

# RAIN AND THUNDER

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## Monstrous

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I sat in the theatre watching the trailers, flinching when I read the title of one coming attraction: *Monster*. The flinch was my reaction to seeing the word "Monster" repeatedly looming upon the screen; I was offended for Aileen Wuornos, the real person behind the title, *Monster*. Too, I was disturbed because I remembered the late '80s, early '90s case involving this woman who had killed men, and was then in turn killed by the state of Florida after serving twelve years on death row. In fact, I had felt disturbed all during that case, and, then anew when I read the reports of her execution. Naturally, seeing there was a movie coming out about her, labeled in such a smugly irredeemably negative way, was upsetting, too.

No, I have no soft spot for people who kill. It's just that I have always hated that Aileen Wuornos became the poster girl for what the media calls female "serial killers." She will always be the Number One token female serial killer, even though she does not fit the definition of a serial killer, and even though she is not the only female to have killed more than once. Her name gets thrown into the serial killer circle like Wayne Williams' name gets tossed in when people want to point to the Number One token Black serial killer (remember '70s Atlanta?). I feel there are some people who take comfort in knowing that Black people and women can be serial killers, too, since statistics on serial killing heavily favor the perpetrator being a *Caucasian male*.

I remember when the men were being found dead in Florida. The cops fretted about who was doing the killing and why. Only after pushing aside doubts based on the expert theory that women did not randomly kill in this way (only men did), it was finally considered that the shooter of these men could be a woman. *Perhaps these men had all picked up the same pissed-off prostitute?* The police then had a scenario - a very scary scenario, in which the tables of violence had shifted along gender lines. No longer was it the sole domain of men to incite fear in others, men now knew their worst nightmare was roaming the highways of Florida - a woman with a gun who wasn't afraid to use it, and was using it against men.

I remember thinking that men (if only in Florida) were finally getting to know the taste of fear. In particular, gender fear. Something women have always known. I felt for the murdered men, a little, but the fact that they appeared to be Johns kept me from feeling more. After all, I reasoned, decent men were at home with their wives and children, not out picking up prostitutes, degrading women. However, that line of

reasoning would then make me think *just look at what happens in the home. Look at what men are capable of doing to the women they profess to love.* Picturing that, I could only imagine what Johns did, or might want to do, to a roadside prostitute that would provoke her to kill.

It was around the time of the Wuornos case that I heard a statistic about how many young males on college campuses would rape, if they thought they could get away with it. I think the number was something like 20%. So it was not hard to assume that at least a

comparable percentage of cruising Johns would harm an unknown woman with absolutely no societal protection, thus starting her on a vengeful spate, perhaps stemming from an initial matter of self-defense. If twenty percent of scrubbed-up preppies had thought enough about getting away with rape to admit to it

aloud in a campus survey, whatever were the depraved thoughts of the less-scrubbed male population?

Yep, I was sure this suspected prostitute was not only giving it as good as she got, but giving it before she could get it. She was sick, maybe, but not evil.

When Aileen was caught, she became an instant celebrity. Never so much camera excitement had followed a killer into a courthouse before her. Everyone wanted to see what a woman who kills looks like, especially a woman who dared to kill *men* - and did not stop at killing just a couple of them.

Then there was the sensationalist lesbian aspect of the case, which only served as further grist for the publicity mill. This human anomaly - a female hunter of men - was also a practitioner of twisted sexual mores. Ah-ha! The press and the public engaged in frenzied, exploitative speculation... Was it the lesbianism that had driven her to hate, hunt, and kill men? Or, was it her taste for spilling male blood that had piqued her sexual interest in women? Whichever. The public believed the two - lesbianism and killing men - went logically together.

It made sense that, in our women-oppressing, heterosexed-up patriarchal culture, Aileen Wuornos, by killing six men, had proven herself to be an all-around female deviate, a freak. In her seeming (and unceasingly projected as such) uniqueness, people (primarily males) could believe that she was nothing but a fluke - something not likely to happen again, a peculiar mix of all that could go wrong with a female but (*phew*) almost never did: A lesbian and a killer! Therefore, if society quickly acted to rid itself of the one fluke, men would be free to rule the earth (and all women) without

fear or rebuke, once again; the skewing of the male misogynist mandate righted.

Wuornos was to become the sacrifice at the altar of the re-regulating (reclaiming) of societal norm. The capture of a woman run amok, her public trial, an execution - the message clear: *See how quickly we can pull this back together again?* No more men in fear of women. *See how fast we can go right back to what has been ordained - men hating, hunting, and killing women?* Status quo returned.

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Aileen Wuornos was on her killing keel of six men, men murdered *thousands* of women in the United States. The number of women lost to the world in total during that time is, literally, untellable. The fact is the status quo was never interrupted.

