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# Monstrous Women<sup>1</sup>

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[T]he monster is the limit . . . [it] combines the impossible and the forbidden. (Foucault, *Abnormal* 56)

From the dominant cultural perspective, [Aileen] Wuornos's acts have produced something like a double negative. Whereas male serial killers are 'naturally unnatural,' as a woman Wuornos has committed *unnatural unnatural* acts. (Hart, *Fatal Women* 142)

In her contribution to the journal *Signs*'s 1999 symposium on women and capital punishment, Renee Heberle addresses the question of why far fewer women than men receive death sentences in the United States (1103-13).<sup>2</sup> She rejects the two major theories that seek to explain this phenomenon: the "chivalry theory," which posits that society's view of women as nurturing mothers results in their more lenient treatment under the law, and the "evil woman theory," which views women as "potentially evil" but ultimately reasserts the view that, as women, they are "deserving of protection" (1107). Instead, Heberle argues that within the contemporary United States the death penalty functions to maintain prevailing relations of power within society, and that given the effectiveness of extra-legal mechanisms such as rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender itself in managing women's behavior in ways that enforce their subordination, capital punishment rarely has to be invoked against them (1107). Women who do violate the dictates of femininity by committing capital crimes, according to Heberle, may "redeem" themselves in the eyes of society by adopting an "appropriate" gender

persona. So even though murder, as an act of violence, in and of itself violates gender norms, a woman can commit murder and still not receive a death sentence. To be considered unworthy to live, a woman must be incorrigible, irredeemable because she is thoroughly immune to “refeminization”—a monster. “[W]omen on death row,” Heberle writes, “are marked as monstrous . . . beyond the pale of not just human but, particularly, feminine behavior” (1106).

As presented by Heberle, a woman becomes a monster by way of a double violation of both the laws of society and normative gender roles, yet it is the latter upon which female monstrosity ultimately depends. In what follows, I consider the role that violating gender norms plays in producing the monstrous woman. In doing so, I point to the limits of behavior that will be socially accepted or even tolerated in women, and thus elucidate the broader workings of gendered power relations within contemporary Western societies (especially since the United States is the only industrialized Western nation that practices capital punishment). To facilitate my analysis, I refer to the work of Michel Foucault—specifically his 1975 and 1976 Collège de France courses, *Abnormal* and *Society Must Be Defended*. Drawing upon Foucault’s formulation in both courses of the concept of the norm as a lynchpin in the proliferation of modern power, I begin by arguing that gender is a normalizing norm, the violation of which by women amounts to a violation of ostensibly natural female behavior. Next, I turn to the 1975 course in order to outline Foucault’s conceptualization of the monster as a violator of both the laws of society and laws of nature, a violation that Foucault refers to specifically as “transgression.” I show that this characterization is significant because it points to the emancipatory potential contained within acts which, taken at face value, merely reproduce existing or create new forms of normalizing power. I then consider the cases of two monstrous women, Henriette Cornier, whose case Foucault analyzes in the 1975 course, and Aileen

Wuornos, who was deemed the United States' first female serial killer and executed by the state of Florida in 2002. I show that while both women violated the laws of society, their monstrosity hinges upon their transgression of standards of femininity and hence, given the normalizing function of gender, laws of nature. The latter part of the essay draws upon feminist scholarship, specifically the work of Susan Bordo and Iris Marion Young, in order to illustrate that while the cases of both women reveal the normalizing function of gender and the ambivalent character of monstrous transgression, Wuornos's case also offers insight into how that same transgression has the capacity to facilitate resistance against normalization within a contemporary context.

## I

Foucault argues that the rise of modernity saw techniques of pastoral power gradually being generalized to society more broadly.<sup>3</sup> The norm, he asserts, lies at the heart of these modern power techniques. In the 1975 course, Foucault explicitly characterizes the norm as the "element" upon which "a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimized" (*Abnormal* 50). Focusing on the nature and function of disciplinary power, he argues that the norm "brings with it a principle of both qualification and correction. The norm's function is not to exclude and reject. Rather, it is always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation, to a sort of normative project" (50). Under disciplinary power, Foucault writes, "there is an originally prescriptive character of the norm," in the sense that the norm determines what is normal (*Security, Territory, Population* 57). Subjects constitute themselves and are in turn constituted through techniques of power that presuppose the norm, construed as an ideal or "optimal model" (57).

As Foucault refined his conception of the nature and function of modern power, his conception of the norm likewise evolved. In the 1976 course, Foucault has come to realize that power does not only target individual bodies, it also targets populations by way of a second form of modern power which he refers to as biopower. Generally speaking, biopower proliferates through the actions of the State in such a way as to regulate populations at the biological level in the name of promoting the health and protecting the life of society as a whole. This regulation and protection intersects with the disciplining of individual bodies within the context of modern societies, Foucault argues, and the norm is the mechanism along which this intersection occurs. It circulates between the disciplinary and the regulatory; it is “something that can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize” (*Security, Territory, Population* 252-53). While the norm still founds and legitimizes power, it now does so specifically by linking disciplinary power and biopower and thus facilitating the flow of power through and across all facets of modern societies.

