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Asa Simon Mittman, Peter J. Dendle

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Surekha Davies
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The Unlucky, the Bad and the Ugly: Categories of Monstrosity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment¹

Surekha Davies

In his diary entry for August 24, 1661, Samuel Pepys described how he came face-to-face with a monster:

“We are called to Sir W. Battens to see the strange creature that Captain Holmes hath brought with him from Guiny; it is a great baboone, but so much like a man in most things, that (though they say there is a species of them) yet I cannot believe but that it is a monster got of a man and she-baboone. I do believe that it already understands much English, and I am of the mind it might be tought to speak or make signs.”

Pepys’s difficulty lay in two uncertain boundaries of his age and, perhaps, all ages, between human and beast, and between nature and monstrosity. As far as Pepys was concerned, this so-called baboon was so like a human that it was more plausible that it was a singular monster of unnatural causes than a regular animal resembling all its kin. One of several conceptual frameworks on which monsters existed in the early modern period was a continuum between human and animal.

Pepys thus points us towards one of the three interpretative traditions of Renaissance teratology, each based in turn on textual prototypes from classical

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¹ For comments on this chapter, I thank Andrew Curran, Glyn Davies, Jennifer Spinks, and the anonymous reader. I am grateful for the support of the Leverhulme Trust.

antiquity. One of these traditions can be traced to Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals* (ca. 350 BCE). It considered monsters as occasional errors in nature, brought about as a result of the working of nature on the brute, occasionally unresisting substance of matter. Anything that did not resemble its parents, particularly its father, was a monster in Aristotle’s view. Thus even women, who lacked the perfection of men, were a kind of monster. These monsters did not, for Aristotle, illustrate or portend anything, apart from showing that female generative secretions had triumphed over male seed and caused a departure from a normal male child—a monstrous birth. A second tradition existed within a discourse of omens and prodigies founded by Cicero’s *On Divination* (44 BCE). Cicero perceived monstrous births as signs of impending calamity. Subsequent classical and Christian authors continued this approach. The medieval chronicler tradition interpreted a range of prodigies, from comets to floods to conjoined twins, as general signs of impending political upheaval or war. The third tradition was of monsters as wonders of nature. Largely based on Pliny’s *Natural History* (ca. 77–79 CE), authors in this tradition added the possibility of entire races of monsters dwelling in the far corners of the earth. The monstrosity of distant peoples was characterized by physical or behavioral abnormalities—such as having one leg rather than two, or living on an exclusive diet of smells—and defined by two central features. First, these deviations were found across a population, rather than being restricted to a few unnatural individuals. Second, it occurred at the edges of the known world—somewhere distant from the observer’s point of view. As Pliny put it, “India and parts of Ethiopia especially...
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teem with marvels.” These elements distinguished extra-European monstrosity from domestic forms. In the fifth century CE, these beings were incorporated into a Christian framework in St Augustine of Hippo’s City of God. St Augustine suggested that “either the written accounts of certain races are completely unfounded or, if such races do exist, they are not human; or, if they are human, they are descended from Adam.” For medieval Christian thinkers, all humans were by definition Adam’s descendants. The uncomfortable implication was that if monstrous peoples were rational, thinking, and therefore human beings, they shared their ancestry with the rest of humanity. Isidore of Seville, the medieval bishop, historian, and encyclopedist, paraphrased and rearranged material from St Augustine and other sources in his Etymologies. Isidore neatly encapsulated the difference between monstrous races and monstrous individuals thus: “Just as, in individual nations, there are instances of monstrous people, so in the whole of humankind there are certain monstrous races, like the giants, the Cynocephali [dog-headed people], the Cyclopes, and others.”

Much has been learned by looking in depth at specific types of monster in isolation from one another. To some extent, the paths taken by modern scholars reflect the separate traditions through which monsters had long been discussed: those of prodigy, natural history, and monstrous peoples. However, European conceptions of monstrosity were wider than any one of these. In many cases in our period, the appropriate framework was uncertain or contested, as is illustrated by Pepys’s encounter with a baboon. The nature of the monster/human divide in the ethnology of distant others was much debated between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, circa 1400–1800. During the Renaissance, while the classical typology of prodigious, natural, and distant monsters (and their medieval variants) continued to inform expectations, the three categories overlapped and intersected in practice. Although a particular text might appear to deal with one type of monster, its author would have been aware of the other types and, in some cases, drew on these traditions, or referred explicitly to their monsters.

