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“Always Different?: Exploring the Monstrous-Feminine and Maternal Embodiment in  
Organisation”

Paper submitted to *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** - This article problematises the notion of woman-as-monster and draws together a conceptual analysis of the monstrous-feminine and its relation to maternal and monstrous bodies including its implications for equality and inclusion in the workplace.

**Design/methodology/approach** - Whilst exploring how female monsters are inextricably tied to their sexual difference, I draw on social and psychoanalytic perspectives to suggest how such monstrosity is expressed through ambivalence to the maternal. I analyse two ‘faces’ of the monstrous-feminine in particular: the archaic mother and the monstrous womb (Creed, 1993) and develop this discussion in relation to the potential for a feminist monstrous politics of organisation.

**Findings** - Firstly, I expose the basis on which the monstrous-feminine articulates and disarticulates femininity, that is to say, how a feminist analysis of monsters may enable but also foreclose a positive articulation of disruption, disorder and disorganisation central to the conceptualisation of monsters. This is done through a reading of the maternal-feminine and literature on motherhood in organisation studies.

Secondly, I locate the monstrous-feminine in the body and explore how maternal bodies are constructed and experienced as monstrous as they disrupt the self/other relationship. This analysis suggests that embodying the monster comes with risks and that different configurations of the monstrous maternal are necessary for equality and inclusion in the workplace.

**Originality/value** - The article identifies and contributes to growing research on the ambivalence of monsters and expands a neglected area of the feminine and maternal aspects of these relationships and what this means for workplace relations.

**Keywords:** abjection, difference, femininity, maternal embodiment, monstrous-feminine, psychoanalysis, work/organization.

## **Introduction**

Monsters are often typified by their relationship with alterity, uncontrollability, liminality and unknowable differences and by their frightening presence, their power, excessiveness and quantitative differences that organisations may attempt to manage and utilise (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999). For example, historically the economic power of monsters was harnessed through the freak show (Dorn, 1998; Dunn, 1989; Grosz, 1996) and more recently the Hollywood co-optation of the loveable monster (in films such as *Monsters Inc.*). A defining feature, as Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999) note, are that monsters are replete with ambiguity or undecidability and are part of organisational life. Indeed, as demonstrated by various treatises on monsters, there is a relation to the Latin *monstrare* meaning to show, demonstrate or prove and to terms signifying omens, signs and warnings (Law, 1991;

Munro, 2001; Thanem, 2011). As Thanem (2011) explores, the implications of these roots are that the meanings attributed to monsters have been ambivalent and understood through extreme differences (Shildrick, 2002) that are perceived as threatening because they are both knowable *and* unknowable. They are knowable in terms of aesthetic, physiological or characteristically visible differences typified by being present or being *marked* (Munro, 2001), but are also unknowable because they represent an uncontrollable, excessive difference – an intolerable ambiguity (Grosz, 1996). Sociological analyses attend to how monsters are culturally and temporally located and whether we are all monsters but some barely look like monsters at all (Law, 1991). Drawing on Nicholas Moseley’s *Hopeful Monsters*, du Gay (1994) explains that monsters are those who have not yet found their time or those not quite ready for the world. These studies reveal how monsters threaten the social order, they are marked (Munro, 2001), are mutants or creatures of exception but that there is also an arbitrariness to their classification. For the study of organisations, this intolerable ambiguity and ambivalence manifests in the control and management of monsters.

Feminist debates on the maternal body explore how our bodies are always already capable of being monstrous (Gatrell, 2011; Riad, 2007; Thanem, 2011) and this is no more apparent than when the body seizes our attention at times of dysfunction, appearing to us in an alien form (Williams, 1998:61). As Betterton (2006:81) writes, “what if that otherness is enclosed in our bodies, as yet unknown, neither friend nor enemy, growing inside our own flesh and blood?” The other within is unknowable but also intimate and connected to what makes us anxious about our bodily selves (Betterton, 2006). Such feelings may manifest in the awareness of particular organs over others, for example, locating and fixing our attention on certain areas of the body

such as the womb or the breast. We break the spontaneous, unreflective relationship with our bodies when they are disrupted where "...our normal modes of bodily disappearance tend to become profoundly disrupted. The body, in other words, becomes a central aspect of experience, albeit in an alien form: it *dys*-appears (i.e. 'appears' in a *dys*-functional state). Suddenly we may come to feel *dys*-embodied, alienated and betrayed by our bodies" (Williams, 1998:61).

