Cover page (not anonymised)

"Show us You Care!" The gendered psycho-politics of emotion and women as political leaders.

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Abstract

This article deploys a new psycho-political approach to examine the relationship between female political leadership and the emotionalisation of political culture by focusing on the case study of the media coverage of UK Prime Minister Theresa May. The article argues that the emotional turn in political culture is a gendered phenomenon because it reinforces deeper fears and fantasies about irrational femininity and the inherent instability of female political leadership and women in the public sphere.

Keywords

Emotionalisation, Media, Female Political Leadership, Psycho-political methodology; Object relations psychoanalysis

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"Show us You Care!" The Gendered Psycho-Politics of Emotion and Women as Political Leaders.

The emotionalisation of female leadership: A psycho-political approach

Following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997, the British tabloid, *The Sun*, famously demanded of the Queen: "Show us you care Ma'am!". This is often regarded as a key moment in the tensions surrounding the UK monarchy in the wake of Diana's death. If we fast-forward to the present day, UK Prime Minister, Theresa May faced a similar cry after her seeming inability to connect empathically to the survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire in West London. Later, following chastisement from the press and the residents, she expressed regret about her lack of empathic connection with those survivors, saying that her response was 'not good enough' and that she had 'learnt her lesson' (Dulcie and Wright, 2018: 27).

The media coverage of such events is indicative of the gendered dimensions of the 'emotionalisation' of politics and its leadership cultures (Richards, 2007). The 'emotional turn' in politics refers to a greater preoccupation with emotion in the language, content and style of political communication which is also driven by processes of mediatisation (Richards, 2007; Yates, 2015, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). The concept of mediatisation signals the importance of media (and new media in particular) in shaping 'the processes and discourse of political communication as well as the society in which that communication takes place' (Lilleker, 2006: 117). This article argues that mediatisation, in turn, heightens emotional responses to politicians, and that this becomes especially pronounced when the gender of political leaders feeds into their role as objects of the psycho-political imagination. From a progressive

point of view, the emotionalisation of politics could be linked to the 'feminisation' of political culture and a breakdown of the old cultural binaries of gender that traditionally shape the representation of politicians and their policies. Here, one could say that the medium of contemporary political communication allows for greater plurality of expression, allowing new voices to emerge, and foregrounding emotional concerns hitherto associated with the private, feminised sphere of emotional expression. Nonetheless, whilst the hegemonic power of such binaries may be diminishing, there remains a gendered division of emotion in political life that plays out in relation to its leaders and what they are allowed to express. The emotionalised framing of women as political leaders in the media constitutes a significant aspect of that process, thereby contributing to the gendered dynamics of mediatisation as a process that contributes to the 'sex-based norms and assumptions' that underpin representations of political leadership (Trimble, 2014: 665).

This article argues that the emotionalised framing of female political leadership reflects a particular settlement with the electorate regarding gendered common-sense notions of what good leadership looks and *feels* like, thereby shoring up hegemonic notions of normative femininity. The gendering of political leadership and emotion has been addressed by feminist political scholars in terms of the gendered 'double bind' – a term first used by Hall Jamieson (1995) to argue that the assertive qualities traditionally associated with competent leadership are perceived as being incompatible with the empathic qualities associated with stereotypical perceptions of caring femininity. Further research by feminist scholars in political psychology and leadership studies suggest that whilst many more women now hold leadership positions in public life and in politics, male leadership is still perceived as somehow 'natural' – the 'male prerogative' (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Carli,

2007; Campus, 2013). The emotional and psychological investment in such perceptions should not be underestimated (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Drawing on examples taken from the UK press and social media, the discussion focuses on Theresa May as a case study in order to examine the gendered meanings that circulate within the media in relation to the emotionalised representations of senior women politicians today. [i] May provides an interesting case study because whilst she is often defined as *lacking* in emotion, her appeal and suitability for the job as Prime Minister has nonetheless often been measured and defined with reference to normative understandings of emotional femininity. Interrogating the meanings of May as a case study is a challenging undertaking for a feminist scholar, as her voting record and policy decisions often fail to support other women. At the same time, the coverage of May's own politics and behaviour is often framed pejoratively with reference to emotion and derogatory fantasies of embodied femininity, and her visibility as a party leader means that there is plentiful material for analysis.

