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Sphinxes, Witches and Little Girls: Reconsidering the Female Monster in the Art of Leonor Fini

Rachael Grew

Abstract
As champions of the irrational and the uncanny, the Surrealists frequently incorporated classical monsters into their art as part of their search for a new modern myth. However, these creatures became subject to gender codification, with the sphinx and chimera in particular becoming attached to the imagery surrounding the sexually provocative, castrating femme-fatale. The woman Surrealist Leonor Fini (1907-1996) diverged from the Surrealist norm to create complex and ambiguous monsters, rather than simply expressions of the lethally enticing femme-fatale.

Fini uses a range of monsters in her art, from the classical sphinx to creatures of popular culture, such as the witch and the werewolf. These monsters are almost always female, or at the very least androgynous, yet the actions and attitudes they are found in invites a new reading of the destructive female monster and/or the ‘monstrous’ female. Equally, the children and adolescent girls that appear in her work are often depicted in a negative light: they are ugly, unkind and selfish. Through a detailed iconographical analysis, this paper will explore Fini’s use of both traditional and non-traditional monsters as a method of subverting preconceived gender and social codes, ultimately reconsidering the notion of what exactly is monstrous.

Key words: Surrealism, Fini, myth, monsters, sphinx, witch, stryge, woman.

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The female monster in both classical and popular traditions, such as the sphinx, chimera, siren and witch, is frequently associated with depraved sexuality and destruction. Little girls on the other hand are more often seen to be innocent of their sexual potential, signifying purity. These same binary definitions are echoed in the Surrealist visions of the femme-fatale and the femme-enfant. While the former ensnares a helpless male victim through her sexual wiles, only to castrate him, the latter remains innocent of her sexuality and acts as the inspirational muse of the male artist. The terrifying female monster and the adoring girl-child are socially constructed stereotypes, continued by the male Surrealists. I argue that, in order to promote the liberated, autonomous woman, Leonor Fini purposefully destabilises these
stereotypes by amalgamating the characteristics of each construct in a single figure, so that sphinxes can be protective and creative, while girls can be sensual and aggressive. Though the ambiguous nature of the sphinx in particular has been noted before, I argue that it forms part of a wider subversive trend in Fini’s art.

Fini grew up in Trieste in Northern Italy amongst her mother’s family, her mother having fled from her abusive husband when Fini was only 18 months old. According to Peter Webb, the women of Trieste at the beginning of the 20th century were “renowned for their sophistication, their cultured bearing, their beauty and their liberated sexuality”. This certainly seemed to rub off onto Fini, who read vociferously in her uncle’s library, but was expelled from a number of educational establishments before her mother agreed to her daughter’s desire to be an artist.

After working in Italy, Fini moved to Paris in 1931 and fell in with the Surrealist group. Though she had friends and lovers amongst the Surrealists, and shared their interest in the unconscious and dreams, Fini never officially joined the group. As well as being interested in the child-woman, the femme-enfant, several of the male Surrealists, such as Max Ernst and André Masson, were very interested in mythological monsters, as they fed their search for a new modern myth. Fini, like other women Surrealists, picks up on the same monstrous and girl-child iconography, but twists and distorts it in order to portray a more ambiguous, multifaceted version that cannot be pigeon-holed into a specific moral category.

In taking the sphinx as an important example, Whitney Chadwick has argued that the sphinx in Ernst’s Une Semaine de Bonté 1934 (fig 1) is representative only of death and decay, and, as such, is a prime example of the monstrous femme-fatale. Fini rejects this one-sided approach in her depictions of the sphinx, frequently locating her sphinxes in surroundings suggestive of both decay and regeneration, as in Sphinx Philagria I 1945. This shows them to be emblematic of both creation and destruction, demolishing the stereotypical one-dimensional view of this monster. Although critics such as Peter Webb and Whitney Chadwick have already noted this, I aim to extend their analysis of Fini’s sphinx as a subversion of the typical destructive reading of this iconic female monster, by demonstrating that some of Fini’s sphinxes can also be equated with the Great Mother goddess and parthenogenesis.

The Great Mother goddess is an ancient deity found in a variety of cultures, who is both benevolent and cruel, and in some instances, can procreate all by herself, without the aid of a male partner. In aligning the sphinx with the parthenogenic Great Mother, Fini not only proclaims the
autonomy of the woman artist, but also further negates the binary categories of *femme-fatale* and *femme-enfant*.

