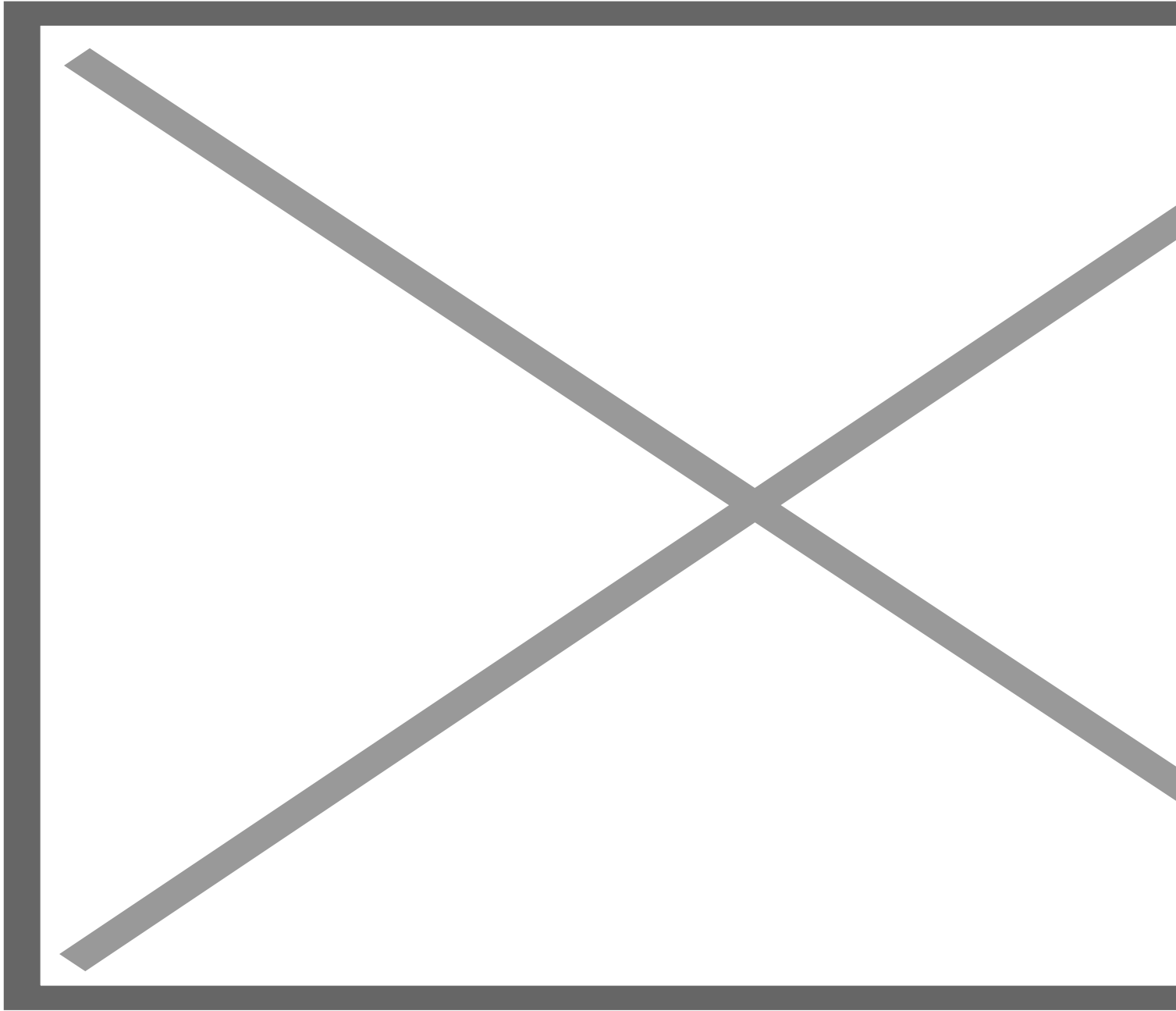


We keep turning women into monsters

Reading Eleanor Johnson's new book while watching the Lindsay Clancy trial, I realized we're still using the same ancient myths against women.

by [Jessica Mesman](#)
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Century illustration (Source image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)

In *Scream With Me*, Eleanor Johnson's 2025 bestseller about horror and feminism in the 1970s, the literary scholar makes the case for horror as the genre that showed us that something was rotten in American domestic life. She outlines four characteristics particular to that decade's domestic horror films (such as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*) that set them apart from other subgenres: The horror takes place in the home, there is a male antagonist who cannot be removed, the horror centers on children and reproduction, and the movies were released against the backdrop of legal conflicts in the US about women's rights.