As noted above, emotions have become central in our understanding and analysis of political discourse (Ahmed, 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). To illustrate how this is operationalized, the empirical research underpinning this conceptual discussion takes the form of a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of press coverage of Theresa May's leadership in four UK tabloid and four UK broadsheet newspapers over two periods: firstly, between 12/05/2010 – 01/07/2016 during her tenure as UK Home Secretary and secondly, from July 01/07/2016 when May began campaigning to be UK Prime Minister up until 25/02/ 2019.[ii] The two time periods were identified in order to see how the coverage of May's emotional persona changed as her leadership profile increased. These publications were selected

via the LexisNexis Database and were chosen to ensure a balance of left/liberal versus right of centre and conservative views. Clearly, given the small size of the sample, one needs to recognize the limitations of the study. Indeed, I am not seeking to make causal claims, rather this is an exploratory investigation and its value lies in its innovative interdisciplinary approach which seeks to unpack the psycho-political meanings of the emotionalised media coverage, using Theresa May as a focal point for illustration.

After an initial scoping exercise for key terms pertaining to the theme of 'emotion' and May's leadership over the two periods, four articles from each publication were chosen at random resulting in a total of thirty-two articles being included in the study, and analysis was undertaken to find emergent sub themes. Employing a mode of critical discourse analysis (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Weiss and Wodak, 2011) meant an exploration of the language used, and an interpretation of the more covert, affective psycho-political meanings of the text and their links to the wider socio-political context. The illustrative case study deploys examples taken from the original data set in LexisNexis and these are clearly identified in the reference list. Following the research protocols of textual and contextual analysis in feminist media studies research (Hesse-Biber, 2014), I adopted a feminist grounded theory approach (Wuest, 1995) in the identification of emergent themes. When analysing the emotionalisation of political leadership in relation to the media representations of May from 2010-2019, the overarching theme was that of irrational femininity and its links to the female body. I also identified three broad recurring subthemes. These were: (i) empathy – or the lack of it, (ii), mortality, motherhood and the disappointing maternal body, and (iii) the focus on May's body as sexualised siren or as 'Maybot. These thematic areas are addressed throughout this article and are the focus of our

case study analysis of May. At the same time, the article argues that this understanding needs to be situated within its wider psycho-political context. As such, some additional references from a mix of academic sources, news and broadcast media are provided for that purpose (for example, speeches cited on the BBC or on You Tube), illustrating further the themes established in the original data set, thus helping to set the scene for the discussion of Theresa May.

As I discuss, the media coverage of May has an affective quality that is suggestive of a wider cultural and psycho-political mood of misogyny and perceptions of irrational femininity and the emotionalised female body. The emotionalised tone of political culture invites a mode of analysis that accommodates the often irrational and contradictory nature of popular political discourse in an era of economic crisis, flux and change. To this end, I use a feminist psycho-political methodology that pays attention to the processes of affect and fantasy, and also to the unconscious defence mechanisms that operate culturally and politically at particular moments in time. Such an approach opens up new ways of reflecting on media representations of senior women politicians and also on the public response to those women. This methodology represents an original and novel intervention within the 'subfield' of gender and politics (Tripp and Hughes, 2018). As Celis and Childs (2012) argue, there is a need to get beyond the descriptive representation of women in politics and instead address the complex 'substantive' nature of those representations. One way in which this has taken place has been through the analysis of media representations of women and politics (O'Neill etal, 2016). Whilst the relationship between politics, media and emotion has been addressed (cf. Ahmed, 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), much of that research has deployed content analysis or modes of discourse analysis that ignore the psychodynamics of affect and gender in the current climate where misogyny is rife.

Applying a psycho-political approach also challenges the positivist legacy of political science and political psychology through its focus on the realm of feeling and affect. Whilst emotion is defined as being linked to ‘relatively conscious’ socio-political realm of discourse, affect refers to the seemingly irrational, unpredictable sphere of embodied feeling (Crociani-Windland and Hoggart, 2012: 2). The tone of media coverage is often anchored in patriarchal narratives focused on the emotional, female body, reinforcing the perception that women are unreliable and inherently unsuitable for the responsibility of leadership within public life. Whilst identifying key themes of the media coverage of May, the application of in-depth psycho-political approach enables us to look behind the performative and discursive aspects of emotion and its expression and instead allows us to unpack the underlying patterns of fantasy and psychological defence mechanisms which is discussed within the tradition of object relations psychoanalysis.

The article contextualises the analysis through a discussion of the emotionalisation of politics and gender, it then moves to psychosocial landscape of object relations theory and fantasies of the maternal body; the article then turns to the case study of Theresa May and concludes by discussing how we might begin to think about the psycho-political relationship between female leadership and a feminist politics of emotionalisation.

Setting the scene: The emotionalisation of politics as a gendered phenomenon

Contemporary attitudes to women politicians are refracted through a lens of an increasingly emotionalised political culture where representations of politicians and their engagement with the public encourages new levels of affective identification and

feeling (Day Sclater etal, 2009). At a general level, the affective dimensions of political culture can be found in a number of contexts that include the popular language of politics – as, for example, in the UK, where objections to Brexit are referred to in psychological terms as 'project fear' (Skinner, 2016), or the widespread reference to the psychological tactic of 'gaslighting' (Waldman, 2016) which is made in relation to the distrust of fake news in connection with leaders such as Donald Trump.

