CHAPTER 8
The Madwoman in the Attic
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Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy... she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her “inconstancy” and by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly. Specifically, as we will try to show here, a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must “kill” the “angel in the house.” In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been “killed” into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the “monster” in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity. For us as feminist critics, however, the Woolfian act of “killing” both angels and monsters must here begin with an understanding of the nature and origin of these images. At this point in our construction of a feminist poetics, then, we really must dissect in order to murder. And we must particularly do this in order to understand literature by women because, as we shall show, the images of “angel” and “monster” have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women’s writing to such an extent that few women have definitively “killed” either figure. Rather, the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly: until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image that lives on what Mary Elizabeth Coleridge called “the crystal surface.”

For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative “I AM” cannot be uttered if the “I” knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that interlace between herself and herself. From Anne Finch’s Ardelia, who struggles to escape the male designs in which she feels herself enmeshed, to Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” who tells “Herr Doktor... Herr Enemy” that “I am your opus,” / “I am your valuable,” the woman writer acknowledges with pain, confusion, and anger that what she sees in the mirror is usually a male construct, the “pure gold baby” of male brains, a glittering and wholly artificial child. With Christina Rossetti, moreover, she realizes that the male artist often “feeds” upon his female subject’s face “not as she is but as she fills his dreams.” Finally, as “A Woman’s Poem” of 1859 simply puts it, the woman writer insists that “You [men] make the worlds wherein you move... Our world (alas you make that too!)” – and in its narrow confines, “shut in four blank walls... we act our parts.”

Though the highly stylized women’s roles to which this last poem alludes are all ultimately variations upon the roles of angel and monster, they seem on the surface quite varied, because so many masks, reflecting such an elaborate typology, have been invented for women. A crucial passage from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh suggests both the mystifying deathliness and the mysterious variety female artists perceive in male imagery of women. Contemplating a portrait of her mother which, significantly, was made after its subject was dead (so that it is a kind of death mask, an image of a woman metaphorically killed into art) the young Aurora broods on the work’s iconography. Noting that her mother’s chambermaid had insisted upon having her dead mistress painted in “the red stiff silk” of her court dress rather than in an “English-fashioned shroud,” she remarks that the effect of this unlikely costume was “very strange.” As the child stared at the painting, her mother’s “swan-like supernatural white life” seemed to mingle with “whatever I last read, or heard, or dreamed,” and thus in its charismatic beauty, her mother’s image became

by turns
Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite;
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate;
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love;
A still Medusa with mild milky brows.
All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked,
And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;
Or my own mother, leaving her last smile
In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth
My father pushed down on the bed for that;
Or my dead mother, without smile or kiss,
Buried at Florence.

The female forms Aurora sees in her dead mother’s picture are extreme, melodramatic, gothic – “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite” – specifically, as she tells us, because her reading merges with her seeing. What this implies, however, is not only that she herself is fated to inhabit male-defined masks and costumes, as her mother did, but that male-defined masks and costumes inevitably inhabit her, altering her vision. Aurora’s self-development as a poet is
the central concern of Barrett Browning’s *Bildungsroman* in verse, but if she is to be a poet she must deconstruct the dead self that is a male “opus” and discover a living, “inconstant” self. She must, in other words, replace the “copy” with the “individuality,” as Barrett Browning once said she thought she herself had done in her mature art. Significantly, however, the “copy” selves depicted in Aurora’s mother’s portrait ultimately represent, once again, the moral extremes of angel (“angel,” “faery,” and perhaps “sprite”) and monster (“ghost,” “witch,” “fiend”).

In her brilliant and influential analysis of the question “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” the anthropologist Sherry Ortner notes that in every society “the psychic mode associated with women seems to stand at both the bottom and the top of the scale of human modes of relating.” Attempting to account for this “symbolic ambiguity,” Ortner explains “both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice)” by pointing out that women “can appear from certain points of view to stand both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture’s hegemony.” That is, precisely because a woman is denied the autonomy—the subjectivity—that the pen represents, she is not only excluded from culture (whose emblem might well be the pen) but she also becomes herself an embodiment of just those extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing. As “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,” she mediates between the male artist and the Unknown, simultaneously teaching him purity and instructing him in degradation.