In Fini’s writings, a creature called Le Pantigane takes the narrator through a church where, behind the main altar, a huge sphinx crouches. To the right of the sphinx lie “six very large eggs, covered in a light layer of red hair”.\(^{12}\) The egg is a well-established symbol of creation, but, as Fini abhorred the idea of having children, its inclusion here should not be read as the desire to have children, but rather to cast this sphinx in the role of Great Mother goddess; simultaneously creative and destructive.\(^ {13}\) The narrator is curious to feel if the sphinx “will soon produce another of these magnificent eggs”, implying that she is capable of making them without the input of any male entity.\(^ {14}\) This suggests that, for Fini, the sphinx can be viewed not only as the ambivalent Great Mother goddess, but also as a parthenogenic creator.

This reading may seem controversial given that Fini maintained a great dislike for babies and motherhood. However, it must be emphasised that this parthenogenic procreation is not the bourgeois motherhood of the nursery, but rather a demonstration of the power of the indifferent Great Mother. This reading is perhaps given greater legitimacy in analysing *Little Hermit Sphinx* 1948 (fig 2). In September 1947, Fini underwent a hysterectomy for medical reasons. She later said: “I was happy to have undergone that operation. The thought of having children horrifies me”\(^ {15}\). Yet *Little Hermit Sphinx*, which Webb states is a self portrait of Fini after the hysterectomy, portrays a sad and lonely atmosphere, with the broken egg shells symbolising destruction, an argument Fini herself confirms and links to an inability to have children.\(^ {16}\) I believe that Fini is not mourning her inability to have children, but her loss of status as woman-as-life-giver. Thus Fini’s sphinx not only subverts its traditional destructive interpretation, but also the traditional notion of feminine maternity to arrive at a new, more ambiguous definition.

The parthenogenic Great Mother and her subsequent subversion of creator/destroyer binary types is not limited to Fini’s sphinxes; the same attitude can be found in another of Fini’s works, this time dealing with more ‘popular’ monsters. In *Stryges Amaouri* 1947 the passive, vulnerable nude male is watched over by what appears to be a werewolf and a witch-doctor or shaman, the latter of whom bears a striking resemblance to Fini.\(^ {17}\) Fini herself testifies to the duality of her protagonists:

> The man…is sleeping, a prisoner of the vegetal universe…The women watch, mount a guard, powerful as witches, sometimes bestial, sometimes animated by the spirit. They are afraid to protect and they are afraid to threaten. They possess the egg, source of life.”\(^ {18}\)
Again, these female creatures are the sole possessors of the ability to bestow life, yet they also possess both creative and cruel tendencies, blurring the boundaries between the socially contrived ‘types’ of women. Interestingly, Chadwick notes that one of the primary abilities of the witch, as identified by Jules Michelet, was to create unaided, suggesting she too acts as a kind of parthenogenic goddess.\(^{19}\) Though I have not come across any paintings of witches by Fini that explicitly refer to this ability, they are nevertheless a further example of Fini’s negation of the static categories of femininity.

Fini does not reject the medieval and early modern depictions of the witch, stripping off their clothes, flying on sticks and cavorting with demons, in fact she seems to embrace them.\(^{20}\) In the previous quote she specifically identifies witches as powerful beings and elsewhere she says that:

> Amazons, witches, sibylles are always on horseback. The amazons on their horses, the witches on brooms, the sibylles on philosophers. The amazons are guerrillas who always defend their territory and renew others. The witches inherit the most ancient knowledge, they can change the century and the age.\(^{21}\)

In both *The Witch* 1935-36 and *The Interlude of Apotheosis* 1935-36 (fig 3) Fini depicts a young woman preparing to go to the Sabbath. In both cases this involves an act of transformation. *The Witch* shows the woman mounted on her broomstick while her clothes fall in tatters from her body. The shedding of clothes may perhaps represent the sloughing off of the respectable ‘skin’ of society to be replaced by the more primal passions implied by naked flesh. However, it seems that the witch is prepared to ride away in this déshabillé state, again suggesting the merging of the traditional categories of woman. The witch is not a maligned housewife or a sexually deviant hedonist; the witch archetype is instead the powerful, liberated and above all, autonomous woman.\(^{22}\)