The latter is indicative of the wider social malaise, where anxiety, fear and a sense of precarity also pervade the political scene. As sociologist, Arlie Hochschild (2018), argues with reference to the period since 9/11, at times of crisis, the perception of the character and emotional sensibility of a leader takes on added significance for those citizens who look to political leaders for a sense of stability and safety. Against the current backdrop of crises, flux, and change, and following Hochschild, one can argue that a widespread wish for an emotionally reassuring and containing [iii] leader is prevalent. The gendered dimensions of such wishes take on new relevance given the mediatisation of politics, where women are subject to constant critical scrutiny and hate speech on social media platforms (Savigny, 2019), and women politicians are not immune to this. The unconscious structures of feeling and prejudice that shape everyday sexism and its manifestation in political culture find expression on social media sites because the anonymous nature of online participation creates a loss of inhibition on the part of the user (Johanssen, 2019) where women become easy targets for the projection of anxiety, hatred and envy. The entanglement of social media commentary with political culture intensifies this dynamic, making female politicians especially ripe targets. This in turn, also feeds into the press coverage and attitudes thanks to the now widespread inclusion of public

‘tweets’ and so on in news reporting (Gardiner, etal, 2016; Hunt and Evershed, 2016; Savigny, 2019). Thus, media coverage fuels the increasingly personalised political public sphere.

The personalisation of politics and leadership is linked to the influence of celebrity culture (Wheeler, 2013) where the performance of emotion becomes a means to demonstrate the authenticity of a leader – a development which has been capitalised by politicians who use it to demonstrate their relational qualities and their capacity for empathy.[iv] The public display of empathy may be read cynically as an empty performative gesture, as illustrated by Bill Clinton’s famous and much-spoofed ‘I feel your pain’ comment in 1992 (Garber, 2004) and Tony Blair’s seemingly off-the-cuff emotional address to camera following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997. A decade later, echoing its use by Republicans in the US, the UK Conservative party leader David Cameron mobilised the concept of ‘caring’ and ‘compassionate conservatism’ to represent a transformed Conservative the party (Cameron, 2011),[v] and despite recent allegations of corruption, the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, provides another example of this trend for ‘compassionate’ political positioning.

The strategic use of empathy made by those male politicians indicates, perhaps, the greater fluidity between the public and private spheres of communication. However, the public performance of empathy is less straightforward for women on the political stage. Female politicians may be wary of emoting to camera for fear of shoring up old stereotypes of vulnerable femininity and appearing too ‘soft’ and weak. As studies indicate in relation to politicians such as Hillary Clinton (Walker, Blalik and Van Kessel, 2018), emotional display makes women more ‘likeable’ but less credible as ’competent’ leaders. Thus, women have a

different 'pact' with the public – any display of compassion carries with it the risk of creating associations with the private sphere of domesticity and emotional expressivity with which women have traditionally been associated (Evans, 2009).

The gendered tensions of emotional display can be found in the coverage of prominent women leaders such as Angela Merkel with reference to her image as 'Mutti' as the empathic mother of the German nation. As with Clinton, and May, media coverage of her suggest an ambivalence on the part of some journalists about her capacity to be *both* competent and properly empathic. As *Das Spiegel* noted, Merkel 'is awkward when it comes to expressing feelings' and that her process for dealing with issues is to minimise them in order to make them 'appear controllable' (Kurbjuweit, 2011).This mode of reporting reflects wider prejudices about female political leadership and 'the double bind' that women in such roles experience, where the competency of leadership is seen to undermine normative images of 'caring' femininity associated with traditional discourses of maternal care or stereotypical, compliant modes of feminine subjectivity (Campus, 2013; Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Gervais and Hillard, 2011). The stereotypical image of Merkel as 'mummy' and the perception of her over-identification with the plight of refugees (Baker, 2016) or, as I discuss, May's so-called 'sad' relationship to motherhood and, by implication, her lack of maternal desire in that context (Little, 2017) suggest ambivalent feelings and fantasies connected to notions of women's subjectivity as being both limited to and governed by irrational forces of the emotional body. To discuss the underlying affective dynamics of such feelings and attitudes I now turn to the psychosocial theories of object relations and maternal ambivalence.

