returned by Ada, Baines must first remove the veil, which figures as a kind of funereal caul. With her chosen final note, Campion qualifies the pleasures arising from romance. In so doing, she ensures that the semiotic order, and an image which brings together both the maternal and the feminine in a deadly yet comforting embrace, will continue to hold sway.

## Appendix

These debates, along with those relating to French Feminism, are usefully highlighted in Felicity Coombs and Suzanne Gemmell (eds.), *Piano Lessons: Approaches to The Piano* (Sydney and London: John Libbey & Company Pty Ltd, 2000) and Harriet Margolis (ed.), *Jane Campion's The Piano* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge, 2000).

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