

Abstracts

Interdisciplinary Panel 1

Roberta Guerrina: 'Gender, Ideology & the Political Economy of Austerity: The Mother War Continues...'

This paper looks at the impact of the UK coalition government austerity measures on working mothers. Drawing on the work of the Fawcett Society looking at the impact of the 2010 emergency budget on women, it looks at how current measures to cut government spending in the public sector has a disproportionately negative impact on working women/mothers. The article will argue that although it is difficult to prove this is a stated government aim, it highlights the deeply gendered nature of coalition politics and associated policy agenda. In particular, government cuts coupled with big society agenda, lack of affordable childcare provisions, and a popular press that largely opposes maternal employment are penalising women/mothers engaged in the official labour market. The data on maternal unemployment rates is particularly worrying as it crystallises gendered norms of dominant economic structures and discourses.

Lisa Baraitser: 'The Maternal in Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Feminist Thought'

This paper revisits the longstanding and productive enmeshment between psychoanalysis, feminism and the maternal. This dialogue was instigated over four decades ago with both psychoanalysis and feminism functioning as an internal critique of the other when the two terms became historically engaged post 1968. As a result, we have inherited a rich body of work that has assiduously deconstructed many psychoanalytic dichotomies, such as the relation between 'paternal law' and 'maternal body', or between paternal and maternal 'function'. Reciprocally, psychoanalysis has been mined by feminist and queer perspectives in order to understand the emergence of gendered and sexed identities, practices, and norms, the place of desire and fantasy in psychic and social life, the centrality of the death drive, narcissism, melancholia, and many other psychoanalytic concepts. However, the maternal has always held an ambivalent place for both feminism and psychoanalysis. In representing that which exceeds the feminine, as well as the vanishing point of the feminine itself, the maternal has been simultaneously erased and 'rescued' by both feminism and psychoanalysis through a range of political, theoretical and clinical gestures. In the light of changes that have taken place in feminist and psychoanalytic theory and practice over the intervening decades, this paper will review the conjunction 'feminism, psychoanalysis, maternity', and offer some thoughts about the tenability of their continued relation.

Clare Hanson: 'Maternal Texts and Subtexts'

This paper explores current approaches to motherhood in literature. It argues that there have been relatively few academic studies of motherhood in Anglophone literature, either as full-length books or as journal articles. It goes on to suggest possible reasons for this, invoking the context of third-wave feminism and the wider socio-cultural shifts of late capitalist modernity. It then assesses the place of literature in an interdisciplinary context, and offers a case history of the writer Rachel Cusk, examining the ways in which her work intersects with and extends the insights of theorists such as Angela McRobbie.

Interdisciplinary Panel 2

Featured book: *Beside the Sea* by Véronique Olmi

Gill Rye: 'Infanticide, Ambivalence, Desperation: The Mother's Voice in Véronique Olmi's *Beside the Sea*'

This paper uses the featured text, Véronique Olmi's *Beside the Sea*, as a case study to explore some of the Workshop's key research questions in relation to what literature can offer cross-cultural and interdisciplinary discussions of motherhood. The novella has enormous potential in this respect: not only does it engage with a difficult topic in relation to motherhood (infanticide) – it is based on a real-life event that the author read about in a brief news-story – but it has also been translated from the original French into several different European languages, and has been adapted for the stage. In taking all these aspects into account, and drawing on selected theoretical work on maternal ambivalence and infanticide, the paper analyses the literary techniques and effects that make the text so powerful (and controversial). In doing so, it also considers how its readers are positioned in relation to the perspective and voice of the mother who has murdered her children. In conclusion, the paper reflects on the extent to which the text may (or may not) contribute to debates on so-called 'bad' mothers and cultural recognition of maternal ambivalence.

Ruth Cain: 'Véronique Olmi's *Beside the Sea*: Law, Psychiatry and the Moral Dilemmas of Filicide'

Véronique Olmi's *Beside the Sea* is perhaps the most harrowing and immediate literary representation of filicide (legally defined as the killing of a biological child aged over one year) in print. In it, readers witness the increasingly dissociated inner monologue of a single mother who wishes to save her sons from the nightmare world she inhabits. For readers, the balance between sympathy for the suffering woman, unaided and burdened with responsibilities she cannot cope with, and horror at the abrupt ending of two lives which clearly held their own promise, is exceptionally difficult. In this paper, I argue that the treatment of filicidal mothers in law and in the wider culture (including the media) frequently reflects a similar dissonance between horror at what the mother has done, and a certain sympathy for her sufferings before the crime took place (as witnessed in the debates surrounding the case of Andrea Yates). The impulse to condemn the murderous mother in stereotypical terms as a devouring Kali or Medea is tempered by a certain limited acknowledgement of the difficulties of unrelieved maternal care for children (particularly when children are infants, as demonstrated by many countries' legal formulation of infanticide) and a medicalised viewing of the murderous mother as frequently insane and thus unable to understand the wrongfulness of her actions. I argue here that both the medicalization imperative, and the impulse to punish filicidal women as 'monsters', are inadequate but perhaps inevitable legal responses to the complex web of social and psychological reasons for filicide. Finally, I look at possibilities for feminist advocacy on behalf of the filicidal mother and the barriers to empathy with her that persist even when we acknowledge that filicide emerges directly from social and cultural constructions of motherhood under increasingly pressurised conditions.