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13 Ibid., XVI.viii (for text and translation): “Aut illa quae talia de quibusdam gentibus scripta sunt, omnino nulla sunt; aut si sunt, homines non sunt; aut ex Adam sunt, si homines sunt.” Earlier in this section, Augustine asserts that any human being, that is, a “rational mortal creature” (“animal rationale mortale”), was descended from Adam, no matter how strange they might be in appearance, custom, or nature.

While the natural or immediate causes of monsters continued to divide them into three categories, monsters across these categories were increasingly considered together in interpretations of their ultimate causes and deeper significances. In order to better understand the interdependency of the three textual traditions of monsters as omens, errors, or wonders, I shall focus here on those monsters that appeared in more than one tradition or whose secondary causes were contested.

Perhaps the biggest problem for those who tried to make sense of the monsters they saw or read about was deciding what they meant. For monsters of all causes looked the same: unnatural. There was no consensus on whether beings like (say) headless infants were one of nature’s errors, a sign of their mother’s sin, portents of communal doom or—if they dwelled far from Europe—members of a monstrous people. God used the same instruments of nature for all his actions and messages. Thus the interpretation of monsters was a contested enterprise. The story of monsters and the monstrous between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment is, in essence, a story of competing interpretations pushed by different groups for the same phenomena.

This essay begins by tracing in turn the trajectories of the theories of prodigious, natural, and distant monsters circa 1400–1800. It will outline the discourses within which these theories were discussed, highlighting instances of ambiguity and overlap in monster types and broader discourses. It concludes by suggesting a series of themes that were common in discussions of all categories of monster in this period, and the possible impact of the blurring of boundaries between monsters in this period for the subsequent paths of discourses about monsters.

Monsters as Signs of Divine Displeasure

Since classical antiquity, monsters had been seen as religious signs, and were closely associated with miracles in early Christian literature. One of the three interpretations offered of monsters in the early modern period was that they were signs of divine displeasure. From the late medieval period, there was an increasing interest in divination via monstrous births. During the Renaissance they were taken as signs that a community was practicing the traditional biblical sins, such as greed, vanity, and adultery, and foretold subsequent punishment through natural catastrophes such as floods or plagues. The late fifteenth century and the earliest years of the Reformation marked a shift in the interpretations of monsters, from portents of general misfortune to signs of particular crimes and impending divine retribution for a new range of failings indicating wrongful political and religious
allegiances. Stories of monstrous human, animal, and (often) hybrid births began to serve propagandistic purposes. Both Protestants and Catholics would produce prints, pamphlets, and broadsheets that interpreted monstrous births as evidence of the wrongness of their opponents.\(^\text{18}\) Thus monstrous births became signs of divine disapprobation that revealed through their particularities the sin that had been committed.

In 1523, an influential pamphlet penned by Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon interpreted monsters as divine criticism of a specific group: monastic institutions and their papal overlords.\(^\text{19}\) The pamphlet combined two monsters: the creatures they called the Papal Ass and the Monk Calf (Figure 2.1). The Papal Ass


had appeared in Rome on the banks of the Tiber in 1495. It sported the head of an ass, a woman’s breast and belly, an elephant’s foot instead of a right hand, a hoof and claw in the place of feet, and a dragon’s head on its posterior. The Monk Calf had appeared near Freiberg in Saxony in 1522. It was devoid of fur, had a flap of skin around its neck (read as a monk’s cowl), and a mark on the top of its head in the manner of a tonsure. Luther and Melanchthon analyzed the elements of these creatures’ monstrous bodies as symbols of the pope and his faulty regime. This kind of pamphlet often contained apocalyptic overtones.

