

***Haunted: The Death Mother Archetype* by Violet Sherwood (Chiron Publications, 2021)**

Reviewed by Louise Embleton Tudor

This disturbing and ultimately uplifting book is rare in its seamless combination of scholarship and depth psychology, dwelling as it often does in the numinous, the liminal, and the terrifying spaces between life and death. Sherwood weaves historical, biographical, creative, narrative, imaginal, and archetypal strands to illuminate the perilous journey from fragmentation, because of psychological infanticide, to wholeness. In her eloquent foreword to the book, Mary Harrell suggests that this book is ground-breaking in its inclusion and use of the imaginal archetype, and she pays tribute to the courage of the author in her ability to “ground an unconscious collective dynamic with individual human experience” (p. 5), acknowledging the psychological danger of holding multiple realities in consciousness.

The book is divided into three parts, each with several chapters.

The author’s gripping introduction describes the impetus for her personal and professional journey into this subject; and sets the context and gives a brief overview of the book. As we are invited in, we, the reader, are offered timely and clear explanations of the methodology of the enquiry, and the terms

and concepts which we will encounter. For example, early on, imaginal enquiry, heuristic methodology and method, and imaginal psychology are explained and contextualized; and archetypes, whether referenced or deeply explored, are described and explained as they are introduced. Throughout, the whole book is richly referenced. In preparing us thus, and in doing what the author says she intends to do at each juncture, however dangerous and disorganising the subjects of murderous rage, child murder, and psychological infanticide become to us, the reader is made to feel that we are in safe hands, So we follow, moving seamlessly with the author between the imagined and the factual; between the known, the secret, and the unknown; between clarity and confusion, and between terror and blissful safety—transformed through witnessing the experiences so generously, purposefully, and unsentimentally shared. We know as much as we need to know, no more and no less.

The title of part one, *Setting the Scene for a Murder Enquiry*, piques curiosity which is rewarded with a historical, personal, psychological, social, and conceptual scene—setting for the stage on which psychological infanticide is explored.

Part two, *Suffer the Little Children*, explores the four themes of violence, abandonment, drugging, and neglect; each being a method of child murder, and of psychological infanticide. In doing so, the author aims to “bridge the gap between the literal

and the psychological using metaphor, myth and (her) own experience” (p. 111) of soul murder, a term whose history and usage she explains. To elaborate on her experience and inviting the reader to make their own associations with enactments of soul murder, she draws on the death mother archetype, and on the work of many writers across the fields of biography, psychodynamic, and Jungian psychology, and literature.

Part three, *A Professional and Personal Synthesis of Psychological Infanticide*, is similarly rich in ideas from diverse sources. It is also where the author invites us further into her world. Drawing on the term ‘*solutio*’, a stage of alchemical process, and a metaphor for the process of depth psychotherapy, Sherwood movingly shares more details of her journey and the means of her own transformation. In doing so, she offers clinicians pointers to some of the many possible means by which they may help their adopted clients to survive psychologically and to grow fully into themselves. The author suggests that the plight of the infant born traumatised by the knowledge of being unwanted or that they cannot be cared for, and the inner world of the stranger-adopted child, are too painful for society to contemplate. Despite adoptees being greatly over-represented in mental illness and certain kinds of criminal statistics, there is “an understandable societal protectiveness against perceived blame of mothers and a focus on their painful grief which serves to silence the adopted child” (p. 279) who, she points out elsewhere, also learns that they

should be grateful for having been rescued or chosen. Without facing into this collective denial, and re-writing of experience, there is a risk of psychotherapists unconsciously re-enacting, perpetuating, and reinforcing the original psychological infanticide.

My only criticism of the book is that the presentation and production is not as good as it could be. For example, a closer edit would deal with some repetition; and there is no index, which, for a book of this stature and scope, with the potential to become a reference text, is a frustrating omission. However, I urge readers not to be distracted by these relatively small problems.

Readers of Victorian history or literature will delight in the references to Brontë, Coleridge, and others; in the research into the role of laudanum in the nursery; and, later, in the descriptions of the lives of several 'baby farmers'. But, most of all, in the delightful and poignant imaginal correspondence the author has with Minnie Dean, the baby farmer who becomes a symbol for the author, and who was hanged for infanticide in August 1895, in Invercargill. Depth psychologists will appreciate the artist, the poet, the creative writer, and the craftswoman, and will feel at home diving into dreams, images, reveries, and journals. Imaginal psychologists will appreciate the scholarship and the sensitivity with which Sherwood approaches the archetypes on which she draws, and the

understanding she demonstrates in relating them to herself and to society. Psychotherapists of all orientations will be inspired by this healing journey. Anyone who knows that their arrival was unwelcome; any mother who struggled to hold or to protect her baby; anyone stranger-adopted, or who loves or wants to help someone who is stranger-adopted, will be changed by this book, for as we read, we are transformed as much as we are informed.