Since the movie's release, I have read many a review belaboring the obvious, such as Wuornos was a killer, and that we should not forget her victims. Moreover, many reviewers feel the softly biographical portrayal makes Wuornos seem too sympathetic, too human - an insult to their sensibilities. Monsters made by society must remain the uniquely demonized creatures we tout them to be, for sense to be made of the everyday madness that is our lives. How else can we measure what is perceived to be the boundary of such a madness? There must be a line, and Wuornos crossed it. Men kill women, but women don't kill men. No mere movie or dramatic reshaping of events can bring Aileen Wuornos back across that line. Fair enough. But we must move the line.

Currently there is a popular American television show in which women (sometimes children) are killed each week as the entertainment focus of the program. I repeat, the *entertainment focus* of the program! Men killing women, day in day out, is daily news and award-winning entertainment. The latest statistics on violence against women as compiled by Amnesty International showed that worldwide, "up to one billion women - 1 in every 3 - had been beaten, forced to have sex or otherwise abused... [and] one U.S. woman is raped every ninety seconds". This is the status quo that never changes and shocks no one, except perhaps women.

Aileen Wuornos was a victim of violence, not even detractors of the bio-drama "*Monster*" deny that, nor do they deny that she was raped at least once (she had a baby at age 13), if not multiple times (as is likely) while prostituting. While I do not know which particular combination of factors cause the countless men

who kill women to do so, as a woman, I do know how a woman could come to kill men. The only shock to me is that so few do.

There is no end to patriarchal society's fascination with male monsters, the most heinous of which are probed ad nauseum by psychologists, their criminal cases revisited on screen and in books, as if to laud their accomplishments. Fewer high-profile books were written exploring Wuornos' presumable 'uniqueness,' although her imprisonment presented the perfect chance to study how systemic poverty and a lifetime of abuse perpetrated by males can co-factor into priming a woman to serially kill. One would think that considering the cavalier acceptance of violence against women, America would be very interested in preparing for another violated woman run amok -- or finding out how to stave one off -- yet the most attention Wuornos got after her conviction was at her death, and then again with the release of the "Monster" movie.

Male monsters are so lionized in American society that they gain the sympathy of unstable females (a form of sub-level victimization) who then marry them in prison and bear children for them. Ted Bundy comes to mind as an example of a monster cum prison daddy. Before he was killed by the state of Florida, Bundy's name came to symbolize the height of male serial killer celebrity. Words like "charm" and "good looks" speckle descriptions of the rapacious woman-murderer Bundy, while accounts of the man-killer Wuornos paint her as an ugly cast-off who found it easier in her heart to shoot men than to settle down with one. Every movie critic mentions how physically ugly the star, Charlize Theron, had to become to portray Wuornos, as if the evil in Wuornos' soul symbolically shone through in her very looks. While critics feel that "Monster" is a romantic portrayal of Wuornos, somehow every made-for-TV movie about the "dashing" slayer Bundy *isn't*.

Patriarchal society appears to be so smugly sure that the likes of another Aileen Wuornos is not in the making right now, that reviews of "Monster" are little more than a bash and 'fash' feature -- bash the killer, rave the fashion of the star playing her. Maybe these reviewers need to read the article by Mary Strange in February's *Women's Review of Books*, titled "No More Raping," subtitled "When some women are armed, are all of us safer?" Ms. Strange ponders if women should live armed. Not all of us, just a percentage large enough to give us an edge. The premise is inviting.

What if scumbags and preppies didn't know which working girl or sorority girl was strapped? Think how that might affect the rape fantasy statistic I mentioned, and incidences of actual rape. Patriarchal culture survives by socializing women to be passive, if not *receptive*, in response to male advances. No one expects a woman to be armed and prepared to use her weapon. *Just imagine if every woman who has had her soul and*

*self-esteem wrung by rape or incest carried a gun... Or, picture the might of a woman who is prepared to stop her attacker with deadly force.* These images are just as scary to purveyors of patriarchy as the living, breathing Aileen Wuornos was before she was stopped and killed! The mere *thought* of a woman ready to meet men with deadly force disables men and paralyzes patriarchal society. It is that simple.

The line of what is accepted needs to change all right. Both women and men must realize that misogyny is what is monstrous. Evil is not cut from "whole cloth", women are often tormented into becoming psychotic. Big evils are nurtured by and grown from everyday little evils, a fact to which the Wuornos character in "Monster" alludes. The real Aileen Wuornos did not foment in a vacuum. Every little girl who is abused, or neglected in poverty, her soul stripped along with her self-esteem, is in danger of graduating from that abusive environment to the streets, where she will molder in more degradation and destitution. That life track should be obvious to all; however, *no* girl is psychologically safe in patriarchal culture, and that is what remains harder to grasp.

There is another Aileen Wuornos in our future, to be sure; will the next one come out of a middle-class suburban home?

Maybe arming women and readying them to meet force with force is not the answer to the monstrous disease that is misogyny (although personally, I believe it is.) It is still, however, incumbent upon *women* to rise up and demand equal protections and equal respect. We should expect to have to throw down and rumble, in order to win our physical safety and peace of mind, because it sure as hell isn't going to be handed to us.

Patriarchal society is afraid when women protect themselves or hit back. I say, patriarchal society, be afraid, be very afraid.

