Hunting Witches: Media Representations of 'Non-compliant' Woman MPs

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The news media produces the lens through which the political world can be understood (Kahn, 1994:154): shaping the parameters within which actors and events can be framed and discussed, and working to produce our discursive 'knowledge' (O'Farrell, 2005:79) of politics. The media works to construct a limited number of rigid discursive categories that subsequently determine how woman MPs can be understood by the public. When woman MPs do not comply with the available gender categories and thus the gender order (Connell, 2005:71), the ensuing 'gender anxiety' (Ritchie, 2013:103) creates and legitimates a modernised media version of the medieval witch-hunt, aiming to expose and exclude these women from the dominant gender discourse in order to protect its norms. This paper uses a 'how-possible' (Doty, 1993:299) approach to explore the ways in which the news media represents woman MPs who do not comply with the dominant gender narrative as dangerous and unnatural 'witches', to be hunted for the protection of 'normal' society.

The paper begins with a look at the wider context, examining the discursive construction of media representations and the more specific 'witch' representation, before illustrating this through an analysis of media representations of Maria Miller in the days surrounding her resignation as Culture Secretary. This case study explores representations in the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday (Mail)* and the *Guardian* of Miller as an 'unnatural' and dangerous 'witch', providing evidence for the argument that this representation works to discursively reinforce the dominant gender order.

The highly gendered connotations of the witch in history and culture (De Blécourt, 2000:291) make this particular representation a key point of interest for gender scholarship, inviting investigation into why woman MPs can be discursively understood in this way when male MPs are rarely, if ever, the subjects of this form of media witch-hunt. The absence of male media 'witches' would seem to suggest that the 'unnatural' or 'monstrous' (Creed, 1993:1) female remains a key figure of cultural fear and mistrust, with women in positions of political power pushing at the boundaries of our existing gender order. The representation of non-compliant woman MPs as 'witches' works to give power to the dominant gender discourse that structures political power as primarily masculine.

<u>Setting the Scene: The Construction of Representations</u>

Early research into representations of gender in the media explored the ways in which woman politicians were rendered 'invisible' in media coverage through a process of 'symbolic annihilation', rarely receiving attention proportional to their male counterparts (Miller, Peake and Boulton, 2010:169). This emphasis on a *lack* of coverage later shifted onto the ways in which the coverage of male and female MPs is substantively *different*. This difference may emerge in stereotypical notions of assumed 'masculine' or 'feminine' characteristics or within broader 'gendered frames' (Childs, 2008:142), both creating a conceptual split between male and female politicians. The power of frames to shape understanding can be seen as 'crucial' to the voting public's interpretation of woman politicians (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996:103).

This active framing of issues by the media works to construct understandable and recognisable narratives that organise reams of raw information or the 'real' into particular orders or discourses that prime us to understand events in a certain way (Fiske, 1989:282). Narrative 'plot devices' can be used to activate and connote particular gendered meanings through a process of 'gendered mediation' (Trimble, 3013:2), which uses frames that 'reflect gender based assumptions about the performance of power' (Trimble, 2013:1), privileging the male politician as norm (Childs, 2008:142). Gendered mediation functions through highlighting the 'threat of the feminine' (Trimble, 2013:1), working to construct woman politicians as 'Other' in opposition to this male norm.

In order for these constructed gender meanings to function effectively, the dominant discourse works to position woman politicians as subjects within a limited number of discursively available categories, which in turn legitimate these meanings. Through the process of symbolic representation, these categories shape the social norms that define what is 'appropriate' for women as a group (Meier and Lombardo, 2011:1). Categorisation works simultaneously to limit the available ways in which woman politicians can be interpreted (Childs, 2008; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996), and to attach the available 'background knowledge' (Åhäll and Borg, 2012:8) of a category to a particular person or action. This background knowledge can 'pre-orient' (Weldes, 2001:649) us in the way that we understand the behaviour of a woman MP, with the use of recognisable tropes such as Polly Toynbee's '5 lurid shades' (2002) signalling which category is the frame for interpretation.