The symbolism of maternal ambivalence and irrational female leadership

Object relations theory provides a useful psycho-political theoretical framework to explore the affective investment in the emotionalisation of female political leaders. From this perspective, the media preoccupation with positioning female politicians in relation to their status as mothers (Campus, 2013; Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015) evoke memories of the first relationship with the primary parent (usually the mother, but not exclusively so) who is internalised and experienced as a powerful psychological object of the inner world (Stonebridge, 1998). In contrast to Freud, who focused on the role of the father and the paternal fantasies which emerge in relation to him as part of one's development, relational psychoanalytic theory highlights the symbolic and material significance of the mother in the first months of life. Object relations studies (Richards, 2007) pay attention to the memories that are bound up with the early, infantile experience of vulnerability and dependence and also the feelings and psychological defences that are stirred up in relation to the maternal figure at that time. The affective patterns of relating established during that period may continue to find expression as adults in connection to the wider cultural and political environment (Rose, 2018). The identification with female politicians and the powerful feelings that emerge in relation to them within the mediatised sphere of political culture provide an example of such processes at work.

Psychosocial theory argues that such feelings are managed through the use of psychological defence mechanisms that are first established in early childhood relations with the primary parent/mother and with subsequent others who are experienced as objects of the both mind and society, thereby establishing a psychosocial pattern for how one relates to others and one's environment in later life

(Day Sclater etal, 2010). These unconscious defence mechanisms include 'projection', (projecting unwanted feelings onto another person/object), 'projective identification', (how one identifies with and responds to those projections), 'splitting' (dealing with anxiety about the other by psychologically splitting people into good and bad objects) (Klein, 1946).[vi]

Such processes do not occur in a social or political vacuum and, at moments of social change or political crises, one can observe the different ways in which such defences may be mobilised personally and politically to ward off feelings of uncertainty and fear. The encounter with the potentially unsettling experience of gender and intersections of cultural difference can also prompt defensive mechanisms into action as a way to defend against the perceived threat to identity rooted in established structures of power and entitlement. The feelings that shape attitudes about senior female politicians and their representation in different aspects of the media provide an example of such defensive processes at work and social media provides a fertile ground for such defensive strategies to take place (Johanssen, 2019). A growing number of studies have examined the polarising nature of online communication, where aggressive hate speech and trolling regularly takes place (Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016). Attacking women online provides a good example of psychological projection at work and illustrates the entanglement of social media with contemporary news reporting. In the UK context, we have seen this behaviour in relation to a wide number of female politicians across the political spectrum, including, for example, MPs Dianne Abbott, Luciana Berger, Anna Soubry and Theresa May (Atlanta: Antisocial Media online, 2018).

The additional layer of prejudice and projection faced by women of colour in relation to the perceptions of an overly-emotional identity, complicate further the

concept of the gendered double bind in connection to women in political leadership roles and the psycho-political fantasies that are mobilised in relation to them as objects of splitting and projection. The UK Shadow Home Secretary, Dianne Abbot, provides a case in point as she has had to deal with pernicious structures of racialisation that operate both across and within gender lines (Hill Collins, 2008). The attacks on Abbott are not limited to those made by male journalists, but by female politicians such as Theresa May, thereby revealing the reach of unconscious drives toward emotionally violent practices in political culture. Both Abbott and May share an experience of having their emotions represented in the media as a means to belittle their authority as senior politicians. Whilst, at various stages of her career, May has claimed to be a feminist (Cosslett, 2016), she has nonetheless, until her conference speech in 2018 (BBC, 2018), failed to empathise publicly with Abbott against the misogyny of such reporting. Indeed, the racialised structures of intersectionality were also mobilised by May herself, who during a 2017 televised UK General Election leaders debate used her identity as a powerful white woman to mock Abbott when she deployed the trope of irrational, incompetent femininity as a weapon of attack (BBC1, 2017). In so doing, May contributed to an image of Abbott as emotionally unstable and unable to conduct herself in a rational manner conducive to her status as a senior Shadow Minister in charge of affairs connected to the operation of law and order. Whilst Abbott's emotions are framed in media contexts as excessive, thereby echoing older colonial discourses of dangerous black femininity, May is, by contrast, often presented as a parody of the excessively over-resilient, repressed white feminine subject and therefore as being devoid of emotion and desire altogether.

In order to unpack these ideas further, I now turn to the emotionalisation of May's identity as a politician, together with the affective response to that persona, and I discuss the implications of that response for a wider understanding of the psycho-politics of women, emotion and power.

