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Introduction

EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGISTS talk about evolution as a generally gradual and linear process that has occasional sudden jumps. Hiccups. Glitches. That is, the natural environment puts pressure on a species to evolve gradually over time, but that process is occasionally interrupted by what are called “point mutations.”¹ Point mutations are genetic glitches that arise in an organism spontaneously but wind up being adaptively advantageous in a particular environment, so that the species maintains that glitch, converting it from a bug into a feature.

Culture evolves similarly. I’ve spent my career working on this idea from various angles, sometimes looking at the evolution of medieval European literature, sometimes at the medieval evolution of Christian theology and practice, sometimes at the history of ecological thought, and most recently at the coevolution of American horror cinema and feminist law.² Cultures tend to trundle along, evolving slowly, until a sudden glitch or mutation forces a rapid period of change. Sometimes, that mutation might be something as small as a new play, book, poem, or film. Sometimes, it might be a particular legal ruling—for example, the 2022 US Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision, which ended the federal right to an abortion—that puts an enormous amount of pressure on a culture so that it suddenly grows or shifts.³ Sometimes, the cultural point mutation is a big, screaming ideological shift, something like the coalescence of Mesopotamian or Greek Patriarchy, the ascendancy of the Roman Empire, the formation of Western Christianity as an institution, the Scientific

Revolution, the birth of psychoanalysis, or the rise of feminism as a popular movement.

In fact, these last six are the massive cultural mutations that we will concern ourselves with most directly in this book. Each of these changes—the coalescence of early Mediterranean Patriarchy, the rise of *Romanitas*, the spread of Western Christianity, the rapid escalation of scientific empiricism, the heyday of psychoanalysis, and the phases of feminism—inflects the evolution of one powerful, transhistorical, transnational, transcultural, translinguistic trope of female monstrosity. I will call this trope the Monstrous Bitch.

What do I mean by calling her that—a bitch? Why use that word? Well, first, I want to highlight and defamiliarize the rampant misogyny in the English-speaking world, in which the word “bitch” has become an increasingly normalized way to refer to women. The term “bitch” is used casually and derogatorily to describe women in music, on television, and in conversation among teenagers, as well as among adults. On the one hand, I have a problem with the rampancy of this word, since I do not appreciate my sex being compared to a breeding dog.⁴ On the other, I appreciate the kind of feminism that wants to reclaim the word “bitch” for the purposes of empowerment, in vexed but suggestive terms like “boss-bitch” or in ideas such as those promulgated in *The Bitch Manifesto*.⁵

If, as a culture, we are determined to use the word “bitch” willy-nilly to refer to women, we should—at the very least—be aware of *why* the notion of an evil she-dog has the talismanic powers that it does. The answer goes back a very, very long time and spans a very, very large distance. The association between evil femaleness and doglikeness goes back about four thousand years: Depictions of female monsters in ancient Mesopotamia often have dog faces or dog heads, and the iconography of female monstrosity ever since then has leaned on dogs as a touchstone for what is monstrous in women. Patriarchy has been telling women that they are dogs for thousands of years. So we come by our reliance on the word “bitch” honestly, and I will use that word in this book as kind of a lexical talisman, in hope of both invoking and disenchanting an ancient form of misogyny by using its modern English

name and asking readers to contend with the discomfort that name brings on.

So that's the theory. Here's the practice. When I use the term "Monstrous Bitch," I mean it to invoke a set of traits and characteristics that includes but far transcends mere doglikeness. For the past four thousand years, Mediterranean and Western cultures have generated massive amounts of art, literature, and ideology about a particular female figure. That figure goes by different names—though, as we will see, those names are often lexical variations on one single original name—but all its guises have core characteristics in common.

- This ancient and contemporary Monstrous Bitch is physically aggressive to the point of being predatory, and she usually exercises her predatory impulses *sexually*.
- The Monstrous Bitch tampers with human *reproduction*. She often targets men and women of reproductive age as her victims, but her especial pleasure often lies in slaughtering infants and small children, to eat them, drink their blood, or use their blood in rituals.
- She exists in strident opposition to the patriarchal status quo in whatever period she exists, and she threatens to destabilize that status quo using her loud, terrifying *voice*—sometimes by spellcasting, sometimes by cursing, sometimes by invective.

