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Blood Relations: Feminist Theory Meets the Uncanny Alien Bug Mother

LYNDA ZWINGER

This essay addresses the troubling and uncanny figure of Mother in feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism, and real life. Readings of feminist literary criticism and the films Alien and Aliens explore the liminality of Mother and the consequences for feminist thought and practice of the persistent narrative modes (the sentimental and the gothic) locatable in all of these discourses on/of Motherhood.

“Not bad, for a human.”—Bishop¹

This essay is part of a project which interrogates the place of women and Woman in the production of gothic narratives. From Monk Lewis and “Mother” Radcliffe to Herman Melville and Sigmund Freud to Flannery O’Connor and any number of films inhabiting the darkling castles of the ubiquitous multiplex, a preoccupation with the uncanny and the Mother’s body perpetuates, transforms, and animates the gothic mode’s narrative incarnations.² Euro-american culture has invested, since the Neolithic Goddess wars,³ an enormous amount of continuous cultural work in taming, binding, dividing Mother. A significant part of that work involves attempts to tame the power of the mother by insisting on a border between representations of the nurturing mother necessary to the middle-class bourgeois dominant culture and the transgressive power maternity might achieve if left to its own (supposed) desires. And like all borders, this one is constantly threatened by permeability, liminality, ambiguity.⁴

The work of establishing and reinforcing categories to protect us against ambiguity and anomaly is never done, nor is the pleasure of contemplating (ostensibly) safely contained fictional ambiguity and anomaly ever exhausted. Ridley Scott’s 1979 movie *Alien* offers us the supreme shiver of horror: a mother so gothic she will collude with evil capitalists and aliens in the murder of her

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children. The gothic castle in this text is an interstellar trading vessel; the ship's computer (caretaker, supervisor) is called "Mother." Mother's children, the crew, spend their time squabbling, whining, shirking work, goofing around, bickering about their shares of the profits. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Mother and her children are at cross-purposes—uncanny, deadly, terrifying cross-purposes.

After Mother wakes the crew, and before the ill-fated shuttlecraft (the *Nostramo*) gets clear of its line to the mother ship (the line is called the "umbilicus") to set out on its alleged rescue mission, Captain Dallas taps out on the bridge's computer keyboard: "What's the story Mother?" The story Mother tells turns out to be a sentimental fiction designed to enable an entirely different agenda.⁵ The real story is utterly monstrous: the Company has decided to use the human crew as whatever kind of fodder it takes to bring back a truly appalling organism for the corporate biological warfare division. (The "fodder" role turns out to be that of portable womb.)

Mother's (real) story is aided and abetted by one of the crew, her truest child: Ash turns out to be an android, his uncanny hybrid mechanical-organic status horribly and suddenly revealed in a battle-to-the-death with Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver, who reprises the character in James Cameron's 1986 *Aliens*) who has by now wormed the *Nostramo*'s true mission out of Mother. Ash is not only closest to Mother in his uncanniness,⁶ he is also, I think, the most abject object in the film (a tough competition, admittedly): during his "death" scene, he gushes and spurts and oozes blood and guts and electronic components of an entirely unacceptable milky color; he also occupies, incidentally, the place of the undead for a moment, when his severed head is reattached long enough for a final, horribly mobile sneer at the mere humans and their chances of survival.

The mission is well-nigh accomplished before Ash "dies." A mysterious "thing" has merged horribly with—and/or invaded and penetrated—crew member Kane's face. Kane's subsequent status is for a time uncanny and ambiguous: he is not quite alive and not quite dead; he is the creature's . . . what? Victim? Lover? Spouse? Food? Mother? The "thing," which embraces his head with long, bony, knuckled, fingerlike appendages and completely covers his face with its, uh, body, looks something like female genitalia (at least it does when Ash has it splayed out in an examining dish). But it also has a tubal/phallic appendage inserted deep into Kane's throat.

This creature dies when its task is finished. Later, in the bloody birth parody (it's also a horrific erection parody), a second creature is "born" of this union. This one grows and grows—and kills and kills. (Kane, as it turns out, can't bear it: he dies, dis-constructed in a reverse gestation process into gobbets of tissue and geysers of blood.)

When it finally confronts lone human survivor Ripley (nearly undressed, in her jammies as it were, ready to go to sleep for the long journey home), it is

huge, menacing, and even seems to be lasciviously relishing having Ripley in its (? his, her, their, whatever) power at last. But, like the crudest of melodrama villains, it lingers just a little too long. As time runs out, Ripley manages to strap herself down and to open the hatch; her adversary is sucked out into the void. The Alien screams and cries shrilly, dangling from the shuttle, attached to the opening by an umbilical-like cord. The cord remains attached to its midsection as it spirals out into deep dark space. And, the last we see of it, the Alien is not (yet?) dead.

“I said no, and I mean it. . . . I’m not going back.”—Ripley

In Scott’s movie, Ripley wins her battle with the Alien. But our satisfaction in her victory ought not to deflect our attention from the battle Ripley loses. Mother—long since demonstrated to be aligned with patriarchy (the Company), machines (Ash), and alien animals as against her “own” children—wins this penultimate struggle.

