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Chapter 7

Woman as Cat Monster: Sax Rohmer and the Green Eyes of Bast

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Monsters fill our nights with nightmares, cause us to shiver in terror and look over our shoulder when we walk down dark streets. In other words, monsters are fun. Famous monsters are often men of despicable shapes and minds: e.g., Count Dracula, Frankenstein, the mummy whose tomb has been violated, the werewolf, and Mr. Hyde. The world of female monsters, like their female human counterparts, is often populated by women who depend upon men for their status. Dracula picks beautiful women to become his bloody mates, and Frankenstein tries to take a "bride." More frequently, however, women are seen as the prey of male monsters: mummies haunt the bedrooms of sleeping maidens and Mr. Hyde stalks and murders his female victims.¹ In this chapter, I examine a little-known female monster, the cat-woman monster, as she is depicted by Sax Rohmer (1920) in *The Green Eyes of Bast*.² I discover that female monsters have many traits shared with their male counterparts, as well as distinctively "feminine" characteristics.

Women as Cat Monsters

Cats are often described as feminine animals, and human females are often attributed with cat-like attributes.³ Webster's Collegiate Dictionary⁴ defines the

¹ For a summary of these and other horror movies, see Favius Friedman, *Great Horror Movies* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1974).

² Sax Rohmer, *The Green Eyes of Bast* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1920).

³ Julia Penelope, "Paradigmatic Woman: The Prostitute," *Papers on Language Variation*, eds. David S. Shores and Carole P. Hines (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 303-332.

word "cat" as, in part: "a person, as a spiteful women, likened to a cat."⁵ Thus, "catty" women are malicious and gossip too much. Women's long fingernails are compared to feline claws, which are usually hidden but appear with great power and viciousness when cats feel trapped. Women who fight with determination or are sensual and difficult for men to control are said to be "wildcats." Other sexual feline terms applied to women include being called a "lynx," and a "minx," and women's vaginas are referred to as "pussy." Female movements which are languorous, sensuous and sneaky are "cat-like", and such movements are both attractive and repulsive. Women and cats, therefore, are closely linked words and symbols.

Associating women with cats can be traced back to ancient Egypt. Thousands of years ago, cats were honored in Egypt as creatures of the gods and their corpses were mummified to help them return to their sacred homes. Egyptian deities often appeared not only as animals, but also as animals with human characteristics. One cat-god was "Bubastis" (or "Bast") who had a cat head and a fully developed human female body. Bubastis was a popular god figure and statutes depicting her remain today in museums and legends. It is this ancient heritage which probably underlies the cat-monster stories which are found in a number of Hollywood "B" movies about cat-women and cat-people.⁶

Sax Rohmer's book on the re-incarnation of Bubastis continues the Egyptian tradition in his then-contemporary context, 1920. Rohmer, best known for his stories of Fu Man Chu, frequently depicted the "East" as mysterious, sinister, and primitive. Primeval forces were better understood there and more virulent than in

⁴ Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. 1961 edition. Q.v. "cat".

⁵ A similar definition is found in the Oxford English Dictionary (1971) where "cat" is defined in part as "a term of contempt for a human being; especially one who scratches like a cat; a spiteful or backbiting woman" and as slang for "prostitute."

⁶ See for example *The Cat People* (1942) and its sequel, *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944). Specific details and production credits are found in Freidman, op. cit., 109-110.

the West. Rohmer was also popularizing a general interest in Egyptian history and artifacts that had capture the public's imagination in his day.

Rohmer devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of the Egyptian legends of Bubastis and draws upon academic references to lend an air of scholarship to his tale.⁷ The reader learns that:

She was allied or related to the Sun, and was now said to be his sister or wife, now his daughter. She sometimes filled a gracious and beneficent role, protecting men against contagious diseases or evil spirits, keeping them off by the music of her sistrum: she has also her hours of treacherous perversity, during which she played with her victim as with a mouse, before finishing him off with a blow of her claws.⁸

Rohmer takes this religious belief and extends it into the world of the fantastic. Thus, once a year, during the month of Bubastis' celebrations and feasts, her spirit is said to roam a small village in Egypt. This spirit can enter into the body of pregnant women where a being that is part human and part animal is created. Rohmer's skeptical scientific villain, Dr. Damar Greefe, believe that this "superstitious folktale" is used to explain the presence of people who are physically deformed and mentally like animals, what he calls "psych-hybrids".⁹ Dr. Greefe explains:

Such strange hybrids do actually occur periodically and in rare cases survive; but their animal proclivities which

⁷ Rohmer, op. cit., 63-72.

⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹ Jane Addams, in her account of the social functions of the Hull-House "Devil Baby" stories, observed that folk-stories about monster babies provided poor women with a mechanism for believing that cruel people (often as not the errant men in their own families) would eventually be punished for their misdeeds. Thus the "Devil Baby" legend was nurtured by women in the community as an example of "what could happen". See Jane Addams, *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House, September 1909 to September 1929, with a Record of a Growing World Consciousness* (New York: MacMillan, 1930), 49-79.

are physically demonstrable, and the possession of certain animal attributes (as the furry body of the cynocephalyte, the claws and teeth of the jackal-man, etc.), are physical reflections of a mental process taking place in the female parent.¹⁰

In this way, a pregnant English aristocrat (who happened to be travelling through this small Egyptian village during the time of Bubastis' feast) gives birth to such a female "monster." And therein hangs the tale!

