



Margaret Finch. *Queen of the Gypsies at Norwood*. n.d.

What we mean to say: Notes Toward Defining The Nature of Lesbian Literature BERTHA HARRIS

The original version of this paper was intended for, and presented to, academics at a Forum on Homosexual Literature at the 1974 Modern Language Association Convention. The paper was entitled, "The Purification of Monstrosity: The Lesbian As Literature." Since then, I have written other versions on this subject of the lesbian as monster in literature; and have begun to realize that I can only finally complete what I have to say in book-length form. So I've started writing the book. The version below contains the theory and a partial analysis. For examples here, however, I have chosen mostly instances of popular literature—such as Dracula, Jaws, Burnt Offerings, etc. Expanded, this essay on the idea of lesbian monstrosity in popular fiction will form one chapter of the book I am preparing.

To misappropriate Oscar Wilde's remark about the English and fox-hunting: *lesbian literature is the pursuit*

of the inedible by the unspeakable. It is also the pursuit of the unspeakable by the inedible; and it is this particularly. As lesbians are "unspeakable" so is "lesbianism" a taste for the "inedible." Literature (in any form) is like the fox, a luxury; a peripheral pastime, because it is inedible; and so is lesbianism. Lesbians and lesbian literature are unspeakable and inedible. Most contemporary attempts to make both palatable and "speakable" (to put a fox in every home's Sunday pot)—universally acceptable and welcome—are tantamount to grinding up chateaubriand into winkleburgers.

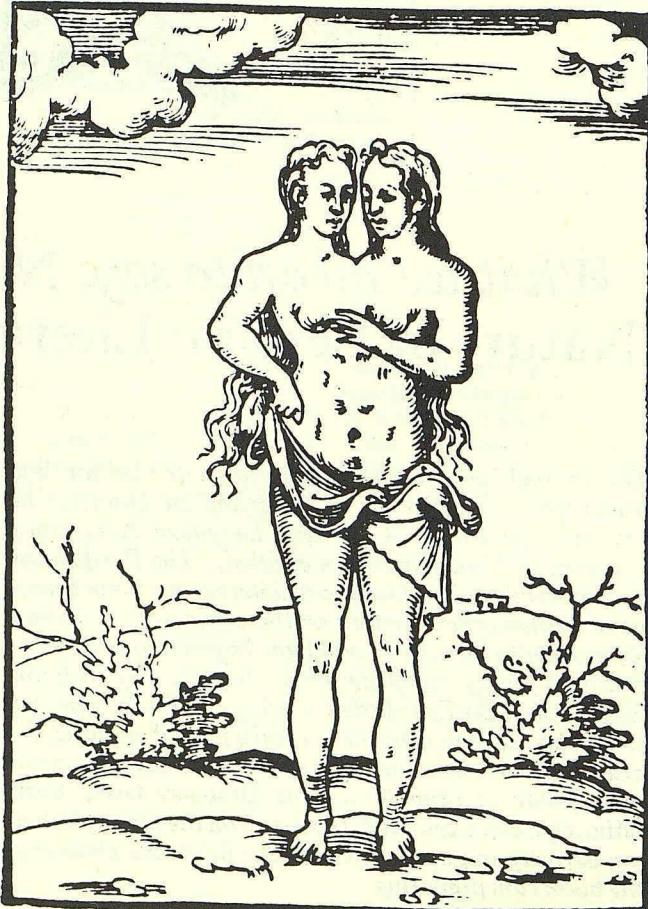
To those acquainted with reading (but most people, and most lesbians, do not read) what is being called lesbian literature these days is sheer winkleburger; and around and about that "literature" is afoot a movement to make the world safe for winkleburger—although tree-worshippers on our west coast will not touch it; and ritualists who periodically burn their menstrual

blood prefer to do that instead. Most lesbians (like everyone else) would rather feel than read; they thus achieve their most longed-for goal: to be like everyone else. And that is too bad. Lesbians, instead, might have been great, as some literature is: unassimilable, awesome, dangerous, outrageous, different: *distinguished*. Lesbians, as some literature is, might have been monstrous—and thus have everything. Monsters are, and have always been, invented to express what ordinary people cannot: feeling. Monsters (among other things) are emblems of feeling in patriarchy. The enemy of the monster is phallic materialism, which demands that chaos be shaped and ordered, made sexually economical, around the emblem of a cock. The literature of phallic materialism is about reducing “chaos” (wilderness, woman, imagination, the erotic) into an erect (predictable) order (by means of rifles and missiles, fire and concrete, the ritual of marriage and the double bed; genital spasm). The story is about what it means to be a cock; and what it means to be the other end of the cock. The most inventive of these stories is regularly awarded the Nobel Prize. “Invention” in these stories regularly takes the form of what constitutes the other end of the cock: what form the monster will take.