As part of her strategy against the Alien, Ripley has caused Mother to activate an automatic nuclear self-destruct mechanism. She is going to escape with Jones the cat in the shuttlecraft, and the Alien will be destroyed in the explosion of the main ship. Just as she (and the viewer) begin to relax, Ripley discovers that the Alien is hiding in the shuttle. She flees. There follows a long, increasingly suspenseful race against time, Ripley gasping for air and running desperately down long hot corridors, fumbling at switches and levers, trying to stay calm enough to perform the fail-safe manual override sequence that will abort the impending explosion. As the cool voice of Mother obdurately continues the countdown, Ripley completes the final step, just in the nick of time.

But Mother, betraying both technological and cinematic convention, continues her doomsday count. When she realizes that Mother won’t back down, Ripley shrieks in terror, anguish, and frustration: “Mother! You Bitch! Goddam it!” Ripley’s epithets (like “bitch,” “goddam”), an instance of what Edmund Leach has called “animal abuse” (Leach 1964, 28) imply that Mother is no June Cleaver; she belongs (like the Alien) to an ambiguous, possibly unplumbable category. The mother Ripley thought was there operates by a set of rules (she is, after all, an operating system); the Mother who/which turns out to be there does not.

Mother’s betrayal could be explained away, extra-diegetically, as a technical malfunction, but all “her” other evil acts are intentional, all following a logic based on the Company’s scheme to use the kids to incubate specimens for its biological research division. And yet how can a machine uncannily exceed its programming?⁷ As mother and as machine, Mother is in horrific excess of her ostensible functions.

Should we bother worrying about this? After all, Ripley wins. But just as James Cameron’s 1986 version of Ripley will not meet our desire for unambig-

uously feminist mother-heroes, Scott's Mother is not merely the Company's girl. If "bitch" and "goddam" reinstall the human/animal overlap undergirding the category "Mother," so the final closeup of Ripley and Jones the cat evokes a similar grey area. We're left wondering if the cat's been impregnated (as we will in *Aliens* about Newt, another little one rescued by Ripley from the grip of the Alien). The carefully composed image of the virgin warrior woman settling down for a long winter's nap with her pet may make us muse about the precise extent to which Ripley (any woman) is really Mother's daughter—with her "unnatural" affinity for loyalties which make a mess of species, gender, and ethical boundaries.

"We're in some real pretty shit now, man!"—Hudson

Mother is a problem. She's been figured, refigured, configured, disfigured as (and the following list is partial, incomplete, fragmentary—the usual feminine mess): who we must think back through; who we want to/don't want to/can't/won't be; who is locked up in the attic; who seduces *every* body—really, first, and always; who we must and will (and possibly can't altogether) abject; who is or is not the object, an object, our object; who has or has not, is or is not the Phallus. I cannot here (or in this lifetime, I sometimes think) review these and the many other perspectives taken on the mother in feminist literary theory: I want just to advert to my own feeling that every time I think I've got a nice tidy lock on this stuff, some tentacle of this monster trips me back into chaos.

The monster trope comes easily, "naturally." Unsurprisingly, feminist literary critical discourse, like the other narrative discourses discussed herein, is populated by monsters. Jane Gallop, for example, notes that they are frequent figures in feminist discourse. She calls attention to the opening sentence of the Editors' Preface of the first feminist issue of *Yale French Studies*: "This is a very unusual issue of *Yale French Studies*, in that its guest editor is a seven-headed monster from Dartmouth." Gallop notes the feminist re-vision in this gesture: "The editors are saying: Look, we are horrifying, we are monstrous, we are inhumanly ugly. This turns out to be an ironic way of saying: Look, we are 'very unusual,' we are beautiful, we are extraordinary" (Gallop 1989, 13). That the monster persistently lurks near mother in feminist theory is nicely borne out in another Gallop review essay, this one on Garner, Kahane, and Sprengnether's *The (M)Other Tongue*; here, Gallop calls the hybrid concept Mother-Other "the monstrous word" (Gallop 1987, 317), and a revealing typographical error both "monstrous" and "an alien within the mother tongue" (*ibid.*, 328).

And why not? That seven-headed monster is, after all, also or therefore, the mothers—or mother—of the issue. One of the etymological roots of "monster" is "to warn," and the insistently returning repressed monstrosity of Mother testifies to something ominous which persists despite the re-visions devoted to

her. For not just in word, but in deed, mother is a gender-monstrosity: ostensibly grounded in biological certitude, motherhood is constructed by and for and in a discourse which persists in trying to keep “bad” behavior out of it. This might help to explain why feminist theoretical use of mother tends to produce discourse populated by monsters. And why when monstrosities like female hostility, anger, and rage are banished, what we have left doesn’t help us with Mother.⁸

“Hey, Vasquez, have you ever been mistaken for a man?”—Hudson (to female Marine)