Emotionalisation and the case of Theresa May

i. Submarine May and the lack of empathy

A recurrent theme of May's media coverage is her lack of emotion and also her alleged capacity to mask any feelings that she might have. May developed a reputation as an emotionally cold and distant politician during her time as the UK Home Secretary. At that time, she was known by colleagues as 'Submarine May' because of her capacity in meetings to mask her feelings and hide her opinions on the key issues of the day (Sabey, 2016). Her diligence in preparing for meetings and for not rushing to hasty decisions could be viewed in a positive light as a model of calm and measured leadership, but instead it was interpreted as cold, secretive and inflexible. In 2016, after David Cameron's resignation as Prime Minister following the UK Referendum decision to leave Europe, May replaced him as Leader of the Conservative Party and, in doing so, she also became Britain's second woman Prime Minister. Initially, the pro-Brexit press welcomed her 'calm' and 'cool' style of leadership and her apparent determination to take the UK out of Europe (Rentoul, 2016). And yet increasingly, in line with her enhanced leadership role as Prime Minister, her attitude was interpreted as enigmatic and lacking in compassion (Parsons, 2016; Kenber, 2017).

A key moment in the development of that narrative regarding her apparently cold character was May's handling of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy which took place 14 June 2017. Following the fire, which claimed 72 lives and injured many others whilst leaving families devastated and homeless, May was portrayed as lacking in empathy. When she visited the site, she failed to meet with any of the families and survivors of the fire and met only with emergency services. The reaction to her apparent absence of feeling sparked a major discussion in the press about the relationship between May's lack of empathy and her leadership qualities. *The Guardian* Editorial noted that: 'Leadership requires courage, imagination and empathy… the Prime Minister has failed to show any of these qualities' (Guardian, 2017). Following her failure to display empathy for the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire, a number of her colleagues spoke to the media about her 'lack of emotion'. As one MP said, 'she is not one of those people who perhaps shows emotion as openly as some of us do…in the media sometimes you need to' (Oppenheim, 2017). Damian Green, who was then First Secretary of State, also spoke to the Today programme (BBC Radio 4) to reassure viewers that May was 'a warm and empathetic woman' (Weaver, 2017).

Journalists often compare May's lack of warmth and compassion unfavourably to her male colleagues. For example, in contrast to May, the London Mayor, Sadiq Khan and Labour Leader, Jeremy Corbyn received widespread praise for their empathic response to the Grenfell survivors. When Corbyn visited the site, he was reported to have 'listened to the people, he hugged them, he promised to find out the truth and told them he would speak for them' (Guardian, 2017). Former MP and media pundit, Michael Portillo, commented on *This Week* (BBC, 2003-) on the differences displayed by the two leaders: 'She should have been there with the

residents, which is where Jeremy Corbyn was. And he was there hugging people and being natural with them' (Oppenheim, 2017).

It may well be that Corbyn and Khan have a greater capacity to communicate empathy with the public (Yates and Weissmann, 2018). However, the emphasis on May's 'unnatural' lack of empathy, compared to such male politicians, provides an example of the gendered politics of empathy, and the problems women face when they are disliked for failing to conform to normative images of nurturing femininity**.** The negative feelings directed towards the apparently unfeeling May, also carried in their wake, fantasies of transgressive femininity that threaten the binary structures of gendered subjectivity and identity, evoking primary fantasies of the all-powerful and unreliable mother.

ii. Fears of mortality and the precarity of May as a disappointing mother

The themes of life, death, and motherhood are often present in the emotionalised media framing of May as a non-caring politician. When May was first elected as Leader of her party, her suitability for the role was questioned by fellow leadership contestant, Andrea Leadsom, whose comments about May's status as a *non*-mother indicated that May had less investment in the future than herself: 'I have children who are going to have children who will directly be part of what happens next' (Bulman, 2016). As if to ward off public anxiety about her selfishness as a child-free woman and politician, May confessed her 'sadness' about 'not having children' and she cited her faith as providing a comfort in that respect (Little, 2017).[vii] Childless women are regularly stereotyped as unnatural, tragic, and even selfish, and their generative capacities in contexts other than childbirth are often ignored within the mediatised landscape of political culture (Deason etal, 2015). As Leadsom implied, in an age of

precarity, childless politicians represent the opposite of future proofing, and a failure of ‘going on being’, which ontologically attracts fears about mortality and death.

