

Monster Mothers: Representations of Mothers of Sons in Popular American Movies

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In “The Case of the Missing Mother,” E. Ann Kaplan writes of the four kinds of mothers in Western culture: the Good Mother; the Bad Mother; the Heroic Mother; and the Silly, Weak, or Vain Mother (128). Here, I write of a fifth: The Monster Mother. The recurring story that I have found is that bad things happen to the world when a (White) boy’s mother is power-hungry. She exhibits a high level of concern for her son’s acquisition of power, purportedly in furtherance of his interests, but really in furtherance of her own, since she hopes to influence his actions by way of their relationship and thereby essentially have power for herself. Because she thus has access to the power of being (White and) male that her son(s) have, she becomes powerful by using her sons; however, this act subverts the “traditional” male-female power dynamic, and as that happens, the boys’ sexuality is subverted as well – or so these representations suggest.¹

I got the idea for the term “Monster Mother” from the actual appellation of it to various

¹ In conducting my research, I realized that all of my cinematic Monster Mothers are either raceless or White. (I also realized that all of the directors of the movies featuring these mothers are male.) Other theorists have addressed the fact that the experience of mothering is different for women of color, but the ideology about good and bad motherhood affects them as well (albeit probably in different ways and to different extents). Thus mothers of sons of color must be absent from the catalog of Monster Mother representations for other reasons, and they are not difficult to recognize. For one, it is Blacks’ and other minorities’ marginality to all aspects of society that cause and reinforce mothers of colors’ marginality to ideals of motherhood in the first place, as Rickie Solinger discusses in *Wake Up Little Susie*; their marginality to literary and cinematic representation results from the same cause as well. Even more importantly, however, because men of color consequently have less access to power than White men, the chance at getting some of the power denied them by way of their sons cannot tempt mothers of color, nor is there much danger of them achieving any. Thus another reason why it is unnecessary for mainstream America to fear Black single mothers is that their depiction actually serves the White patriarchy by providing an excuse to denigrate another minority group’s supposedly dangerous sexuality – Black men’s – and in that regard helps to reinforce Black men’s lack of access to power, which in turn once again minimizes the risk of their mothers being able to gain any power either.

mothers in both written and visual fiction and from the representation of literally monstrous mothers in both mediums as well. For instance, the earliest literal Monster Mother – Grendel’s mother – appears in one of the earliest pieces of writing in English, *Beowulf*.² Another early Monster Mother is Edmund Spenser’s serpent-lady Errour, who eats her young. Peter Jackson’s 1992 zombie thriller parody *Dead Alive* is a movie with a literal Monster Mother;³ 2005’s

² Grendel, a fatherless (l.1355), power-hungry [“Grendel wants only to dominate the hall,” not the “outlying buildings” (35n3)] “brute” and “fiend out of hell” from “among the banished *monsters*,/ Cain’s clan” [I note that Cain’s mother too could bear the blame for her son’s and his descendants’ inferior status.] of “ogres and elves and evil phantoms/ and the giants too” kills dozens of people every night for twelve months, showing neither mercy nor remorse (ll.100-156; emphasis added). The language of one passage even suggests that Grendel commits a kind of homosexual rape when he wins a battle, “glut[ting] himself” on the men whom he defeats, “swoop[ing] on that flower of manhood/ as on others before,” and, “gorged and bloodied,” carrying away the body of the men’s leader to “feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy/ fouling his moor-nest” (ll.442-450). In the end, he is weaker than Beowulf, who brings forth from him fear and an overwhelming desire to retreat like a child to his mother, to “flee to his den and hide with the devil’s litter” (ll.753-763). The “devil’s” child dies at that point, but then Grendel’s mother (presumably the devil herself), the “*monstrous* hell-bride,” comes after Beowulf, seeking revenge (ll.1259-1278; emphasis added). Grendel’s mother takes Beowulf to “her outlandish lair” (l.1500) – another indication of her deviance – where she shows that she is an even more challenging opponent than her son, almost killing Beowulf against whom Grendel had not had a chance; only God could surpass her strength in the end (ll.1543-1554).