The construction of categories and the positioning of woman politicians within these also allows the dominant discourse to designate desirable and undesirable categorisations. Categories exist within two fundamental groups, either falling within the acceptable gender narrative and discursive understanding of femininity, or outside of or transgressing from this. As discourse works to construct its particular meanings as 'natural', categories that comply with discursive gender norms are themselves constructed as natural. Conversely, when woman politicians behave in a way that transgresses the acceptable gender narrative, they are categorised as somehow 'unnatural' or not 'real' women. Media representations that construct former Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard as subverting natural femininity by remaining 'deliberately barren' (Bates, 2014:56), or former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as a cyborg due to her 'masculine' aggression (Ritchie, 2013:103), exemplify this. When women in politics fail to comply with the dominant and naturalised gender order that privileges the male politician as norm, they are constructed as dangerous and unnatural, and positioned firmly outside of the acceptable discursive parameters.

Witches and Witch-Hunts

The witch-hunts that took place across Europe and America in the early modern era are understood by many gender theorists and historians as inherently gendered, seeking to expose and punish women who failed to comply with the patriarchal norms of their context (De Blécourt, 2000:300). Although male witches were thought to exist, their witchcraft was discursively different, focusing on profit and without the connotations of harm as a direct consequence of female sex and sexuality (Creed, 1993:75). The apparently causal link between femininity and witchcraft rendered all women potential witches, with the transformation from 'potential' to 'actual' occurring as they transgressed the accepted gender boundaries (Toivo, 2008:102). Witch hunting could therefore be more accurately described as woman hunting (De Blécourt, 2000:294), often emerging at times of social change and operating as a form of control in order to maintain the existing status quo and dominant gender order (Hester, 1992; Schoeneman, 1975). Labelling a woman a witch was to simultaneously label her as inverting social roles and this inversion as evil (Toivo, 2008:105), bringing order to chaos. This pattern continues to unfold in the modern context, with 'monsters appear(ing) frequently at times of category crisis' (Ritchie, 2003:103). Stanley Cohen has conceptualised this need to protect societal values and interests against a perceived

threat as the construction of 'folk devils' (2002) onto whom discursive fears are projected in a 'moral panic' that acts to legitimate witch-hunts.

In the modern day, a similar context of gender anxiety could arguably be created when woman MPs take on discursively 'masculine' political roles, appearing to subvert the existing gender order. This discursively 'unnatural' subversion works to position these women as dangerous 'folk devils' – the modern equivalents of subversive medieval witches. In order to signal these women as 'witches' and therefore as dangerous and unnatural, the news media works to symbolically attach the trope of the witch-hunt to them, activating its deep-seated connotations of fear, unnaturalness and monstrosity. The term 'witch-hunt' is not simply a discrete and de-contextualised way of describing media harassment, but rather calls on existing background knowledge of the unnatural female 'Other' to give the term discursive power and meaning. Culturally, the witch is constructed as the 'implacable enemy of the social order' (Creed, 1993:76), the ultimate folk devil.

Witches in the context of today are 'identified' in the same way as their medieval predecessors; for the social inversion that they represent (Toivo, 2008:102). When woman MPs behave in ways that appear to blur the lines between the dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity, they create a gender or category anxiety in their failure to act within the acceptable parameters. Woman MPs that behave in ways constructed as 'masculine'; showing aggression, autonomy, hyper-rationality or unemotional behaviour, may be represented by the media as dangerous and subversive 'witches'. This representation functions through attaching these attributes to women MPs in an inherently negative and unnatural way, focusing disproportionally on the appearance of these traits and using them to demonstrate political unviability. 'Witches' are represented as existing outside of the natural gender norms that normal society knows to be 'true', making it necessary to expose and punish them.

Case Study: Maria Miller

The context of the witch-hunt and the 'witch' representation that it constructs can be illustrated clearly through an analysis of the media representations of former Culture Secretary Maria Miller in the days surrounding her resignation in April 2014.

