Monstrous Women

English 461-03, Senior Seminar
Dr. Maureen McDonnell
Fall 2013, Wednesdays, 4:00-6:45 p.m.
Eastern 39

“A woman promoted to sit in the seat of
God, that is, to teach, to judge, or to reign
above man, is a monster in nature, contrary
to God, and a thing most repugnant to His
will and ordinance.”
– John Knox, The First Blast of the
Trumpet against the Monstrous
Regiment of Women

“She'll give me nightmares for a week or so;
that I can handle.
Or she'll turn the water in my well into blood;
I'll scream when I see it,
and that will be that.”
– Patricia Smith, Medusa

“Many things are true at once.”
– Elizabeth Alexander, Amistad

This seminar has a dual focus: to analyze the depiction of “monstrous” women
in literature and to explore what those portrayals reveal about what we imagine
to be normal and natural. What must women do to be labeled as monstrous or
deviant? By analyzing these representations, we are able to witness how this
particular group of people began to embody social, religious, and political
debates. We will also discuss what these women’s supposed monstrosity reveal
about their political and historical contexts, as well as how these texts were
used to legitimate social paranoia.

Texts for our class may include Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Charlotte Brontë’s Jane
Eyre, Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea, Sophie Treadwell’s Machinal, Lillian
Hellman’s The Children’s Hour, Elizabeth Alexander’s The Venus Hottentot, and
Charlaine Harris’s True Blood.

All English majors who have taken ENG 203 and have senior status are
welcome.