Monsters could also signal the errors of a single individual. They could, for example, be the result of a mother’s secret desires and active imagination. Monstrous births might be judged to be the result of sex between women and animals, or even the devil. A child resembling anyone other than its lawful father was sometimes interpreted as evidence that the mother had been thinking of someone else at the moment of conception. The monstrous birth thereby publicly signalled divine retribution for impure thoughts or deeds. It also served as a mechanism for identifying crimes that were difficult to detect, notably adultery; as one scholar has noted: “monsters themselves are texts ... [that] render the private beliefs and behaviours of early modern men and women spectacularly visible.”

Of course, as the French physician Nicolas Venette asserted, an adulterous woman might conceal her crime by thinking about her husband: thus “resemblance is not proof of filiation.” The juridical implications of this were far-reaching. Marie-Hélène Huet’s wide-ranging study of perceptions of the monstrous maternal imagination, drawing on medical works, philosophy, literature, and other subjects, illustrates how these discourses cross-fertilized freely between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Huet argues that the importance played by resemblance in theories of generation imposed a superficial order on the unverifiability of paternity, which was “unmasked” by monstrosity. In other words, since a monster’s attributes did not allow it to be tied definitively to specific natural causes or significances, the converse was also true: the resemblance of a baby to its mother’s husband was no proof that it was not monstrous, a subversion of natural order. The proper interpretation of such observations was deemed to require the judicious consideration of context—was the

20 For the circulation of news of this monster and the political uses to which it was put, see Niccoli, Prophecy and People, pp. 35–60.
21 For English examples of flaps of skin being compared to Catholic vestments, see Alexandra Walsham, Providence in Early Modern England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 195–6.
22 For analysis of the pamphlet, see Spinks, Monstrous Births and Visual Culture, pp. 59–72. For apocalyptic dimensions, see Daston and Park, Wonders, p. 187.
23 Huet, Monstrous Imagination, pp. 5–6.
24 Ibid., chapter 4.
26 Quoted in Huet, Monstrous Imagination, p. 80.
27 Ibid., p. 34.
mother a “known” adulterer, for example? Perhaps the greatest danger of monsters was the shadows they cast over normality, which, in turn, became unverifiable.

The relations between a monstrous body, such as a ruffed calf or a two-headed baby, and its meaning were multiple and protean. In the early seventeenth century, the Puritan parish rector William Leigh offered two different interpretations of the same monstrous “double child.” In one, he read the monster (born dead) as a judgment of an individual’s moral wrongdoing. In the other, he claimed that it was a warning that signaled God’s imminent, more general punishment of English religious wrongdoers, both heretical Catholics and those avowed Protestants whose thoughts and deeds were too close to “Romish” practices. The problem was that observation alone was not enough to determine whether or not a monster was a sign of individual or collective sin and thus also of divine displeasure and impending punishment. The implications of a monster were dependent on the interpretation of the viewer, rather than on any visible characteristics of the monster.

Ideas of providence shaped the worldviews of individuals across all social strata in early modern England. They informed the interpretation of monstrous births as divine fingers pointing at sinful individuals and social groups—“larum-bels” sent by God as “lesons & scholynges for us all.” During the English Civil War and the Restoration, metaphors of the state as a body, and as particular forms of government as akin to monstrous bodies, were widespread in intellectual thought, popular culture, and political theory. Religious fanaticism, political polemics, gender politics, portents, and divine retribution were welded together in popular explanations of headless births in 1640s England. A 1646 pamphlet, detailing a headless baby born to a certain “Mrs Houghton, a Popish Gentlewoman,” recounted on its title-page that it had “the face of it upon the breast, and without a head (after the mother had wished rather to bear a Childe without a head than a Roundhead) and had curst the Parliament.” Births such as these were held up as proof of God’s displeasure at individuals and the political and religious views they espoused.