In the Middle Ages, of course, mankind’s great teacher of purity was the Virgin Mary, a mother goddess who perfectly fitted the female role Ortner defines as “merciful dispenser of salvation.” For the more secular nineteenth century, however, the eternal type of female purity was represented not by a madonna in heaven but by an angel in the house. Nevertheless, there is a clear line of literary descent from divine Virgin to domestic angel, passing through (among many others) Dante, Milton, and Goethe.

Like most Renaissance neo-Platonists, Dante claimed to know God and His Virgin handmaid by knowing the Virgin’s virgin attendant, Beatrice. Similarly, Milton, despite his undeniable misogyny (which we shall examine later), speaks of having been granted a vision of “my late espoused saint,” who

Came vested all in white, pure as her mind.  
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight, 
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shined  
So clear, as in no face with more delight.

In death, in other words, Milton’s human wife has taken on both the celestial brightness of Mary and (since she has been “washed from spot of childbed taint”) the virginal purity of Beatrice. In fact, if she could be resurrected in the flesh she might now be an angel in the house, interpreting heaven’s luminous mysteries to her wondering husband.

The famous vision of the “Eternal Feminine” (*Das Ewig-Weibliche*) with which Goethe’s *Faust* concludes presents women from penitent prostitutes to angelic virgins in just this role of interpreters or intermediaries between the divine Father and his human sons. The German of *Faust’s* “Chorus Mysticus” is extraordinarily difficult to translate in verse, but Hans Eichner’s English paraphrase easily suggests the way in which Goethe’s image of female intercessors seems almost to be a revision of Milton’s “late espoused saint”: “All that is transitory is merely symbolical; here (that is to say, in the scene before you) the inaccessible is (symbolically) portrayed and the inexpressible is (symbolically) made manifest. The eternal feminine (i.e. the eternal principle symbolized by woman) draws us to higher spheres.” Meditating on the exact nature of this eternal feminine, moreover, Eichner comments that for Goethe the “ideal of contemplative purity” is always feminine while “the ideal of significant action is masculine.” Once again, therefore, it is just because women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power (like “Cyphers”) that they become numinous to male artists. For in the metaphysical emptiness their “purity” signifies they are, of course, self-less, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests.

Elaborating further on Goethe’s eternal feminine, Eichner gives an example of the culmination of Goethe’s “chain of representatives of the ‘noblest femininity’”: Makarje, in the late novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*. His description of her usefully summarizes the philosophical background of the angel in the house:

*She ... leads a life of almost pure contemplation ... in considerable isolation on a country estate... a life without external events — a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. Her existence is not useless. On the contrary ... she shines like a beacon in a dark world, like a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travellers whose lives do have a story, can set their course. When those involved in feeling and action turn to her in their need, they are never dismissed without advice and consolation. She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart.*

*She has no story of her own* but gives “advice and consolation” to others, listens, smiles, sympathizes: such characteristics show that Makarje is not only the descendant of Western culture’s cloistered virgins but also the direct ancestress of Coventry Patmore’s angel in the house, the eponymous heroine of what may have been the middle nineteenth century’s most popular book of poems.

Dedicated to “the memory of her by whom and for whom I became a poet,” Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* is a verse-sequence which hymns the praises and narrates the courtship and marriage of Honoria, one of the three daughters of a country Dean, a girl whose unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility reveal that she is not only a pattern Victorian lady but almost literally an angel on earth. Certainly her spirituality interprets the divine for her poet husband, so that...
No happier post than this I ask,  
To live her laureate all my life.  
On wings of love uplifted free,  
And by her gentleness made great,  
I’ll teach how noble man should be  
To match with such a lovely mate.  

Honoria’s essential virtue, in other words, is that her virtue makes her man “great.” In and of herself, she is neither great nor extraordinary. Indeed, Patmore adds many details to stress the almost pathetic ordinariness of her life: she picks violets, loses her gloves, feeds her birds, waters her rose plot, and journeys to London on a train with her father the Dean, carrying in her lap a volume of Petrarach borrowed from her lover but entirely ignorant that the book is, as he tells us, “worth its weight in gold.” In short, like Goethe’s Makarie, Honoria has no story except a sort of anti-story of selfless innocence based on the notion that “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure.”