As with ‘Mutti’ Merkel, it has been reported that, in 2016-17, despite her child-free status, May was referred to as ‘Mummy’ or ‘Mother Theresa’ by some Conservative politicians and newspaper pundits (Ditum, 2017). The Oedipal connotations of May as ‘Mummy’ recall the passionate feelings that some older male members of the Conservative party felt about May’s role model, Margaret Thatcher (Clark, 2010) who was also given the moniker of ‘Mummy’ and referred to herself as such in her 2001 Plymouth ‘Mummy Returns Speech’ (Thatcher, 2001). That speech, which was uploaded to YouTube in 2013, still resonates with the public and, to date, it has received over 21,000 hits (YouTube, 2013). Such examples show that the association of women politicians with fantasies of the maternal requires adherence to specific formations of maternal holding and containment so that the status quo is maintained and hegemonic structures of ideology are not under threat. For example, it may be significant that Merkel, May and Thatcher are all conservative women who have been voted in as leaders, but progressive politicians such as Hilary Clinton in the US cannot be tolerated. Nonetheless, the memory of Thatcher and the legacy of her politics continues to stir up ambivalent feelings within the Conservative Party, and May is compared to her in both favourable and negative terms (Toynbee, 2017). Against a backdrop of internal party conflict, following the Referendum result, May’s associations with Thatcher as the ‘Iron Lady’, worked well initially to reassure and contain fears about her identity as a woman leading the country at a moment of national uncertainty in relation to Brexit. May’s 2017 General Election campaigning slogan: ‘Strong and Stable for the National Interest’ re-invoked the link between herself and the memory of a strong female leader.

However, in the UK, where the real and symbolic lines of patriarchal inheritance and male leadership dominate, any associations with the maternal inheritance of a woman, even one of Thatcher's stature, is risky. May's precarious status in that respect was not helped by her poor communication skills which undermined her credibility as a leader, and her weakness in that regard became a focus of media coverage instead. Since her election as leader, May's indecisive, public persona has been linked to a series of contradictions at the level of policy. For example, was she a Remainer or a Leaver as she now claimed? How could she be a feminist politician – albeit of a conservative disposition – and make a deal with the reactionary Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland? How could she claim to want to reach out to 'ordinary people' and listen to their problems when her policies of austerity seemed to contradict that message? May's ambiguities and perceptions of her problematic policies have thus been reinforced by a latent distrust of her as a figure who is not all she seems. As with other senior female politicians, that distrust is often symbolised through media representations of her body as a non-mother who is seemingly unable to perform in accordance with traditional images of empathic femininity.

iii. May's body as both sexualised siren and Maybot

The defensive psychosocial processes identified above are also at play in relation to May's body being represented either in sexualised terms or as a machine-like automaton. The sexualisation of May can be traced back to her time at the Home office when the press would focus on her 'flashing a large amount of cleavage' (O'Callaghan 2016), or as one journalist put it, 'crush unfettered immigration under the spike heels of her Jimmy Choos' (Parsons 2010). There is a pronounced

relationship to mechanisms of power and authority in that role which exceeds stereotypical associations with women's capabilities. Here, the processes of projection may be especially manifest because of the real and symbolic power and authority that women Home Secretaries hold in relation to matters of law and order. Such women are deemed to have 'overstepped the mark', rendering them 'phallic' with too much sexual power. Psychologically and culturally, sexuality is more readily associated with emotion than the intellect, and so one way to manage the threat posed by women in senior political positions of power is to sexualise them. Hence, senior female politicians can expect to be framed in terms of their appearance and by the idea of their excessive sexuality, and the media preoccupation with Theresa May's 'sexy' kitten heels illustrates this trend (Walters, 2015; Parsons, 2010).

The previous Labour Government Home Secretary (2007-09) Jacqui Smith was also regularly the object of a sexualised, public gaze, marking her out from the men in suits opposite and beside her in the House of Commons and the coverage of her speech following a terrorist incident provides a well-known example of that belittling process (see Mailonline, 2007). Similarly, the professionalism of Diane Abbott as the Labour Shadow Home Secretary (2016-Present) is regularly undermined by references to her past relationship with the Labour Party Leader, Jeremy Corbyn (Norman, 2015). Such news coverage negates Abbott's many years of parliamentary experience and instead she is discussed in terms of her status as Corbyn's possession to 'show off'. The aggressive sadism that was implicit in the shaming of Smith, Abbott and May as senior politicians suggest – at the level of fantasy – a wish to punish the symbolic mother whose power evokes feelings of inadequacy, envy and loss.

Alongside the ongoing sexualisation of May through fetishised images of her feet in leopard skin shoes, her ‘cleavage’ (O’Callaghan, 2016), her figure in leather trousers and in mid-length skirts such as that worn in ‘legs-it gate’ (Vine, 2017), there is also fascination with the awkwardness of her body language and movements. The widespread coverage of May’s facial expressions and body language during her time as Prime Minster, capture the contradictions of being a senior woman in the public eye where as we have seen, the characteristics of competency sit uneasily with those associated with emotional vulnerability. May’s facial expressions often appear to fall clumsily somewhere in between the smile and the non-smile, thereby projecting to the camera a strange and uncanny defensive state of indecision and vulnerability that is often difficult and even painful to witness. On social media, comical images circulate showing May curtseying in an ungainly manner to the royal family, or dancing in a stiff and awkward fashion whilst on a trip to Africa, providing further examples of the media focus on her body as a symbol of her ineptitude as a leader (Barnes 2018).