The assumption of a new identity is also represented in *The Interlude of Apotheosis*, as the stripping witch appears to be growing out of, or climbing into a wig, with several others strewn around her. This suggests the duality of the witch’s identity, she is not simply a one-dimensional figure. Fini believed she had multiple sides to her self, and expressed them through dramatic photographic poses and fantastic costumes: could *The Witch* and *The Interlude of Apotheosis* refer to the multiplicity of women at large?\(^{23}\) I would argue that Fini regarded the very definition of the monster, particularly in connection with the female, in a different manner than its typically negative meaning. For her, the traditionally violent entity that is the female monster becomes an
ambiguous creature that is neither good nor bad, but a complex amalgamation of the two that should be accepted and celebrated, rather than repressed and feared.

Fini is quite egalitarian in her subversion of the binary gender roles given to women by both contemporary society and her Surrealist colleagues. Not only does she bring a creative slant to bear on the sensual yet vicious monster, she also gives the traditionally pure and innocent little girl a greater knowledge of her sexuality, which, while not completely bringing her to the level of the femme-fatale, excludes her from the status of ignorant femme-enfant, transgressing typical feminine roles and emphasising Fini’s multifaceted view of woman.24

The group of girls crowded around the decaying corpse of a man in The Anatomy Lesson 1966 (fig 4), show an unusual degree of haughty detachment, even boredom and contempt.25 This work was painted during a period in Fini’s career which Estella Lauter identifies as one in which Fini: “became the kind of feminist who tolerates only feminine males, or males under female power.”26 Yet, Fini’s feelings towards feminism were lukewarm at best, and she certainly did not like to be described as a feminist herself.27 This painting is not a feminist vision of a decaying patriarchy, but perhaps a depiction of the cruel side of the ‘innocent’ little girl.

It could be argued that this subversion of the typical ‘sugar and spice’ image of girls stems from Fini’s own dislike of babies and physical motherhood. Xavière Gauthier has quoted her as saying that: “the humility [of having children] is inconceivable in the modern world” and also that “physical maternity repels me instinctively.”28 This attitude is particularly noticeable in paintings such as Maternity 1933 and The Orphan of Velletri 1974 (fig 5). However, this more simplistic, biographical reading falls down when we remember that not all of Fini’s depictions of girls are quite so disapproving.

In The Busybody 1936, an adolescent girl stares angrily at a door, behind which an older woman crouches, peeping through the keyhole. Most teenage girls get angry with their mothers for (attempting) to keep them under their thumb, yet the rod the young girl holds like a whipping cane perhaps adds an air of malevolence and violence unfamiliar to a ‘normal’ teenage argument. Webb argues that this work also refers to the “mystery of adolescent sexuality” and to the witch. Fini read Jules Michelet’s La Sorcière, and later wrote that the witch of Michelet was, for her, “beauty, rebellion and knowledge”.29 While the girl of The Busybody can be linked to the witch through her rebellious attitude, perhaps other girls in Fini’s œuvre share this same association through acquiring knowledge of their sexuality.

Kinderstube 1970 (fig 6) portrays a pair of girls doing just that; the mirror is intended to reflect the parts of the vagina. This focus on adolescent sexuality is also possible to see in The Pearl 1978 (fig 7). Though the girl appears to be hanging from a rope (perhaps suggesting auto-erotic asphyxia),
the way in which she does not seem to be in any pain gives this work a transcendent quality, suggesting that this exposed sexuality is to be celebrated. In analysing similar paintings to *The Pearl* from this same decade, which also explicitly reveal the girl’s gender, Pierre Borgue concludes that the pre-pubescent girl, neither a child nor a woman, embodies the very essence of femininity. As such, it is perhaps inaccurate to view paintings like *The Pearl* in a negative manner.