³ The satire genre helps to illustrate the pervasiveness of the Monster Mother trope as it by nature makes use of tropes to critique the society that creates and maintains them. The actual zombie scenes in *Dead Alive* are in many ways reminiscent of those in *Night of the Living Dead*, which starts with a scene in which a son dies at the hands of a zombie because his mother has ordered him and his sister to drive hundreds of miles to place flowers on their father’s grave while the widow herself stays at home. Later the zombie that that son, once dead, becomes is the one who delivers his still-living sister into the hands of other zombies. One could argue, then, that *Dead Alive* is simply a full-length exposition of the societal stereotypes underlying those circumstances in *Night of the Living Dead*, thus demonstrating once again the ongoing effects that those stereotypes have on moviegoers and thereby on the mothers of sons among them trying to determine the best way to relate to their sons. In this case, the Monster Mother is Vera, exerting control over her consequently emasculated son Lionel. The first scene in the movie with Vera shows her wielding a butcher’s knife, exclaiming about her ambition to be an officer in a philanthropic organization, and ordering Lionel around: all examples of her “unfeminine” relationship with power. The knife in particular is a wonderfully vivid symbol of what could be called her castration of Lionel’s “masculinity.” She begins to display acute jealousy when he directs any of his attention toward another woman, Paquita, and as the audience will learn later, Vera’s jealousy has turned homicidal in the past. Indeed, that is how she became an autonomous mother in the first place, and that is more or less what happens again during the film. [Rather than “single motherhood,” I use the phrase “autonomous motherhood” throughout this essay to avoid reinscribing heteronormative marriage-centered attitudes about parenting. Of course, “autonomous motherhood” seems to support society’s irrational ideal of complete independence instead, but it does serve to draw attention to the fact that society does largely fail to support these women – like most mothers, of course.] A Sumatran rat monkey bites her while she is spying on Lionel and Paquita’s first date at the zoo, and within days that bite causes Vera to begin eating anything living that crosses her path as well, all of which interferes with Lionel’s pursuit of romance. He even tries to show disinterest in Paquita, thus choosing his mother over the more appropriate companion, in a literal manifestation of the Freudian Oedipal pathology. Later his uncle puts him to work serving hors d’oeuvres at a party and laughs about how different Lionel is from his father, who was apparently a notorious womanizer. The implication is that Lionel is either gay or womanly, but either way he is certainly not “masculine.” Of course, *Dead Alive*, like any other satire, plays with those tropes and others as the movie progresses, but their presence and central figuration in the plot of the movie is one more indication of their continuing pervasiveness. Moreover, the character of Vera is one more example of a literal Monster Mother whose relationship with her son has fatal consequences for society itself.

animated *Robots* is another. And another 2005 “comedy,” *Monster-in-Law*, simply by replacing the word “Mother” with “Monster” in its title, provides further evidence of the easy connection that even contemporary popular American movies make between mothers and monsters.

Of course, mothers’ historical powerlessness justifies their pursuit of power by way of their sons, since for many years that was the only way that women could legitimately achieve any. That notion was even institutionalized for a time when the establishment told women seeking suffrage that they already had representation through their fathers’ and husbands’ and sons’ votes. A woman who actually did achieve power on her own was often suspected to be a witch – as though it would take magical powers for a woman to become great in her own right.⁴

The Monster Mother is also frequently celibate. As Marina Warner indicates, “Bogeymen and women are frequently imagined as single, anomalous outsiders” (28). The fact that films present her this way suggests that we are supposed to see her as lacking something as a woman, as distant from her “appropriate” role as a “true” woman. Without a man to demand her submission in (and out of) the bedroom, this mother is not-submissive – that is, she is assertive. Like her hunger for power for herself rather than just for her men, her failure to submit to sexual intercourse with a man is a symptom of her violation of traditional gender boundaries. It is not just a matter of this women being an ideal sexless mother either, though, for she does still exhibit some degree of sexual desire. However, in these films her desire is for her son, with whom she would be the more powerful partner – that is, the “masculine” partner. And because her son is