Marina Warner’s work on Mariolatry (wherein motherhood is rendered safe for patriarchy by dint of de-sexualizing it—getting it separated from the “low” category of the female body) records hundreds of years of symbolic work expended on the project of patrolling the patriarchal border which installs a binary image of woman to defend Christianity against the “evil,” often triple, goddess. And, in what one might have felt safe in assuming to be a completely different cultural (not to mention historical) venue, Madelon Sprengnether has located a similar if not identical policing effort: “despite Freud’s own position as an agnostic Jew, his account of the vicissitudes of desire via the Oedipus and castration complexes parallels and reinforces the split encoded in Western Christianity between woman as asexual mother (Mary) and as erotic object (Eve)” (Sprengnether 1989, 305). What kind of unholy alliance joins centuries of Christian gender imperialism and the godless modern scientist?

As we know, two elements in a binary pair—mother/slut—can always be shown to collapse toward the middle. But more important for my purposes here is a slightly different point. As Edmund Leach puts it:

the physical and social environment of a young child is perceived as a continuum. It does not contain any intrinsically separate “things.” The child, in due course, is taught to impose upon this environment a kind of discriminating grid which serves to distinguish the world as being composed of a large number of separate things, each labeled with a name. . . . It is crucially important that the basic discriminations should be clear-cut and unambiguous. . . . But how can such certainty of discrimination be achieved if our normal perception displays only a continuum . . . ? We have to train our perception to recognize a discontinuous environment. We achieve this . . . by means of a simultaneous use of language and taboo. Language gives us the names to distinguish the things; taboo inhibits the recognition of those parts of the continuum which separate the things. (Leach 1964, 35)

Taboo helps to provide us with a representation of a stable environment and self “by suppressing our recognition of the nonthings which fill the interstices” (ibid., 37), graphically represented as the area of overlap between the circles “p” and “not-p.” The intolerable paradox of matter that is both “p” and “not-p” means that the suppressed material becomes a focus not only of special interest, but also extreme anxiety. The taboo, then, as Mary Douglas has taught us, exists to isolate insistent ambiguity, persistent anomaly, recurrent liminality—anything our cultural, aesthetic, political taxonomies find it impossible to control by separation into categorically pure divisions.⁹

In order to begin to be able to see the extent of the mess mother is and is in, another dimension must be added. Body, sex, and sacred borders are not only established and patrolled by the cultural work of language, taboo, narrative, representation—they are also hierarchized. Grounding their analyses in cultural studies work on transgression, taboo, and the grotesque, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White discuss the “complex cultural process whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 2). They argue that “a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity” results from the impossibility of maintaining (whether in political practice, cultural theory, or symbolic representation) a clean, clear border between hierarchy positions—not only is such division impossible, “the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its fantasy life” (ibid., 5). And in reading a dream of Walter Benjamin’s, they demonstrate¹⁰ (a word nurtured by the etymological roots of “monster”) that the mother is a privileged site of such commerce: “In the boy’s fantasy, the mother was also the maid whose hand unlocked the gate to the murderous deaf-mute. She must be split, as he was, between the pieties of the household and the ‘blasphemous indifference’ of the teeming streets of Berlin. . . . Like the ghost, the mother mediates between the lined cupboard and the sinister and forbidden corner of the parental bedroom. . . . the mother symbolically repeats . . . the maid . . . the site of transgressive desire” (ibid., 169).¹¹ “Mother,” then, is precisely an ambivalent, fearsome, powerful, confusing categorical space, in all kinds of discursive and nondiscursive formations—which tends, of course, to provoke rather than discourage attempts to constrain her.

“No, have you?”—Vasquez (in reply to Hudson)

Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Taboo of Virginity” (1917) opens with a panoramic (and voyeuristic) review of certain monstrous practices of “primitive peoples,” practices “*alien* to our own feelings” (Freud 1953-74, 9: 193). Reviewing the available material on the taboo of virginity, Freud notes that “wherever primitive man has set up a taboo he fears some danger”—earlier in this essay figured by Freud as “something not understood or uncanny” (ibid.,

197)—and it cannot be disputed that a generalized dread of woman is expressed in all these rules of avoidance” (ibid., 198). But, he concludes, the “general taboo of women throws no light on the particular rules concerning the first sexual act with a virgin” (ibid., 199).

To make a long story short, Freud decides that the taboo of virginity is motivated by “our” fear of the woman’s hostile response to her “deflowering”: “we” fear she may respond aggressively because “a woman’s *immature sexuality* is discharged on to the man who first makes her acquainted with the sexual act” (ibid., 206). (This aggression is not necessarily always—or maybe ever—completely discharged, we are told.) The “immature sexuality” of which Freud speaks here centers on, of course, the notorious penis wish: *mature* female sexuality is marked by a conversion of that wish to a wish for a child.