The 'estranged alien', thing-like presence exposes a sense of liminality and prompts the dissolution of boundaries such as the divisions between self/other. This is demonstrated in studies of the maternal and motherhood in organisation (Gatrell, 2011; Höpfl and Kostera, 2003; Riad, 2007) which draw attention to this dissolution and its effects for gendered subjectivity. Such liminality has prompted scholars to question the politics of marginality (Shildrick, 2002; Thanem, 2011), equality and inclusion to which this special issue attends. As Thanem intimates, "an organization theory that directs attention to the study of monsters in social life may give important insights into the status of formal organizations and to the processes that seek to organize social life outside such entities" (Thanem, 2006:166). Thanem (2011) goes some way to conceptually redefining monstrosity and locating monsters as an organising principle. However, there has been less focus on closely examining the feminine and maternal aspects of these relationships. The purpose of this paper is to bring together feminist and organisational perspectives to examine the psychoanalytic and social aspects of the monstrous-maternal-feminine. As Creed (1993:1) notes, "all societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject". The construction of woman-as-monster stems from the psychoanalytic idea that the mother is castrated. This paper draws on this

notion and the social/cultural implications for organisations of a feminist monstrous politics.

In relation to embodied and lived difference, as Braidotti (1996) notes, the Greek term *teratos* suggests both prodigy and demon and evokes fascination and horror and is thus structurally ambiguous (Betterton, 2006). Teratology, as the science of monsters, “was largely a mystic and superstitious doctrine until it was linked more closely to the medicalization of bodily regulation” (Grosz, 1996:57). As Braidotti (1996) argues, a key point, and one that I draw on in relation to organisations throughout the paper, is that the monstrous structurally organises (and disorganises) differences in terms of same/other; normal/abnormal; sacred/mutant (Betterton, 2006). Drawing on Bakhtin, constructions of the carnivalesque body (Williams, 1998), one that is out of control, stresses its transgressive potential (Stallybrass and White, 1986), especially a corporeal transgression, *redrawing* boundaries of silent dualities between self/world, inside/outside or mind/body (Leder, 1990). Teratologies thus invoke classifications of monstrosity.

This paper contributes to debates in which the abject status of monsters, as both unknowable and uncontrollable, troubles the relationship between self and other. I attend to hitherto less developed discussions at the intersections between the monstrous-feminine and maternal-feminine in organisation (Dale, 2001; Gatrell, 2011; Haynes, 2008a, 2008b; Höpfl and Kostera, 2003; Longhurst, 2001, 2008; Riad, 2007). Feminist contributions have hitherto explored psychoanalytic approaches to demonstrate the power of the monstrous, its excesses or lack (Creed, 1993), and the emancipatory potential of recognising one’s own monstrosity by embodying the

monster (Shildrick, 2002). In contrast, studies of the maternal in organisation analyse the social and cultural effects of the maternal body and issues of discrimination and inequality in the workplace. A turn to the monstrous-maternal furthers current empirical discussions in the field and offers us a way of understanding material, cultural and institutional repressive dynamics in organisations (Riad, 2007:205).

Thus, the conceptual contribution of this paper is threefold: firstly, the maternal-feminine is central to the idea of the monstrous-feminine as a figure of horror and this relates to the materiality and physicality of woman and women's maternal power of procreation. This is no more apparent than in empirical studies of motherhood in the workplace and visual cultural representations in popular culture. Secondly, as Betterton (2006; Braidotti, 1996) notes, the monstrous helps organise structures of difference in relation to binaries such as self/other; normality/abnormality and sacred/mutant. This paper attends to how these binaries institute particular relationships between corporeality, subjectivity and identity politics of marginalised individuals and groups in organisations. Thirdly, there are all too familiar ways in which the power of the monstrous is co-opted and reproduced as restrictive and repressive notions of (in)equality which leads us to examine the double bind that occurs in embracing one's own monstrosity. These manifest in both positive and negative stereotypes of women in organisations such as labels of queen, goddess and martyr or office bitch, seductress or man-hater (Telford, 2003) The cultural/political position of the monstrous-feminine thus has significant implications for our understanding of equality, inclusion and discrimination in organisations and raises the question of what is politically liberating and what is risked by embracing the monstrous (MacCormack, 2004; Ussher, 2006). Does the monstrous-feminine help us

to think differently about a feminist project and its relation to equality and inclusion in the workplace?