Whereas the norm establishes what is normal, techniques of normalization function to “make normal,” and thus to distinguish the normal from the abnormal. They intervene within both individual bodies and populations in order to establish and bring into conformity with particular social norms. This is the case with gender, where subjects are divided into two mutually exclusive groups, the appropriate, pre-determined behaviors of which these subjects are encouraged to perform over and over again. Through such intervention, techniques of normalization perpetuate the power relations the norm founds and legitimizes. Over time, repeated behaviors become embedded to the point where they are not perceived as a particular set of prevailing norms but rather, when they are perceived at all, they are perceived as natural, inherent behaviors. By presenting socially acquired behaviors as immutable, normalizing norms

hinder not only critical analysis but also, to the extent that they become naturalized, the recognition that such engagement is needed or possible at all. So while the specifics of what is considered acceptable gendered behavior may change over time, the idea that women and men are different in some fundamental ways that simply must be accepted, persists. Hence Foucault's identification within "normalizing societies" (e.g., the modern West) of a relationship between increased capacities, expanded modes of existence, and increased power, on the one hand, and the inhibition or even prevention of the cultivation and exercise of practices that could elucidate and loosen this link, on the other. Moreover, hence his contention that normalizing norms are counter to the practice of freedom.

## II

Following Georges Canguilhem, Foucault conceives of monsters in terms of their relationship to the norm—specifically, to normative laws of both society and nature. Monsters, Foucault argues, emerge within and occupy what he refers to as a "juridico-biological domain" (*Abnormal* 56). Within this domain, the precise character of the relationship between monster and law is ambivalent. On the one hand, monsters violate both types of law. As Foucault puts it, the monster's "very existence is a breach of the law at both levels" (*Abnormal* 56). With respect to laws of nature, Foucault concurs with Canguilhem that all monsters are "organic" or "living" beings (Canguilhem 28). As Canguilhem writes, "[t]hat which has no rule of internal cohesion, whose form and dimensions have no variations from one end to the other of a spectrum that can be called a measure, mold, or model—that cannot be called monstrous" (28). Yet because their physiology or biology is irregular—that is, because of their *monstrosity*—monsters violate the laws of nature of which, as organic, living beings, they are a product.<sup>4</sup> Concern with these

violators of nature—these “natural monsters” that embody “the spontaneous, brutal, but consequently natural form of the unnatural”—Foucault argues, characterizes the medieval period (*Abnormal* 56). Both “extreme and extremely rare” (56), natural monsters violate laws of nature by mixing or combining aspects of the natural world that according to prevailing “rules of internal cohesion” or, to use Foucault’s terminology, “natural limits” or “classifications,” ought to be distinct (63). Specifically, natural monsters are comprised of admixtures of the following kinds:

**Realms** (human and animal);  
**Species** (“the pig with a sheep’s head”);  
**Individuals** (“the person with two heads”);  
**Sexes** (“the person who is both male and female”);  
**Life and Death** (a baby that is born and lives for only a few minutes);  
**Forms** (“the person who has neither arms nor legs, like a snake”). (63)

Foucault analyzes the monster’s violation of laws of society in his discussion of “moral monsters.” He shows that by way of historical developments occurring during the transition from the medieval to the modern period,<sup>5</sup> monstrosity becomes internalized as *monstrousness* (*Abnormal* 89). Whereas physiological or biological monstrosity “brought with it an indication of criminality,” it is now the case that criminals are seen as monsters—specifically, as possessing perverted souls or characters (81). Crime, the violation of the laws of society, is seen as having a “natural basis” within the individual, with the result that the concern is now with that individual her or himself rather than with her or his acts. In short, “the person accused of a crime” has become “a criminal” (89).

On the other hand, the monster’s violation of particular manifestations of law (i.e., laws of nature and society) does not destroy law as such. Put differently, monsters challenge particular norms, but in doing so they neither render unintelligible or meaningless the concept of the norm,

nor eradicate the distinction between the normal and the abnormal (and, hence, the relations of power) that this concept enables. In fact, the threat that the monster poses ultimately results in either the rearticulation and augmentation of existing norms and power relations or the development and establishment of new ones. Monsters, Canguilhem writes, “[demonstrate] how precarious is the stability to which life has accustomed us” (29). In making a “law” or necessity of this “customary” stability, persons in the modern West find anything that challenges it threatening and respond by redoubling our efforts toward establishing and maintaining stability or, at least, the illusion of it. It is through revealing stability as contingent and creating anxiety, then, that the monster “gives an all the more eminent value to specific repetition, to morphological regularity, to successful structure” (29).

