

H-France Review Vol. 4 (November 2004), No. 112

Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, Eds., *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. xi+304 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$22.50 (pb) ISBN 0-8014-8901-6.

Review by Kathleen Wellman, Southern Methodist University.

This volume, a set of essays produced from a symposium on monstrosities held at Pennsylvania State University, is designed to call into question “progressive rationalization” as an apt description of the way early modern Europeans dealt with monsters and to emphasize the richness of the ways monsters could be used, especially to serve political ends. The rationalist account of the Enlightenment has led us to underestimate the array of purposes monsters served. Monstrosity, the editors insist, evades “containment” by eighteenth-century rationalists into a science of teratology (p. 5).

The articles are organized in four sets of two essays each around a theme connecting the two, albeit sometimes quite loosely. Peter Burke deals first “monstrous races” or peoples depicted as between human and animal, often with their animal attributes highlighted. These, he insists, were not fantasies but distorted images of the other. Over the early modern period, such images shifted from the old world to the new, from the wild man to the savage. Ultimately they led to scientific quests to classify “monstrous races” such as Linnaeus’s *homo monstruosus*. Animal images applied to human beings by one group of Europeans seeking to characterize another as uncivilized or barbaric were, Burke contends, an early modern way to define national characteristics of other peoples. Such images have had a long life. In the eighteenth century, they were integrated into physiognomy and, in the nineteenth century, they formed the basis of “race thinking.” They persist in national and racial stereotypes.

David Cressy treats more specific kinds of abnormality. His article is rife with images of “headedness” in the period of the English Civil War, from two-headed dogs to the headless children of anomalous births. Monstrous births were considered ample demonstration of both general and particular disorders; “the world was turned upside down,” and radical women, who challenged authority, bore obstetrical disasters. “Headedness” was a preoccupation of political imagery as well, from Roundheads to the headless Charles I. As Cressy demonstrates, monsters were invoked to castigate gender, religious, or political disorder or deviance.

The second section reinforces themes of the first. R. Po-chia Hsia explores the role of monstrous births in the polemics of the German Reformation. He distinguishes the German response to the monstrous from that described by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park as “wonder” or a pleasurable response to monsters.[1] Instead, Hsia finds that in Germany monsters provoked fear among Lutherans and repugnance among Catholics. For Protestants, monsters exacerbated fears of the Apocalypse, even though Luther himself refused to speculate on their meaning. For Catholics, images of monsters depicted heresy. Hsia deftly explores the use of the language of monsters deployed by each side to suggest general affinities and subtle differences. Catholics were rather dubious about monsters, seeing them as tainted by enthusiasm. While Protestants looked to monsters as prophecies, Catholics deployed them in polemics against Protestants. Hsia also finds a broad evolution in the Protestant use of monsters. They were first seen as portents of the coming Apocalypse and later as warnings to impel correct behavior. He concludes that when they were no longer able to constrain virtuous behavior, Protestant churches adopted institutional means to shape disciplined Christians.

Laura Lunger Knoppers’s article focuses on another specific political use of monsters. She points to the many images of monsters invoked both to support and to oppose Oliver Cromwell. Initially, Cromwell’s supporters used such images to convey their belief that he was an agent the second coming, and thus the monstrous creature of the Apocalypse highlighted Cromwell’s millenarian role. After some of Cromwell’s supporters became disillusioned with him when he failed to go to war against Dutch Catholics and seized Parliamentary power, they depicted him as the “whore of Babylon,” even though this image was more often associated with the Renaissance papacy. The earlier positive association between monsters and Cromwell shifted to negative uses of them to indict him. The image of

the “whore of Babylon” was further turned against Cromwell by Dutch Catholics who feared him. Both of these two articles offer careful expositions of the ways in which the same images were used in a specific context to reflect on both sides of religious and/or political divides. Both are also especially sensitive to the evolution in the uses of the images of monsters in religious and political polemics.