In this paper I bring together psychoanalytic and sociologically inspired accounts of the monstrous and maternal feminine, both neglected areas in the study of organisation. The paper is presented in three substantive parts: firstly I explore how the maternal body is managed and the social/cultural effects for subjectivity and organisations. Secondly, I draw on psychoanalytic approaches where significant research has been undertaken on the ontological status of the monstrous-feminine especially in the context of popular culture. This serves to demonstrate its liminal abject status and has key organisational implications for difference and inclusion. The aim of this discussion is to emphasise ways in which the psychoanalytical and social/cultural aspects of monstrosity can be brought together to inform a feminist monstrous politics and invert the essentialising functions of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1986, 1993). This echoes Halberstam's (1995) concern of the dangers of a wholly psychoanalytic explanation and the importance of showing how monsters are historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal. Thirdly, and finally, I turn to the political position of the monstrous-feminine and whether women are able to escape these problematic representations. I highlight the tensions of current notions of equality and inclusion reproduced by organisations which seek to excise or manage monsters and which serve to threaten the corporeal limits of subjectivity (Grosz, 1996).



## **Managing the Monstrous Maternal Body – Implications for Equality and Inclusion in the Workplace**

What may be risked and what is politically liberating by embracing the monstrous (MacCormack, 2004)? And what does this mean for a feminist politics of the monstrous? In this section I explore in more depth the relationship between the monstrous, maternal-feminine and organisation. The wealth of literature on women's lived experience, maternal subjectivity and (pre- and post- birth) maternal bodies in management and organisation primarily highlights social explanations for the repressive and oppressive dynamics experienced by mothers in paid employment (Riad, 2007). These studies serve to highlight the monstrous-maternal in action, or indeed ways in which the monstrous-maternal is tamed, co-opted or utilised in organisations. Arguments of inclusion, for example, are often based on the utility of the maternal-feminine in terms of gender balance or positive assumptions for organisations of the maternal as synonymous with being gentle and kind. Riad (2007) provides an interesting embodied autoethnographic account of motherhood and work and highlights the ambiguities and ambivalences of being a mother at work. In her account, organisations reproduce particular notions of discrimination and marginalisation of mothers which either work to silence or excise maternal subjectivity or reproduce problematic assumptions of motherhood. Riad notes the ways in which children can become objectified as accessories to professional image: "Exhibit A – family" (Riad, 2007:211) and this erases signs of the maternal in neatly framed boxes. The implications of Riad's analysis expose ways in which the (uncontrollable) maternal is contained, seductively reproducing many of the stereotypes of the maternal-feminine and work (Riad, 2007) such as idealised notions

of mothers as gentle and selfless (Gatrell, 2008, 2011). In addition, forms of reverse discrimination or feminine organising principles that privilege restrictive views of femininity become reproduced.

Gatrell's (2011) cogent literature review investigates the material conditions faced by employed mothers and serves to highlight the seductive stereotypes of motherhood reproduced in organisations alongside its negative consequences. This includes the negative assessment of firm, decisive behaviour or perceived lower job commitment in which the monstrous archetype of the emotional, excessively irrational pregnant manager is reproduced. Clear decision-making skills, as opposed to nurturing, are more likely to be seen as domineering and dictatorial (Gatrell, 2011). Similarly, Haynes (2008a) describes the subtle practices mothers are subjected to in accountancy, with its emphasis on rationality and emotional detachment, such as questioning work commitment and belonging (Haynes, 2008a). According to the *Equal Opportunities Commission* one fifth of new mothers experience some form of discrimination in the workplace (Gatrell, 2011). Legislation and scrutiny of equal opportunities is placed upon pregnant employees and maternity rights at work in order to reduce discrimination and protect pregnant women (King, 2003). However, the *Equalities Review (2007) Fairness and Freedom* report stresses that becoming a mother is clearly one factor that above all leads to women's inequality (Tyler, 2009). The themes highlighted in these studies suggest that the maternal has long since been something to be constrained and that such embodied differences are a source of widespread discrimination in which difference becomes problematically structured.