Significantly, when the young poet-lover first visits the Deanery where his Honoria awaits him like Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, one of her sisters asks him if, since leaving Cambridge, he has “outgrown” Kant and Goethe. But if his paean of praise to the Ewig-Webliche in rural England suggests that he has not, at any rate, outgrown the latter of these, that is because for Victorian men of letters Goethe represented not collegiate immaturity but moral maturity. After all, the climactic words of Sartor Resartus, that most influential masterpiece of Victorian sagacity, were “Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe,” and though Carlyle was not specifically thinking of what came to be called “the woman question,” his canonization of Goethe meant, among other things, a new emphasis on the eternal feminine, the angel-woman Patmore describes in his verses, Aurora Leigh perceives in her mother’s picture, and Virginia Woolfshudders to remember.

Of course, from the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic. There is a long and crowded road from The Books of Cartesye (1747) to the columns of “Dear Abby,” but social historians have fully explored its part in the creation of those “eternal feminine” virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness — all of which are modes of mannerliness that contributed to Honoria’s angelic innocence. Ladies were assured by the writers of such conduct books that “There are Rules for all our Actions, even down to Sleeping with a good Grace,” and they were told that this good Grace was a woman’s duty to her husband because “if Woman owes her Being to the Comfort and Profit of man, ’tis highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him.”

The arts of pleasing men, in other words, are not only angelic characteristics; in more worldly terms, they are the proper acts of a lady. “What shall I do to gratify myself or to be admired?” is not the question a lady asks on arising, declared Mrs Sarah Ellis, Victorian England’s foremost preceptor of female morals and manners, in 1844. No, because she is “the least engaged of any member of the household,” a woman of right feeling should devote herself to the good of others. And she should do this silently, without calling attention to her exertions because “all that would tend to draw away her thoughts from others and fix them on herself, ought to be avoided as an evil to her.” Similarly, John Ruskin affirmed in 1865 that the woman’s “power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings” of domesticity. Plainly, both writers meant that, enshrined within her home, a Victorian angel-woman should become her husband’s holy refuge from the blood and sweat that inevitably accompanies “a life of significant action,” as well as in, her “contemplative purity,” a living memento of the otherness of the divine.

At times, however, in the severity of her selflessness, as well as in the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life, this nineteenth-century angel-woman becomes not just a memento of otherness but actually a memento mori or, as Alexander Welsh has noted, an “Angel of Death.” Discussing Dickens’s heroines in particular and what he calls Victorian “angelology” in general, Welsh analyzes the ways in which a spiritualized heroine like Florence Dombey “assists in the translation of the dying to a future state,” not only by officiating at the sickbed but also by maternally welcoming the sufferer “from the other side of death.” But if the angel-woman in some curious way simultaneously inhabits both this world and the next, then there is a sense in which, besides ministering to the dying, she is herself already dead. Welsh muses on “the apparent reversibility of the heroine’s role, whereby the acts of dying and of saving someone from death seem confused,” and he points out that Dickens actually describes Florence Dombey as having the unearthly serenity of one who is dead. A spiritual messenger, an interpreter of mysteries to wondering and devoted men, the Ewig-Webliche angel becomes, finally, a messenger of the mystical otherness of death.

As Ann Douglas has recently shown, the nineteenth-century cult of such death-angels as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s little Eva or Dickens’s little Nell resulted in a veritable “domestication of death,” producing both a conventionalized iconography and a stylized hagiography of dying women and children. Like Dickens’s deadlive Florence Dombey, for instance, Louisa May Alcott’s dying Beth March is a household saint, and the deathbed at which she surrenders herself to heaven is the ultimate shrine of the angel-woman’s mysteries. At the same time, moreover, the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty — no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman — obliged “gentle” women to “kill” themselves (as Lederer observed) into art objects; slim, pale, passive beings whose “charms” eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead. Tight-lacing, fasting, vinegar-drinking, and similar cosmetic or dietary excesses were all parts of a physical regimen that helped women either to feign morbid weakness or actually to “decline” into real illness. Beth March’s beautiful ladylike sister Amy is thus in her artful way, as pale and frail as her consumptive sibling, and together these two heroines constitute complementary halves of the emblematic “beautiful woman”
whose death, thought Edgar Allan Poe, “is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.”