Again following Canguilhem, Foucault sees the reassertion of the concepts of law and the norm occurring as a result of the anxiety that monsters, as both the enactors and embodiments of disruption, create. Natural monsters “provoke anxiety,” Foucault argues, because their particular breach of the law simultaneously confounds it and in doing so “leave[s] it with nothing to say” (*Abnormal* 56). Hence the fact that natural monsters elicit not a legal response, but rather “violence . . . or medical care or pity” (56). In the face of violation by the monster, the law must therefore either appeal to or create “some other reference system” in order to compose and justify a response (56).

Foucault’s analysis of moral monsters illustrates the means by which law responds to violations by the monster. Insofar as moral monsters are criminals, the law now has something to say to and about them. Still, moral monsters continue to pose a problem for the law because it is ill-equipped to judge and punish character. Even medico-juridical discourse proves inadequate, such that the problematic figure of the moral monster eventually gives rise to the production of

new forms of knowledge and techniques of power (Foucault, *Abnormal* 87). Given that, unlike natural monsters, moral monsters are not readily discernible, techniques such as control, surveillance, and examination are required in order to distinguish them from normal individuals. Witness, then, the emergence of criminal psychiatry, a new domain of knowledge that hones such techniques for its own purposes.

This emergence of criminal psychiatry as a new domain of knowledge and power illustrates that through violating and thereby threatening laws of nature and society the monster ultimately (re)asserts law and norm as such, as well as the distinction between normal and abnormal. Yet it is instructive that Foucault refers to the breach or violation of law that the monster commits specifically as a “transgression.” “Monstrosity,” he states, “requires a *transgression* of the natural limit, of the law-table . . . There is monstrosity only when . . . confusion comes up against, overturns, or disturbs civil, canon or religious law” (*Abnormal* 63, my emphasis). As Foucault conceives of it, transgression need not merely reproduce existing or generate new forms of power relations. Rather, limits and their transgression mutually define one another; they are involved in a kind of “instantaneous play” that indicates a dynamic relationship wherein the violation of limits by way of transgression provides insight into or “clarifies” those limits (Foucault, “Preface to Transgression” 29-52). Clarification, which I understand as making overt what has been taken for granted, yielding insight into its function, and providing critical perspectives that may foster new possibilities, takes place within this volatile space between limit and transgression. Put differently, transgression has the potential to unsettle us by revealing the contingency of that which has been uncritically accepted. As previously discussed, occupying this volatile space may produce anxiety that causes retreat into what is familiar, but it may also promote critical questioning that may in turn be taken up in ways which promote change. In this



way then, transgression opens up possibilities for practices that counter normalization and promote freedom. Examining the cases of Henriette Cornier and Aileen Wuornos will illuminate their actions as simultaneously ambivalent (a violation of law that ultimately results in increased normalization) and transgressive (creating possibilities for resistance and, at least potentially, the practice of freedom), while also elucidating the interconnection between transgression of laws of society and (insofar as gendered behavior is considered an expression of inherent qualities) laws of nature in determining monstrosity in women.

### III

Apart from a few side comments that Henriette Cornier was menstruating when she committed her crime, Foucault fails to remark on the rather remarkable fact that two of the “three major founding moral monsters of criminal psychiatry” that he discusses in his 1975 course are women (*Abnormal* 110). His interest in Cornier’s case stems not from her gender, but from the fact that he sees it “crystallizing the problem of criminal monstrosity” (111). Foucault states that on a day when she had threatened to kill herself, Henriette Cornier went to the home of a neighbour and offered to look after the neighbour’s child for a few hours. The neighbour hesitated but agreed. Foucault continues:

Henriette Cornier took the little girl into her room and there, with a big knife she had ready, cut right through her neck. She stayed for quarter of an hour with the little girl’s corpse, its trunk on one side and the head on the other. When the mother came looking for her little girl, Henriette Cornier told her, ‘Your daughter is dead.’ The mother, who was upset but at the same time did not believe her, tried to enter the room. At that point Henriette Cornier took an apron, put the head in it, and threw it out the window. She was arrested immediately and when asked, ‘Why?’ she replied, ‘An idea.’ Nothing more could be got from her. (112)

Foucault sees Henriette Cornier's case as foundational because insofar as her crime is apparently motiveless it confounds the law, yet insofar as she displays no signs of madness, Cornier herself similarly confounds the field of medicine. Her case therefore calls forth criminal psychiatry, a discipline in which "the illegal and the question of the abnormal, or of the criminal and the pathological, are now bound up with each other" (92). Arguments made by the prosecution as well as the defense in Cornier's case illustrate this binding together in its infant stages: both sets of arguments reflect an interpretation of Cornier's act in terms of who she is. That is, in the absence of both motive and madness, Cornier's crime is construed as a manifestation of her character, just as she herself is said to "resemble her act" (124). And what of Henriette Cornier's character? To get a sense of it the prosecution and defense looked at her life, a life which "exhibits little that is good" (124). Cornier "separated from her husband . . . gave herself up to debauchery," and "had two illegitimate children" whom she subsequently gave up for adoption.