⁴ As Lucy Fischer indicates,

throughout the history of myth and religious practice, when women have been ‘granted’ magical powers by men, those powers have most often been regarded as evil or dangerous. We rarely find an image of a harmless female magician, playfully conjuring people or objects. Rather, she is cast as a figure of great perversity. (44)

In that sense, it is not surprising to recognize the language of witchcraft also pervading the discussion of what the Monster Mother can do to her sons’ sexuality.

partially his mother, indulging in her sexual attraction toward him constitutes revelling in her own appreciation for herself, an act equally inappropriate for a “true” woman. For Raymond Bellour, the essence of the Oedipus complex is a failure to replace one’s mother with another woman – a “surrogate” for the desire that a son actually feels for his mother (Fischer 24-25) – and thus the Monster Mother sexually pathologizes her son as well.

The fact that this woman is responsible for the ever-crucial upbringing of boys makes her supposed traversal of gender boundaries even more critical. These stories pertain to politics and the governance of entire nations rather than to just individual families and communities, thus emphasizing the danger to our entire society that such women represent.⁵ Joan Crawford’s daughter is angry,⁶ but Norman Bates kills people.⁷ It is significant that it is really only mothers of sons whose transgressions of “traditional” gender roles are portrayed as so horrible: Because of the political power that men can achieve, those transgressions result in problems that affect the world outside of the immediate circle of acquaintance to which the consequences of being a bad mother to a girl are usually restricted in the movies. In the Monster Mother scenario, it is not just a matter of being dissatisfied with one’s upbringing.

⁵ There are movies in which it seems to be actually the father to blame for a son’s socially significant problems, such as *Peeping Tom* (which is neither mainstream nor American, incidentally), or in which both parents bear the blame, such as *Catch Me If You Can*. However, their relative absence compared to the Monster Mother movies is telling; the absence in them of the sexuality issues that is rampant in the Monster Mother movies is, I think, to blame. Apparently if a boy’s father is present and active enough to screw up his son in ways that do not trace back to the boy’s mother, at least he can still be a “real” man. Society is just not as worried about boys as long as their “traditional” masculinity is safe, so such representations do not draw as much attention.

⁶ See *Mommie Dearest*.

⁷ In *Psycho*, Norman’s self-representation as his mother enables him to take from her her own power of self-representation, but he also attempts to offset her power of *his* creation by himself creating *her*. Thus it is a challenge to consider *Psycho* as a film with a mother in it, since Mrs. Bates herself does not figure in the movie at all – merely representations of her by way of her son throughout and by way of the policemen at the end. However, most film theory dealing with *Psycho* does consider Mrs. Bates as a character distinct from the character of her son – and indeed, Norman “as his mother” seems to be distinct from Norman “as himself” in the film. We must also recognize that rarely does a mother represent herself in anything anyway; even in feminism, representations of mothers usually come by way of their daughters (Fischer 23) – perhaps because, as so many have noted, the “creation” and responsibility of children is so great that it preempts creating much of anything else, as Fischer notes as well (214-215).

The sons, on the other hand, manage to impress the viewers with a sense of their impeccable honor, as they do not ever expressly dishonor their mothers – why don't their mothers get any credit for that?! – yet they do not completely submit to their mothers' wills either. We as viewers are supposed to be thankful that it is the men who are in power rather than their mothers, for then there would be no check on their violent ambition at all – and thus we leave with the all-too-familiar message that women are not deserving or capable of power. Were these women, we are to think, merely to be partnered with men who would make them submit to sex again – “true” men – these women would remember their place, and the world would be safer for the rest of us. As Iago says in Shakespeare's *Othello*, woman does her work in the bed.

Although the title of this paper promises “movies,” besides the others that I briefly mention above, I only have time to really analyze one story here. It is, however, the one that – well over a year ago – first gave me the idea for this paper, which has since turned into my thesis and which I hope to develop even more into my dissertation. Thus there are numerous additional Monster Mother stories that I could share with you, both in literature and in film, and there are even numerous additional details beyond what I will read from this paper that appear in the footnotes, which I have posted in my professional blog – so if you are interested, I encourage you to contact me.

