This is the accepted version of a chapter published in *Absent mothers*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Äström, B. (2018)
Dying to create a hero: changing meanings of death in childbirth?
In: Frances Greenslade (ed.), *Absent mothers* (pp. 7-16). Bradford: Demeter Press

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-139752
According to Pliny the Elder, the greatest gift a mother can bestow on her child is to die in childbirth, preferably painfully. In his first century AD book, *History of Nature*, he rates such a death as highly auspicious, promising a great future for the child, citing Julius Caesar and Scipio Africanus as examples of how the mother’s destruction ensures the son’s success (7.9). This idea of the hero who loses his mother at birth has been recirculated through centuries of Western literary history, including for example the Arthurian knight of sorrows, Tristram, and Macduff, the man who defeats Macbeth. In his latest incarnation on film (2011), Conan the Barbarian also loses his mother at the moment of his birth. In this paper I read Conan against earlier traditions of motherless heroes, and discuss the implications of the film makers’ choice to kill off a mother that his creator, Robert E. Howard, seems to have left alive and well. I also contrast the 2011 version of the dying mother to literary dead mothers of earlier centuries. The 2011 mother is a warrior, not a cipher or just a vessel for her husband’s seed to be discarded after delivering the son. Her death is framed as a sacrifice that confers increased hero status on her son. Yet, what appears to be a re-interpretation, a valorisation of the dying mother, does not alter the fact that like so many other heroes in recent years, Conan is left to be raised by a father, and it is thus their relationship that is in focus. Rather than an upgrading of the mother-status, Conan’s dead mother seems to be just another victim of what Hannah Hamad has termed postfeminist fatherhood, a valorisation of fathers that is predicated on the marginalisation of mothers.
Dead mothers in cultural and literary history

Throughout Western history, mothers have been regarded as problematic by patriarchal society. As scholars such as Katherine Park have shown, the medical profession, as well as laypeople, have worried, not only about the mother’s sexual fidelity, but also about the effects her body may have on the unborn foetus. As a result, much effort has been spent regulating the mother’s behaviour in order to protect the child’s physical and mental health (Åström “Corrupte Mylke”). But the mother remains problematic even after the birth of the child. The belief that mothers are incapable of raising boys to men is well attested throughout patriarchal history, and remains to this day (Kimmel 150). Considering this, it is not surprising that the boy who grows up without a mother is seen to have a great future, or as Janet Adelman phrases it, “heroic masculinity turns on leaving the mother behind” (130). A prerequisite for achieving hero status is to reject the mother, emotionally and physically.

Thomas Mallory expresses this idea of rejecting the maternal in his 1471 version of the King Arthur-story. The pregnant Queen Elizabeth sets out to find her husband Meliodas, who has been kidnapped. Whilst travelling in the wilderness, she goes into labour, giving birth to a son she names Tristram. Realising she is about to die, she observes to the boy “thou hast murdered thy mother, and therefore thou that art a murderer so young, thou art likely to be a manly man in thine age” (304). The infant has proven himself to be able to kill at such a young age, which shows promise for his adulthood – he will be not only a man, but a manly man. And most important of all, he has murdered his mother. He has rejected her, and in so doing, has protected himself from her potentially harmful influence.

Another example of a hero who leaves his mother behind is William Shakespeare’s Macduff, who is the only man powerful enough to kill the tyrant Macbeth. This power derives from his status as not born of a woman. As the witches have told Macbeth, only a man not of woman born may kill him, and Macduff claims to be such a man. The power inherent in such
a birth is related to a patriarchal fantasy of “an all-male family, composed of nothing but males,” as Janet Adelman notes in her analysis of *Macbeth* (139). In this fantasy, men would ideally not have to rely on women at all in order to reproduce. This idea of men being the sole progenitors of children is of long standing. An early written record is Aeschylus’ fifth century BC play *The Eumenides*. There Apollo proclaims that it is only the father who is a true parent of the child. The mother is only the vessel, the nurse of the seed that the father has sown. In his attempt to excuse Orestes’ murder of his mother, Apollo makes it clear that mother and child are no more related than strangers (line 657). In the fourth century BC, Aristotle adds scientific weight to Apollo’s claims, stating that “reasoning and observed fact” show that the father is the one who “generates” the child through his semen, whilst the mother is the one “out of which it generates” (113, 111). Although the mother may contribute the space for the foetus to grow in, and the material, the soil so to speak, in which it grows, it is the father who is the child’s creator, just as the carpenter creates a bedstead out of wood (113). These texts evidence a desire to eradicate the mother’s involvement in human reproduction. On a more everyday level this is, of course, not possible, but a way of minimising the maternal impact is to remove the child from her body at the first available moment. Such is the birth of Macduff, who, although obviously having grown inside a woman’s body was at least “from his mother’s womb untimely ripped” (5.10.15-16). As Adelman notes, in an echo of Pliny: “violent separation from the mother is the mark of the successful male” (144). It is thus not enough to be born early; the birth must also be violent. A man who can carve, or rip, his way out of his mother, such as Macduff does, or kill his mother, as Tristram does, has secured a heroic future for himself.

