Today, the debate over motherhood in US seems inexhaustible. Commentators anxiously note women’s growing tendency to delay childbearing until they reach “advanced maternal age.” Journalists and bloggers write hyperbolically of the alleged “mommy wars” between stay-at-home mothers and those employed outside the home. Feminists decry the “motherhood penalty” that women with children suffer in the workplace. And an endless stream of maternal memoirs attest to the widespread sense that motherhood and childrearing have become highly vexed issues.

Yet heated debates over motherhood are by no means a new phenomenon. Professor Plant will look back to the mid-20th Century, an era that many Americans now envision as a simpler time, when familial roles were more clear. She will argue that the cultural ideal of motherhood in fact underwent a major shift during these decades, as Americans came to rethink fundamental assumptions about what it meant to be a good mother. Previously imagined as an all-encompassing, life-long identity rooted in self-sacrifice and suffering, motherhood increasingly came to be viewed as one component of a more multifaceted self, as well as a source of self-fulfillment. In surprising ways, this new conception of motherhood helped to facilitate the rise of liberal feminism.