This essay is also invaded by a monster: Judith, (officially) Apocryphal woman-warrior and alien-slayer marches in, via quite a patri-genealogy of narratives (the extent to which Judith is presented through male-authored fictions in Freud’s essay reminds me of nothing so much as of the wagons circled defensively in the classic Western film—or of the embattled marines of *Aliens* holing up on the planet LV 426). Freud cites a contemporary Viennese comedy titled “Virgin’s Venom” (an Arthur Schnitzler short story) and Hebbel’s *Judith and Holofernes*—all versions of the Judith story—as evidence that “the taboo of virginity . . . has not died out in our civilized existence” (ibid., 206). The biblical Judith (who is a widow) boasts that she has not been defiled by Holofernes. Hebbel’s Judith goes her one better than that: she is a married virgin (her husband was paralyzed on their wedding night by a mysterious anxiety). She allows Holofernes to “deflower” her, whereupon she rises up and beheads him—thus, according to Freud’s reading, becoming the fearsome monster the taboo of virginity exists to protect “us” from. Judith is a virgin who has clearly not surmounted her immature penis wish—what *she* wants is not a child, is not motherhood.

Thus Freud’s Hebbel manages by dint of a wonderfully circuitous denial to keep mother separate from the monster. But the very ingenuity expended on that separation calls our attention to two details of this maneuver. First, as Freud notes, it has something to do with keeping the mother *sexually* “pure”—thus “our” anxiety about mother’s sexuality is exposed. Second, which Freud does not note because the essay is devoted, precisely, to not-noting it: it has something to do with separating any conceivable connection between the violence attributed to the Virgin and *anybody’s* mother. Freud’s curious conclusion is of a piece with this denial: he ends the essay with a reference to the paradoxical reaction of wives who have not discharged their hostility yet “still cling to their first husbands . . . but no longer through affection. . . . They cannot get away from them, because they have not completed their revenge upon them” (ibid., 208). This continuing, lifelong aggression of women—it

has nothing to do with mothers (certainly not with my mother). These women can't be mothers—they're virgins, and anyway they make their husbands impotent.

In the logic of "The Taboo of Virginité," then, Judith is a man-slayer/warrior—and is *therefore* not-a-mother.¹² This gesture of naming by denial is anatomized (by precept and example) in Freud's "The Uncanny" (1917), an essay haunted by virgins, monsters, the domestic, and their ever-present appendages: the oscillating, repressed but returning, familiar/familial terrors that turn out to lead always back (in)to Mother. This continuous and prodigious effort devoted to dividing and then policing the separation of Mother from the virgin is provoked and accompanied by fear of the monstrous return of whatever we are trying to jettison (and the detritus will vary, of course, historically and culturally). What we are always looking for is the definitive gesture that will reassure us that the boundary thus asserted is nonpermeable, a fact of nature; what titillates and frightens us is anything that reminds us of the constant threat of collapse into the middle, the gray area of both/and. The gothic genre in general exploits both these desires (for reassurance and for titillation) in its preoccupation with the continual struggle to narrate a self *out* of the uncanny goo and horrifying trickiness of the material from which we must construct it: the boundlessness of infancy, the internal war between self and Other, the family, desire, and, perhaps most notably, the Mother-self border.

These are also the major thematic concerns of James Cameron's 1986 film *Aliens*. Faced with an alien invader whose specialty is rubbing our noses in the horrific, murderous, monstrous aspects of childbirth, a Judith-like Ripley, in her words, "[blows] it out of the goddam airlock." This film aims at the same cultural work Freud's essay does: to persuade those of us who have had mothers—and (perhaps less pointedly) those of us who would be, might be, could be put in the Mother position—that *only* the sentimentally validated qualities (convenient lists thereof to be found on any Hallmark Mother's Day card rack or *The Cosby Show*) are "motherly." The non-motherly qualities are, of course, *unheimlich*, monstrous, gothic, alien. Like Ripley, like Freud, we try to eject them, to confine them to dreams, infantile complexes, "stories and imaginative productions," or to dismiss them as primitive fears and dreads (Freud 1953-74, 17: 403).

Cameron's Ripley defies patriarchal authority (in the guise of an investigating committee of The Company) but bonds with the male-adolescent corps of colonial marines (apropos of a *very* large phallic weapon—"Where do you want it?" she suggestively smirks at the tough, cigar-chewing sergeant). In the course of the story, she moves in and out of a number of gender positions—the tremulous-voiced noncombatant (she's dubbed "Snow White" when she's in this mode), the competent big machinery operator, the natural leader, the noble soldier (this would be her Judith phase): all of these are mere prelimi-

naries (or maybe basic training) for the big one. Ripley, having left her cat Jones behind on this trip, catches and tames the sole survivor of the colony, a girl named Newt, and ultimately does the Rambo thing and saves her single-handedly from the evil Alien. And in the process saves the universe from the monster too. (Maybe. There seems to be room for a sequel.)

To put this another way: the asexual-virgin mother Ripley appropriates the big phalli of the Colonial Marine Corps and becomes a monstrous killing machine in order to fight an even more monstrous mother (supplied with multiple *organic* phalli) and thereby defeats the monster/mother in herself as well. For Ripley, sentimental mother par excellence (she's engaged in an interstellar *Not Without My Daughter* plot) is the only one equipped to ask and then answer the quintessentially gothic question: "So who's laying these eggs?"