The next section focuses on the medical or anatomical by treating first monstrous births within the medical tradition and then the use of grotesque anatomies in the culture of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Marie-Hélène Huet specifically focuses on the role of the maternal imagination in monstrous births, but she first provides a broad overview of the role of monsters in medicine. Although monsters contaminated nature, physicians studied them because they told them important things about nature. Monsters fascinated physicians as kinds of prodigies; they also gave physicians access to the “wonders” sensibility described by Daston and Park. As part of this overview of monsters in medicine, Huet integrates them into theoretical frameworks of early modern medicine, such as Galenists and empirics, and notes the role of religion in medicine. She concludes that as medicine divested itself of religion, monstrous births lost their association with the supernatural.

Joan Landes makes interesting connections between the French Revolution and anatomy, especially grotesque anatomy. The revolution, in Landes’s account, is full of monstrous body images. The king and queen were depicted with animal images and under various monstrous guises; the revolution itself was a many-headed hydra. The counter-revolution then required expiation for the acts of “monstrous cannibals.” “What is a monster” comes to be defined by political groups as the other, or, as Landes puts it, “it is not one of us” (p. 154). Landes suggests a number of associations between bodies and the culture of the revolution. Body parts were distributed as scientific specimens to medical and veterinary institutions. Anatomy was connected to the monstrous since abnormal bodies were especially highly prized as anatomical specimens. Bodies were featured in artistic competitions held by the new republic to award prizes for depictions of such classical events as the death of Brutus. (Some of the entries were ruled too realistic.) Honoré Fragonard developed *écorchés* as an artistic/anatomical medium. Flayed bodies were put on display in artistic poses; they offer especially vivid examples of the connection between anatomy, art, and the monstrous. As the chilling illustrations of the *écorchés* attest, scientific/artistic specimens still have the power to horrify.

The last section presents two specific literary representations of monstrosity from opposite ends of the early modern period. Timothy Hampton offers a close textual reading of several chapters of Rabelais’s *Pantagruel* as a subtle commentary on the religious debates of the day. He looks to the Monster of Lent of *Pantagruel*. Rabelais describes the monster with more than six pages of outrageous and improbable analogies. Hampton reads this almost incomprehensible set of associations on many levels. He compares the hyperbole to the language of contemporary critiques of Lent, especially by Calvin. (One of the many unnatural aspects of the Monster of Lent is that it resembles “demonical Calvin,” p. 189). According to Hampton, Rabelais is contributing to the debate on Lent by arguing against Lenten excesses a critique made by both Christian humanists and Protestants. But Rabelais also used the monstrous to inveigh against religious intolerance. So a whale is first perceived as an allegory of evil and then simply as a dead fish. And, in the war against the Sausage People (the proponents of Carnival), the Council of Trent (proponents of Lent) is indicted for deepening rather than resolving religious divisions. Both of these examples, Hampton suggests, illustrate Rabelais’s discomfort with religious rigidity and his implicit espousal of toleration.

David Armitage takes notes of the sharp distinction usually drawn between the early modern and modern use of monsters, i.e., portent versus scientific specimen. The same distinction between the early modern and the modern, he suggests, extends to the appreciation of mythology. Thus, by the nineteenth century, myth was considered to reflect a primitive mind and to be treated appropriately only in poetry. Armitage both accepts and challenges this distinction, largely because the text he treats, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, is such a powerful counter example. Armitage traces Shelley’s literary gratitude, as he puts it. Shelley was conscientious in both acknowledging and discussing the important literary influences on her work from Ovid to Keats and Percy Shelley. Armitage also discusses her literary heirs, William Hazlitt and John William Polidori, who also revive classical mythology and endow it with modern meaning. For Armitage, despite these rich sources, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, with monstrosity at its core, was anomalous in the nineteenth century but resonant in the modern age.

The afterward by Andrew Curran points out some the useful connections between the articles and prods the reader to consider contemporary issues of physical abnormality and how these might relate to our own political, ideological, and methodological concerns.