Like that of Henriette Cornier, Aileen Wuornos's life is not "pretty" (*Abnormal* 124). Wuornos was born in 1956 in Troy, Michigan. Her mother, Diane, was married at the age of fourteen and was sixteen years old when she gave birth to Aileen. Diane divorced her abusive husband, Leo Pittman, before Aileen was born (Smith 371). Pittman was later convicted of child rape and kidnapping; he committed suicide in prison (371). When Aileen was only a few months old, Diane abandoned her and her brother. Aileen was raised and eventually adopted by her maternal grandparents; her grandfather was an alcoholic who abused Aileen emotionally, physically and, evidence suggests, sexually (371-72). Aileen became pregnant at the age of thirteen, probably as a result of rape (Lavin, White, and Ross). She tried to hide the pregnancy, but her grandfather eventually found out and sent her to a home for unwed mothers until she gave birth (Lavin, White, and Ross). The baby was put up for adoption. After her grandmother

died, Aileen ran away from home. Her grandfather refused to allow her to return, and she was living on the streets, using drugs and alcohol and prostituting herself, by the age of fifteen (4). Wuornos eventually left Michigan and for several years hitchhiked her way around the United States. She was briefly married to a much older man, but the marriage ended in divorce; both claimed that the other had been abusive (Lavin, White, and Ross).

In the years that followed, Wuornos was convicted of various petty crimes, as well as for the armed robbery of a convenience store in 1981. She supported herself primarily by working as a prostitute (Lavin, White, and Ross). Arrested in January of 1991 for the murder and robbery of seven men within the state of Florida between late 1989 and late 1990, Wuornos was subsequently sentenced to death in 1992 and executed ten years later. Obtaining a clear picture of the killings for which she was executed is difficult. While Wuornos steadfastly and consistently maintained that she killed the men in self-defense, the nature of the threat they posed to her is ambiguous. The transcript of her interrogation by police indicates that she was worried about being raped, that she reported having been beaten and raped multiple times during the course of her work as a prostitute. Yet the transcript fails to provide clarification on whether Wuornos killed each of the seven men because they themselves overtly threatened or harmed her or because of the general threat she felt herself to be (and indeed was) under. She repeatedly states that she believed the men she killed were going to “hurt” or “rape” her and that the killings were not premeditated. ““I had no intentions of killing anybody . . . It was because they physically attacked me . . . I figured these guys deserved it. Because these guys were gonna either rape, kill—I don’t know what they were gonna do to me.”” Later in the transcript she states: ““I was definitely gonna shoot ‘em and let ‘em die because they . . . in my head . . . they were gonna rape

me, kill me, strangle me . . . they were crossing my line . . . I don't know if they were gonna strangle me – if they had a gun''' (Smith 378).

Given the nature of Wuornos's statements, it remains unclear whether her crimes were, as Abbe Smith puts it, "justifiable homicide or justifiable only in [her] mind" (377-78). Regardless, Smith argues that

[a]t worst, Wuornos offered a story of imperfect self-defense in the face of anticipated assault or rape, excessive force to collect for services rendered when the recipient reneged on payment [i.e., killing the men for refusing to pay her for sex], or homicide while intoxicated [Wuornos reported that the men got her drunk before going out into the woods with her to have sex]. (379)

Why, then, was Wuornos characterized as a "killer who robbed, not a robber who killed," "a sort of female Ted Bundy" who "killed because she enjoyed the control and domination of men"? (Lavin).

Heberle offers insight into this question when she points out that the claim by a prostitute to have killed in order to defend herself against men's violence "constitutes a clear violation of the rules of the gendered system of prostitution in which prostitutes . . . are expected to accept the threat of rape and violence as "part of the job" (1109). By all reports, Wuornos was decidedly unfeminine in all aspects of her life. The earliest newspaper headlines after her arrest identify her simply as a woman; within a few days she has been identified more specifically as both a lesbian and a prostitute and, hence, as violating feminine sexual norms. From the outset, Wuornos's crimes are described as "male" in nature, "meeting the standards of a serial killer" ("Slain Motorists' Property Found"). Wuornos murdered strangers—strange men, no less—rather than family members or persons known to her, as is usually the case for women who kill (Heberle 1105). As Abbe Smith puts it in her analysis of why feminists remained largely silent on the matter of Wuornos's case despite the fact that Wuornos, while a perpetrator, was also a victim of

violent crime: Wuornos “shot her victims and robbed them, much like a man might” (388). Moreover, Smith notes that throughout her life Wuornos was simultaneously “loud, rude, profane, and vulgar . . . at once tawdry and ordinary” (387). After her arrest, at her trial, and throughout her incarceration, she was “angry, abrasive, hostile, and scowling . . . she lacked the piety and contrition of Karla Faye Tucker, the fragility of Andrea Yates, and the soft femininity of Susan Smith” (387).<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Abbe Smith agrees with Herberle that Wuornos both “[did] something that women just do not do” and behaved in ways that women are not supposed to behave (391).

