

Horror and the Middle Ages

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Outside In/Inside Out in *Alien*:

The Question of the Female Body from the Middle Ages to Today

The 1979 film *Alien* is, at its core, an exploration of the deepest anxieties of the male psyche and its own discomfort with the female body. The film is preoccupied with the space in between male and female, and on an even deeper level, the relationship between the inside and outside of the female body. *Alien* begins with the crew of a ship called the *Nostromo* investigating a possible distress signal from an unknown planet, awoken by the ship's computer, an almost sentient voice called MOTHER. The emphasis on the female body is established from the opening moments, as one of the first images in the film is the crew, emerging from stasis, climbing out of pods that are immediately seen as wombl-like. As they explore the planet, one of the officers, Kane, goes down on his own to investigate what they believe to be an alien ship. While looking at what seem to be eggs of an alien species, one hatches and, breaking through his helmet, attaches itself to his face, immobilizing him. As we later learn in the film, the alien has latched itself onto Kane's face and is using his body as an incubator for an alien baby. The birth of this alien baby is similarly horrific, with it bursting from Kane's chest, killing him in the process. Kane's body is put through the deeply female process of pregnancy and birth, his body turned inside out in the birthing process. In many ways, this offers the ultimate horror for male viewers; oral rape and forced pregnancy- a kind of castration.

In the introduction to her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover explores how a male audience relates to the protagonist of the horror films that they view, specifically those that are female. She quotes Stephen King in this belief that male readers can identify with the heroine of his horror novel *Carrie*, as “Carrie’s revenge is something that any student who has ever had his gym shorts pulled down in Phys Ed or his glasses thumb-rubbed in study hall could approve of” (qtd. in Clover 4). Clover then compares those threatening gestures to castration, immediately offering a link between a man’s relationship to his genitals and his fear at their exposure, and woman’s pain, specifically through her demonstration of and retaliation against that pain. Clover then states her intended purpose with the book to explore “the possibility that male viewers are quite prepared to identify not just with screen females, but with screen females in the horror-film world, screen females in fear and pain” (Clover 5). Much of the question of the female body comes from the fact that their genitalia is located on the inside, as opposed to the exposed male genitalia. This idea comes into play in the horror film because there is a sense of knowability to the pain of an onscreen female in a horror film as opposed to the unknowable, unseeable pain tied to a woman’s genitalia.

It is this way, I believe, that the purpose of the female in a horror film becomes clear, to bring the inside, whether that be the emotional or literal inside, of a woman to the outside. If menstruation comes from an unknown source, then the blood of a stab wound in a film offers identification and understanding previously impossible. A woman in a slasher film gives males a chance to identify with a woman in pain, if only because they can literally see the source of her pain, and even when she dies, she becomes less unknowable, as through the “slashing” so important to the genre, her insides are brought to the outside.

This central question of why horror films are particularly concerned with the inside and outside of the female body is, as I previously stated, explored and taken to another level in the film *Alien*. Instead of just identifying with female pain, the male viewer watches the most deeply female parts of life enacted upon a male character without his consent as they cause his pain and ultimate death. The Alien, attached to Kane's face, has taken up residence in his "insides", the unknowable part of his body, and it is then through his gory death, with the creature bursting from his chest, that his insides are literally brought out, blood and guts plastering the walls of the spaceship.

This theme of the inside/outside can even be found in the choice to set the horrific events of the film almost entirely inside their ship, with a computer, as I already mentioned, named MOTHER. The crew of the ship is trapped inside a sort of form of a female body- if you were to look at it from the outside, you would not be able to see what was going wrong inside. This is especially of importance when one considers that the only way Ripley is able to survive is to literally expel herself from said ship, and then again, in a way almost similar to a birth, expel the Alien from the smaller ship to kill it. The inherent question of the female body exists in many twisted layers in the film, embracing and playing with Clover's horror ideal that male audiences can relate to females in horror movies through their pain.

In her introduction to the medieval women's medical manuscript *The Trotula*, editor and translator Monica H. Green takes on this longstanding question of the female body and female pain. She states that the differences between the way that those in the Middle Ages and us in the 21st century view medicine are not caused by different diseases, but how "these societies saw a different body than we do, not necessarily because the physical body itself differed significantly, but because their intellectual structures of explanation and their social objectives in controlling

the body differed" (Green 1). In many ways this statement holds true; today we have an understanding of the importance of bodily cleanliness and our societal relationship with religion has turned towards the secular, but many of the questions and attitudes raised and held against women both societally and medically are still as much in place today as they were hundreds of years ago.

The female body's unknowability is at play here, just as it has been, causing anxiety and misunderstanding. Throughout her introduction to *The Trotula*, Green brings up again and again just how little was known about the female anatomy in comparison to male; while men were known to have "seed", whether or not women did was consistently questioned. Even where a woman's womb was located was a mystery, as many physicians believed in the the "wandering womb" - "the idea that the uterus is capable of moving within the body" (Green 22). These problems of understanding stemmed not only from our own inability to see the inner working of the female body, but also the inherent sexism at the time and the fact that "male physicians clearly diagnosed and prescribed for gynecological conditions... but it is doubtful that they ever directly touched the genitalia of their female patients" (Green 13-4). Even though there were some female physicians at the time who had more access to women, there is a clear bias against them due to the mere concealed nature of their anatomy.