May’s ‘masquerade’ as political leader, then, seemingly fails to convince. However, in the psychoanalytic account of masquerade, discussed by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1929), it is understood as a strategy to ward off patriarchal aggression. In an era of spectacle-laden mediatised political communication, where emotional authenticity is highly prized, May’s uncanny public persona unsettles the public, and she certainly attracts ridicule in the press and on social media (Greenslade, 2017). Nevertheless, and despite the increasingly mocking coverage of her as Prime Minister as the unfeeling ‘Maybot’, a machine-like, robotic automaton, her emotional clumsiness can be read as an attempt to meet the inherently conflicting demands and projections placed on her as a woman, warding of aggression from male colleagues whilst operating on the crisis-laden political stage. This strategy, which at some level,

attempts to reconcile the contradictory demands placed on her as a woman in the public eye, also continues – albeit more awkwardly - the tradition of Thatcher's masquerade thirty years earlier (see Nunn, 2003). The sub-themes that I have identified in relation to May, converge around the dominant theme of the unreliable, emotional body, which symbolise her failure to overcome the contradictions of female political leadership in an age of emotionalised politics. Such psycho-political processes cannot be separated from the wider psycho-political scene in which she operates and I now turn to that wider context.

The psycho-political economy of May as an ambiguous leader and the failure of emotional containment

As we have seen, May attracts frustration and distrust because she appears to lack a coherent identity and struggles to communicate empathically and thus to conform to the norms of femininity. She fails to provide the necessary charisma or authority (matriarchal or otherwise) with which voters can identify or surrender to and feel cared for and safe (Ghent, 1990). This wish for a containing leader is a recurring theme of leadership studies, and is said to mirror early modes of object relating, where alongside the psychosocial defences identified earlier, the desire to suspend disbelief and open one's self up to another who is bigger than oneself is not only an aspect of human development but also shapes the dynamics of the leader/followership relationship (Popper, 2014).

This same dynamic can be seen in the desire for a strong and stable leader where the inherent wish is to have someone to whom one can surrender at times of crisis and insecurity. Political communication panders to that wish, through slogans aimed at winning over voters such as 'strong and stable', and 'taking back control'.

From a psychosocial perspective, that wish to trust and surrender to a leader allows voters to experience a form of dependence. And yet, at the same time, the wish for safety and emotional dependence is resented partly because, in a neoliberal society, emotional dependence is not encouraged; instead, the values of resilience and individualism are promoted as a way to manage vulnerability and emotional insecurity.

The ambivalent feelings about May are linked to the content of her policies. But, when examining the psycho-politics of her status as an object of disappointment for those across the political spectrum, one can also recognise the gendered dimensions of that frustration and its links to processes of affect and unconscious fantasy about the unreliable mother, and, at the socio-political level, to patriarchal discourses about women leaders as articulated and expressed through the emotive systems of political communication which allow the mechanisms of projection to flourish. However, those gendered processes are also intertwined with the wider historical context of ambivalence towards political leaders more generally, as occupying an ambiguous space in the minds of voters within neoliberal capitalist societies.

Theresa May embodies that ambiguity, reflecting the internal conflicts within the UK Conservative party at the present moment in connection to their disagreements about Europe and the UK referendum result. As a political party, the Conservatives are in a conundrum: When May became Prime Minister following the Referendum, their former leader, David Cameron, resigned and, in effect, abandoned them and since that time they have appeared stuck, with different factions fighting each other over its outcome. May encapsulates that stuck-ness; even her name 'May'– evokes an interstitial moment. The modal verb, 'may', refers to what is

wished for or imagined, and May's name thus symbolises perfectly her identity as a leader who designates neither one thing nor the other. She claims to be *for* Brexit and yet, as we have seen, she voted to remain in Europe. Thus, having May as their leader allowed the Conservative party to avoid change and remain a-historical at a time when they seemingly have no way forward. As Prime Minister, May was therefore symptomatic of this ambiguous state of affairs, and, as a woman leader, she evokes rage because she is seemingly neither empathic nor competent.

The affective politics of emotionalisation, women and leadership

A critical analysis of Theresa May should lead us to think constructively about the nature of a feminist approach to leadership and the emotionalisation of politics. The press have made much of May as 'the Vicar's daughter' with strong Church of England values, and whilst her childless status is discussed, her mother is rarely mentioned as an influence in her life (Thompson and Yates, 2017). This omission and the emphasis on her paternal inheritance (interestingly linked to a presumably male God) reflect – albeit symbolically – her voting record on women's issues such as more restrictive abortion laws, cuts to child tax credits, and the attack on public sector jobs and social care and immigration (Norris, 2017). Thus, as with Thatcher, she often fails to support other women through her social policy decisions.