Pregnant bodies represent a similar problem in that they become monstrous by being 'unreliable' (Gatrell, 2011, Mäkela, 2005) such as potentially increasing sickness absence. However, there is also evidence of presenteeism where employed pregnant women remain present at work despite feeling sick (Gatrell, 2011). Pregnancy, as a condition that deviates from 'normal' health (Gatrell, 2011; Young, 2005), represents the disintegration between self/other boundaries, a central aspect of the monstrous. What is evident is that the body becomes a vehicle for displaying conformity and non-conformity to social norms where the maternal is both expected yet out of place and where others feel anxious and uncomfortable (Haynes, 2008a). The maternal body represents a site in which the sacred/mutant are at play. Longhurst (2001; Holliday and Hassard, 2001) echoes this point where maternal subjectivity elicits the feeling of being out of place, looked down upon (Riad, 2007), and of not being included given the norms of male embodiment. The body splitting into two and body parts enlarging are a source of anxiety for some employers that invokes suspicion and fear and therefore expulsion from the organisation (Longhurst, 2001; Kitzinger, 1994). Davidson and Cooper (1992) also comment on the reduced commitment of employers to the careers of mothers post-birth. The perception of the alien body at work (Tyler, 2009) contributes to the negative appraisal of workplace performance and pregnancy discrimination. Thus, monstrous bodies are troublesome or expelled and where the ideals of equal opportunities legislation do not echo the practical and lived experiences of employed mothers (Gatrell, 2011). The result is often degendering and disembodiment of mothers, symbolically expelling the 'whiff of kitchen and nursery' (Cockburn, 2002:185, cited in Gatrell, 2011), or naturalising mothers' different needs as difficult (Riad, 2007). Milk leaking from a breast and the politics of public breast feeding (Van Esterik, 1992) are key examples. The implications of these

studies highlight ways in which the monstrous is controlled in line with organisational objectives and the negative effects experienced by women who are caught in the paradox of organisational commitment and parenthood.

As Tyler (2009:2) asserts, “Sacking women from their jobs because they have identified as ‘maternal subjects’, and abjecting them to the ‘private sphere’ of domestic labour” highlights the fundamental problematic that women “are only able to enter the public sphere through processes of maternal abjection – painful processes of splitting and disavowal. Even when women accomplish this process and achieve some degree of ‘equality’ they will nevertheless be continually interpellated by their relation to the maternal”. The norms that construct the maternal-feminine thus lead to the repression of motherhood in the workplace. Whilst Riad (2007), Gatrell (2011), Haynes (2008a), Longhurst (2001) and Tyler (2009) have focused on the material and institutional conditions of the maternal in organisations, what is necessary is further research on the political and symbolic systems that organise social relations (Riad, 2007). Demonstrated in these studies is that the monstrous-feminine poses a disruptive force to habitually reproduced notions of equality and work becomes a source of maternal ambivalence (Almond, 2010). A feminist politics that harnesses this force as a mimetic strategy may serve to disturb workplace routines and break the dualism of career/children but also raises the question of whether it is advantageous to those who are its objects (MacCormack, 2004; Weiss, 1999). In other words, is it possible to embrace the monster? My contention is that this becomes problematic unless we attend to and question the political and symbolic systems that organise, or indeed govern, the monstrous-maternal. As Tyler (2009) points out above, maternal abjection results in mothers disappearing as ‘maternal subjects’ in order to be

organisational participants. Or alternatively the maternal is something which is seen to be harnessed by organisations. Having explored the literature on motherhood and the maternal in an organisational context, I now turn to representations of the monstrous-maternal which raise ontological questions concerning the status of the monstrous. This opens up discussion to alternative psychoanalytic perspectives and serves to highlight the political potential of the monstrous-maternal.