Whether she becomes an objet d’art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self – of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both – that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, like the life of Goethe’s Makarik, is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of “contemplative purity” evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave. To return to Aurora Leigh’s catalogue then – her vision of “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite” in her mother’s portrait – there is a sense in which as a celestial “angel” Aurora’s mother is also a somewhat sinister “ghost,” because she wears the face of the spiritualized Victorian woman who, having died to her own desires, her own self, her own life, leads a posthumous existence in her own lifetime.

As Douglas reminds us too, though, the Victorian domestication of death represents not just an acquiescence in death by the selfless, but also a secret striving for power by the powerless. “The tombstone,” she notes, “is the sacred emblem in the cult of the overlooked.” Exorcised from public life, denied the pleasures (though not the pains) of sensual existence, the Victorian angel in the house was allowed to hold sway over at least one realm beyond her own household: the kingdom of the dead. But if, as nurse and comforter, spirit-guide and mystical messenger, a woman ruled the dying and the dead, might not even her admirers sometimes fear that, besides dying or easing death, she could bring death? As Welsh puts it, “the power of an angel to save implies, even while it denies, the power of death.” Speaking of angelic Agnes Wickfield (in David Copperfield), he adds a sinister but witty question: “Who, in the language of detective fiction, was the last person to see Dora Copperfield alive?”

Neither Welsh nor Dickens does more than hint at the angel-woman’s pernicious potential. But in this context a word to the wise is enough, for such a hint helps explain the fluid metamorphoses that the figure of Aurora’s mother undergoes. Her images of “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,” we begin to see, are inextricably linked, one to another, each to its opposite. Certainly, imprisoned in the coffinlike shape of a death angel, a woman might long demonically for escape. In addition, as death angel the woman suggests a providentially selfless mother, delivering the male soul from one realm to another, the same woman’s maternal power implies, too, the fearful bondage of mortality into which every mother delivers her children. Finally, the fact that the angel-woman manipulates her domestic/mystical sphere in order to ensure the well-being of those entrusted to her care reveals that she can manipulate; she can scheme; she can plot – stories as well as strategies.

The Victorian angel’s scheming, her mortal fleshliness, and her repressed (but therefore all the more frightening) capacity for explosive rage are often subtly acknowledged, even in the most glowing texts of male “angelographers.” Patmore’s Honoria, for instance, proves to be considerably more duplicitous than at first she seemed. “To the sweet folly of the dove,” her poet-lover admits, “She joins the cunning of the snake.” To be sure, the speaker shows that her wiliness is exercised in a “good” cause: “to rivet and exalt his love.” Nevertheless,

- Her mode of candour is deceit;
- And what she thinks from what she’ll say
- (Although I’ll never call her cheat)
- Lies far as Scotland from Cathay.18

Clearly, the poet is here acknowledging his beloved’s potential for what Austen’s Captain Harville called “inconstancy” – that is, her stubborn autonomy and unknowable subjectivity, meaning the ineradicable selfishness that underlies even her angelic renunciation of self.

Similarly, exploring analogous tensions between flesh and spirit in yet another version of the angel-woman, Dante Gabriel Rossetti places his “Blessed Damozel” behind “golden barriers” in heaven, but then observes that she is still humanly embodied. The bars she leans on are oddly warm; her voice, her hair, her tears are weirdly real and sensual, perhaps to emphasize the impossibility of complete spirituality for any woman. This “damozel’s” life-in-death, at any rate, is still in some sense physical and therefore (paradoxically) emblematic of mortality. But though Rossetti wrote “The Blessed Damozel” in 1846, sixteen years before the suicide of his wife and model Elizabeth Siddal, the secret anxieties such imagery expressed came to the surface long after Lizzie’s death. In 1869, to retrieve a poetry manuscript he had sentimentally buried with this beloved woman whose face “fill[ed] his dreams” – buried as if woman and artwork were necessarily inseparable – Rossetti had Lizzie’s coffin exhumed, and literary London buzzed with rumors that her hair had “continued to grow after her death, to grow so long, so beautiful, so luxuriantly as to fill the coffin with its gold!” As if symbolizing the indomitable earthiness that no woman, however angelic, could entirely renounce, Lizzie Siddal Rossetti’s hair leaps like a metaphor for monstrous female sexual energies from the literal and figurative coffins in which her artist-husband enclosed her. To Rossetti, its assertive radiance made the dead Lizzie seem both terrifyingly physical and fiercely supernatural. “Mid change the changeless night environeth, / Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death,” he wrote.19