The Lindsay Clancy trial was not a movie. The Massachusetts mother of three admitted to experiencing a psychotic break, strangling her three small children in their basement, and then attempting suicide. But the trial—and the discourse around it—became a spectacle, one that many of us watched as if it *were* a horror film. I began to wonder if this was because the Clancy story can be so easily conformed to those mythic cinematic elements Johnson describes in *Scream With Me*.

The victims were children. The killings took place in the home. Despite Clancy's own admissions, the discourse attempted to cast her husband as the villain in her story. It seemed plausible enough. Statistically, family annihilators are usually men, and it's not close: 91 percent of familicides are committed by men. In the comments of the Clancy posts on social media, I saw hundreds of different iterations of the same sentiment: It's *always* the husband. As the trial proceeded, women dressed in pink protested outside the courthouse, sharing their stories of post-partum depression and domestic abuse. Countless TikToks argued for Clancy's innocence, including one notorious video that used Bratz dolls to recreate the crime scene.

It began to feel like the case was less about Clancy and more about our fears that there is something rotten and unfixable in the lives of US women. I kept reminding myself as I followed along that this was a real-life tragedy, a true story in which there is no catharsis or tidy ending. The trial ended in a hung jury, which means the confusion and fear followed everyone out of the courtroom, the way a horror movie haunts us even when we leave the theater or turn off the television. I suspect many of us will continue to carry the fear and vulnerability we absorbed from Clancy's trial. Nobody wins here. Nothing is explained. The conspiracy theories will hold, even as public interest wanes and Clancy remains confined in a psychiatric hospital.

I am ashamed of how deeply this trial affected me, but I'm not alone. The case cast a spotlight on something people would rather not think about: how women—and mothers, in particular—suffer behind their closed doors. As the progress achieved by the feminists of the '70s is undermined and stripped away, a new generation of women is losing the bodily autonomy that they took for granted. What if we are not in control? What if we never were?

That might be the most terrifying theory about what Clancy did. If she were found not guilty by reason of insanity, that would mean she lost control of her own will. It would mean that a woman who was by all accounts a devoted and loving mother responded to the pressures of motherhood and domestic life in the most unimaginable way. So we might, too. It's understandable that women would rather blame the husband, going to outrageous lengths to find holes in his story and prove that he was gaslighting his wife into committing a heinous crime so he could escape domestic prison. This is in some ways the less terrifying narrative for us, perhaps because it's so familiar we are desensitized to it.

But I also see in the discourse the deployment of far older, more sinister scripts. Some want to see Clancy rot in jail. South Carolina representative Nancy Mace said Clancy should face public execution. I've seen comments presenting her actions as evidence that we should repeal the 19th amendment, which gave women the right to vote. In the eyes of those who would see her locked up or killed, Clancy stands in a long line of terrifying women who threaten the peace and prosperity of the home—a mythological and religious trope that can be traced all the way back to the ancient Mediterranean. She is, in this view, a *Monstrous Bitch*.

Johnson's new book of that name offers a sweeping survey of the archetype in Mesopotamian epics, Greek tragedies, Roman poetry, medieval Bibles, witch hunts, Renaissance plays, vampire lore, and contemporary horror movies. A medievalist who teaches English and comparative literature at Columbia University, Johnson writes in the preface that the book was inspired by the creeping realization that her feelings of gratitude for living in a time of relative safety, freedom, and progress for women were morphing into feelings of fear. "Things are getting worse" for women all over the world, she says, "and it's happening fast." For the first time in her lifetime, women are losing rights, not gaining them. Johnson sees a threatening resurgence of patriarchal order, one that, as she carefully explains over the course of the book, has always benefitted from the dissemination of stories that assert that there is something inherently evil in women, and that we must be tightly controlled both for our own sakes and to keep everyone else safe.