A relatively recent literary Monster Mother appears in Richard Condon's 1959 bestseller, *The Manchurian Candidate*. Even his very first mention of her characterizes her as a Monster Mother: “Let her liddul Raymond pull up dead and he knew the answer from his liddul mommy. If the folks would pay one or more votes for a sandwich she would be happy to send for her liddul boy's body and barbecue him” (8). Raymond Shaw's mother, then, seeks to use her son to advance her own political power, and Raymond sees no alternative but to kill her to escape from

her power in the end.⁸ Raymond even calls her a monster in the book (239).

Raymond's mother's name is, incidentally, Eleanor, although, like Grendel's mother, whose name is absent from *Beowulf*, the word "Eleanor" itself appears very infrequently in Condon's book. Instead, he refers to her as "Raymond's mother" throughout – even when her being his mother would have no other explicit connection to the storyline at that point. Such negation of all aspects of a woman besides her role as a mother quietly gestures to and thus perpetuates the idea that, once a mother, a woman is never anything besides a mother.⁹ Instead, Eleanor is "the woman who could think but could not feel" (17) anything besides violent rage (242), with the voice of "a hard woman on the make for big stakes" (289) – all characteristics of stereotypical antifemininity.¹⁰

⁸ This scenario resembles that of Agrippina, a widow and mother to the eventual Roman emperor Nero. The story goes that Agrippina marries the emperor Claudius to give her son access to power, thus demonstrating her sexual danger. Then she murders Claudius, enabling her son to take the throne, at which point she tries to exert political control over Rome by controlling Nero – until he tires of her power and, with some difficulty, has her killed. Like Clytemnestra, despite being a victim of matricide, Agrippina gets no sympathy from her readers; in fact, in Canto XXXII of the *Inferno*, Dante makes a point of condemning her to hell for murdering her husband. *The Manchurian Candidate*, in all its versions, is also comparable to *The Oresteia*, as many other theorists also note, perhaps because Condon himself makes that comparison in the book, comparing Raymond's telling of his life story, which "all seemed to revolve around his mother" to "Orestes grip[ing] about Clytemnestra" (23) – again foreshadowing the ending. One theorist who teaches the first movie version of *The Manchurian Candidate* in a Classical Mythology course at the University of Texas also makes that comparison because, she writes, "in the novel [...] Mrs. Iselin had secretly poisoned Raymond's father" (Taylor), but there is no indication that that is actually the case, as Condon writes that the man poisons himself, without so much as a suggestion to the contrary (70) – and Condon's writing, as demonstrated throughout this part of my paper, is anything but subtle.

⁹ That, in turn, perpetuates the ideal of her subordination to nothing besides, as I discuss in my thesis, the "best interests" of her child(ren). As in the quote above, however, Eleanor does not fit that ideal – and in the book, Eleanor never seems to bother to deny that, but she does in the movie adaptations. In 1962, she tells Raymond, "You know I want nothing for myself. You know that my entire life is devoted to helping you – and to helping Johnny. My boys – my two little boys – that is all that I have." (Her calling of two men "little boys" could constitute an indication of her emasculation of them; in 2004 as well, she treats Raymond like a child, and I discuss other indications of her emasculation of the men in her life below.) Likewise, in 2004, Eleanor tells Raymond, "I did this for you, [to make you] who you really are" – that is, who she wants him to be. Meanwhile, her political statements to others indicate that it's because of what she wants to happen on a national level, which she describes as "controversial." However, she appears to belie those sentiments when in 1962 she describes what she is working for as in fact paving the way for "when I take power." The implications of that statement are the same as those created by the statements in the book listed in the next note.

