

Review: Sady Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy and the Fear of Female Power*

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Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy and the Fear of Female Power
By Sady Doyle
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In the course of my research, I have often dealt with the treacherous slope on which talking or writing about female monstrosity rests, for the propensity of patriarchal forces to morph female evil for their own advantage is an ever present threat. In other words, elucidating *badness* from the subject position of a woman is both a challenging (not to say fascinating) and a demanding task. Painstaking attention to detail is needed, to avoid getting misconstrued and branded as an ‘antifeminist.’ One way out of this conundrum is through wit, satire, and irony, particularly at moments where systemic victimisation of women threatens to preclude them from wielding any kind of power, brute and/or sovereign. This is the method that Sady Doyle successfully employs in her book *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy and the Fear of Female Power*. The book oscillates between exploring extreme subjugation and supreme power of women via the concept of monstrosity. This approach is both the book’s strength and limitation: strength because of the rigorous resoluteness with which the arguments are put forth; limitation because this ultimately makes it difficult for the text to engage with moral ambiguity, the greyness (not blackness) at the core of female monstrosity. If we agree that fear of women is central to the workings of misogyny, then the metaphor of the cage, Doyle argues, serves two purposes: first and the obvious one is of confinement, to restrict women from accessing male territories of capital and power, but second and the more fascinating one is “to protect the world from what is inside it,” that is to say the patriarchal drive is more concerned with keeping women from getting *out* than keeping them in “custody” (xv).

Doyle’s book is divided into three conventional seeming parts: *Daughters*, *Wives* and *Mothers*. She draws from Hollywood’s representation of young girls and women – predominantly within the genres of horror/gothic and noir/crime thriller; from mythology and

urban legends; and in media reports and literature – to explore the position of women in our collective consciousness/society, our beliefs and ideas about what constitutes femininity, and most significantly to reexamine the construction of female monsters. According to her, patriarchy constructs monsters out of women's desire and sexuality which are both horrifying in their feral ambition and threatening in their capacity to violate social and biological norms.

One of the most compelling concepts that emerges from the section on *Daughters* is that of liminality. While drawing a correlation between the perceived beginnings of monstrosity in the figure of the young girl and the period of puberty vis-a-vis the taboo of menstruation, Doyle writes,

In folk belief, magic is often said to accumulate around liminal moments — points of transition, places where something is neither A nor B but both at once... Midnight is the witching hour because it is neither today nor tomorrow... Adolescence is the most frightening and protracted forms of liminality, a time when someone is neither child nor adult, but can seem like either, or both. (9-10)

Hence, in the analyses of *The Exorcist* (1973) that follows, her sardonic inference that a “little girl is less a person than she is a portal” (14) does hold water; portals, in any case, are transitional, shifting and flexible in their ontological construction. Two ideas come to my mind at this juncture in understanding the figure of the young girl – Gilles Deleuze's idea of “larval self/ves,” as it opens up the possibility to confront the critical discourse on biopolitics in a new manner where the body of the young girl can be constituted (primarily) as an un-situated body among other bodies;¹ and Giorgio Agamben's concept of “Bare Life” as it fundamentally exists in *exclusion* from the sovereign power and continuously finds itself within the grasp of death much like the girl.² Moreover, it is also worth noting, that Doyle evokes Carol Clover's iconic

“Final Girl,” from the latter’s book *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, who bypasses her preordained death in the slasher films, and is consequently recognised as *a case of exception*. The question that remains unanswered in Clover and Doyle’s works is whether the twenty-first century girl, a persistent survivor, is still a case of exception? Further, when the presence of this young girl, on the verge of womanhood, induces anxiety within the structures of a patriarchal order, Doyle argues that this liminal space generates power and creates monsters. However, a monster, she submits, “is not something to dismiss or look down on. A monster does not merely inspire anger or disgust. A monster, by definition, inspires *fear*” (xiii-xiv).