Sex, reproduction, and voice. These are the Monstrous Bitch's primary mechanisms of striking terror into the heart of Patriarchy—which I will, as noted in my preface, capitalize throughout this book, personifying it in order to highlight that Patriarchy functions as an agential being. The Monstrous Bitch has been demonized for thousands of years for *exactly* the things that so many women—in the United States and elsewhere—find themselves demonized for in the twenty-first century's catastrophic collapse of women's rights. There is also a fourth trait, not so much behavioral as innate: The Monstrous Bitch has bestial aspects, usually doglike, often also snakelike, and sometimes birdlike or buglike. She is sexually, reproductively, and vocally aggressive *and* something both more and less than human.

If we are going to wriggle out from under the sprawling weight of contemporary Patriarchy, we need to learn about the Monstrous Bitch, in all her capacities and all her innate traits. More specifically, we need to excavate her relationship to patriarchal power, and to understand how and why she has morphed and shifted over time. As we will see, the iconic Monstrous Bitch has been created and sustained by Western Patriarchy, and she has proved an extraordinarily important ideological tool for the oppression of women.⁶

Let me make this more historically concrete. In Old Period Mesopotamia, from about 2300 BCE to 1800 BCE, Monstrous Bitchery tends to take a particular form, encapsulated by a frightening semidivine demoness named Lamashtu.⁷ This demoness lasts as a mainstay of religious culture in Mesopotamia for at least two thousand years, evolving only at the slowest rate. But toward the end of the Old Period, in what is modern-day Iraq, there is a sudden consolidation—both theologically and politically—of patriarchal energy. To be clear, patriarchal religious, governmental, and social norms have existed before this moment, but they have existed in a cultural environment that is relatively tolerant of ideas like powerful women, or even violent, aggressive, dominant women.⁸ But at a certain point, the fledgling Patriarchy in Mesopotamia snaps into focus and becomes culturally dominant. Manifesting that shift, a new religious tradition arises, which focuses on the slaying of one exceptionally important Monstrous Bitch: Tiamat, goddess of the sea. Tiamat's death is the first sudden point mutation in the evolution of the Monstrous Bitch in ancient Mesopotamia. And that point mutation has reverberations and consequences for thousands of years afterward, even though Lamashtu—the demon goddess who preceded Tiamat—also exists and isn't obliterated by the killing of Tiamat. And as we'll see, Lamashtu's reach is very long; she survives well forward in history, up until the present day, sometimes in more conscious cultural references and ideas, sometimes less.⁹

Lamashtu migrates geographically in the ancient world, spreading around the Mediterranean basin. Lamashtu appears in Greece, in a few different guises. She appears again in the Roman Empire, again in a few different guises. She appears in the Jewish tradition, going back to

the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible—mostly notably Isaiah—but then rearing in supercharged form in the Babylonian Talmud and Kabbalistic traditions of Late Antiquity and into the Middle Ages. The Monstrous Bitch Lamashtu is continually evolving in subtle ways, but she is *always* there. She has been for thousands of years. Symptomatic of that evolutionary shifting, Lamashtu’s name changes over time, morphing into ones that may be familiar to many readers.

Ultimately, this book tells how Patriarchy has needed—for literally thousands of years—to embody in monstrous form the things about women that it has most desperately feared: their sexuality, their reproductive power, and their voice. Some recent interpreters of cultural history, perhaps most notably psychologist and self-help author Jordan Peterson, have tried to define women as transhistorically and archetypally “chaotic” and dangerous, whereas men represent “order,” which is what societies should strive toward.¹⁰ *Monstrous Bitch* argues instead that the long-standing tradition—“archetype”—of women as dangerous, chaotic, and requiring masculine social “order” to bring their sexualities, reproduction, and voices to heel is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but rather one that has been produced and reproduced by male-dominated culture for thousands of years and then has proceeded to evolve *as though* it were a truly natural phenomenon.

Monstrous Bitch highlights the profound misogyny encoded into the very idea of women as naturally or archetypally dangerous, chaotic, and in need of “order,” and it diagnoses that misogyny as a symptom of Patriarchy’s barely buried fears about women. From there, *Monstrous Bitch* highlights when and how the idea of the Monstrous Bitch might have liberatory potential for women and suggests how contemporary women might reimagine the Monstrous Bitch so as to push back against the very Patriarchy that seeks to hold women down by training men and women alike to think of women as monstrous.