Johnson begins with the ancient Mesopotamian she-demon Lamashtu, who took particular delight in tampering with reproduction, targeting mothers, fetuses, newborns, and young children. Pregnancy and childbirth are mortal dangers to women without access to any form of recognizable reproductive or obstetric care, and devising a character who could be placated with talismans and charms is one way to create the illusion of safety. A woman who hurts babies was among humanity's worst fears, even 5,000 years ago, so Lamashtu is depicted not as fully human but as a chimeric animalistic deity. She has a woman's body with a wolf's head, a bird's claws, and wings. She slithers like a snake. (When the prosecution in Clancy's case suggested that she'd faked her suicide attempt, they described her as sliding out of her window, and I couldn't help but think of Johnson's description of Lamashtu and wonder if we're still telling stories about her.)

Lamashtu is terrifying, Johnson theorizes, in part because threats to reproduction are also threats to patriarchy. The deaths of women of reproductive age and their children isn't what's horrible, per se; it's the resulting destabilization of inheritance and property lines. Society depends upon the reproductive capacities of its women. Johnson suggests that this same anxiety drove the historical witch hunts; where there was a rise in private property, there was an increase in the persecution of witches.

We tend to associate witch hunts with the church, but Johnson points out that Christianity was sometimes deployed as a corrective against the persecution of women as witches. She quotes the Anglican bishop Francis Hutchinson, who argued in the early 18th century that the signs and symptoms of "witchcraft" (contorted expressions and poses, superhuman strength) could also be symptomatic of mental illness: "Witches, then, might be sick, and deserving of our pity, rather than evil, and deserving of execution," he writes. Not quite feminism, but a welcome ounce of pushback on the witch hunts of his time.

The same dichotomy unfolded in the Clancy trial. The defense pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity: sick, and deserving of pity. The prosecution said she was fully aware of her actions: evil, and deserving of punishment. Meanwhile, the public was unhappy with either of those too-tidy narratives, and a strong contingent (mostly women) rallied for another option—that she was framed by her husband.

That story tracks with the evolution of the Monstrous Bitch Johnson sees in the 2010s, when she is depicted as the wronged party. By 2015, in the gothic folk horror film *The Witch*, "the eternal return of female monstrosity" was even "starting to feel like something to celebrate," Johnson muses—a way out of patriarchy. Thomasin is not guilty of witchcraft; she is unjustly accused by her mother and father throughout the film. But in the end, she experiences something like vindication when she assents to the narrative she's already been assigned. Johnson reads Thomasin as free, dancing in the woods with her new sisters, the daughters of the witches you didn't burn. She might have worn a white pantsuit and celebrated the election of the first female president a little prematurely. The Monstrous Bitch was on her way to being reclaimed as an anti-heroine. "She's going to be all right, and the Patriarchy is a little bit weaker now, by virtue of her being in the world," Johnson writes. I read the end of *The Witch* differently. There's always a price for signing the devil's book.

When Trump was elected the first time, a year after the film came out, women marched in opposition and were ridiculed for their pink hats. The Monstrous Bitch was defanged, powerless, a cowering Karen, a punchline. A few years later, *Roe* was overturned. But one thing about the Monstrous Bitch—she always comes back. “Patriarchy will never be safe from her,” warns Johnson.

I wish I could distribute a copy of *Monstrous Bitch* to every woman who has been following the Clancy trial. Then maybe we could talk about how “we are living four thousand years into a history of the systematic cultural demonization of women” and, instead of litigating Clancy’s culpability, we could hold our own discourse accountable. Confronted with such an unthinkable tragedy, we are, once again, creating a character, a folk tale, a placatable deity, or a projection of our own worst fears, forgetting what Johnson says is so important to remember about the Monstrous Bitch, in every age: “She was *not real*.”

[*Monstrous Bitch: A History of Terrifying Women by Eleanor Johnson*](#) is forthcoming from Princeton University Press October 6, 2026.