¹⁰ In fact, Condon goes to great lengths to prove that Eleanor's desire for power is strictly for herself: He lists more than 28 organizations of which "she had been a member or officer or founder or affiliate," all of which she used "to claw out recognition for herself[...]. She sought power," he notes, "the way a superstitious man might look for a four-leaf clover. She didn't care where she found it" (65-66). Condon then explicitly connects her ambition with

Condon also describes Eleanor as “as ambitious as Daedalus” (23), suggesting that her drive for power will result in her son’s destruction, which it does. Raymond seeks to “keep the rest of the world on the other side of the moat surrounding the castle where he had always lain under the spell of the wicked *witch*” (150; emphasis added) – his mother, of course – because he “distrusted all other living people because they had not warned his father of his mother” (10). As Yen Lo, the Chinese doctor who carries out Raymond’s brainwashing, explains, “Raymond’s mother helped bring about his condition [of “true resentment”] to the largest and most significant extent” (43) because “His soul has been rubbed to shreds between the ambivalence of wanting and not wanting; of being able and unable; of loving and hating” (44). In fact, “Raymond did not feel emotion, and that could not be changed” (181). Raymond’s ambivalence, of course, is directed toward his mother, and Condon illustrates that throughout the book.

Eleanor, the reader learns, “cast off” Raymond’s late father while pregnant with Raymond (25) for her second husband Johnny,¹¹ but “There was more than the usual talk in their community that loud, lewd Johnny Iselin was the father of the unborn child.” Thus “To Raymond [...] his mother would always be a morally adulterous woman” (62-63) – and Johnny, as he repeatedly points out, is “*not [his] father!*” (15; emphasis in original) And yet he finds her so incredibly attractive and irresistible to him¹² that when he does find another woman to love –

masculinity by indicating that it comes from “competition with her only brother to show him which of them was the heir of [their] father” (74).

¹¹ As the reader learns later, in fact, Eleanor actually leaves her first husband because he would not submit to her control, while, on the other hand, she “ruled” Johnny (67), and “he had been custom-made by” her (91). Since she orchestrates her son’s brainwashing and is also the “operative” who uses it to control him, she literally custom-makes and rules Raymond as well. As an investigator confirms in an interview, she “manufactured” him (286).

¹² For instance, at one point he “Suddenly [feels] himself being made soft” toward her (144). At another, the reader learns that he “always felt a nagging fear that he was gaping at her beauty” (190). He thinks:

Oh, what a woman! What a beauty she is[...]. How can I look into those serenely lovely eyes, how can I be so deeply thrilled by the carriage of her exquisitely wholesome body and grow so faint at the set, the royal set of that beautiful head and not remember, not always and always and always remember

Jocie Jordan, who loves him in a more maternal way than his own mother does, incidentally¹³ – he still “battle[s] to hold the thoughts of his mother and Jocie apart” (100). Ultimately it is only allowing the conflation of the two that enables him to actually have Jocie, though, when she appears before him at a costume party dressed as the queen of diamonds – the playing card that Lo had chosen as a symbol for Raymond’s mother to initiate the effect of his brainwashing. Eleanor conflates Raymond with her romantic partners as well, for instance “wooing him as she had wooed Johnny Iselin” while telling Raymond of the “absolute sexual experience” that she was having eating a steak stuffed with oysters for lunch (193). She also twice sees a resemblance between Raymond and “her darling, darling Poppa” – her father and first sexual partner. The first time it motivates her to take and lead him by the hand in such a way that “one woman guest [tells] another woman guest that they looked as though they were rushing off to get a little of you-know-what” (260). The second time, she orders him to kiss her, “Really, really kiss” her, as she “pull[s] him to her on the chaise” and opens her robe (290). The reader is left to guess at the rest.¹⁴

His feelings are made further ambivalent by “a constant, summer-long nausea as he trie[s] to equate the daughter of Senator Jordan with the ancient, carbonized prejudice of his mother” against the Senator (99). Thus in the end, Condon is able to portray Eleanor’s compulsion that Raymond end the relationship with Jocie as motivated by a desire for political

that it encases a cesspool of betrayal, a poisoned well of love, and a city of deadly snakes? (191)

In the 2004 adaptation, Raymond says that his mother has destroyed his life and describes her as controlling – yet irresistible.