Like many edited collections, the diversity of the articles is both its strength and weakness. The articles are not uniform in what they attempt to accomplish. Some provide synthetic overviews, while others offer very specific arguments. Because the articles in the collection treat a broad array of subjects--from anatomy in French Revolution to allegory in Rabelais--the authors must often provide brief, short hand background not only on their topics, but also on the relevance of their specific topics to the broader themes and even on how particular topics relates to their disciplines. Huet, for example, surveys the history of medicine in the broadest of brush strokes. Timothy Hampton provides a telescoped discussion of the literary forms used to describe monsters, from Aristotle, to Cicero, to the sixteenth-century popular text by Pierre Poistua. The excellent introduction and afterward are effective in integrating articles whose connections to each other are not readily discerned in all cases.

Since this volume intends, in part, to critique the notion that the Enlightenment rationalized monsters, it is peculiar that so many articles look to periods and texts much prior to the Enlightenment. Many deal with the polemics of the Reformation and the English Civil War, neither subjected to eighteenth century rationalism. Other articles lend some credence to a progressive rationalization of monsters as they lose their power to move their reader or observer in specific contexts over time. For example, Armitage accepts that because science discredited the role of monsters, the Romantics revived the imagination's ability to produce monstrous depictions. Huet argues that as religion retreated from medicine the monster became a medical phenomenon, and Hsia points to a decline in the power of monstrous images to impel virtuous behavior.

The collection poses a series of fundamental issues: the extent to which "monstrous language" becomes polemical, the effect of multiple appropriations of monsters, the emotional response monsters generate, and the role of political exigency in shaping monsters (p. 13). The first and last are admirably addressed by many examples of polemical uses of monsters and their role in political debates. The emphasis on the political uses of monsters is very broadly construed, and indeed the specific examples brought to bear demonstrate an astonishing diversity in the application of images of physically monstrous bodies to abhorrent or monstrous politics. Ultimately, one of the strongest points the collection makes is the clear evidence that charges of monstrosity proved an effective way to disparage political enemies. In every case, the charges were leveled on both sides of the question. Despite the richness of the examples treated, it remains unclear how these images were perceived by their intended audience. And, of course, for many of these images, such evidence would be hard to glean. One is left to wonder about the effect of these depictions. Had they become political labels, deployed so readily and so frequently by partisans of both sides of a political conflict that they were robbed of meaning or effect?

The volume has a number of attractive features. Compelling images and a thoughtful explication of the import of the images is a feature of virtually every article, and the articles are engagingly written. They provoke us to consider not only these early modern images but also how we read the images, especially the political images, presented to us. As this collection amply demonstrates, monsters both proved to be good for early moderns to think with and good for us to consider in thinking about the early modern period.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, Introduction

Part 1: Monstrous Races, Boundaries, and Nationhood

- Peter Burke, "Frontiers of the Monstrous: Perceiving National Characters in Early Modern Europe"
- David Cressy, "Lamentable, Strange, and Wonderful: Headless Monsters in the English Revolution"

Part 2: Apocalypticism, Bestiality, and Monstrous Polemics

- R. Po-chia Hsia, "A Time for Monsters: Monstrous Births, Propaganda, and the German Reformation"
- Laura Lunger Knoppers, "The Antichrist, the Babilon, the great dragon!: Oliver Cromwell, Andrew Marvell, and the Apocalyptic Monstrous"

Part 3: Medical Knowledge, Grotesque Anatomies, and the Body Politic

- Marie-Hélène Huet, "Monstrous Medicine"
- Joan B. Landes, "Revolutionary Anatomies"

Part 4: Displacing Monsters: Sign, Allegory, and Myth

- Timothy Hampton, "Signs of Monstrosity: The Rhetoric of Description and the Limits of Allegory in Rabelais and Montaigne"
- David Armitage, "Monstrosity and Myth in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*"
- Afterword: Andrew, Curran, "Anatomical Readings in the Early Modern Era"

NOTES

[1] *Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998)

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H-France Review Vol. 4 (November 2004), No. 113

ISSN 1553-9172