### **Representations of The Monstrous-Maternal-Feminine**

In this section, I primarily draw on psychoanalytically inspired studies to further explore the liminal, abject status of the monstrous-feminine. Through Kristeva, Creed (1986) locates five faces of the monstrous-feminine: the archaic mother; monstrous womb (*cf.* Vachhani, 2009); the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman. For the purposes of this article I focus closely on two of these images, namely the archaic mother and the monstrous womb as they most closely address fears of women's reproductive functions and the maternal. Popular culture offers dramatic and intense insight into organisation (Hassard and Holliday, 1998; Rhodes and Parker, 2008) and forms an important context for understanding constructions and representations of monstrous femininity. Mulvey (1989) suggests that through representations such as cinema one is able to see the signifying practice of ideology (*cf.* De Lauretis, 1984). Central to this discussion is how the monstrous-feminine, certainly in the Western visual imagination, continues to be intimately haunted by the maternal-feminine (Betterton, 2006; Ussher, 2006). As Creed (1993) notes, all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine. Drawing on Freud, man's fear of woman is

linked to the belief that the mother is castrated. Campbell (1976:73, cited in Creed, 1993:1; see also Höpfl, 2005; Vachhani, 2009) draws our attention to the vagina as the mouth of hell, castrator and phallic mother: “There is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as ‘the toothed vagina’ – the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called ‘phallic mother’, a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch”. This is no more apparent than how numerous horror films are populated by familiar female monsters such as witches depicted as old crones capable of monstrosity (Creed, 1993).

In the context of management and organisation this manifests in a variety of ways. Telford (2003) provides an analysis of the monster in the early Victorian novel and dissects how female power is constructed as both controlled and uncontrolled to demonstrate ways in which female managers court or militate against power. Telford deconstructs female monsters through the binaries of good/bad and controlled/uncontrolled and demonstrates how such conceptions play out in terms of the mother, maiden, mistress and monster but that these haunt and restrict female managers. Whilst the term monster often carries negative connotations, as Telford (2003:111) notes, it can also represent an admired character in the sense of “‘monster sacré’, namely, a kind of icon, a goddess figure, a female character whose saintly virtues raise her far above the norms of average humanity, a heroic figure (in the mould of Joan of Arc) whose altruistic actions remove from her exercise of power any self-interest or personal profit, thus rendering it safe from female misappropriation”. Telford examines how the representation of female power is presented as good/controlled in various notions such as: queen, goddess, Biblical heroine, wise

woman, saint or martyr; or reproduced as bad/uncontrolled in notions of the unsexed virago, evil, murderous or madwoman (Telford, 2003:110). This analysis exposes how the monstrous-feminine appears in the forms of the seductress, the deviant or man-hater, the bitch, the mother earth role, or the pet role (Davidson and Cooper, 1992, cited in Telford, 2003:118). The implications here are that despite positive connotations the monstrous still translates into restrictive options for female managers and raises the issue of how to escape from the heuristic binaries of good/bad subject positions.

Female monsters in mythology and representations in popular culture are tied to their sexual difference and “when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (Creed, 1993:7; see also Almond, 2010). The mother is thus also implicated in the reproduction of monsters (Stacey, 1997). Whether it is the aggressive mother, the unassailable ‘yummy mummy’ or the ‘Mama Grizzlies’ Sarah Palin invokes (“You thought pit bulls were tough? Well, you don't wanna mess with the mama grizzlies!”, remarked Palin), these designations reify phallogocentric notions of femininity as they have historically always already been defined for women rather than by women. These designations define what is considered monstrous and construct the image of an “acceptable”, or at least tamed, female monster. Examples of this are the terrible mother in *Psycho*, Ripley in the film *Alien* who represents the reassuring mother (Creed, 1986) or contemporary cultural examples of the monstrous (often working class) mother unable to exercise control over her children and symbolic of the neglect of maternal responsibility (Tyler, 2009).