Fini’s adolescent girls may be described as transgressive as, despite appearing to be close to the French age of consent, they engage in ‘unusual’ sexual practises – aside from the masochistic auto-eroticism of *The Pearl*, the inquisitive nature of the two girls at sexual play in *Kinderstube* hints at lesbianism. In both instances, the girls have become aware of their sensuality, removing them from the category of *femme-enfant*, yet there is no sign that the girls have lost their virginal innocence through being deflowered, thus Fini seems to question the very notion of sexual innocence.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Fini should glory in images of sexual misbehaviour. She created illustrations for an edition of the Marquis de Sade’s *Julliete*, in which Julliete indulges in every possible violent sexual act, and also for other erotic novels such as *L’Histoire d’O*. In commenting on children in her painting, Fini stated: “Of course, they play. Under their games there is always an erotic substrata”. Similarly, in her introduction for Joseph-Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, for which she provided the illustrations, she describes Carmilla as “a vampire drawn only to the youngest, most delectable young girls”, and that the girls themselves “perpetually yearn for Carmilla”. The erotic subtext for Fini’s depictions of little girls and adolescents, and their apparent capacity for cruelty, perhaps edges them closer to the fatally sensual female monster. Fini’s girls, as with her monsters, do not wholly belong in one sphere or another, they appear to represent a conflation of good and bad that defies categorisation, as with the witch and the sphinx.

Fini seems to view the female monster as a morally ambiguous creature that transgresses the static confines of gender stereotypes. Yet this monster should not be viewed as a fearful entity, it has been defined as such through out-dated notions of femininity. It is not simply a harbinger of destruction, but something much more complex and independent, creating a new vision of Woman. Fini has succeeded in the task of creating a modern myth, redefining the classical myths and contemporary woman by blurring socially conceived boundaries of femininity. Moreover, in achieving this new, autonomous woman-monster, Fini has subverted the binary categories of the superficially liberated Surrealist *femme-enfant* and *femme-fatale*.
Notes

1 For a more detailed discussion of the patriarchal fashioning of ‘types’ of women, particularly the femme-fatale, see Bram Dijkstra, Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986.

2 Xavière Gauthier has previously argued that Fini’s sphinxes can be ambiguous, but I believe she means in terms of gender rather than their very nature. She also discusses the merging of the real and the imaginary in Fini’s art, but does not seem to discuss the merging of social types of woman. (X Gauthier, Leonor Fini, Musée de Poche, Paris, 1973, pp. 58-59). Similarly, Marcel Brion notes that the vampire, ghost and sphinx in Fini’s art suggest the interconnection of desire and fear, thus locating them solely in terms of the femme-fatale. (M Brion, Leonor Fini et son Œuvre, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris, 1962, n.p.).

3 Though Webb notes the ambiguous nature of the sphinx, he does not connect them to other monsters in her art, or to the ambivalent Great Mother archetype. Similarly, he argues that the sphinx legitimises creation outside the realm of procreation, whereas I would contend that procreative association is legitimate, as it belongs to the indifferent Great Mother. For him, it seems that it is predominantly the sphinx which is connected to female liberation and metamorphosis, whereas I believe it to be a recurring theme. (See P Webb, Leonor Fini: Métamorphoses d’un Art, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 2007, pp. 102, 275). Equally, Whitney Chadwick also notes the regenerative/destructive aspect of the sphinx, but largely in connection to nature, and does not equate this tendency with other monsters. (W Chadwick, Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985, p. 188).


5 Webb, p. 6. «Les femmes étaient reprises pour leur sophistication, leur culture, leur beauté et leur liberté sexuelle».

6 Webb, pp. 11-15.

7 For more information on Fini’s activities leading up to her move to Paris, see Webb, pp. 25-28.

8 Dorothea Tanning is another woman Surrealist who subverts the notion of the good little girl in her art.

9 Chadwick, p. 189.
Sphinxes, Witches and Little Girls: Reconsidering the Female Monster in the Art of Leonor Fini

Borgue equates Fini’s Guardian figures (c. 1954-1961) with the divine Mother, as does Brion, but I would argue that the presence of the Great Mother is visible much earlier in Fini’s art. (Borgue, pp. 204-05, Brion, n.p.).

Such goddesses include Kali, Hathor, Isis, Hera and, depending on whether one reads her as one figure or several with the same name, Macha.

Gauthier, p. 52. « A droite de la creature gisaient six œufs très grands, couverts d’une légèr couche de poils roux ». For the full story see Gauthier, pp. 47-53. The manuscript quoted by Gauthier may possibly be L Fini, Humour (dualité), La Belle Dame sans Merci au Pied de Porc (Animaux) Le Sphinx, undated manuscript from the Leonor Fini archive, Paris.