Bishop, the "artificial person," replies, "I don't know. It must be something we haven't seen yet." This exchange stages the oppositions the narrative is working to effect: the difference between the alien mother Ripley (it's not, after all, *her* planet) and the alien Mother Alien (neither is it hers—or his—or its); the difference, too, between the human species and the . . . whatever it/they are. Thus, we get this bit of dialogue between Newt and her new mom: Newt: "My mommy always said there were no monsters—no *real* ones. . . . Why do they tell little kids that?" Ripley: "Most of the time it's true." Ripley's job in the film is to do whatever has to be done to reestablish, in reasonable security, the fictional status of monsters in general and the sentimental status of *human* mothers in particular. (Her choice of strategies, by the way, is to "nuke the site from orbit . . . it's the only way to be sure"; it gets an enthusiastic endorsement from what's left of the Corps.)

The Mother-division the film works to effect lies along the axis "human/animal."¹³ The fly in the ointment here is reproduction: in its monstrous biological insistence it is "animal." (In *Aliens*, it is one *very big* "animal.") While it might seem obvious that "they" are not "us," these distinctions turn out to be all too rickety. The film works to impress upon us the threatened human/animal distinction in many ways. One notable gesture is the enormous number of close-ups of the human cast, intercut constantly with gooey, slimy, nasty animals and animal parts.¹⁴ The uncanny oscillation of the "natural" species boundary also displays itself nicely in two moments of dialogue. When Ripley suggests that the "aliens" have begun a counterattack on the humans' home base, Hudson (the macho-man-turned whiner—as we all knew he would) howls in repudiation: "What d'ya mean? *They* cut the power? How could they cut the power, man, they're ANIMALS!" And Ripley's scornful indictment of Burke, the Company man: "I don't know which species is worse. You don't see *them* fucking each other over for a percentage!"

Thus, the movie's perhaps *most* famous line is the challenge with which Ripley "calls out" the Bug for the final showdown, a showdown that has been called, revealingly, a huge cat fight. As the Big Bug stalks the terrified Newt,

once again reduced to insectlike scuttling, a huge door whooshes open. Inhabiting the enormous technological chrysalis-like “loader,” framed monstrously and in shadow, Ripley, who now looks very like the other mother, spits: “Get away from her you Bitch!”¹⁵

In addition to providing a wonderful—albeit (therefore?) sexist—catharsis, this moment reinstalls the animal imagery at its most liminal/uncanny: as noted above, “bitch” is an instance of the kind of “language of obscenity” termed “animal abuse” (Leach 1964, 28): “The thesis is that we make binary distinctions and then mediate the distinction by creating an ambiguous (and taboo-loaded) intermediate category” (ibid., 45). Domestic animals are located in the tabooed gray area of both “p” and “not-p,” both “us” and “not-us.” (Thus, not surprisingly, we tell ourselves both sentimental and gothic stories about our pets: e.g., the dog that saved the baby; the dog that ate the baby.) “Bitch,” then, even as it assimilates the monster to a convenient domestic-squabble category, is at the same time a not-so-comfortable step away from Jones the cat (left behind at the beginning of this movie), whose role as Ripley’s familiar and fellow survivor in *Alien* is taken up in *Aliens* by another domestic unit, the barely tamed, liminally-named girl-child Newt. All of which serves to remind us of both the animal and the uncanny qualities lurking ambiguously in *Mother*.

The Big Bug messes up the gothic/sentimental, human/animal mother boundaries in other ways too. In the scene in which we, with Ripley, discover the Bug in her, uh, nursery, s/he/it (the Bug) actually seems curious about Ripley and the rescued just-in-time Newt (newly detached from a cocoon and newly attached—fiercely clinging—to Ripley). The Bug’s first impulse is not mayhem. It is only after Ripley, almost clear of the nursery, deliberately torches all the egg pods in sight (classic overkill, as Ripley knows that the planet is about to disappear in a nuclear explosion) that the Bug sounds a war cry. During the ensuing chase sequence, the camera cuts briefly to the Bug’s face (well, head, anyway) as s/he/it apparently learns from Ripley’s action how to run the elevator. And the Bug’s pursuit of Ripley in the first place is in defiance of the monomaniacal concentration on reproduction attributed to insect queens.

So the Bad Mother (the Bug) is both a Good Mother (from an alien-ated point of view), and a baaad Mutha (in the marine tongue). And Ripley looks disconcertingly like Sylvester Stallone as Rambo as often as she looks like Claire Huxtable. Does this mean that *Mother* is a bitch? That the rescuing, nurturing, protective mom is indistinguishable from the aggressive, raging, fierce, scary Mother? And if the lethal virgin and mother are both in actuality aggressive, bloody, bossy, enraged, enraging, fierce, murderous, how are we going to get out alive?

