

Maria Dahvana Headley, *The Mere Wife*, London: Scribe Publications, 2018. ISBN 9781925713459.

*Reviewed by Giulia Mastrantoni*

Headley's *The Mere Wife* is both a celebration of motherly love and an exploration of the disruptive tension between coexisting opposites. While motherly love is the real focus of this novel, being its leading force, reversals of fortune are an equally important element. They permeate the story on a range of levels. The two main female characters of the novel could not be more different: American marine Dana Mills is a practical, lonely and down-to-earth woman who is mysteriously pregnant and an amnesiac (she does not remember the last six months of her life), while the beautiful Willa Herot is a fashionable, apparently-sociable and empty-headed woman who takes the whole day to do her grocery shopping. At first, Dana seems to be a woman who is deeply intimidating: not only did she fight during the War on Terror, witnessing terrible crimes; she also remembers being executed on camera during that same war. Yet there she is, pregnant in a cave.

The mysterious pregnancy is a particularly dark element in Dana's story, evoking in every woman reader the horrific possibility of rape. This woman's undeniably troubling past makes her difficult to fully understand and therefore to trust. As a reader, I distrusted Dana, finding it hard to empathise with a character who sounded secretive and unwilling to disclose. However, things changed very quickly for me. Indeed, after going through Willa's thoughts (beginning in Chapter 2), the reader begins to see a deeper, much more meaningful difference between the two women. As

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the reader is dragged deeper into the story, Willa's past is revealed, and this is when the two main female characters of this novel are shown for what they truly are. Dana becomes an open book, almost a symbol of sincerity and safety to the reader because she makes no secret of her past; and Willa transforms into a desperate, hopeless character, hiding terrible demons. Willa's addiction to alcohol shows her weak, lonely side, which is revealed to be a consequence of her abortion and failed marriage.

This mother-and-daughter relationship darkens Willa's past even more, as the reader begins to believe that Willa is far more secretive (and possibly scarier, more troubled, or even more dangerous) than Dana. Dana becomes more familiar and relatable while the sections of the novel that focus on Willa are marked by a sense of unease. To me, Willa came to symbolise out-of-control personalities, shadowy in bursts. *The Mere Wife* is marked by the peripeteia of its characters. The revelations early in the novel concerning Willa's life are significant, and change the way characters are perceived.

As a woman reader, I feel that it is important to highlight another opposite between the two female characters: their pregnancies. While Dana is forced to give birth (she wakes up not long before the baby is due), Willa is not: she conceives Dylan willingly with Roger, her second husband, and she does everything that mothers-to-be traditionally do: she nests, makes plans, and fantasises about her family. Willa seems to be a woman who has always had plans for a family, so her pregnancy is in no way shocking to the reader. However, when the reader finds out about the earlier failed marriage and abortion, Willa's pregnancy with Dylan suddenly becomes shocking. Indeed, her second pregnancy can no longer be seen purely as a desire for motherhood. It begins to seem like a conscious, perhaps even painful choice that Willa makes to improve her social status. She wants to stay married to the powerful Roger Herot, and Roger wants a family, so Willa gives him Dylan. This revelation reverses the reader's perception of Dana's pregnancy: she suddenly becomes a woman who makes the choice of *keeping* her baby, as opposed to being a rape victim who is cornered into giving birth. To the eyes of the reader, Dana suddenly becomes a mother by choice, while Willa is the victim (or the executer) of someone else's desires. Although at first Dana appears to be a victim, she transgresses that label: she is a survivor and the maker of her own destiny. On the other hand, the seemingly lucky

Willa executes her mother's and then Roger's desires, trapping herself in a life she neither likes nor wants.

With the constant reversal of fortunes, this novel is a hymn to the transience of all things. *The Mere Wife* reminds the reader that nothing is permanent: nothing and no one is destined to last forever.

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