Over time, cultural shifts occur, punctuating the steady evolution of Lamashtu across the millennia. One big shift is the advent of Christianity, which radically reinvents what female power and virtue should or could look like, as well as what might qualify as a Monstrous Bitch. As Christianity finds its sea legs in the late antique Mediterranean, we see Monstrous

Bitchery morphing, glitching, adapting, and ultimately finding its footing in some terrifying post-Lamashtean Monstrous Bitches in the European Middle Ages. These monsters wear new clothes, they say new things, they act in novel ways, but they share most of their core features with the ancient Monstrous Bitch Lamashtu and her later avatars Lamia and Lilith: Medieval Monstrous Bitches are sexually aggressive; they drink blood or eat human flesh; they tamper with male sexuality; and in many cases, they specifically attack women and babies. The medieval European Monstrous Bitch has several names—including (appropriately enough, considering Lamashtu’s original Mesopotamian origins) the Whore of Babylon—but her most important manifestation isn’t as one singular monstrous entity but rather as a whole category of female monstrosity that begins to take over European ideology in the late Middle Ages: witches.

Witches had existed as a concept for a long time, but they really come into focus in the very late Middle Ages, and ideologies about them continue to evolve and gain momentum well into the Renaissance. The witch fever that we know and love/hate from the early modern period, including but not limited to actual witch trials and the resultant executions of real human women, had everything to do with the evolution of the ideology of the Monstrous Bitch into what we now think of as a witch: old, haggard, ugly, predatory, sexually voracious, enchanting, spellcasting, murderous, and fond of eating children. In her new witchy guise, the Monstrous Bitch poses new ideological and practical problems for Patriarchy, while also offering up herself—her body, her life, and her words—as a tool for its perpetuation. In the Renaissance, the Monstrous Bitch retains her basic personality from antiquity: She’s bloodthirsty, she attacks babies, she uses her voice in ways that Patriarchy cannot tolerate, and she toys with male sexuality and procreation. But now she seems to be somehow more organized, or at least more pervasive. It’s not just *one* demoness or one terrifying monster. In this period, we see the threat of the Monstrous Bitch crack wide open, engulfing untold tens of thousands of real, historical women, tried and executed as witches, in her gaping maw.

When the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution hits Europe, cracks yawn wider in the ideological foundations of Christianity. With

those cracks, the Monstrous Bitch changes clothes and nomenclature again, transmogrifying in just a few hundred years from a witch into a vampiress.¹¹ Yes, even though some of the most familiar vampires in Western culture are male—most obviously the vampire enshrined in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*—it's important to remember that the vampire tradition itself is much, much older than the nineteenth century and is traditionally female dominated.¹² Indeed, contrary to the popular understanding that vampire literature and art somehow originates in either eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, the concept of the vampire *actually* originated thousands of years earlier, in the days of Lamia, Lilith, and Lamashtu. So, in addition to anatomizing and studying the evolution of demonized women, *Monstrous Bitch* also offers up a new genealogy of the vampire—one whose roots are in depictions of Mesopotamian demonesses. Indeed, even in her new vampiric guise, the Monstrous Bitch still acts recognizably like Lamashtu and Tiamat from millennia before. Frequently, throughout this tradition and closely associated with this turn to vampirism, we'll see her slink her monstrous way closer to being a dog—a she-wolf, a werewolf, or a Greek *mormolyke*, she is a Monstrous Bitch indeed.¹³ She changes shape and form, and she changes focus somewhat—targeting young adults as her predatory marks, rather than infants and babies—but she never dies: She remains dangerous in her words, and even more dangerous in her sexuality.¹⁴

The next truly major ideological shift in the evolutionary history of the Monstrous Bitch is the heyday of psychoanalysis and modern medicine. As a mechanism for diagnosing, treating, and curbing what is seen as monstrous in women, there has been no more powerful ideological system than this since the birth of Christianity. Psychoanalysis and medicine seek to turn the Monstrous Bitch paradigm from something divine, demonic, witchy, vampiric, or otherwise otherworldly into something psychopathological or physiological. The Monstrous Bitch is no longer supernatural, magical, or transcendent. Now, she is ill, unwell, broken, and in need of treatment. It is a neat trick, and a *very* effective way to discipline and control the Monstrous Bitch, to make her into a patient. Almost immediately after the introduction of Freudianism and modern medicine, however, depictions of Monstrous Bitches in art

will rapidly begin to reassert the ineluctable, ancient, and supernatural origins of the Monstrous Bitch.