That Henriette Cornier and Aileen Wuornos fit the description of the moral monster seems clear enough: they are criminals whose acts are attributed to monstrous characters. Yet it seems to me that these women’s monstrosity cannot be separated from and indeed hinges on their violation of gender norms. Their crimes are said to be simultaneously contained within and an expression of their characters, the nature of which is in turn reflected by how they lived their lives and neither woman lived her life according to the dictates of femininity. Monstrous women like Henriette Cornier and Aileen Wuornos, insofar as their monstrosity depends upon the violation of gender norms, reintroduce the figure of the natural monster, the transgressor of laws of nature. Because gender norms are normalizing, entrenched to the point that they are perceived as natural and given, women who violate these norms, as the epigraph from *Fatal Women* suggests, are seen as doubly “unnatural”: first, because they are murderers and secondly (and most importantly), because they are women. The lives of Cornier and Wuornos demonstrate that neither was successfully gendered, despite intervention and attempts at transformation by way of marriage, motherhood, and compulsory heterosexuality. Both women were prostitutes and social outcasts; both had attempted suicide.<sup>7</sup> Their crimes thus confirm the monstrosity their lives and

characters suggest: Cornier killed a child—someone else’s child—thus violating the stereotype of women as naturally nurturing mothers; Wuornos killed strange men from whom she solicited sex, thus violating the stereotype of women as naturally sexually passive and dependent. In the cases of both women, motive was difficult—if not impossible—to determine. Insofar as “[e]verything [they are] can be found within [their acts], or again, [their acts are] already present in a diffused state in [their] whole [lives],” the failure of Cornier and Wuornos to become appropriately gendered is fundamental to their monstrosity (*Abnormal* 124).

As I have described them here, the acts of the two monstrous women under consideration are ambivalent: in addition to taking the lives of others, the acts are self-destructive; moreover, they do not destroy normalized gender relations. Yet, as the embodiment of transgression, monstrous women do clarify and thus expose gender as a relation not of nature but of power—a relation that is both contingent and oppressive. In what follows I therefore suggest and shall endeavor to show that despite their ambivalent character, the actions of monstrous women nonetheless create possibilities for social criticism of the nature and function of gender that may function in the service of anti-normalization.

#### IV

In her 1983 essay, “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture,” Susan Bordo provides an excellent illustration of ambivalent actions committed by women.<sup>8</sup> Arguing that eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are not reducible to inherent flaws within individuals, Bordo instead portrays eating disorders, like all forms of psychopathology, as “characteristic expressions” of the culture in which they occur (391). She shows that eating disorders are manifestations of Western dualism, particularly the separation of

mind and body, with its accompanying devaluation of the body, and the separation of human beings into men and women, with its simultaneous devaluation of women. Within the West, bodies are objectified, seen as not only external to the subject, but also, insofar as they are susceptible to illness, injury, and aging, as posing a threat to the subject's integrity, and thus in need of being brought under control.<sup>9</sup> Given this view of bodies, striving to gain mastery over them via diet or exercise is experienced by the subject as empowering because it provides a "sense of security" and "independence" (Bordo 401). Devaluation of the body characterizes not only eating disorders but also, and seemingly paradoxically, practices like body-building which, insofar as they enhance rather than diminish the body, would appear to view it positively. "Many body-builders," she writes, "like many anorectics, unnervingly conceptualize the body as alien, as not-self" and therefore "put the same emphasis on control, and on the feeling of accomplishment derived from total mastery of the body" (400).

Devaluation of and desire for control over the body, according to Bordo, is gendered. In the West, the body is associated with women, while the mind is associated with men. Thus, the devaluation of the body and desire to achieve control over it (not accidentally, by means of the assertion of mind by way of the will) is interconnected with the devaluation of and desire to control women, including one's own feminine self. Insofar as this is the case, Bordo argues, it makes sense that the vast majority of persons with eating disorders are women. Like hysteria during the latter part of the nineteenth century, eating disorders within a contemporary context constitute a rejection of and "protest" against prevailing cultural constructions of femininity (406). Anorexia and bulimia emerged in the generation of women whose mothers were subjected to stringent gender roles and expectations of domesticity; both disorders prevent the body from acquiring the appearance of mature womanhood. These disorders may therefore be

seen as expressions of “fear and disdain for traditional female roles and social limitations,” as well as of “a deep fear of ‘the Female,’ with all its more nightmarish archetypal associations and voracious hungers and sexual insatiability” (403).