Being born this way also ensures that the mother dies. Until very recently, women did not survive a caesarean section. In some literary cases, they are already dead, as is for example Coronis, the mother of Asclepius, the god of medicine. Apollo, the father of the
unborn Asclepius, kills Coronis when he finds out that she has been unfaithful. As she lies on the funeral pyre, he decides to save the boy, by cutting him out from her corpse (Edelstein 4, 31). Thus, in these various stories, sons are rescued from the potentially harmful influence of their mothers. Being “prematurely deprived of a nurturing maternal presence” is what gives a man power, saving him from the potentially feminising effects of the mother (Adelman 144).

**Conan and the tradition of dead mothers**

Unlike the heroes mentioned so far, the original Conan appears to have had a mother who survived giving birth to him. The character was created by prolific pulp fiction author Robert E. Howard. Between 1932 and 1935, Howard wrote twenty-one stories about the character, set in a prehistoric period he called the Hyborian age. Most of the stories were published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*. It appears that Howard himself was not really interested in Conan’s immediate family background, stating that the character “seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness” (Jones 907). Howard’s Conan is an adult who does not need parents, and the only reference to his mother is oblique. In the story “Black Colossus” Conan says that he “was born in the midst of a battle” and that the “first sound my ears heard was the clang of swords and the yells of the slaying” (Howard 116). No further information is given as to the fate of his mother. Howard simply stated that Conan “was born on a battle field, during a fight between his tribe and a horde of raiding Vanir” (Jones 900). Later developments of the character, including fan-created timelines constructing an internal chronology for the stories, which Howard set in no particular order, continue this tradition (Bertetti 23). This fan-work is also the basis for the later Dark Horse *Conan* comic books (24). In these comics, published from 2003 onwards, the mother has been given a name, Fialla, and is introduced as fighting alongside her husband in a border skirmish. When she goes into labour, the men in her tribe
protect her, and the circumstances of his birth are taken as an omen that the boy will become a great warrior (Comicvine n.pag.). At the time of writing, she is still alive.

Regardless of Howard’s own narrative preferences as regards mothers, he places Conan “within a Western prototypical heroic pattern” (Elliott 52). Thus, when the Conan-stories were adapted into the film Conan the Barbarian in 1982, the conventions of Western narrative tradition came into play. These conventions demand that heroes grow up without mothers (Åström “Symbolic Annihilation”), and so the young Conan is forced to watch his mother be decapitated by the main villain, Thulsa Doom. The 2011 version retains the dead mother, and kills her off even earlier, during the prologue, before the opening credits. Yet, unlike, for example, Queen Elizabeth, Macduff’s mother, or Coronis, Fialla is not weak, unnamed, or adulterous. She is a warrior, clad in leather and metal armour, fighting in the battle alongside her husband, Corin, and other members of their barbarian tribe. When her assailant stabs her in the belly, she retaliates and kills him with her own sword. When Corin comes to her aid, she tells him “I want to see my child before I die.” She then hands him her knife, so that he can open up her belly and free the child. She holds the baby and names him, before dying. In contrast to the other mothers mentioned, she is an active subject who makes demands, and chooses the place and manner of her death. The unnamed mother in the 1982 version of Conan appears transfixed by Thulsa Doom’s gaze, and meekly allows herself to be decapitated. The 2011 Fialla, however, kills her own murderer. Despite her brief presence on the screen, Fialla’s words and actions make her a memorable character and present her as a hero.

This heroism is evoked later in the film. Conan’s friend Artus uses the way Fialla died to explain Conan’s extraordinary bravery and fighting skills to the heroine, Tamara: “Most men are born to their mother’s milk. His first taste was of his mother’s blood. He was battleborn.” Because Conan was born during a battle, and because she gave her life for him,
he is a hero. This is not an attempt by Artus to make Tamara feel sorry for Conan, having lost his mother, nor is it perceived that way by her. Her response is that a birth in battle renders Conan unfit for anything but killing. Although the two characters view warfare and killing differently, both Artus and Tamara regard the mother’s heroic action as conferring hero status onto her son.

Up to this point, it is tempting to read this reinterpretation of the death in childbirth-trope as a valorisation of the mother. Yet there are complications. As has already been noted, a mother’s nurture may make a man weak. One form which this dangerous nurture may take is breastfeeding. There is a longstanding Western distrust of breastmilk as poisonous for the infant. Although the mother’s milk is ideally the best nourishment for the infant, medical texts, as well as lay traditions from the Middle Ages onwards, have expressed fears that the breastmilk would cause illness or death. The milk was also suspected of making sons effeminate (Åström “Corrupte Mylke”). These fears have continued into the present time, and are particularly prevalent in newspapers and online forums for pregnant and new mothers.5 Viewed in this light, Artus’ comment that Conan did not taste his mother’s milk, only her blood, takes on a more sinister tone. Since Conan did not nurse at his mother’s breast, he has not imbibed a substance that may make him effeminate, or ill. He has been able to grow up strong and masculine.