Most writers of imaginative literature (by which I mean fiction and poetry)—and their attentive readers—do not understand that a lesbian form significantly differing from the patriarchal form I have described is not achieved through sexual substitution. For example, two women (instead of a woman and a man) overcoming parental opposition, surviving the wilderness, enjoying domestic bliss together, achieving orgasm with a finger instead of a penis is only Romeo and Juliet again with two differences: happy endings—of both kinds. A woman suffering in Tolstoyan detail over another woman (instead of a man) overwhelms with catalogues of sexual candor; genital explicitness substituting for Napoleon’s entry into Moscow. It is not that these, and all the others, are not “good” books. They are—and so are the excruciatingly refined recollections of a dear old lady who mistakes the chirrups of a female sociologist for the call of the Wild. Anything is, after all, better than nothing. My complaint lies in the fact that these individual turnabouts of heterosexual reality seem, to many, to constitute a literary expression of lesbian sensibility; and as such distract us from the apprehension of lesbian reality.

The great service of literature is to show us who we are. Put more simply, we tend to behave, and think, as books show us how to behave and think (and I am being deliberately naive here—I do know that movies and television have almost completely taken over the role of books as behavior show-ers and shapers). Lesbians, historically bereft of cultural, political and moral context, have especially relied on imaginative literature to dream themselves into situations of cultural, political and moral power. Twenty years ago, without Molly Bolt, we were Rhett Butler and Stephen Gordon and the Count of Monte Cristo. It is, of course, much more to the point to be Molly Bolt—or Patience or Sarah or Mrs. Stevens. The trouble with this process (vulgarily referred to as “identifying with”) is that while the new lesbian hero is certainly safer for our mental health than Rhett or the Count of Stephen—we do not have to associate power and adventure with the penis any longer; we do not have to call on God to cure us of “inversion”

and wear male underwear any longer—and while we see her operating in what some might very loosely call a “cultural” context of tree-hugging, feminist folk/rock, vegetarianism and goddess-worship, her aggressive, strong, even magnificent image is by and large taken on by her beholder *still* inside the heterosexual/patriarchal definition of moral and political reality. Lesbian literature is *not* a matter of a woman plus a woman in bed. As the devout seek to “prove” a matriarchal pre-history by pointing to circular forms in cave painting; as still others cherish bizarre snippets of human detritus as the foreskin of Jesus—lesbians overwhelmingly believe that acts of lesbianism are positive proof—both in and out of literature—of the existence of lesbians. As though we were spending all our lives in the courts of law, we rely almost entirely on materiality as evidence of truth. It is sexual materiality, of course, that is these days the supreme evidence, not only of truth and love but, indeed, that one is alive. And perhaps it has always been so; and perhaps it is best that it is so. But lesbians have been unable to enact a completely lesbian reality—and therefore, a literature—because of such reliance on the sensational as proof of existence: because we have been the apotheosis of the sensational, defined utterly by sexual behavior and no other kind. As such, we have served an emotionally crippled society well: imagined as entirely sexual, we are also imagined as complete: i.e., a human form (therefore natural) engaging in unnatural (therefore supernatural) activity. Law, basing its decision on material evidence, thus shows what is *out of* law; and makes the divine, which is worshipped; and makes the criminal, which is brutalized—and adored,



Female monster with two heads. From Boaistuau’s *Histories Prodigieuses*, Paris, 1573.

and for the same reasons the "divine" is worshipped: because of its *difference*. Human beings tend to adore that which they are not, but long to be; or, given the "chance," can be; and this is a wish for salvation—and salvaging. Such a wish, expressed in an entirely whole social context, makes a literature in which heroes appear performing great tasks of strength, love, endurance, intellectuality, suffering. Each task accomplished for the hero means transcendence, not only for the hero but for the culture whose need he has accomplished. The task itself changes from time to time; from place to place; but its purpose—transcendence—does not. The lesbian equivalent of such a hero in literature is the monster.