The Green Eyes of Bast

Dr. Greefe was called in to "assist" in the delivery of Lady Coverly's child. When the "monster" was born, the parents were told that it died in birth. But Greefe, the maddened scientist, took it home for his research:

With what scientific ardor did I study her development, noting how the cat traits at certain periods (corresponding to the Feast of Bast), proclaimed themselves above the human traits, whilst at other times the psychic-felinism sank into a sort of subconscious quietude, leaving the subject almost a normal women.¹¹

This "cat-woman" had great physical beauty and amber eyes. At night, however, they turned green and glowed in the dark: she had night vision like a cat. She had cat-like fingers, toes, and teeth, although the exact details are never given. She could bound over walls and climb them using all four limbs. These physical signs were almost normal, compared to her mental state. Again, Greefe explains:

What I may term, for convenience, the psychic side of her hybrid mentality at these periods undoubtedly bordered closely upon true insanity; and learning from the Eurasian nurse . . . the whole history of her birth, my charge, . . . began to display even more marked

¹⁰ Ibid., 267.

¹¹ Ibid., 277.

evidence of a sort of monomania And, certainly, during one month of every year, her condition closely resembled that which was termed in the Middle Ages "possession".¹²

She was easily infatuated with men, but when they became tiresome or too demanding, she unleashed her claws and mauled their bodies. She particularly slashed the face of these men, leaving visible scars of her attack, but did not injure them fatally.

Her murderous traits are all directed towards her family. She murders her young brother, indirectly causes the death of both parents, and then kills the remaining male heirs, an uncle and cousin. She does this partially because she was disowned, but also she wants the power and money that she would inherit. Thus, this female monster exhibits both "generic" monster traits, and particularly feminine ones.

Bast as a Non-Sexed Linked Monster

Like male monsters, Bast is an outlaw to humans. She endangers their lives, communities, and sense of human strength. Like Frankenstein, she is saved and kept by a mad scientist. Like the male mummy, she is a product of ancient Egyptian life. Like the werewolf, dogs fear her approach and howl when she is near. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, she has times when she is better and worse.

More generally, she has supra-human strength. She is not able to walk down the streets as an "everyday" person. Her greatest power occurs at night when "ordinary" people are in their homes. Her different physiology is a key to her underlying difference of mind. She is not bound by human mores and morals: she is insane and uncontrollable, she is a murderer. Each of these general characteristics are shared with male monsters. In these ways, Bast is another good horrible monster and part of our general literature of fantastic and evil beings. In other ways, however, she is uniquely female and a contribution to the stories of horror.

¹² *Ibid.*, 279.

Bast as a Female Monster

Bast is a unique monster in that she does not track down strangers to kill but only family members. These family members, moreover, have never helped her, loved her, or recognized her existence openly. Because she is a female, all the male line must be removed before she can inherit the family estate and money. This structural, legal problem leads her to kill an uncle and cousin who would otherwise have been unharmed. The family, therefore, stands in the way of her independent financial existence and public status.

She is similarly a creature of controlled violence toward the men to whom she is momentarily attracted. They call down their problems upon themselves. These men, thinking she will be a victim of their male sexuality, become instead her victim. One silly and vain man appears to be quite deserving of his fate after his plan to "ruin" her fails.

The hero-detective of the story is protected from her by another male, Greefe. The hero is often chilled by her presence, attracted and repulsed. He is mystified by her. At the end of the story, the cat-woman attacks the hero's female love:

Isobel lay forced back upon a settee which occupied the window recess—and bending over her, having her back turned towards me, was a tall, lithe, black-clad woman who, so far as I could see, was clutching Isobel's throat and forcing her backward upon the cushions strewn upon the settee!

But instant upon the door's opening this horrible scene changed. With never a backward glance (so that neither Gatton nor I had even a momentary glimpse of her face) the black-robed woman sprang to the window, opened it in a moment, and to my dismay and astonishment sprang out into the darkness!¹³

¹³ Ibid., 307.

The cat-monster is never clearly seen, never caught, and remains a mystery to the end. Unlike her hapless male counterparts, Bast survives and may strike again. As a successful monster, Bast has a different tradition than her male counterparts.

Conclusion

Few tales of female monsters exist. Bast is part of a series of horror tales of cat-like women, linked to Egyptian mythology and our English-language. She is significantly more intelligent than most male monsters, more oriented to "home/family" murders, and less interested in tracking down and murdering the sensually attractive opposite sex. She is more physically attractive than most male monsters, and she is definitely more in control of her fate than her human female counterparts.

Bast, in this story, frightens men more frequently than women. Her unfair legal status as woman goads her into murdering more male family members than she would otherwise do. The reader does not feel too much sympathy for her, for she "gets away with murder" and literally lands on her feet. This female monster gives us a hint at the fantastic world of fears of the feminine and a small but distinct tradition in horror tales.

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