Conan’s birth also features Adelman’s “violent separation” of son from mother. The film’s opening sequence, detailing the ancient history leading up to the film’s events, segues into an image of a child floating in a womb. This womb is pierced by a sword. The next shot is of Fialla’s attacker pulling the sword out of her belly. Just like Macduff, Conan is untimely ripped from his mother. Thus, even though she chooses to have the child cut from her, rather than let it die with her, the son is separated from her through violence, to live on with his father, whereas she dies.
That Howard’s Conan is transformed into a hero who loses his mother early, a mother from whom he is separated violently, may be seen as a reflection of what film scholar Hannah Hamad has termed postfeminist fatherhood. Hamad argues that beginning in the early years of the twenty-first century, a new type of hero, the postfeminist father, has begun to appear in films. This is a character whose masculinity is based on his ability to nurture and care for his children: he is “emotionally articulate, domestically competent, skilled in managing the quotidian practicalities of parenthood” (2). Although Corin is never shown to change nappies, he has successfully raised his son as only a man can. He has taught him to fight with swords, and, more importantly, he is not afraid to tell his son that he loves him. It appears that after the mother’s death, father and son have lived together without the need of any maternal figure. This lack of mothers, and privileging of fathers is a prominent feature of narratives of postfeminist fatherhood, Hamad notes (3). In order for fathers to reach their full potential, mothers must be marginalised, or removed completely.

Western heroic narratives thus require that sons leave their mothers behind, embrace their fathers’ heritage, and avenge their deaths. This is what happens to Conan in both the 1982 and the 2011 versions of the story. As Nicky Falkoff notes, although the 1982 Conan is somewhat unfocused in his endeavours, his quest is to avenge his father, and when he faces Thulsa Doom, his parents’ murderer, he charges him with the deaths of his father and his tribe but he does not mention his mother (128, 132). In the 2011 version, Fialla has avenged herself on her killer, an insignificant raider, so there is no need for Conan to seek revenge for her death. The narrative instead constructs a drawn-out death scene in which Corin sacrifices himself for his son, when the villain Khalar Zym steals his sword and the ancient artefact he has been guarding. Corin’s death subsequently haunts Conan for many years, until he manages to track down Khalar Zym, take back the sword and kill him. With this task completed, Conan chooses, not to settle down with Tamara, who evidently wishes him to do
so, but to return to his father’s tomb to show that the sword has been retrieved. What happens afterwards is anybody’s guess, but the narrative appears to suggest that communing with one’s father’s spirit is more important than forming relationships with the living. A dead father thus trumps a living girlfriend, whereas a dead mother is soon forgotten.

At first glance, Fialla’s character, manner of death, and the way she is evoked later, all suggest that the trope of the propitious maternal death in childbirth is being subverted. However, this subversion is at best superficial. To all intents and purposes, Fialla is as marginal as Queen Elizabeth, Macduff’s mother and Coronis. And the character who has any lasting effect on Conan is his father. He is the parent who teaches him about sword fighting and everything else he needs to know. Corin is the parent whose expectations and standards Conan wishes to live up to. It is true that in the Hyborian world that Howard created, there are “no mothers, grandmothers, aunts … and only a couple of sisters of any merit” (Elliott 58), but at least in Howard’s universe the adult Conan rejects all family members equally—he has no need of either father or mother. It is the film makers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century who make the character fall in line with all the other heroes who must reject their mothers and embrace their fathers. It appears that Pliny’s claim still holds true: it is an excellent omen for a child if his mother dies violently and painfully. At least on film.
Works cited

   http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Eumenides.htm


Falkoff, Nicky. “Arnold at the Gates: Subverting Star Persona in Conan the Barbarian.”


http://theblogthattimeforgot.blogspot.se/2009/10/it-is-end-of-all-hope.html


https://archive.org/stream/plinysnaturalhis00plinrich#page/n7/mode/2up


1 “Auspiciatus enecta parente gignuntur, sicut Scipio Africanus prior natus primusque Caesarum a caeso matris utero dictus, qua de causa et Caesones appellati.” Page 192 in the Wernerian Club edition.

2 It is usually assumed that he was born through a caesarean section.

3 Frank Coffman, however, has shown how Conan grew out of Howard’s early writing.

4 Fans of Robert E. Howard state emphatically that the fact that the 2011 Conan was birthed through a caesarean section rather than vaginally means that he is not battleborn, which would be a break with the whole mythos (Harron).