Monsters, heroes, criminals and lesbians (and sometimes saints and gods) have the following traits in common: an ability to make a life outside the social norm that seems both enviable and frightening to those inside; an actual or imagined power to concentrate which may be either emotionally or intellectually expressed—but whose object is to solve a problem; marks of difference that are physically manifested and both horrify and thrill; a desire to avenge its own (and sometimes others) outcast misery: through destruction or through forcing a change in the world that will admit it and its kind; an ability to seduce and tempt others into its "evil" ways; super-human power.

From boy to man to old man, the male body changes hardly at all. The changes it does incur are hardly dramatic. From girl to woman to old woman, the female body is in constant flux; and to the primitive imagination (which we all have) female physical change is the matter of all magic; the genesis of all fear; the stuff of all mythic and fictive exaggeration. The female bleeds. She bleeds, *but does not die* from bleeding. She grows breasts: breasts springing from the nothing that is chest. Her hips spread; her waist indents; her belly grows huge. In great physical turbulence, she produces life, her self's replica, and seemingly at her will and unaided. Her body can feed this new life. Such a creature with such power—not only over life itself but power over the continuing life of the community—must be dealt with: her power over life must be met with an equivalent power. The most obvious form that this new *invented* power (invented through motives of fear and envy) will take is the power to choose whether the woman will live or die. Her power over life must be matched with a power over her death. This invented power over woman is enacted in various overlapping stages: she is made sacred and worshipped (because she is outside the male "norm"). Through worship, it is hoped, she will be propitiated—she will not turn her magic inside out and cause death instead of on-going life. She is made profane, stripped of her magical properties, reduced to "mere" flesh. In this form she embodies horror and thrill and, especially, evil. For fear that she herself will turn her magic inside-out, the community appropriates that decision and does it instead. In both divine and obscure forms, the woman's magic is under the control of others and she is rendered powerless. To experience powerlessness is to experience death. Further, both forms of control have the added effects of "taming" that which was perceived as wild, and therefore dangerous. For the male to *appear* wild, he must create a contrast to tameness; in effect, steal woman's wildness and use it as drag: become magic himself. And he will become divine, by contrast, if she can be made profane. And he will become pure if

she can be shown (as her bleeding testifies) to be impure. Such a cooptive process is accompanied by huge eruptions of guilt and fear which, in literary creation (as well as myth), takes the form of the monster: the quintessence of all that is female; and female enraged.

The amount of collective guilt by those who hold power over women can be effectively measured at any one time by the amount of "monster" literature that is published during that time. Especially if such literature is popular with the public (as it was in nineteenth century Europe and as it is now in twentieth century America) we can be certain that two emotions have seized the general imagination: extreme fear that those who have been tricked of power are conspiring to regain it—and will—and that artificial restraints on the wild (such as marriage) are collapsing; and a great longing (accompanied by remorse and nostalgia for "real" wildness) for the conspiracy to succeed. While Mary Shelley was composing *Frankenstein*, William Blake was observing the havoc the Industrial Revolution was wreaking on England's green nature. Mary Shelley's monster rises out of "dark Satanic Mills" as pure evil and as a *result* of evil inflicted on the natural: "Oh Horror!—let me fly this dreadful monster of my own creation!" *Frankenstein's* monster longs to be loved; many monsters feel that love will cure their alienation. Significantly (perhaps uniquely among monsters) Mary Shelley also wishes it could read and write. Blake's "dark Satanic Mills" have advanced into the last half of the twentieth century transformed into sophisticated technological death; and almost daily a new monster is mass-distributed in paperback. Vampires, poltergeists, witches are being refur-



The lion-headed Barbara Urselin, born in 1641 in Augsburg, from Aldrovandus' *Opera Omnia Monstrum Historia*, 1668.