The narrative has an answer that will work, well, “most of the time.” There’s a reason we don’t have to worry about Ripley’s heimlich status, not even when she is most Judith-like (unless we’re critics). For when she sports the various

phallic weaponry of the marines, she does so by permission. She's initiated in the use of these weapons by the future wounded nuclear father, Hicks, in the movie's only approach to a heterosexual love scene: having demonstrated most of his big gun's features, Hicks balks when Ripley wants to master the nuclear grenade launcher. Ripley's riposte, "You started this. Show me everything. I can handle myself," is punctuated by a loving close-up cheek to "cheek" with the everything in question. Plus, her subsequent Rambo masquerade is performed *for the sake of her child*, not to gratify any illicit desires of her own (she's not, that is, moved by Freud's big gun, penis envy).

In the course of buttressing the Mother-division, this sentimental motivation purifies and recuperates other scary ambiguities and transgressions too. The first person we notice looking at Ripley appreciatively is Vasquez, stylized Chicana lesbian grunt,¹⁶ who murmurs, "Que bonita. . . ." In a later scene, Ripley's hesitant, distinctly feminized briefing on the aliens is interrupted by Vasquez's (fellow-Marine approved) macha gun posturing. Ripley replies fiercely (interestingly, she is equally fierce with the other "mannish" woman she has an exchange with, the token woman on the Company's board of inquiry). There follows a consistent pattern of Vasquez looking at the increasingly authoritative and respected Ripley. This is paralleled by Hicks's "courtship" behavior. The film's version of lesbian desire is indistinguishable from its version of heterosexual desire (as disquieting as reassuring, surely), except that he gets to teach her how to use his weapon and give her a locator bracelet (remarking that it doesn't mean they're engaged or anything). Vasquez just gets to die for her (of course, given the scripts of heterosexual romance, this is, again, as disquieting as reassuring). It is the manner of her death that stills the oscillation. She's a partner (with the upper-bourgeois white Lieutenant Gorman) in the one male-female embrace in this movie, an embrace impossible to distinguish analytically from any other homoerotic Fiedlerian noble death-scene embrace. They resolve (?) their differences (!) in a valiant rearguard defense of the retreating (almost-)nuclear family that culminates in a joint martyrdom—they blow themselves to bits.¹⁷

So even though the big tough marines couldn't go back to rescue the buddies who were captured alive and who face a horrible death; even though Ripley *does* go back, against all odds, risking death, for the one left behind; even though she, like Vasquez, proves to be more macho/a than the rest—her sentimental mother status is not threatened. After all, this battle can convert even the hardest heterosexuality-resisters, and just as Vasquez sacrifices her desire and her life to the cause, it is only in order to preserve her position as new, nuclear, sentimentalized mom that Ripley appropriates military, masculine attributes. The repatriarchalized Good (virgin/dyke) Mother is a Good Soldier.

The story *Aliens* apparently wants to tell us is that "most of the time" it is possible to blow those *other* (gothic, uncanny, alien) qualities out the airlock.

And to promise that we can rescue the sentimental qualities to keep for our very own. The movie closes with Ripley purged of her “borrowed” monstrosity. Exhibiting a kinder, gentler maternity, the caring, loyal, nurturing, dependable, sweet mother Ripley puts herself and her daughter quietly to bed—innocently, virginally, next to the sleeping wounded-male Hicks and Bishop (this movie’s Tonto, in a baggie). It “most of the time” tells us that there are no *real* aliens, no *real* monsters, in the nuclear family.

But after the credits stop rolling, we can hear a skittering, squishy, squeaky, creeping-running noise—the exact sound made by the aliens in their implanting phase, when they resemble female-genital-like, phallus-provided crab things. The young bugs look “female” but implant phallically; the Big “Mother” Bug has both a detachable egg-laying protuberance and multiple phalluses in her “mouth”—with teeth. (Penis dentatis?) Further, she impregnates—or causes to be impregnated—anybody and everybody: without regard to what we are pleased to call “sexual difference(s)” (evidently nobody told her about binarism). Further yet, her horrific (from the human point of view) behavior is very nearly recuperated for the Company: that scary, post-post-late capitalist entity on behalf of which Carter Burke, science fiction yuppie extraordinaire, sent the colonist families to their deaths as disposable/expendable wombs bearing biological warfare research fodder for the Company. The monster-mother and the monster corporation are in league in both these films; can we be sure what unholy alliances are forged in the process of gothicizing these particular entities over against the Ripleys both Scott and Cameron present to us?

“I knew you’d come.”—Newt

For those of us who have been thirteen-year-old daughters Ripley’s howl, “Mother-you-bitch-goddam-it,” can certainly be recognized as one of the names-of-the-mother (“M” is for the many names we call her?). As adolescents, we’ve probably all been convinced at one time or another that our particular mothers are Monsters; that if we could only somehow blow her out the airlock, our lives, our self-concepts, our discourse would be cleaner and easier. But we grow out of that just as we grow out of other “unfeminine” impulses—“naturally,” which is to say, without any necessary awareness of the added assistance of constant pressure and policing on all cultural fronts. We grow out of the intensity, the ambivalence, the anomalous, uncanny thralldom of Mother. And in our sage and sophisticated, not to mention feminist, adulthoods, we are (pretty) sure there are no monsters, no *real* ones.