This medieval attitude has by no means gone away, even with the advent of modern medicine, and its anxieties can be found in, and I would argue are the catalyst for much of the male/female dynamics in the modern day horror film, especially *Alien*. The obsession with the questions contained within the female anatomy can be seen reflected in the character of Ash, who spends much of the film in a scientific spin, obsessing over the anatomy of the alien, trying to figure out its inner workings. Later in the film we learn that Ash, who is also revealed to be a

android robot, has ordered the crew of the ship as “dispensable” in order to bring the Alien back to Earth to be studied. This seems to reflect our inherent need to control things, even to our and those who we are controlling’s detriment. The extreme unknown of the female body, its questions and discomforts, and the unseeable pain caused by menstruation and birth, make it a question must be answered, and if it cannot be answered, it just be controlled or destroyed. The fact that a horror movie allows the control of the female body and inversion of its insides is reflected in the fact that Ash and the company, inhuman and calculating, see the question mark of the Alien and how it works as something that must be figured out, controlling and even killing in the process of that goal.

With all this discussion in regards to the female elements of the film, we must also take into consideration one of its most important element; the main character of Ripley, who is of course, a female. Throughout the film, Ripley is seen as a decidedly masculine figure, acting with traits commonly regarded as male- strength, decisiveness, etc. Her femaleness is only brought into question by Ash, who continually pushes back against her and even attacks her at one point, choking her with a magazine in an immediately phallic gesture. The preceding fight even sets them at odds as male and female, with blood running down from Ripley’s nose- an unseen wound, and a mysterious white liquid dripping like sweat from Ash’s head. I must reference here a section of medical advice from the text of the *Trotula* that states “because ...their weakness [isn’t] able to tolerate sufficient labor so that Nature might expel [the excess] to the outside through sweat as [it does] in men, Nature established a certain purgation especially for women, that is, the menses to temper their poverty of heat... this purgation occurs in women just as nocturnal emission happens to men” (Green 66). Immediately there is a parallel that can be drawn, with semen and sweat as representative of the male and blood representative of the

female. That these are the liquids chosen to gender Ash and Ripley shows the internalization of this kind of thinking for audiences. Their insides are brought to the outside, and since this is the fight that reveals Ash as a robot, Ripley's blood and femininity, not only genders and humanizes her, but lets the audience identify with her fear and suffering, even though, and maybe because, she is a woman.

One interesting part of the *Trotula* that explores the idea of the inside/outside of the female body is its section titled "Women's Cosmetics". It approaches the female body in a "head to toe order" with things ranging from "recipes for care of the hair" to recipes for making the female genitalia smell more palatable for men (Green 45). The interesting part of this is not just what the text is about, but the sheer fact that it makes up about a third of a medical text pertaining to women. Its inclusion, I believe, points to and stems from their, and our, central distrust of the female body, specifically its insides. Again, the anatomy of the female body is not only not understood, but it is not allowed to be investigated in any clear way. With this lack of understanding as the basis for women's relationship to the world, it comes that society must then control her outsides, since her insides are in flux and so in question. Just as important to society at the time as physical and gynecological health, was that women were pleasing to the eye-controlled from the outside in. Throughout the section on cosmetics, much of the focus is on bathing practices, ostensibly good as hygiene does in fact lead to good health, but with the express purpose of creating a physical ideal with hair color, depilatories, and scented water for the genitalia (Green 46). The moral is clear here, the outside of a woman is just as, if not more, important than the inside.

The physical outside of a woman acting in place of her insides is also seen in *Alien*. The final showdown between Ripley and the Alien happens after the character of Ripley takes off her

spacesuit crew clothing and strips down to just a thin white tank top and small pair of white underwear. For the first time in the film we have a large amount of human flesh on display, in comparison to the metal of the ship and the biomechanical flesh of the Alien, and it is important that it is the flesh of a woman. Much of *Alien* is focused on the unknowns of the body, especially in relationship to things from the “female” realm. There is a sense that the body is in danger, the body is out of control, the line between male and female is blurred. What do we do with this anxiety then? We put somewhere we can understand; we control what we can control, and what we can control is the outside of the female body. Clover’s earlier beliefs hold true here and even without the actual physicalization of violence- the mere threat of it is enough. We can control the female body through violence, through sexualization and here we are, with the flesh of a woman on display, and more importantly, in danger. Since her insides are in question, we do what we can with her outsides, controlling them with the threat of danger and sexualization through the male gaze of the camera.

This bias against and misunderstanding of the female body has larger implications beyond the realm of film. Even today, that same discomfort with and misunderstanding of the female body in the *Trotula* and explored in *Alien* can be found in the treatment of women by the modern day health care field. This bias and maltreatment is documented in medical journals and articles such as “Physician Gender Bias in Clinical Decisionmaking: Screening for Cancer in Primary Care” where Peter Franks and Carolyn J. Clancy lay out the fact that “women tend to undergo more examinations, laboratory tests, and blood pressure checks than men, but are less likely to receive major diagnostic or therapeutic intervention” (Franks 213). Even publication like *The Atlantic* have explored this phenomenon with an article title “How Doctors Take Women’s Pain Less Seriously”. The writer of the article tells of his wife’s hospitalization for an

ovarian cyst that was diminished by those in the emergency unit, even noting that when the doctor came to her “he never touched her body” (Fassler). While today we obviously have a much better and more complete understanding of the female anatomy, inside and out, that same bias exists, that a woman cannot control or understand her body better than a man who has not looked at it.

It was not until 1993 that the government mandated that women be included in health studies performed by the National Institute of Health, a fact notes in the article “The Girl Who Cried Pain: A Bias Against Women in the Treatment of Pain” published in 2001, which opens with the biblical line “To the woman, God said. ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in child bearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’” (Genesis 3:16). From this point where a woman’s body cannot be understood and her pain comes from a higher, unknown place, I would argue, comes our societal need to control the female body, and, specific to the horror film, see it in the kind of pain that is easily understood, the inside brought out.

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