bished in modern guise: Ann Rice deliberately recreates old Dracula as a dream of eroticism; but old Dracula, from the nineteenth century, still threatens his worthy pursuers (intent on making the world safe from "vampires") that he will take their women away from them and turn them (the men) into his jackals. An adolescent girl, abominated because she is "different" elects to let difference serve her instead of defeat her, and turns the "shame" of menstruation into a bloom of napalm. The natural conspires with the supernatural—as it always has through monster literature; and, through the union, produces both a configuration of love that is non-phallic; and of power that is counter-phallic. A maiden plus a beast produces a monster: that is, "unspoiled" nature (unfucked, unsocialized) whose image is the maiden who will find herself (sometimes through happenstance, sometimes even deliberately) in league with the supernatural. Together, they terrify, and must be separated (by the phallus)—one, commonly, transformed to wife; the other exchanged for husband. While patriarchal guilt has invented the monster to manifest its guilt, patriarchal need to reenact triumph over the monster is so far a greater urge. But *Burnt Offerings*, another mass-market paperback, is an interesting switch; as is *Carrie*. Carrie, though she herself is killed in the holocaust her rage creates, seems as alive after death as she was before. "Can female anger be quenched by the grave?" seems to be the question. Certainly, the vampire's cannot—except by the stake through the heart: a long, stiff, pointed object snuffing out eternal life through love's symbol. While *Burnt Offerings* is thematically similar to Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (but thematically only; literary merit is not an issue here); and while there is material lesbian content in Jackson's novel and not in the other, *Burnt Offerings* is one of the few monster tales with a happy monster ending. The young housewife, with the help of the vicious house, gleefully turns into a witch (or witch variant), uses her new

power to destroy her husband and son; and at last can enjoy not only a room of her own but an entire, and rather lovely, house of her own. Blood, as in the case of the vampire, is the transforming agent. Frequently patriarchal guilt will, besides the monster, produce types of men to suffer and eventually defeat her. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Peter Benchley's *Jaws* are exactly the same in this respect: a man of the past, a man of the present and a man of the (technological) future unite emotionally and as workers to kill the being whose erotic rage most threatens their sexual control; and the crucial lesson of male/skill bonding against female/creature union is again reinforced. Of this genre, *Jaws*—whose direct ancestor is the old tale of "Beauty and the Beast"—is the most clearly lesbian. Maiden, beast and nature are fused in one giant, ravenous killer form whose freedom depends upon the wipeout of the nuclear-familied, heterosexual beach and all its supporting structures. And this time it takes more than mere phallic flesh to subjugate the monster: the penis (the pointed stake through the heart) has become great tubes of lethal explosive. As *vagina dentata* grows even longer, stronger incisors, so must the weaponry to blow it up—and teach it a lesson—increase in diameter, length and ability to shoot straight. When Djuna Barnes wrote *Nightwood* she was creating, in the silent, devouring magic of her lesbian, Robin Vote, a sleepless swimmer in the depths of all our imaginations; and her new name is *Jaws*—and her ancient name, Beauty.

But lesbian literature, which, in patriarchy is necessarily monster literature, has begun to take new shapes utterly independent and free of the male tradition: as it must, to produce any kind of happy ending. With only a few exceptions, the old monster is experiencing its most telling re-rendering in the imaginative literature from the independent women's presses, where it is being returned to its original female shape. The old fearsome disguises, the gruesome costumes of terror are being stripped away, revealing what was there all along: a free woman declaring through art, for the first time, what a lesbian is. Much of what a lesbian is, this new work is telling us, is that which has been unspeakable about women. In June Arnold's *The Cook and The Carpenter*, we learn that political passion is a direct result of physical passion among women. In Linda Marie's *I Must Not Rock* and Nancy Lee Hall's *The True Story of a Drunken Mother* the "common" language of the common woman that Judy Grahn prophesied in *The Common Woman* poems is at least an esthetic reality. In June Arnold's *Sister Gin* to be old and fat is also to be a lover. Pat Parker's poetry shows that it is even possible to be Black and stay Black when one is a lesbian. In M.F. Beal's *Angel Dance* and in my own novel, *Lover*, men are dangerous to the lives of women: and so they are killed. Such works, from such places, constitute the beginnings of the future of lesbian literature and serve to show what the lesbian is becoming: a creature of tooth and claw, of passion and purpose: unassimilable, awesome, dangerous, outrageous, different: distinguished.

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Wonder Woman by Charles Moulton. May 1957. D.C. National Comics.