Nonetheless, as noted above, May does sometimes identify as a feminist. During her period as Home Secretary, she founded the 'Women2win' campaign to encourage women to become MPs. May also borrowed the symbols and slogans of feminism – for example, the Fawcett Society's 'This is What a Feminist Looks Like' T-shirts, which she used to promote her image as a woman-friendly candidate (Cosslett, 2016). One can argue that the superficial and tokenistic manner in which

May adopts such symbols, reinforces a *lack* of empathy with other women through their cynical adoption as a matter of political expediency and a wish for power. When taken together with policies that often mitigate against the interests of women, such a wish reveals the hegemonic lure of white neoliberal postfeminism, where the emphasis is on the instrumental values of the market and the merits of individual resilience rather than the empathic practice of connecting with others through collective action as a means of achieving political goals (Rottenberg, 2018).

When considered alongside her rigidly and repeatedly stated wish to be a leader whose aim is to 'take back control', May's neoliberal feminism appears to be founded upon her disavowal of those parts of herself linked to a feminism underpinned by social justice, thereby propping up older, 'split' notions of femininity as the cultural and political other. May's approach therefore negates the possibility of a more emotionally integrated model of political leadership that acknowledges vulnerability and the value of a feminist leadership style which is rooted in *authentic* rather than the *faux* empathy which is so often performed as part of the masquerade of mediatised promotional politics. These same cultural and political processes, which reinforce the limiting, normative understandings of gender, continue to shape the press coverage of women and the emotionalised framing of their performance on the political stage.

This article presents a new, psycho-political approach to the study of female political leadership and its representation by paying attention to the affective, gendered processes that operate in relation to the contemporary emotionalised scene of mediatised political communication. Theresa May provides a provocative case study because her success or failure as a politician is represented in relation to her persona as a cold and un-feeling woman. Throughout her career - from Home

Secretary to Prime Minister, May has increasingly been shown to fall short - not only as an empathic politician *per se*, but in terms of her identity as a woman who deviates from traditional norms of emotional femininity. The violent hatred directed at May arguably exceeds her perceived failures and culpability as a political leader in relation to matters such as Brexit or even her woeful role in creating the ‘hostile environment’ for immigrants in the UK. For example, as ‘a dead woman walking’, it is significant that she has regularly been discussed (albeit in fantasy terms) as an object of murder by male members of her own party (Mason, 2017). Such imagery was heightened during her time as Prime Minister and the symbolic violence of such murderous wishes are bound up with the affective structures of the psyche and society and the wider psycho-political context in which she operates.

The interpretive nature of the psycho-political approach adopted in this article brings with it its own risks. And yet it nonetheless allows one to explore not only what is said but *how* it is said within the public sphere, creating a greater understanding of the sensibility of a political culture that fears women leaders and defines them in emotional and affective terms. Such an approach contributes to a growing field of interdisciplinary work that allows for new insights to emerge through a provocative troubling of the disciplinary boundaries of political and communication studies research.

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Endnotes

[i] This article develops themes first discussed in a co-authored blog with Shelley Thompson (Thompson and Yates, 2017) and my thanks to Shelley and to Amy Tatum who assisted in the collation of articles discussed here.

[ii] The four UK Broadsheets included the *Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Guardian* and the four UK Tabloids included *The Daily Express, The*

Daily Mail, The Mirror and *The Sun.* The newspapers' Sunday papers were also included within the search.

[iii] The notion of containment is used in a generic way here by Hochschild to denote reassuring leader. From an object relations organisational perspective, it also denotes the capacity of a leader to hold and therefore manage difficult feelings and anxieties on behalf of the group members. The leader represents a parental figure which in contrast to the symbolic father of classical Freudian theory, refers to the symbolic mother who in infancy holds and contains the anxiety on behalf of the child (Gabriel, 2011).

[iv] Empathy is a slippery term and its meanings are contested (Pedwell, 2014). According to the OED, empathy refers to 'the ability to understand and share the feelings of another'.

[v] Ironically – in the context of this article, it was Theresa May who in 2002 said that in order to return to power, the Conservatives needed to adopt a less 'nasty' and friendlier image for voters (White and Perkins, 2002).

[vi] Psychosocial theory often draws on object relations psychoanalysis associated with the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1988) and those influenced by her (see Rose, 2018; Stonebridge, 1998).

[vii] SNP Leader Nicola Sturgeon similarly had to explain why she had no children (Johnson, 2015).