The film *Alien* provides a complex and ambivalent representation of the monstrous-maternal especially the archaic mother. Sigourney Weaver's portrayal of Ripley's character represents an example of the 'tamed' or acceptable female monster and the film, more broadly, engages with representations of the monstrous womb (cf. Höpfl, 2005). The on-board computer and support system is aptly named 'Mother'. As Creed (1986:69) notes, "She [Ripley] signifies the 'acceptable' form and shape of woman. In a sense the monstrousness of woman, represented by Mother as betrayer (the computer/life support system), and Mother as the uncontrollable, generative, cannibalistic mother (the alien), is controlled through the display of woman as reassuring and pleasurable sign". Creed stresses that the nightmare of the monstrous-feminine is repressed once the alien has been disposed with by returning to the notion of birth as a pristine affair. The archaic mother can be linked to the ancient mythology of Mother-Goddess (cf. Telford, 2003), however, what is significant is that Mother Alien is terrifying not because she is castrated but because she castrates (Creed, 1993:22). The ambivalence of the maternal in representations such as *Alien* is played out in the monstrous as both goddess-like and archaic but also threatening and horrific.

A common interpretation of the maternal is perhaps most apparent in the variety of interpretations of Perseus's myth of the Medusa in which Medusa is mediated by difference, a difference grounded in monstrosity and which invokes castration anxiety (Cixous, 1976; Creed, 1986). In Freud's (1964) essay "*Medusa's Head*", Medusa's head takes the place of female genitals. In psychoanalytic terms the primary monster is the mother (MacCormack, 2004). As Creed (1993) expresses, "it is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the



mother's genitals, for the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (Creed, 1993:2). How these representations are interpreted in an organisational context require closer examination as they necessitate a rereading of key aspects of the Oedipus complex and castration crisis which move beyond bipolar sexual difference, namely the *male-hero-human* and *female-boundary-space* (De Lauretis, 1984:121). This is a key point for organisation studies, that in order to embrace the monster these designations must firstly be redefined.

The ambivalent relationship to the maternal is commonly expressed through Kristeva's (1982) theorisation of abjection especially in the power of horror (Grosz, 1994, 1996). Cancer and pregnancy have both been described as abject conditions by Kristeva (1980; see also Stacey, 1997). The alienation of the body from the self raises a dualist metaphysical puzzle (Williams, 1998:63) that questions the corporeal limits of subjectivity where the monster is part of us but separated from our sense of self. This has implications for studying the maternal-feminine in organisations, as Grosz (1992:198) asserts, the abject "signals the precarious grasp the subject has over its identity and bodily boundaries, the ever-present possibility of sliding back into the corporeal abyss from which it was formed". Identity, system and order are thus disrupted (Douglas, 1966; Kristeva, 1980, 1982; Vachhani, 2012) and as Stacey (1997) explores, the desire to escape abjection has its roots in the fear of the mother's body, one which needs to be understood as a construction marked by patriarchal culture. Drawing on Mulvey (1989), this raises the question as to *why* the maternal body is associated with decay and is predominantly symbolised by liquidity and leaking (Shildrick, 1997). Shildrick (2002:31) develops the idea that maternal

embodiment highlights the uncontainable, unknowable and vulnerable nature of embodiment where the pregnant body is ‘actively and visibly deformed from within’ (Thanem, 2011:83; Betterton, 2006). Maternal bodies are constructed as difficult to organise as they are unpredictable and leaking; natural yet monstrous (Haynes, 2008a; Warren and Brewis, 2004).

The insinuation is that maternal bodies *need* to be organised and the relationship built on individuation and order. As Stacey (1997:86) also exposes, “To enter the Symbolic Order, the subject must separate from the maternal body in order to achieve autonomy...The maternal figure is thus constructed as abject and turned into a terrifying spectre who may protect the child from the burdens of responsibility, but also may prevent the proper individuation by clinging greedily to her offspring. Seductively conforming, yet stifflingly claustrophobic, the maternal body continues to tempt and to repel in a patriarchal culture so bent on individuation and order” (*cf.* Höpfl and Kostera, 2003; Gatrell, 2011; Riad, 2007). Central to Kristeva’s notion of the abject is that it is the place where meaning collapses and as such must be radically excluded (Kristeva, 1982). However, although the abject must be excluded as it is morally threatening, it also defines life and is thus tolerated. Given this inextricable connection, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up their proper place in relation to the symbolic (Creed, 1986:46; Gallop, 1982; Höpfl, 2004). However, as Gallop (1982) explores, the mother is associated with the pre-verbal or semiotic and therefore tends to disrupt the symbolic order. A full examination of Kristeva’s abjection is beyond the scope of this article, but what is useful here is the relationship between the maternal and the monstrous and the desire and repulsion that mediate the two. Above all, the abject is ambivalent and the

maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires which have implications for the politics of equality, inclusion and discrimination in the workplace. Thus far, I have considered social and cultural representations of the monstrous-feminine and, using psychoanalytic theory, discussed the maternal which situates and locates the feminine in various (monstrous) guises. I have explored aspects of equality and inclusion, the abject and how monsters threaten an already defined symbolic order. I now turn to the organisational implications of the monstrous and maternal feminine for a feminist monstrous politics. This discussion serves to further highlight the repressive material, cultural and institutional organisational dynamics (Riad, 2007) that are unable to bear the (metaphorical) weight of maternal embodiment (Gatrell, 2008, 2011; Haynes, 2008a, 2008b; Longhurst, 2001; Riad, 2007) and questions whether a feminist politics is possible in organisations.

### **The Potential For a Feminist Monstrous Politics**

I return to the question of how the monstrous-feminine is played out in organisations as both a site of resistance and subversion but that it also risks being expelled from organisations, as abstract entities, not seen as places for bodies that produce and secrete blood, milk and other maternal functions (Höpfl and Kostera, 2003). Thus, the maternal is both powerful and threatening but its power is also dissolved in the context of formal organisation. Embracing woman-as-monster has implications for our understanding of a monstrous politics of organisation. The key issue, as I raised at the start of the paper, is whether the monstrous-feminine enables a radical rethinking of femininity and helps us to think differently about the feminist project. Throughout this paper I have explored representations of the monstrous-feminine and how it is

circumscribed by maternal embodiment. Representations of the monstrous-feminine in myth and visual representation may construct the feminine as active but this may not aid in reconstructing the monstrous-feminine as a positive sign - “The feminine is not *per se* a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse” (Creed, 1986:70). This tells us more about male desires and fears rather than elucidating feminine desire or subjectivity (Creed, 1993) and is demonstrated in the literature on maternal bodies at work discussed above. The ambivalence of the monstrous-maternal is seen in the archaic mother and monstrous womb where the mother is the producer of monsters and also represents the fear of incorporation expressed in archetypes from the mother-goddess to the seductress or man-hater.

This enables us to consider the politics of reclaiming these identity positions as “feminist” or “liberated” (ibid:7). Thus, the key question for feminists is whether the female monster could be a reclamation of power, or woman’s “power-in-difference” (for example, Cixous’s, 1976, *The Laugh of the Medusa* re-writes Medusa as smiling and laughing) or, indeed, the ‘promise of monsters’ - the monster as a productive process (Betterton, 2006; Haraway, 1992). The “visibility” of monstrous difference (whether it is constructed through disability, race, sexuality or class, for example) is always already available for co-optation by organisations and highlights the limits of diversity “management”. This raises a double bind in that those designated as marginalised other are often only able to use already designated subject positions to challenge hegemonic norms (Thanem, 2011). Rearticulating the monstrous-feminine as a positive sign is central to a feminist project able to redefine sexual difference as the interplay between different sexualities, genders and subjectivities, and one that

breaks with essentialist notions of woman as matter-substance, nature and fluidity.

However, there are risks to this endeavour.

Firstly, a key organisational implication is the need to address the political position of the monstrous-feminine and that a feminist monstrous politics rests on how *power in difference* can be articulated within current organisational contexts. The monstrous-feminine destabilises and disarticulates categories of sexuality, gender and subjectivity but is always at the risk of exclusion, stigmatization or marginalisation if we continue to think of monsters in a dualistic mode of either good or bad (Shildrick, 2002). In terms of maternal embodiment, certain articulations of motherhood are sanctioned. Culture is saturated with images of mothers yet theoretically she is a shadowy figure (Baraitser, 2009). As Baraitser notes, the mother is the impossible subject, par excellence. “The ever-widening gap between her idealisation and denigration in contemporary culture and her indeterminate position as part object, part subject within western philosophical tradition the mother has always been left hopelessly uncertain with all the death-like and dreadful connotations that the abject possesses” (Baraitser, 2009:4). Whether it is public breast feeding, bringing children into work or symbolically erasing any trace of maternal embodiment from the office, identifying as a maternal subject may enable a monstrous politics that questions the ontological stability of monsters and makes such categories strange (Halberstam, 1995), and where the position between the idealised and denigrated, sacred and mutant is a rearticulation of the monstrous-feminine.