Yet Bordo shows that this form of protest against normative standards of femininity ultimately fails for two related reasons. First, eating disorders are self-destructive. Most obviously, they are harmful to women’s health and in fact threaten their lives. But they are also harmful in the sense that the desire to lose weight becomes so “all-consuming” for sufferers of eating disorders that it is impossible for them to engage in or even conceive of “any other ideas or life-projects” (406). Eating disorders therefore also fail as a form of protest by “preclud[ing]” in sufferers the kind of self- and social critique that characterize not only a “conscious politics,” but any sort of “social or political understanding at all” (406). In other words, eating disorders prevent development of the kind of critical consciousness that could facilitate women’s recognition of their own self-destructive or self-defeating behavior, as well as of ways in which individual pathologies are shaped by and within broader socio-cultural pathology. Hence Bordo’s point that through their failure, eating disorders ultimately function not as a counter to but rather “in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them” (406). The disorders reassert the stereotypical association of women with the body, as well as notions of women as insubstantial, irrational, and in need of external (male) control, at the same time that they inhibit the development of means by which normative femininity might be effectively challenged.

The actions of monstrous women are ambivalent in the same way that Bordo depicts those of women who suffer from eating disorders. Violating gender norms, as I have illustrated, defines monstrousness in women. And while it’s not clear whether Henriette Cornier and Aileen Wuornos “feared . . . traditional female roles and social limitations” and stereotypical



conceptualizations of women's sexuality, both women did violate and thereby "reject" them. As is the case for women with eating disorders, this rejection obviously fails as an act of protest or resistance on behalf of monstrous women themselves: their actions destroy others (murder) and result in the destruction of self (imprisonment, execution). Moreover, the actions of monstrous women do not destroy but rather ultimately reinforce the gender norms they violate; they are not conscious expressions of resistance or protest, and they function to at least inhibit the development of a critical consciousness within the women who commit them. As Wuornos's case illustrates, her violation of traditional standards of femininity did not generate questioning or critical analysis of gender norms, but instead resulted in the characterization of her personality and actions as "masculine" and "male." Despite (or, rather, precisely because of) the fact that Wuornos was not feminine, she and her crime were continually analyzed in gendered terms, and the issue of whether or not her gender would play a role in her trial and sentencing was endlessly debated.

While acts of murder do not in and of themselves function as part of an all-consuming life project in the way that losing weight does for women with eating disorders, I think it is the case that monstrous women are externally reduced to and defined purely in terms of those acts in a way that produces similar results. As described by Foucault, insofar as moral monsters' crimes are seen as expressions of their inherent characters, those crimes effectively become the sum total of who they are. To the extent that alternative ways of viewing "the criminal" are precluded generally, the development of an alternative self-understanding is at least inhibited. The previously mentioned reduction of Wuornos from "woman" to "lesbian," to "prostitute," and ultimately to "serial killer," in media coverage of her case helps to illustrate the extent to which

counter-narratives or alternative interpretations of monstrous women and their actions, by both others and themselves, are rendered unintelligible.

Bordo's analysis also illustrates that notwithstanding their failure as a form of protest on behalf of the women who commit them, the violation of traditional standards of femininity by women with eating disorders provides insight into the contingent and oppressive nature of gender. This violation creates a space within which analyses such as Bordo's, which both engage in and call for critical examination of the broader socio-cultural context that produces psychopathologies such as eating disorders, might be generated. Insofar as this is the case, these women's actions can be considered transgressive.

The same is true for the actions of monstrous women. These actions expose gender as a power relation in a variety of ways that create possibilities and illustrate the need for broader analyses of the society of which such women are products, two of which I will mention here. First, the actions of monstrous women illustrate and thereby support Bordo's argument that psychopathology cannot be understood merely as a manifestation of inherent traits within an individual (as articulated in the discourse of criminal psychiatry as described by Foucault), but rather must be viewed as a reflection on the condition of a particular society and its culture. This point is clearly illustrated by the fact that women's monstrousness depends upon their violation of gender norms. That their acts are deemed criminal and pathological only insofar as they violate what society considers "normal" behavior for women indicates that the true violation, the violation that matters, is not that of the laws of society (i.e., murder), but of norms that, precisely because they are construed as immutable laws of nature, function to maintain prevailing (gendered) power relations within society.

This exposure of the contingent, normalizing, and oppressive effects of gendered power relations unsettles what appear to be stable features of contemporary Western societies. While such unsettling is largely perceived as threatening and thus responded to by attempts to maintain and strengthen the status quo, it nonetheless creates a space for critical questioning of, for example, precisely how gender operates within the cases of women who commit murder. As Heberle points out and as I have endeavored to show here, gender plays a much more complex role than simply protecting most women from death row and execution. Issues that might be addressed by such analyses include the apparently motiveless nature of Cornier's crime and the ambiguity surrounding motive in the murders committed by Wuornos. Does accounting for gender as a normalizing and therefore oppressive relation of power facilitate a reformulation of the concept of motive? Does it provide insight that might help to explain these women's acts? Accounting for gender in this way certainly points to the need for critical examinations of monstrous women who are both victims and perpetrators—examinations that, as Abbe Smith points out, never happened and indeed for reasons I have discussed, would never even have been considered a possibility in Wuornos's case. How might the de-gendering of the categories of victim and perpetrator, as well as recognition of the slippage between the two, facilitate understanding of the degree to which monstrous women's "psychopathology" reflects social pathology?