To show this change, having focused in its first two episodes on literary works, the final episode of *Monstrous Bitch* will look to twentieth- and twenty-first-century depictions of the Monstrous Bitch on the silver screen. The reason for the shift to film is that cinema is the most widely available, most popular, and most popularizing art form we have in the modern world, and it has the capacity both to represent and to revise ancient ideas and cultural preoccupations at a mass scale, and in very short periods of time. Film is, in effect, a glitch-maker, a point-mutation machine, a cultural DNA recoder that structures and boosts the twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural changes to women's rights and status. As cinema reproduces and reimagines the Monstrous Bitch for a broader and broader public, she remains every bit as sexually rapacious, bloodthirsty, aggressive, antimaternal, and verbally irrepressible as ever.

But something novel and powerful happens as we edge over from the twentieth into the twenty-first century: Filmmakers begin to resurrect Tiamat, Lamashtu, Lilith, Lamia, witches, vampires, and werewolves, *not* as horrid demonesses that need to be disciplined, curbed, killed, diagnosed, or otherwise guarded against but instead as avengers, advocates, and, in some cases, heroines. This is the glitch of glitches, in the evolutionary history of the Monstrous Bitch—the moment and medium in which the Monstrous Bitch escapes patriarchal control and patriarchal demonization, to turn back around and bite the hand that built her. Indeed, in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century horror cinema, we find a powerful revision to the Monstrous Bitch trope, with a decisive slant toward vengeance, toward resistance, and—most important—toward autonomous survival. At least in *some* films.

Monstrous Bitch offers an evolutionary cultural history of how patriarchal culture fetishizes ideas about female monstrosity in order to oppress women. In that sense, I'm writing a kind of historical tragedy. But it's not just a tragedy: *Monstrous Bitch* is also a narrative of survival, resistance, and perspective—as will become increasingly clear in the final chapter. The archetypal Monstrous Bitch has mostly served, but in some cases challenged, Patriarchy for four thousand years. By learning

about her long, long history, I think we may yet be able to tip the balance decisively toward challenging. Put simply: We are standing four thousand years into a history in which women's desire to control their own sexuality and reproduction, and to use their voices to influence the world around them, has been demonized and, through that demonization, persecuted and imperiled. And I think it's time we started telling some new stories—both for our future and about our past.

Put more polemically: If we find ourselves locked into a hyperpolarized fight about women's reproductive rights, women's sexualities, and women's right to speak out, we cannot be blamed. It's not totally our fault that the fight is there, either on the right or on the left. It's not even the fault of any living human individuals that we think in this way. We have inherited millennia of cultural history in which female reproductive agency, sexual freedom, and right to speak were the core of what was evil, fearful, and horrible to Patriarchy—the core of what needed to be shut down and repressed. We come by our polarization honestly and historically, having been told that loud, sexy, reproductively autonomous women were Monstrous Bitches for thousands and thousands of years. We have coevolved with this idea, so much so that we tend to see the Monstrous Bitch *as natural*, rather than as an evolutionary cultural process in which we have been trapped for so long that it *appears* natural.

My hope in writing this book is to reinject some complexity into how we think about issues like reproductive autonomy, sexual freedom, and the freedom of expression for women by looking at the history of how women's rights to exercise those things have been demonized. To fully understand the status of women now, we need to go back to the origins and evolutions of Patriarchy's primal fear of women and trace out the evolution of that fear. We need to look at the Monstrous Bitch paradigm and how it shape-shifts over time—changing names a little, changing costume, but never changing its most basic genetic makeup. Because, really, there is *one* archetypical Monstrous Bitch, who just keeps coming back for sex, blood, vengeance, and power, across four millennia, and who just keeps scaring us half to death, allowing Patriarchy to shore itself up and keep women down—and to characterize them as animals.

On the one hand, the perpetual production and reproduction of this archetypal Monstrous Bitch is depressing: Through the demonization and cultural circulation of this bitch, women have been pigeonholed and lambasted, persecuted and prosecuted, dehumanized and marginalized, diagnosed and tortured. But on the other hand, in this evolutionary history I eventually want to highlight the *survival, persistence, and resistance* that's encoded into this trope of female monstrosity. If we collectively can tilt our heads and squint our eyes, and learn to see the Monstrous Bitch in just a slightly different light, she *could* be a kind of feminist icon for us now, in the twenty-first century, in these Waning Days of Women's Liberation.