In organisations we see archetypes of the monstrous-feminine and various female cultural models played out in the office bitch, seductress, man-hater, nice girl and

Mother Earth (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Katila and Meriläinen, 1999; Katila and Meriläinen, 2002; Nencel, 2010; Sotirin and Gottfried, 1999; Telford, 2003). The political potential of the monstrous-feminine is still unrealised as individuals and groups continue to be silenced or “managed” through diversity initiatives or organisational cultures insistent on “being yourself” but only within acceptable (or acceptably monstrous) bounds (Thanem, 2011). This only serves to strengthen the paradox and negative definitions of the knowable, manageable and always already defined monster, one that marks the limits of organisation where the business case for monsters is legitimated through the virtues of needing to be diverse (Thanem, 2011). Indeed, given that some monsters are more monstrous than others, we must be mindful of how and whose difference is marked and who is doing the marking that inscribe both visible and invisible monstrosity. For many feminists the monstrous-feminine is already prescribed and defined through phallogocentrism (MacCormack, 2004) as we see in various cultural representations. The monstrous is organised, classified and ordered in relation to primarily Western cultural discomfort with (female) bodies (Betterton, 2006; Braidotti, 1996). One way to rearticulate the symbolic order is to examine how those designated as vulnerable in hegemonic culture are often more powerful in challenging it and that such a micro politics allows for alternative expressions of identity and embodiment which test the threshold of tolerable, knowable humanity (Grosz, 1996; Thanem, 2011).

The second implication is that a turn to a maternal ethics of organisation which embraces natality (Tyler, 2009) may be a way to further unpack the potential for an ethico-political monstrous-feminine, or a positive monstrous ethics that is ethically and culturally transformative rather than legislatively prescriptive. This would help to

further uncover the deep structural relationships between the maternal and organisation that contribute to restrictive institutional conditions and question the ways women are continually interpellated by their relation to the maternal (Tyler, 2009). This should, however, come with care not to reproduce biologically essentialist assumptions or problematic divisions between marginalised and dominant groups in organisations. This leads to the third implication that closer attention to becoming-monster, how it manifests in organisational discourses of the maternal (Höpfl and Kostera, 2003) and its ambivalence in characters such as vampyric mothering or bad mothering (Almond, 2010) provide a fruitful way to develop these encounters. This turn questions the privileging of nurturing and whether the fascination and horror with the maternal-feminine serves to intensify, in oppressive ways, the monstrosity of the monstrous (Weiss, 1999) that results in the painful process of splitting and disavowal central to the maternal function.

“Becoming monster is fraught with the threat of being named monster by someone else in the wrong terms, as the wrong kind of monster within the wrong discursive episteme. But what becoming monster does successfully achieve is the emphatic refusal of phallogocentric categories and boundaries that have been set up monsters-semi-monsters and the rare normal subject” (MacCormack, 2004:37). In conclusion, by attending to the monstrous-feminine in organisation, we may be better able to appreciate “how bodies, emotions and sexualities disrupt and shift boundaries of social and organizational norms” (Thanem, 2011:6) but without attention to the different types of monsters, how they are gendered and brought to bear on social relations in organisations, these boundaries may serve to reconstruct and solidify existing stereotypes of feminine subjectivity and maternal embodiment. A fascination

with monsters illustrates our “pleasure and fascination with our mirror-images, a fascination with the limits of our own identities as they are witnessed from outside” (Grosz, 1996:65). Providing a robust ethico-political account of monsters in organisational life (Thanem, 2011) requires examining how any monster may be used to signify any thing, through totally idiosyncratic associations (Weiss, 2004:124). Embodying the monster invokes a feminist monstrous politics that exposes the acts of naming and defining the monstrous (and the reasons for the acts) (MacCormack, 2004) as a way of realising the necessary subversive potential and risks of becoming-monster. Only then will different figurations of the monstrous-feminine be positive alternatives for us all.



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