If we define a woman like Rossetti’s dead wife as indomitably earthly yet somehow supernatural, we are defining her as a witch or monster, a magical creation of the lower world who is a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel. As such, she still stands, in Sherry Ortner’s words, “both under and over (but really simply outside) of the sphere of culture’s hegemony.” But now, as a representative of otherness, she incarnates the damning otherness of the flesh rather than the inspiring otherness of the spirit, expressing what – to use Anne Finch’s words – men consider her own “presumptuous” desires rather than the angelic humility and “dullness” for which she was designed. Indeed, if we return to the literary definitions of “authority” with which we began this discussion, we will see that the
monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author’s power to allay “his” anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained “place” and thus generates a story that “gets away” from its author.

Because, as Dorothy Dinnerstein has proposed, male anxieties about female autonomy probably go as deep as everyone’s mother-dominated infancy, patriarchal texts have traditionally suggested that every angelically selfless Snow White must be hunted, if not haunted, by a wickedly assertive Stepmother: for every glowing portrait of submissive women estranged in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called the “Female Will.” Thus, while male writers traditionally praise the simplicity of the dove, they invariably castigate the cunning of the serpent—at least when that cunning is exercised in her own behalf. Similarly, assertiveness, aggressiveness—all characteristics of a male life of “significant action”—are “monstrous” in women precisely because “unfeminine” and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of “contemplative purity.” Musing on “The Daughter of Eve,” Patmore’s poet-speaker remarks, significantly, that

The woman’s gentle mood o’erstep
With hers my love, that lightly scan
The rest, and does in her accept
All her own faults, but none of man’s. 21

Luckily, his Honoria has no such vicious defects; her serpentine cunning, as we noted earlier, is concentrated entirely on pleasing her lover. But repeatedly, throughout most male literature, a sweet heroine inside the house (like Honoria) is opposed to a vicious bitch outside.

Behind Thackeray’s angelically submissive Amelia Sedley, for instance—an Honoria whose career is traced in gloomier detail than that of Patmore’s angel—lurks Vanity Fair’s stubbornly autonomous Becky Sharp, an independent “charmer” whom the novelist at one point actually describes as a monstrous and snaky sorceress:

In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all around has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster’s hideous tail above water! No! Those who like me peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling around corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous. 22

As this extraordinary passage suggests, the monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within (or in the lower half of) the angel. Thus, Thackeray implies, every angel in the house—“proper, agreeable, and decorous,” “coaxing and cajoling” hapless men—is really, perhaps, a monster, diabolically hideous and slimy.

“A woman in the shape of a monster,” Adrienne Rich observes in “Planetarium,” “a monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them.” 25 Because the skies are full of them, even if we focus only on those female monsters who are directly related to Thackeray’s serpentine siren, we will find that such monsters have long inhabited male texts. Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts. Moreover, to the extent that they incarnate male dread of women and, specifically, male scorn of female creativity, such characters have drastically affected the self-images of women writers, negatively reinforcing those messages of submissiveness conveyed by their angelic sisters.

The first book of Spenser’s The Faerie Queene introduces a female monster who serves as a prototype of the entire line. Error is half woman, half serpent, “Most loathsome, filthy, foule, and full of vile disdain.” 26 She breeds in a dark den where her young suck on her poisonous dugs or creep back into her mouth at the sight of hated light, and in battle against the noble Red-crosse Knight, she spews out a flood of books and papers, frogs and toads. Symbolizing the dangerous effect of misguided and undigested learning, her filthiness adumbrates that of two other powerful females in book I, Duessa and Lucifera. But because these other women can create false appearances to hide their vile natures, they are even more dangerous.