¹³ Condon also makes a point of demonstrating without question that Eleanor does not behave toward her son as a mother when Raymond’s first thought upon awakening in a hospital bed – eight or nine days after his admittance, incidentally – to see her crying is, “Is Johnny dead?” (140) He suspects that she is “just a very clever impersonator sent over to play the mother while [his] true mummy tries to sober up the Great Statesman” (140), “pretending to be [...] honest and maternal and wistfully remorseful about how we had let our lives go along—coldly and separately” (142). Raymond even tells her so: “You are such a fraud, Mother” (141).

¹⁴ There is a similar moment in the 2004 movie version, in which Eleanor kisses Raymond on the mouth and appears to be about to do so again when the scene changes.

gain (102) – and, of course, it also constitutes maternal interference with the healthy psychological replacement of the mother in the son’s affections, which Eleanor had clearly already been doing anyway. At one point she expresses the hope that he “will kneel beside [her] and thank [her] and kiss [her] hands and [her] skirt and give only [to her his] love” (144).¹⁵ Then, when Raymond does finally marry Jocie, it is only with his mother’s approbation (239), and when he (insensibly) kills her in the end, it is essentially at his mother’s bidding. It is no surprise, then, that Condon portrays Raymond as demonstrating detrimental sexual effects of his mother’s style of mothering.

Bruce Krajewski claims that Raymond is homosexual in the book (219-220), although in actuality he is merely “a sexual neutral” (235) and “inhibit[ed] against the uses of sex” (18) until he undergoes brainwashing. Lo calls it “his concealed tendency to timidity, sexual and social” (43). Nevertheless, Condon does describe him as “a very handsome man, very nearly a pretty man,” wearing his hair “in a style affected by many American businessmen of a juvenile or eunuchoid turn” (24). Condon further describes his prettiness:

He could not have moved up the scale to a better tailor because he had always used the best. He could not have worn whiter linen. His fingernails gleamed. His shoe tips glowed. His color shone. His teeth sparkled. (181)

Eleanor herself even calls him “a homosexual” in the letter that she writes to the Jordans to effect the end of her son’s relationship (104). Then, a very attractive, “very very ready” woman asks him at one point if he’s “queer” (111), and his best friend and former commanding officer Ben Marco suggests that what the brainwashers did was not just remove his inhibitions but “fix it up [...] so that, all of a sudden, [he]’d get interested in girls” (231) – so Krajewski’s claim is not

¹⁵ As though the example of Eleanor is not clear enough, Condon also includes another example of a man whose mother interferes with his capacity to have a mature relationship with another woman: 39-year-old Lou Amjac, whose longtime fiancée leaves him for another man because, as she explains it to him, “Maybe if you had been able to make up your mind between me and your mother, you and I would have been married by now” (211).

completely unfounded.

Eleanor emasculates Johnny as well, as Condon transcribes, telling Johnny, “You’ll be a goddam fool if you don’t go in there and do as you’re told,” indicating that he does not know “what the hell [he is] talking about,” and, finally, ordering him to “Shuddup!” – which he does (130). Thus Eleanor makes him “seem docile and harmless,” forcing him to crinkle “his thick lips and make them prissy” (60). Condon emphasizes the transformation that she effects by emphasizing Johnny’s formerly inherent manliness: With his “raucous laugh and [...] fleshy nose” (62), “that old-time mattress screamer and gasper [was] throughout his life quite capable of getting and giving full satisfaction with other women.” With Eleanor, however, he “found himself as impotent as a male butterfly atop a female pterodactyl” so that, in fact, “the marriage was never consummated” (70). Thus, even though she is married, Eleanor does not submit to sexual intercourse with a man, as society dictates that she should. Instead, she uses her sexual allure to get political favors from other men (81), thus epitomizing the literal danger to society of unchecked female sexuality.