Which leaves us with one big question: “So who’s laying these eggs?”

NOTES

1. Epigraphs are taken from *Aliens* dialogue.
2. See Aiken (1990, esp. 67-83) for a brilliant discussion of the gothic mode and its generic and analytic potential in feminist writing: "As the etymological links of *sublime* and *subliminal* suggest, the Gothic potentially impels us simultaneously toward the upper limits and beneath or beyond the ordinary thresholds of perception and representation" (Aiken 1990, 82). Jacobus's discussion of Bronte's *Villette* and of psychoanalytic theory and its imbrication in the (gothic) body is also fundamental for a feminist reading of these issues: "The enigma of theory returns Freud to the maternal body or fundamental space of differentiation as the place where theoretical mastery must recognize its limits" (Jacobus 1986, 165). For an illuminating use of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in a reading of the horror film (a contemporary avatar of the gothic) as a "constant repudiation of the maternal figure," see Creed (1989).
3. See, among others, Gimbutas (1982), Kristeva (1987), Stone (1976), Walker (1983), Warner (1976).
4. For an example of feminist literary critical work that puts these notions to brilliant use, see Babcock (1990).
5. This is always the task of the sentimental mode. See Zwinger (1991).
6. Difficulty in distinguishing the mechanical from the organic is one of Freud's prime examples of the uncanny (Freud 1953-74, vol. 17); see also Haraway (1991).
7. James Cameron's film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) puts into play many of the uncanny and vertiginous recombinations of sex, gender, biology, and parental mythologies explored in this essay: "'The irony of this film,' remarks Linda Hamilton (who plays the mother of the savior of the future), 'is that Arnold [Schwarzenegger] is a better mother than I am, and I'm a better Terminator than he is'" (Chase 1991, 16).
8. I have in mind here the extreme difficulty feminists have in keeping Mother analytic yet personal, historical yet theorized, academic yet anecdotal. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, editors of *Conflicts in Feminism*, had these issues in mind when they staged a conversation (which they then edited by compromise from a transcription of a recording of the original discussion) among three erstwhile "rival" daughter-feminists who have crossed the border into friends and mother-feminists: Jane Gallop, Nancy R. Miller, and Marianne Hirsch. The discussion ranges widely, touching on issues that some feminists feel should not be discussed publicly for fear of weakening whatever footholds feminism has gained in academia. It is valuable for what is said and pleasurable for the fiction that the reader gets to be "the woman at the keyhole," to misappropriate Judith Mayne's (1990) wonderful formulation. And on another level, the event usefully stages one of my concerns in this essay. The three women (and this number evokes a long history of three-ness in women's history and mythologies; see Walker [1983] for some background) often refer to their own feelings of being *both* powerful *and* vulnerable. They are clearly more interested in displaying, discussing, and acknowledging their own and one another's vulnerability (at least in the version they agreed to publish) than they are in the power. In their references to younger "generations" of feminists, they scrupulously avoid placing themselves in any but the most benign of mother-positions apropos of the students they are "training." The conversation also takes up the vexed and vexing question of feminists "trashing" (as opposed to "criticizing," another continuing and vexing distinction) other feminists—seen as an intra- and intergenerational practice.

(This issue is an extremely overdetermined and difficult one from any point of view, see Zwinger [1991], Chapter Three, “*Little Women: The Legend of Good Daughters*”).

These are all reasonable attitudes and significant issues, but I think that until we are all willing to climb down into the blood and guts of the still-unspeakable violence of even metaphoric mothering, feminist theory will be unable to progress beyond its current formulations. I personally find this thought frightening and unattractive, and that is, I think, precisely the point: the notion that we must always be *only* nice and nurturing (I’m not advocating abandoning these as standards; I’m objecting to them as the only thinkable female to female behaviors) and *never* stern, mean, sweaty, or rejecting keeps us all far too squeamish about both “power” (however one defines that) and Mother. Another way to put this is that while it is certainly a necessary and useful gesture to practice re-vision on female “monsters” (the Medusa, the witch, Medea), there is also a necessity and a utility in female monstrosity itself. (And no, I don’t want to be the first to wash my own dirty fangs in public—and yes, this is precisely my point.)

It also seems to me, in this same vein, that one result of a successful prohibition against “trashing” fellow feminists would be the loss of the contribution symptomatic readings of feminists’ writings can make to our project. A generous and helpful reader of this essay, for example, noted that it is often “flippant” and “too gimmicky”; stylistic symptoms (of dis-ease? of counterphobic impulses? of professional ambivalence?) that might open the questions I am raising and enacting to further useful analysis. (Having said which, I want to add that I have gratefully profited by this reader’s suggestion and removed some of the more egregious stuff.)