The egg as a symbol of creation can be seen in Christian dogma, through its association with Easter and Christ’s resurrection, in alchemy the egg is a symbol of the crucible in which the Philosopher’s Stone is ‘born’, and it also appears as a cosmogenic symbol in various creation myths. (See M Eliade, The Two and the One, translated by J. M. Cohen, Harvill Press, London, 1965, p. 108).

Estella Lauter has previously discussed the Great Mother in association with Fini’s paintings, however, she does so from a feminist stand point, something Fini would not necessarily have agreed with. See E Lauter: Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by 20th Century Women, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, pp. 114-28 for her analysis in full.

Gauthier, p. 53. « ...et pourtant, il m’était défendu de la réveiller vraiment...de tâter si elle ferait bientôt encoure un autre de ces œufs magnifiques ».

Webb, p. 133.

Webb, p. 135. « Parce que c’est la destruction. Ce n’était plus possible d’avoir encore des enfants, alors j’ai pensé que l’œuf contenit l’enfant ». Eggs also appear elsewhere in Fini’s œuvre, most conspicuously in the paintings Guardian of the Red Egg, Guardian of the Phoenix and Guardian of the Black Egg. Webb notes that their particular significance is difficult to define, given Fini’s dislike of children, yet they fit the argument that Fini is reclaiming primeval female fertility. (Webb, p. 193).

There is a photograph of Fini dressed in costume for the Bal du Panache, which took place in Paris in June 1947, in which she wears a similar headdress of a skull and leaves. See Webb, p. 125.

For more information of the stryge or the numerous variations thereof, see M Summers, The Vampire in Europe, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ltd, London, 1929, pp. 191 and 265.

Webb, p. 132. « L’homme...est endormi, prisonnier de l’univers vegetal...Les femmes veillent, montent la garde, puissantes, comme des...»
sorcières, parfois bestiales, parfois animées par l’esprit. Elles peuvent protéger et else peuvent menacer. Elles possèdent l’œuf, source de vie.

19 Chadwick, pp. 181-82. Chadwick, despite acknowledging the importance of Michelet’s book La Sorcière for the Surrealists, she does not discuss it in connection with Fini. Borgue notes that, for Fini, the witch represents a revolt against society, but does not appear to say how she achieves this, nor does he analyse these paintings of the witch. (Borgue, pp. 111-13).

20 Webb specifically states that Fini owned a copy of Grillot de Givry’s La Musée des Sorcières, Mages et Alchimistes, which contains images of witches stripping and naked. See Webb, p. 49.


22 The positive portrayal of the witch is not unique to Fini. Leonora Carrington (1917-) and Remedios Varo (1908-1963) both celebrate the magical, powerful female.


24 Ironically, Brion argues that Fini invokes the dream with the naivety of a child, yet I would argue that the children in her art are far from naïve. (Brion, n. p.).

25 Lauter, p. 123.

26 Lauter, p. 123.

27 Webb, p. 273; Gauthier, pp. 75-6.

28 Gauthier, p. 74.

29 Webb, p. 49. « Ces tableaux [The Busybody and Two Women] semblent bien relever du mystère de la sexualité féminine adolescente…À fortes connotations autobiographiques, ils témoignent aussi d’une familiarité avec La Sorcière de Michelet…Plus tard, Leonor écrivit de La Sorcière de Michelet qu’elle était « la belle, la révoltée, la savant » ». 
30 See Borgue, pp. 149-55 for his argument in full. In specifically discussing *Swing II* he states: «Cette nuée dansant au seuil de l’abîme est le symbole même du caractère spirituel et mystique du féminin tel que le conçoit Leonor Fini» (p. 155).
31 I do not believe this to be the influence of feminism as Fini did not see herself as a feminist (see note 12).
32 Webb, p. 112. For a full list of texts illustrated by Fini see Richard Overstreet’s appendix in Webb, pp. 296-97.
34 Translation / Leonor’s Introductory Text / *Carmilla*, undated typescript from the Leonor Fini archive, Paris, pp. 1-2.

**Image List**


Rachael Grew is currently finishing a PhD in the History of Art at the University of Glasgow. Her research engages with concepts of gender and identity in Surrealist and Symbolist art.