The political component of this story is important here, as it is that, I argue, which makes it so film-worthy. Condon’s book constructs Johnny Iselin as a corollary to Joseph McCarthy, as, at Eleanor’s bidding, Iselin creates his political career through his accusations about Communists in the U.S. government – an approach that one person in the book tellingly calls “Iselinism” (153). The danger in it, Condon tells us, is that “Mrs. Iselin achieved more for sustained anti-Americanism and drove infected wedges more deeply between America and her allies than any other action by any individual or agency, excepting her husband, of the twentieth century” (217). Thus it is a Monster Mother – a controlling, sexually powerful mother to a son – who represents the greatest political danger to the nation.

In 1962, John Frankenheimer directed a movie adaptation of this book, although it did not begin to garner much fame until 1987 (Menand *vii*). Nevertheless, it contains many of the scenes from the book that are pivotal to the establishment of Eleanor as a Monster Mother, along with a few more vivid ones as well. For instance, the viewer sees clear indications of Eleanor's emasculation of Johnny in her control of his career when she says to him, for instance:

Well you're going to look like an even bigger idiot if you don't get out there and do exactly what you're told[...]. So just stop talking like an expert all of a sudden and just get out there and say what you're supposed to say[...]. I keep telling you not to think[...]. I will handle the rest.

Raymond too follows Eleanor's orders, but in his case he must do so due to his brainwashing. Drunk, he tells Ben: "My mother, Ben, is a terrible woman – a terrible, terrible woman."¹⁶ He indicates that he hates his mother for convincing him to break up with Josie (which circumstance differs from the book in that in the movie he does still do it himself). Nevertheless, he still cries and shows an excessive (read: "feminine") degree of emotion while lamenting that Eleanor is not "loveable," thus demonstrating the same ambivalence toward her as in the book.

Josie verbally identifies another manifestation of that ambivalence when she calls her own saving of Raymond's life after a snake bites him "Freudian," as it gives a maternal aspect to her relationship with him from the start. His susceptibility to harm from the likes of a snake¹⁷ could constitute another indication of his femininity. Bruce Krajewski cites Stanley Cavell's interpretation of Freud that "the medium of [the castration] threat [is] the woman's voice" as evidence of the threat to Raymond's sexuality that this movie depicts (221). However, he also writes that "[t]he Oedipal tension in the film seems to be one-sided" (218), as indeed, Raymond does not express any positive ideas about his mother here. Nevertheless, he does continue to

¹⁶ Then Raymond himself makes the ubiquitous reference to Orestes and Clytemnestra.

¹⁷ Which resonates with his description of Eleanor in the book from note 12 above.

tolerate and respect her, as he must to maintain the image of a good man as which the movie presents him, once again in accordance with the traditions of the Monster Mother trope. Meanwhile, Eleanor seems jealous of Josie, which circumstance also differs to some extent from the book, thus leading the viewer to suspect that she might actually have intended for Raymond to kill Josie when he does so in the end.

In the 1962 *Manchurian Candidate*, there is no indication that Eleanor is celibate with her husband, as there is in the book (where it is clear that Eleanor engages in sexual intercourse with other men anyway, although always as the aggressor). In a 2004 movie version, though, Producer/Director Jonathan Demme keeps Eleanor a widow and has her take over her husband's position as Senator after his death. These changes eliminate the justification for a mother to use her son to gain some political power for herself, as evidently Eleanor already has a lot; that makes it easy for the audience to consider any further ambition on her part to be pure selfishness. In addition, 2004's Eleanor (Shaw) is more likely to be celibate than 1962's remarried Eleanor (Iselin). In fact, 2004's Raymond literally plays the role that his stepfather does in the 1962 version, in addition to his "own" role: In 1962, Johnny is a politician running for Vice President and shot, along with his wife, on the stage. In 2004, Raymond is a politician running for Vice President and shot while dancing with his mother on the stage. And as in the earlier versions, it is Eleanor who gets him on the party ticket in the first place.