It is important to bear in mind that framing monstrous women's acts as the product of a society that is pathological where gender is concerned is not to spare these women from punishment for their crimes. Bordo's analysis makes clear that she is not suggesting that individuals are merely determined by the norms and values of their societies and hence bear no responsibility for their actions; as I have shown, she presents women who suffer from eating

disorders as “actively advancing and extending” the conditions for the possibility of their own harm (393). But she also takes a Foucauldian perspective on the nature and function of modern power that always locates such “advancement and extension” within a sociopolitical context over which no particular individual or institution exerts complete control. Power relations within a particular social context are not consciously orchestrated by any (let alone a tyrannical) individual or institution, making it impossible to completely separate out an individual’s actions from the norms and values that shape it. The absence of “plots, designs, or overarching strategies” within the workings of modern power, Bordo correctly states, “does not mean that individuals do not consciously pursue goals that in fact advance their own position. But it does deny that in doing so they are consciously directing the overall movement of power relations and engineering their shape. They may not even know what that shape is” (393).

Analysis of precisely what implications a Foucauldian perspective on modern power relations has with respect to issues of individual responsibility is beyond the scope of this essay. My point here is simply that in pointing to the need for critically analyzing and perhaps even reconceptualizing prevailing notions of responsibility, Bordo’s reconceptualization of individual psychopathology as an expression of social pathology is not promoting the idea that persons may simply act with impunity. As Hannah Arendt argues, socio-political context provides a framework from within which to consider individual actions, but it does not excuse them; a system, Arendt contends, cannot be responsible for anything (“Personal Responsibility”).<sup>10</sup> Bordo’s reconceptualization does—rightly, I believe—present a more nuanced view of personal responsibility than that provided by criminal psychiatry as presented by Foucault.<sup>11</sup>

The second way in which the acts of monstrous women can be seen as transgressive is though their illustration of the extent to which gender norms are white, middle-class,

heterosexual (male) norms (Young 136). According to Iris Marion Young, the modern Western conceptualization of the subject as an autonomous agent possessing “normalizing reason,” that is, “the reason of a subject purified of body and change . . . that masters and controls the objects fixed by its measuring gaze,” gives rise to what she refers to as “behavioral norms of respectability” (136). These norms, which originate in “nineteenth-century bourgeois morality,” are grounded most fundamentally in and in turn function to perpetuate the idea of order—within both the individual and society—by governing individuals’ relationships to their bodies (136). Norms of respectability dictate socially-acceptable standards regarding bodily hygiene (i.e., proper management of “fluids, dirt, [and] smells”) and the environment individual bodies occupy (i.e., the creation of a separate “sphere of individual privacy” within which bodily management takes place), while also determining socially acceptable standards of behavior (i.e., manners broadly construed—how to eat, what can be said in public, appropriate forms of dress) (137). While Young notes that the latter “do not apply directly to bodily functions,” she nonetheless contends that manners “come to be associated with bodily decency, restraint, and cleanliness” (137). In sum, Young argues, “the respectable person is chaste, modest, does not express lustful desires, passion, spontaneity, or exuberance, is frugal, clean, gently spoken, and well mannered. The orderliness of respectability means things are under control, everything is in place, not crossing borders” (137).

Insofar as norms of respectability are grounded in a conceptualization of subjectivity that reflects a white European bourgeois male perspective, Young argues that historically these norms functioned to create and maintain stark distinctions between women and men, whites and people of color, and bourgeois and proletarian classes, as well as to promote monogamous heterosexuality as a normative ideal. And while she acknowledges that over time these

distinctions have become less rigid, with women, people of color, members of the working class, and gays and lesbians no longer being reduced to the level of beings who are in varying degrees “naturally embodied, amoral, expressive, undisciplined, unclean, [and] lacking in self-control,” Young nevertheless maintains that norms of respectability continue to operate within contemporary Western standards of “professionalism” (138). Subdued in all aspects, professional standards of behavior (“sitting, standing, walking, and speaking”), dress (the business suit), and decorum (“rationality and authoritativeness”) reflect the same concern with order and control that characterize norms of respectability (139). So while particular social groups are no longer overtly singled out as inferior, uncivilized, or irrational, given that norms of professionalism continue to reflect and maintain as norm a white, middle-class, heterosexual male perspective, they effectively function in an oppressive manner. As Young writes, “Despite the claim that professional comportment is neutral, it is in fact the product of socialization into a particular culture” into which “white, Anglo heterosexual middle-class men are most socialized” (140). Given the presentation of a particular cultural perspective simply as “normal,” women, people of color, working-class people, and gays and lesbians will continue to fall short of professional standards and, hence, to be viewed as inferior. Even if they adhere to professional standards, Young argues, these groups are marked as Other, and are therefore always in a position of having to “prove themselves” in ways that white bourgeois men are not required to do.<sup>12</sup>