Shortly after Miller became Culture Secretary in 2012, the *Telegraph* published allegations that she had claimed £90,718 in expenses over a period of 4 years, money that she had used to make mortgage payments on her main rather than second home. They stated that Miller had 'swapped' her residences, claiming that her home in Basingstoke was her main residence when in fact she and her family resided in her 'second' southwest London home. They also alleged that Miller had not reduced these mortgage payments in line with falling interest rates. (Newell, Watt and Ward, 2012) After an investigation, the final recommended repayment for Miller was £5,800, along with a requirement that she apologise to the Commons for her attitude during the inquiry, given on the 3rd April. The following day however, the press responded with outrage over Miller's 32-second apology, suggesting that Miller had used threats and bullying behaviour during the investigation. Despite initial support from the Prime Minister, Miller resigned on the 9th April, arguably after unsustainable media pressure.

To investigate my claim that Miller was the subject of a media witch-hunt and represented as a 'witch', I used LexisNexis to find articles from UK newspapers the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* referencing 'Maria Miller' between 23rd March and 23rd April 2014, covering the period from Miller's apology to her resignation. Of 92 articles that reference Maria Miller in this period, 27 articles deal primarily with Miller's role and will constitute the content for my analysis.

Using a feminist discourse analysis framework, I adapt Trimble's use of 'tagging' (2013:6) to highlight the use of the witch-hunt trope and the use of tropes that signal the 'witch' representation: aggression; autonomy; hyper-rationality and unemotional behaviour, as they appear across my selected news stories. By grouping instances where a particular trope has been called upon across the material, I create an overarching picture of the dominant representations employed and to what effect.

Findings

The most frequently used trope across both papers was aggression, with 44 references to Miller's aggression as a negative and undesirable trait. This is consistently constructed as the condemning factor, with Miller's conduct becoming the crux of the media criticism. The length and style of Miller's apology was criticised in 14 of the 27 articles, often framed as the first shot in the ensuing battle. This kind of aggressive imagery is repeatedly attached to Miller as a justification for her removal, with the

descriptor 'threat/en' used 17 times in reference to her 'egregious' behaviour. Phrases such as 'guns blazing', 'consistently refusing', 'enemy' etc. work to highlight the inappropriateness (Trimble, 2013:4) of Miller's aggression in terms of her expected gender role. This 'aggression' is a central point of criticism for the *Mail* in particular, which suggests that her behaviour was 'extraordinary', and the 'most disturbing aspect' of the case. This emphasis suggests that the media outrage had more to do with Miller's transgression of gender norms during the investigation, than the findings of the investigation itself.

The hyper-rationality trope appeared in 21 'tags', often conceptualised as an excessively rational pursuit of profit and political power: 'entirely in the interests of her own career' etc. Although this is a criticism also levelled at male politicians, the frequency with which it appears as a solely negative attribute for Miller suggests that it is particularly unexpected or unusual. Miller's rational behaviour is also conceptualised as negative when it is linked to her lack of emotion. Both papers criticise her 'overly legalistic response' and 'stern' tone, aspects worthy of remark because they appear at odds with the expected gendered response. 5 tags similarly flag Miller's 'shocking' lack of emotion which 'exacerbated the outcry' due to its discursive inappropriateness. On several occasions when the *Guardian* uses this trope, it is set in contrast to Miller's 'friends' claiming that she was emotional and even 'not sure if she could hold herself together without crying'. This juxtaposition appears to legitimate the idea that her lack of emotion signals her as outside gender norms, meaning that to defend her she must be repositioned within these. The *Mail* stresses her 'tearful' resignation to signal that the media coverage was able to position her back within the 'natural' discourse and avert the danger.