In "The Enemy Within: Inside the *Manchurian Candidate*," one of the special features on the DVD, Daniel Pyne, the co-screenwriter of the 2004 adaptation, explains the changes:¹⁸ "In

¹⁸ Interestingly enough, according to the creators' commentary during the movie, it was actually co-Producer Tina Sinatra's idea to eliminate Iselin from the 2004 version. Tina is daughter to Frank Sinatra, who plays Ben in the first film; in the second movie, Denzel Washington takes that role. Neither is likely ideal for it, however, as in the book Condon describes Ben as looking "like an Aztec crossed with an Eskimo" with "metallic (copper-colored) skin and [...] the straight (black) hair, the aboriginal look, and the eyes colored like Pôtage St. Germaine, the potage's potage (green)" (27).

2004, Eleanor Shaw [is] a force in her own right.” As Demme and Pyne discuss in that clip, in general, what people fear has changed, but one thing that they fear has not. Pyne explains that with political power in “the hands of someone as damaged and scary as Eleanor Shaw, disaster could ensue[...]. Eleanor Shaw is the enemy in the film.” He concludes that this movie is “a mirror of who we are and who we’ve become.”¹⁹

That discussion continues in their commentary during the movie itself. In it, they say, Meryl Streep, as Eleanor, draws attention to issues of mother-love and the character’s enactment (or lack thereof) of a “balance of mom and power.” She is “a modern, twenty-first century woman who [is] a power in her own right and yet still could have this strange relationship with her son[...]: She uses him as a weapon to eliminate the people that oppose her.” Once again, Demme and Pyne are essentially saying that it was not, as feminists argued, mothers’ need for power that drove them to seek it through their sons. Rather, it must be something “damaged and scary” about mothers themselves. To illustrate their point, the 2004 version begins with Eleanor lecturing a group of male politicians in such a way that she demonstrates her love of military strength and power – like the reference to using her son as a weapon, representations that masculinize her character. As Demme and Pyne comment: “She’s all power. She’s the most intelligent person in the room[...]. She doesn’t extort anything[...]. She just convinces them.”

Numerous other feminist theorists tell of the “pernicious” 1940s stereotype of the “overinvested” mother (Fischer 13). They blame that perception for the popular cultural representations of Monster Mothers at that time. Likewise, Lucy Fischer uses Mary Ann Doane’s *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) to argue that “the sin of excessive motherhood was tied to a politics of international isolationism” (18). Thus Fischer notes a

¹⁹ In her own political career, he explains, “She hit the glass ceiling.” That terminology suggests an association with feminism – and therefore that her attempts to get around that ceiling in this movie are what society fears from feminists as well.

correlation between societal worries and the timing of the appearance of Monster Mothers in films, indicating that after WWII, “Primary among the concerns for the returning soldier was his potential *violence*. It was understood that he had been trained as a murder machine and that he might fail to override his ‘education’ in a civilian context” (101).²⁰ Meanwhile, “the discharged soldier [feels] hostility [...] for the working woman who has taken his job” (106). Men experience hysteria as a consequence of their involvement in the war and thus visit male doctors who must play the role of caring for them (102) – both hysteria and care traditionally being women’s domain – while women are working like men. Those perspectives are clearly relevant to movies like *The Manchurian Candidate*.

However, those concerns about women replacing men in their domain are contemporary ones as well, and they are intensified by the myriad other concerns about masculinity that dominate the political arena today. Thus the fact that there is a 2004 version of *The Manchurian Candidate* (and other contemporary Monster Mother films) reveals the political situation at this time in our culture as well; further, the pervasiveness of the Monster Mother trope over time even more strongly suggests that it is not merely indicative of the contemporary political or social situation but, rather, demonstrates that this trope is about mothers themselves.²¹ As above, there is something “damaged and scary” about mothers. That attitude persists despite the treatment that it consistently receives from feminists,²² and thus it is a continuing problem.

²⁰ I note that a similar concern can apply to Monster Mothers’ sons, as I discuss here, in that they have been trained to be “feminine” – or, even worse, “turned” feminine – and are therefore unable to override it.

²¹ I discuss more of both the contemporary and historical examples in my thesis.

²² Which I also discuss in my thesis.

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