

ERIC PAUL SHAFFER

THE OTHER MOTHER, ON SOLOMON'S JUDGMENT

When the king commanded the child be halved, I could not bear the lie and begged the babe be given his true mother. The naked, wailing boy was not some inn-keeper's disputed bill at dawn, after a night of torches and silks, wine, dainties and song. It was only right. My child was dead.

I was desperate, but my grief not enough to spill the blood of innocents on the stones of the court. I'm a harlot. Others and more would come. Yet the boy was bestowed on me. And now, I raise a child not mine, decreed by a fat man with a low throne and a high opinion of his own

crafty wisdom, which profits only his subjects who still their tongues. At noon, *she* broods on us, mother and child begging in the marketplace, she, rapt with persimmons or dates cradled in her arms. At dawn, I draw the day's water from the well, and she watches, sentimental and grand

with weeping. But mark my wisdom, she comes not to lament this child. Her gaudy modesty mocks her sister whores who dote on the nameless, sireless sovereigns we raise. She thrives without her burden, childless, admired for my buried son, pitied for her empty arms. "Neither mine

nor thine," she shrieked that day, and still, she is right. I remember the boy she buried, my child, the one she mourns so extravagantly for the comfort and constant gifts kind-hearted, soft-headed fools grant a grieving mother, while I lay daily with the faithless and filthy to feed her abandoned son.