Like Error, Duessa is deformed below the waist, as if to foreshadow Lear’s “But to the girdle do the Gods inherit, / Beneath is all the fiend’s.” When, like all witches, she must do penance at the time of the new moon by bathing with herbs traditionally used by such other witches as Scylla, Circe, and Medea, her “neither parts” are revealed as “misshapen, monstrous.” 25 But significantly, Duessa deceives and ensnares men by assuming the shape of Una, the beautiful and angelic heroine who represents Christianity, charity, docility. Similarly, Lucifera lives in what seems to be a lovely mansion, a cunningly constructed House of Pride whose weak foundation and ruinous rear quarters are carefully concealed. Both women use their arts of deception to entrap and destroy men, and the secret, shameful ugliness of both is closely associated with their hidden genitals—that is, with their feminality.

Descending from Patristic misogynists like Tertullian and St Augustine through Renaissance and Restoration literature—and Sidney’s Cecropia, Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth and his Goneril and Regan, Milton’s Sin (and even, as we shall see, his Eve)—the female monster populates the works of the satirists of the eighteenth century, a company of male artists whose virulent visions must have been particularly alarming to feminine readers in an age when women had just begun to “attempt the pen.” These authors attacked literary women on two fronts. First, and most obviously, through the construction of cartoon figures like Sheridan’s Mrs Malaprop and Fielding’s Mrs Slipslop, and Smollett’s Tabitha Bramble, they
temporarily staving off dissolution, for like Pope’s “Sex of Queens,” Swift’s females are composed of what Pope called “Matter too soft,” and their arts are thus always inadequate. 30

For the most part, eighteenth-century satirists limited their depiction of the female monster to low mimetic equivalents like Phoebe Clinket or Swift’s corroding coquettes. But there were several important avatars of the monster-woman who retained the allegorical anatomy of their more fantastic precursors. In The Battle of the Books, for instance, Swift’s “Goddess Criticism” clearly symbolizes the demise of wit and learning. Devouring numberless volumes in a den as dark as Error’s, she is surrounded by relations like Ignorance, Pride, Opinion, Noise, Impudence, and Pedantry, and she herself is as allegorically deformed as any of Spenser’s females.

The Goddess herself had claws like a Cat; her Head, and Ears, and Voice, resembled those of an Ass; Her Teeth fell out before; Her Eyes turned inward, as if she look only upon Herself; Her diet was the overflowing of her own Gall. Her Spleen was so large, as to stand prominent like a Dog of the first Rate, nor wanted Excruciations in forms of Teats, at which a Crew of ugly Monsters were greedily sucking; and what is wonderful to conceive, the bulk of Spleen increased faster than the Suckling could diminish it. 31

Like Spenser’s Error and Milton’s Sin, Criticism is linked by her processes of eternal breeding, eating, spewing, feeding, and redevouring to biological cycles all three poets view as destructive to transcendent, intellectual life. More, since all the creations of each monstrous mother are her excrescences, and since all her excrescences are both her food and her weaponry, each mother forms with her brood a self-enclosed system, cannibalistic and solipsistic: the creativity of the world made flesh is annihilating. At the same time, Swift’s spleen-producing and splenetic Goddess cannot be far removed from the Goddess of Spleen in Pope’s The Rape of the Lock, and—because she is a mother Goddess—she also has much in common with the Goddess of Dullness who appears in Pope’s Dunciad. The parent of “Vapours and Female Wit,” the “Hysteric or Poetic fit,” the Queen of Spleen rules over all women between the ages of fifteen and fifty, and thus, as a sort of patroness of the female sexual cycle, she is associated with the same anti-creation that characterizes Error, Sin, and Criticism. 32 Similarly, the Goddess of Dullness, a nursing mother worshipped by a society of dunces, symbolizes the failure of culture, the failure of art, and the death of the satirist. The huge daughter of Chaos and Night, she rocks the laureate in her ample lap while handing out rewards and intoxicating drinks to her dull sons. A Queen of Ooze, whose inertia comments on idealized Queens of Love, she nods and all of Nature falls asleep, its light destroyed by the stupor that spreads throughout the land in the milk of her “kindness.” 33

In all these incarnations—from Error to Dullness, from Goneril and Regan to Chloe and Caelia—the female monster is a striking illustration of Simone de Beauvoir’s thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man’s ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth
and death. As the Other, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, life that is made to be destroyed. "It is the horror of his own carnal contiguity," de Beauvoir notes, "which [man] projects upon [woman]." In addition, as Karen Horney and Dorothy Dinnerstein have shown, male dread of women, and specifically the infantile dread of maternal autonomy, has historically objectified itself in vilification of women, while male ambivalence about female "charms" underlines the traditional images of such terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy.