Moving forward, in her section on *Wives*, Doyle expands the category of monster to lay open the exigencies of seduction as it is attributed to women (femme fatales, home-wreckers, temptresses etc.) while also summoning the institute of marriage to the witness box. She points out that the fear of female sexuality in films like *Cat People* (1942) and *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) among others, is the fear of queerness, the fear that women’s desires will exclude men, and the fear that heteronormativity will go for a toss. Even though from a typical (and at times controversial) Freudian vantage point, Joan Riviere – a key author in feminist literature best remembered for her seminal 1929 paper “Womanliness as a masquerade” – has marked this queerness as the fundamental nature of female sexuality. However, Doyle uses Simone de Beauvoir’s work to argue that “to pose Woman is to pose the absolute Other, without reciprocity denying all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being” (66), to bring home the immanent *otherness* of monsters. This is also akin to Nina Lykke’s postulation within the framework of feminist science studies, of the female monster as a boundary figure, where she asserts that “being close to *nature* in patriarchal thought, ‘woman’ may often be found lurking in the discursive spaces representing what lies between universal man and his non-human others”³ (my emphasis). Lykke goes on to argue (bear with me for this digression, the relevance to Doyle will present itself in a moment) that a female feminist subject must not

hesitate to position herself alongside monstrous affairs in the grey zone between the human and the non-human.⁴ In fact,

*[I]f the feminist subject [attempts] to escape the grey zone of the monstrous through the category of “gender,” she may at first glance seem to be saved. Apparently, she has attained a subject position on the human side of the great divide... Sex is nature, belonging to the non-human part of our being; gender is culture and a purely human affair. Hybrid interpretations are not admitted!*⁵

Hybrid forms, in fact, are the crux of the matter – woman-panther, woman-serpent, faeries, mermaids, or more specifically, Circe, Medusa, Lilith, Echidna, Tiamat and so on – which often feature in Doyle’s analysis and clarification of media, literary and cinematic texts. She revisits these mythical creatures to amass either female power or attest to their oppressed condition. Violence, so customary to women’s lives, reveals itself poignantly in the section on *Mothers*. Luce Irigaray was right in her declaration that control of women’s lives is most blatantly discernible at the site of reproduction.⁶ But the maternal body is also the site of abjection, from Norma Bates in *Psycho* to Margaret White in *Carrie*, more so when it produces monstrous children. Additionally, the maternal, much like the monster, is also the site of insurmountable sorrow and pain, and we confront this when Doyle delineates Mary Shelley’s tragic life that led to the writing of *Frankenstein*, in which the monster pronounces, “I am malicious because I am miserable... I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion” (139-140). This is precisely what becomes so critical when it comes to understanding evil within femininity, its unfettered link to despair, to sadness.

However, I want to question Doyle: can badness and villainy in women *always* be traced back to preexisting misogyny, such that bad behaviour ultimately remains safely tucked

away in the possession of men? Our attempt to constantly rehabilitate female villainy, within literature and cinema, to look for explanations and justifications for their actions make *badness* in women an anomaly. In other words, our tendency to somehow alleviate evil from women leaves no room for women to be anything but fundamentally good, taking us, paradoxically, right back into the long-rejected territory of the “ideal” woman. I would end by echoing Margaret Atwood’s remark that “women have more to them than virtue,”⁷ the scope of which is realised, even if not unconditionally, by Doyle. Having said that, this book has been long overdue. We desperately needed somebody to engage with the replete images of dead blondes and the “domineering” bad mothers of popular culture.

¹ Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. (Columbia University Press, 1994)

² Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford University Press, 1998)

³ Lykke, Nina. *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminists Confrontations with Science*, pp. 78 (Zed Books, 1996)

⁴ Ibid, 78.

⁵ Ibid, 78.

⁶ Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp. 192-197 (Cornell University Press, 1985)

⁷ Atwood, Margaret. *Spotty-Handed Villainesses*, 10 (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2017)