Loud, crude, aggressive, vulgar, her (deviant) sexuality writ large, Aileen Wuornos is the antithesis of respectability; she is the embodiment of *disorder*. Her violation of standards of respectability and professionalism comes across as an affront; it seems to border on indecency, it generates feelings of aversion. I think Wuornos produces such a reaction because she unsettles; she strips away the cloak of neutrality within which norms of respectability and professionalism

are wrapped and which, by masking their implication in normalizing relations of power, effectively maintains those relations. Wuornos accomplishes this not only, as we have seen, through the apparent disconnect between her gender and her behavior and actions, but also between her conduct and her race: she is not only a woman, she is a white woman, but nothing in what she says or does—the ways she behaves—is consistent with a genteel, subdued, ordered whiteness that remains bound to middle-class hetero-normative values. Through this disconnect, and to the extent that who and what Wuornos is cannot simply be explained away by appealing to her lower-middle class upbringing or sexual involvement with women, she exposes ostensibly neutral norms and standards as expressing and reasserting a normalized, normalizing, and oppressive social reality with respect not only to gender, but also to race, class, and sexuality. In doing so she disrupts and threatens what is an illusory, but precisely for this reason all the more deeply embedded, social ontology of stability and order, predictability and control.

Space for critical reflection upon and analysis of the oppressive function of accepted and even valued aspects of modern Western societies exists in the moment between the disruption of these norms and their reassertion. Wuornos's case points, for example, to ways in which treating gender, race, class, and sexuality, as well as age and physical ability, as separate categories of analysis may function in the service of normalization; it thus emphasizes the importance of scholarship that furthers the notion of intersectionality. In doing so, her case simultaneously reasserts Foucault's emphasis on the need to seek out, identify, and critically interrogate those aspects of our contemporary reality that appear beyond critique, or simply benign, or even, and perhaps especially, unintelligible. Precisely because of its unintelligibility in terms of existing normative categories of understanding, Wuornos's affront to the social order is reduced, as Abbe Smith notes, to mere tawdriness, the details of her life poured over in the media, obsessively

recounted, shocking and titillating “polite society” like a bad reality television show that people complain about to their friends but secretly tune in to watch week after week. How much of what we fail to understand about the world in which we live is similarly reduced to caricature and spectacle, and to what effect?

## V

Heberle writes that monstrous women “embod[y] the worst of contemporary nightmares about women’s potential for disorderliness” (1110). Similarly, Smith contends that Wuornos embodies a “frightening prospect: women erupting in violence instead of enduring violence” (391). Through their transgressions, monstrous women are able to lay bare the normalizing function of gender. If women who violate the law become monsters only to the extent that they also violate their prescribed gender role, then it’s because of the “nightmare” they threaten to make a reality and the fear they invoke, the threat they pose to gendered power relations, and not their violation of the laws of society, that monstrous women are deemed unfit to live. Despite the fact that, through their transgressive character, the actions of monstrous women facilitate critical questioning and analysis that has the potential to promote new, anti-normalizing modes of thought and existence, the fact that these women’s lives may be spared only through submitting to a system that requires them to repeatedly enact their own oppression bodes badly for all “disorderly” women, unfeminine but not monstrous, who challenge the gendered order of things.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Stephen Thierman for his insightful response to the version of this paper that I presented at the 2010 meeting of the Canadian Philosophical Association at Concordia University in Montreal, as well as for his careful reading of and comments on a subsequent draft.

<sup>2</sup>At the time of this writing, there are 3270 inmates incarcerated on death rows across the United States; fifty-three of these inmates are women. Since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976, 1188 people have been executed; eleven of these people have been women.

<sup>3</sup>“Far too many things,” Foucault states, “were escaping the old mechanism of the power of sovereignty, both at the top and at the bottom, both at the level of detail and at the mass level” (*Society Must be Defended* 249).

<sup>4</sup>As Andrew Sharpe points out, Foucault conceives of monstrosity and monstrousness differently than Canguilhem does. See Ch. 2, “Foucault’s Theoretical Framework,” in Andrew N. Sharpe, *Foucault’s Monsters and the Challenge of Law*.

<sup>5</sup> Historical developments that are particularly significant within this essay include (1) the emergence of the modern notion of a subject whose defining characteristics are located internally in the soul and (2) the emergence of modern forms of power that aim not to make visible and thereby reassert the might of the sovereign through public spectacles of torture but instead function to “subject, use, transform, and improve” by way of “permanent mechanisms of surveillance and control” (*Discipline and Punish* 136).

<sup>6</sup>Tucker was executed by the state of Texas. Yates and Smith, both of whom killed their own children, received prison sentences of life and thirty years to life respectively. Yates’s conviction was subsequently overturned on appeal.

<sup>7</sup>Multiple sources report that Wuornos attempted suicide more than once, and as many as half-a-dozen times.

<sup>8</sup>The essay was originally published in 1983; I am referring to the 1996 version which, according to Bordo, differs only slightly from the original. See Bordo 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Cressida Heyes provides a provocative illustration of this point. See Heyes 2007.

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