9. Babcock (1975) provides the most useful and lucid overview on this material.

10. Stallybrass and White (1986) are not concerned to locate any possible feminist critical valences in their reading of Benjamin’s dream. For a luminous feminist analysis of the mother/(nurse)maid substitutive economy, see Gallop: “If the nurse is assimilated to the mother (if the transference goes unquestioned) then the family cell can close up again” (Gallop 1982, 146).

11. This dream, as reported by Stallybrass and White concerned a ghost lurking

in a place known, tantalizing, and inaccessible to me, namely the corner of my parents’ bedroom that was separated from the rest of the chamber by an arch with a heavy, faded-violet curtain, and in which my mother’s dressing gowns, house dresses and shawls were suspended. The darkness behind the curtain was impenetrable, and this corner was the sinister, nocturnal counterpart of that bright, beatific realm that opened occasionally with my mother’s linen cupboard, in which, piled up on the shelves, edged with white trimming and bearing a blue-embroidered text from Schiller’s “The Bell,” lay the sheets, table-cloths, napkins, and pillow-cases . . . These were the hell and paradise into which the ancient magic of hearth and home had been sundered. (Stallybrass and White 1986, 168)

The day after Benjamin had this dream, his house was burglarized/contaminated by robbers determined to be in league with one of the household’s maids.

12. Revealingly, Marina Warner points out that: “In medieval times, a parallel between Judith and Mary was developed: the widely read *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, which unveiled the inner typological meaning in Old and New Testament scenes by setting them side by side, shows Judith’s triumph over Holofernes beside an all-conquering Virgin Mary, who transfixes Satan with the vexillum thrust deep into his gullet” (Warner

1976, 55). This association seems to have been left behind; Cameron's *Aliens*, it could be argued, resurrects it for secular mythology.

13. That the human/animal dichotomy is a particularly fertile space for science fiction/gothic thrills is perhaps best testified to in the remark Linda Hamilton makes apropos of her characterization of yet another hero-mom in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*: "I wanted to play her like an animal," says Hamilton, "she's savage" (Dougherty 1991, 19). See also Susan White's reading of a character called "Animal Mother" in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*: "his name is an index of that never quite expelled 'maternal' force which seems to haunt the film: Animal Mother is the fighting man (a particularly ruthless one) who must wear the banner of the fertile female principle if he is not to be subsumed by it" (White 1988, 127). This is, of course, a fate all but one of Cameron's fighting "men" fail to avoid (and we finally can't be all *that* sure about Hicks).

14. The counterphobic gesture of the multiplication of heads, of course, has all kinds of suggestive resonances with castration anxiety (which is linked to nervousness about the possible fictionality of sexual difference) and fetishism. See "Medusa's Head" (Freud 1963a) and "Fetishism" (Freud 1963b). For invaluable examples of feminist appropriation of such notions, see, among many others, Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction* (especially chapter 5, "The Father's Seduction") and Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (especially Chapter 5, "Desire in Narrative").

15. Both recall avatars of the snake-bird goddess, see Gimbutas (1982) and Walker (1983). Constance Penley has also noted the unsettling sameness of Ripley and the Bug: "Tenaciously protective, she takes on the mother alien, whose sublime capacity for destruction is shown nonetheless to result from the same kind of maternal love that Ripley exhibits" (Penley 1989, 133). My analysis of *Aliens* diverges from Penley's comments on it in her illuminating essay, which is focused on the science fiction film's preoccupation with sexual difference; see also Byers's (1989) revealing discussion of pivotal moments of misogyny in the genre.

16. When I teach this movie in introductory women's studies courses, Vasquez is often the students' favorite character (and this reaction traverses the basic race, class, gender, sex borders). While there is always a substantial amount of viewer pleasure in the simple gestures of gender reversal and class comeuppance, I would like to think that the student reaction to Vasquez speaks to a nascent desire on the part of variously sex(uality)- and gender-configured people for another representation of desire of the sort Judith Mayne discusses in *The Woman at the Keyhole*. It is important to keep in mind, however, that as a dominant cinema representation of a lesbian, Vasquez falls short of representations of lesbian desire found elsewhere—see, for example, Mayne's discussion of the films *Je tu il elle* and *Ticket of No Return*: "The films demonstrate a strategy of female authorship in which lesbian desire is foregrounded, and not simply demonstrated as the return of the repressed of the heterosexual codes of dominant cinema" (Mayne 1990, 149). On the heterosexualization of representations of lesbian desire in psychoanalytic theory, see also Roof (1990). Using these discussions as guides for analysis, we have to acknowledge that "Vasquey" (her affectionate—and domesticating—nickname) represents a hetero cinematic version of desire vis-a-vis Ripley, given that her stance seems indistinguishable from Hicks's. On the other hand, Hicks, as a Gary-Cooper-cum-Rochester (after the fire) character, may displace, ever so slightly, some of the features of the hetero hero code.

17. In a paper that examines the Alien films in terms of vampire stories and their engagement with the horrific return of the gaze, Judith Roof calls Vasquez's demise "a curious lesbian sacrifice to the cause of reproductive purity" (Roof 1988, 11).

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