The sexual nausea associated with all these monster-women helps explain why so many real women have for so long expressed loathing of (or at least anxiety about) their own, inexorably female bodies. The "killing" of oneself into an art object - the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odors and aging, with hair which is invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick - all this testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying not to become female monsters. More significantly for our purposes, however, the female freak is and has been a powerfully coercive and monitory image for women secretly desiring to attempt the pen, an image that helped enforce the injunctions to silence implicit also in the concept of the Ewig-Weibliche. If becoming an author meant mistaking one's "sex and way," if it meant becoming an "unsexed" or pervasively sexed female, then it meant becoming a monster or freak, a vile Errort, a grotesque Lady Macbeth, a disgusting goddess of Dullness, or (to name a few later witches) a murderious Lamia, a sinner Geraldine. Perhaps, then, the "presumptuous" effort should not be made at all. Certainly the story of Lilith, one more monster-woman - indeed, according to Hebrew mythology, both the first woman and the first monster - specifically connects poetic presumption with madness, freakishness, monstrosity.

Created not from Adam's rib but, like him, from the dust, Lilith was Adam's first wife, according to apocryphal Jewish lore. Because she considered herself his equal, she objected to lying beneath him, so that when he tried to force her submission, she became enraged and, speaking the Ineffable Name, flew away to the edge of the Red Sea to reside with demons. Threatened by God's angelic emissaries, told that she must return or daily lose a hundred of her demon children to death, Lilith preferred punishment to patriarchal marriage, and she took her revenge against both God and Adam by injuring babies - especially male babies, who were traditionally thought to be more vulnerable to her attacks. What her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and female "presumption" - that is, angry revolt against male domination - are inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic. Excluded from the human community, even from the semi-divine communal chronicles of the Bible, the figure of Lilith represents the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to define themselves. And it is a terrible price: cursed both because she is a character who "got away" and because she dared to usurp the essentially literary authority implied by the act of naming. Lilith is locked into a vengeance (child-killing) which can only bring her more suffering (the killing of her own children). And even the nature of her one-woman revolution emphasizes her helplessness and her isolation, for her protest takes the form of a refusal and a departure, a flight of escape rather than an active rebellion like, say, Satan's. As a paradigm of both the "witch" and the "fiend" of Aurora Leigh's "Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch and sprite," Lilith reveals, then, just how difficult it is for women even to attempt the pen. And from George MacDonald, the Victorian fantasist who portrayed her in his astonishing Lilith as a paradigm of the self-tormenting assertive woman, to Laura Riding, who depicted her in "Eve's Side of It" as an archetypal woman Creator, the problem Lilith represents has been associated with the problems of female authorship and female authority. Even if they had not studied her legend, literary women like Anne Finch, bemoaning the double bind in which the mutually dependent images of angel and monster had left them, must have gotten the message Lilith incarnates: a life of feminine submission, of "contemplative purity," is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of "significant action," is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story. Either way, the images on the surface of the looking glass, into which the female artist peers in search of her self, warn her that she is or must be a "Cypher," framed and framed up, indited and indicted.

... Yet, despite the obstacles presented by those twin images of angel and monster, despite the fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered, generations of texts have been possible for female writers. By the end of the eighteenth century - and here is the most important phenomenon we will see throughout this volume - women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised. And as self-conceiving women from Anne Finch and Anne Elliot to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson rose from the glass coffin of the male-authored text, as they exploded out of the Queen's looking glass, the old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority.

Notes
4 Ibid., p. 620. Obviously Makarie's virtues foreshadow (besides those of Patmore's
Honoria), those of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Ramsay, in To the Lighthouse, for Mrs Ramsay is also a kind of “lighthouse” of sympathy and beauty.


6. Ibid., p. 73.


13. Ibid., pp. 187, 190.


17. Welsh, City of Dickens, pp. 182–3.


24. King Lear, 4.4.142–3; The Faerie Queene, I.2.361.


33. Pope, The Duenna in Four Books (1743), canto 1, ll. 311–18, in The Poems of Alexander Pope, p. 734.

34. Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. 138.