Miller's autonomy was represented as negative and undesirable behaviour 5 times, all in the *Guardian*. This was largely conceptualised as Miller's attempts to direct, rather than submit to, the investigation; behaviour presented as evasive and stubborn: 'instead of directly answering questions', 'failing to be open' etc. Autonomous actions were also conceptualised as acts of aggression: she 'pushed' the rules rather than bending to them. The absence of the autonomy trope from the *Mail* could be explained by the paper's conservative stance, rendering it unwilling to grant its representation of Miller any direct autonomy, but rather contain her more strongly within its discursive boundaries and traditional gender norms.

The witch-hunt trope is called on 15 times, appearing far more in the *Mail* than the *Guardian*. Both papers report Cameron's plea for the press to 'back-off' within articles about Miller, suggesting that continuing to pursue the 'truth' is of great public importance and cannot be silenced. This concern with exposing the 'truth' about Miller functions within Cohen's idea of 'moral panic' and the construction of Miller as a folk devil. The claim that Miller's behaviour will 'inflict untold damage' on politics similarly reflects a concern with exposing her as a harmful individual. While the *Guardian* appears to critique the right-wing press for 'hound'-ing those who 'threaten' its values, the *Mail* mounts a full-scale attack on Miller, demanding that she is 'stripped of her role', 'thrown out' and 'punished'. Although the *Guardian* ostensibly criticises this 'trophy hunt', its use of this term functions within this very trope, calling on game-hunting imagery that culminates with the head of the victim proudly displayed. This works to position Miller as the inanimate or inhuman 'trophy' with little agency within the context of the hunt. As the paper which relies most heavily on discursive gender norms to enforce a representation of Miller as dangerous and unnatural, it follows that the *Mail* felt compelled to brand the idea of a witch-hunt 'absurd' in order to reinforce its dominant discourse, while the *Guardian* could take a more critical role.

Discussion

Miller is subject to the 'witch' representation because, in exercising an aggressive agency throughout her investigation, she has failed to comply with the dominant gender norms that often construct women as submissive and hesitant. The *Mail* can be seen to rely the most heavily on the tropes that construct the 'witch' representation, with particular emphasis on Miller's 'aggression' and the idea that she must be 'exposed' as harmful in order to protect the public. While the *Guardian* criticises the 'shrieking' right-wing press and provides the only direct critiques of the media hunt, it too relies on tropes of aggression and hyper-rationality to more implicitly signal that Miller is a figure of suspicion. This supports the idea that the 'witch' representation will appear most clearly in contexts of gender anxiety or 'category crisis' (Ritchie, 2013:103), as the *Mail* could be expected to have a more rigid and conservative gender discourse, prone to this anxiety.

Both papers interpret Miller's eventual resignation as a triumph for the public good. Through constructing themselves as instrumental to her departure, they are able to legitimate their representation of Miller as 'witch', as their 'exposure' of her appeared to remove her. This supports Toivo's idea that the accusation of witchcraft is a tool for

defamation (2008:106): once accused Miller could never escape the 'witch' representation and was forced to resign even when cleared of wrongdoing. The success of the media in removing Miller demonstrates the enduring discursive power of attributes constructed as 'witch'-like and the consequent potential for woman MPs to be represented as 'witches'.

Conclusion

Media representations attach meanings to woman MPs that then symbolise the values and beliefs 'appropriate' to women as a group. These meanings are made 'appropriate' by the working of gender discourses, which provide the frame for understanding a constructed meaning as 'true' and 'natural' and limit the potential to interpret the world without this lens. Media representations of woman MPs do not simply attach meanings to specific women, but instead produce the gender norms and expectations for women in everyday life.

The 'witch' representation enforces a particular gender order that excludes women from displays of 'masculinised' political power. Woman MPs are subject to this representation when they fail to comply with the dominant gender expectations that subordinate them to the male politician norm. In order to ease gender category tension, the media employs recognisable tropes to position non-compliant woman MPs firmly outside of the 'natural' discourse. The coverage of Maria Miller in the days surrounding her resignation similarly worked to negatively attach masculinised 'witch'-like attributes to her in order to remove her as a threat. The dominant media gender discourse constructs a powerful lens through which women in political power can be framed, working to 'expose' and exclude those who fail to comply with its gendered norms.

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