There's a reading of this history of Monstrous Bitchery that's not just about the ideological demonization and persecution of women by Patriarchy but also about the persistence of the idea of a woman as powerful, intractable, indomitable, and constantly resurrecting herself again and again across time. Because, of course, the reason that Patriarchy has had to demonize women for their sexuality, their reproductive power, and their voices throughout history is that those *are* real, legitimate sources of power. Since Patriarchy couldn't get rid of those things—particularly sex and reproduction—and still function, it had to find ways of demonizing the women who wanted to wield them. It had to make both men *and* women afraid of the Monstrous Bitch—of her voice, of her sexiness, of her reproductive power. What better way, really, to keep women down than by convincing them of their own monstrosity? Like I said, we come by our twenty-first-century feminist collapse honestly. At the very end of this book, we'll turn the clock back to the beginning, in the Archaic Period of ancient Mesopotamia, to remind ourselves that, despite this long, long evolutionary history of the demonization of women for their sexuality, reproduction, and voice, there was—and still is—another way to understand female power, a way that conceives of that power not as monstrous but as transcendent.

Finally, a quick note on the kinds of cultural artifacts I'm looking at in this book. Because I'm interested in ideas about the Monstrous Bitch that were truly *popular*, which is to say, present throughout a large population over a long period of time, I'm going to favor forms of art that

demonstrably had a wide cultural reach. In the earliest periods in Mesopotamia, I'll be looking at talismanic devices, such as bowls or amulets that regular people kept in their homes to ward off evil; these items and objects are widely attested in the archaeological archive. I'll also be looking at epic literature that is known to have both reflected and helped ossify patriarchal religion. In later periods, in ancient Greece and Rome, I'll be looking at dramas, epics, and prose narratives, with extra focus on dramas, since they are, by their nature, experienced by large groups of people all at once, and therefore are formally structured both to presuppose and to generate broad cultural reach. In Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, I'll examine biblical texts and treatises written about female monstrosity. Some of these were in wide circulation; others were more niche, but their *effects* were extremely broad-based, since they set norms for how the church should construe and curtail female monstrosity. As we enter the early modern period, we'll focus on dramas as a primary source, to see how monstrous women were depicted on the public stage. In the Romantic and Victorian periods, I'll spend some time with the newly popular genres of the novel and novella; before the advent of television and film, the novelistic mode was beyond question the most popular and popularizing literary form the world had ever seen, circulating across classes and genders, and among nations and different linguistic groups. In the twentieth century, I'll turn decisively to cinema, and I'll keep us there through the 2020s, since the cinematic form—more, perhaps, than any other cultural form in all of history—both reflects and creates culture at a massive scale. Some of the films I'll look at are critical classics—films like *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Hunger* (1983), *The Witch* (2015), *Hereditary* (2018), or *The Substance* (2024). But most of the films in this book are B-list films, or “cult classics” at best—films like *Wasp Woman* (1959), *Black Sunday* (1960), *Witchcraft* (1964), *Vampyres* (1974), *Werewolf Woman* (1976), *Ginger Snaps* (2001), and *Jennifer's Body* (2009). These films didn't meet with much mainstream critical regard at the time of their release, but they *did* generate a fan base, and in some cases enough capital to finance sequels and re-makes. It's important to remember that, when we're thinking about truly popular forms of culture, we can't throw the lowbrow out the door,

because lowbrow art constitutes a crucial part of the archive of our modern and contemporary culture.

So now, let's go look at how Western culture has convinced itself—including its women—that women themselves are monstrous, demonic, terrifying, and in need of suppression. Let's look at the generation, proliferation, and demonization of the Monstrous Bitch, across the centuries and across media. And let's think about whether we can either put her away or reinvent her to be an ally, rather than an enemy, of women's freedoms as we carry forth our burden of history into the future. In the words of the great feminist poet Denise Levertov, from her luminous poem about learning to take nourishment from what hurts us,

If I bear burdens
they begin to be remembered
as gifts, goods, a basket
of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me
in fragrance. I can
eat as I go.¹⁵

Levertov called the poem that includes this passage “Stepping Westward,” which is also part of why I wanted to include it here. We'll see the paradigm of Monstrous Bitchery originate in Mesopotamia but gradually step westward over time, until it winds up smack in the middle of American popular culture.

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