In the 1640s and 1650s, during the civil wars and the Interregnum, English pamphlets depicting monstrous births proliferated. The headless monster was a common motif during a period in which beheading—the punishment for a traitor—was frequent. Royalist pamphlets drew on the concern that, with the

28 For discussion, see Crawford, Marvelous Protestantism, chapter 3.
29 Walsham, Providence, pp. 2–3.
30 Strange News out of Kent (London, 1609); cited in Walsham, Providence, p. 195.
31 See, for example, William E. Burns, An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics and Providence in England, 1657–1727 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Laura Lunger Knoppers, “‘The Antichrist, the Babilon, the great dragon’: Oliver Cromwell, Andrew Marvell, and the Apocalyptic Monstrous,” in Knoppers and Landes (eds), Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities, pp. 93–123.
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beheading of Charles I, England was itself headless. In some cases, depictions of headless women showed them giving birth to headless offspring. These women emblematized several perceived threats: women who did not obey their husbands; the unnatural power of Parliament; and divine retribution for one’s sins. Thus instances of monstrous deformation of the head were particularly resonant in this period, with beings that were headless, bore the wrong number of eyes and ears, or exhibited other unnaturally shaped heads being interpreted as signs that England was politically monstrous. In the case of fashion and cosmetics, where the head and body were consciously deformed, the deployment of the body metaphor for the state was particularly ingenious.

Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, commentators on prodigies interpreted them against deism and atheism. Rather than necessarily being a divine portent of future menace, the prodigy was often evidence of God’s existence, and of punishment of a particular sin committed by an individual. While to some, the loss of the monarchy rendered the body politic monstrous, to others, the presence of a female monarch was a monstrous aberration. Women on and behind the throne, including Elizabeth I, Mary Tudor, and Catherine de Medici, provoked the ire of many. John Knox’s *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), published anonymously, railed against the horror of female leaders, and in particular Queen Mary: “a woman promoted to sit in the seate of God (that is, to teache, to judge, or to reigne above man), is a monstre in nature.”

Between the Reformation and the late seventeenth century there was a marked increase in the variety of explanations given for prodigious monsters. Monstrous births were often tied to particular political or religious agendas. Nevertheless, there remained much uncertainty over whether such monsters might signal the reprehensibility of an entire social group (and, if so, which group?), or merely the reprehensible thoughts and behavior of their own mothers. In this way, prodigious monsters overlapped with monsters as errors within nature, as we shall see.

**Monstrous Births and the Order of Nature**

The maternal imagination did not merely give rise to monsters through divine punishment. Monsters could also appear as a natural consequence of more benign

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37 [John Knox], *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (Geneva, 1558), f. 17r.
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desires or blameless experiences. A mother’s thoughts and imagination were believed to influence the shape of her unborn child not only during conception but also through pregnancy. This view had its roots in ancient thought, particularly that of Aristotle, and continued to inform explanations about unnatural births into the early nineteenth century. In 1697, the Sussex vicar William Turner described a girl with “the figure of a fish” on her leg, and a boy with “a mulberry growing upon his forehead,” and explained that both aberrations were caused by maternal cravings during pregnancy.

The very sight of something unnatural, alarming, striking, or desirable during pregnancy, including misshapen animals and statues, could enter a mother’s imagination and thereby affect the form of the foetus. The French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche was a fervent believer in the power of the maternal imagination over the shape of a foetus. In De la recherche de la vérité (1674) or The Search for Truth, he stressed the fragility of the foetus, and its ability to receive, and be shaped by, impressions formed in the mother’s mind. In a memorable passage, he notes how a mother who saw a criminal executed on the wheel gave birth to a child who manifested the same injuries: “At the sight of this execution, so capable of frightening a woman, the violent flow of the mother’s animal spirits passed very forcefully from her brain to all the parts of her body corresponding to those of the criminal, and the same thing happened in the child.”

By the late sixteenth century, a range of specialized medical writing about monsters existed, both as sections of broader works about nature or human generation, and as monographic treatments of monsters. Germany in the 1550s saw the emergence of wonder books that combined monstrous births with other natural wonders. Des Monstres et prodiges, a treatise by Ambroise Paré, chief surgeon to the kings of France, was published in Paris in 1573. It covers some 40 marvels and monstrous individuals. For Paré, monsters were a motley bunch: some were animals, others were human, and some were a mixture of the two, like the hermaphrodite, winged, horned, human-faced, one-legged wonder...
of Ravenna, that even sported a third eye in the middle of its leg. Paré’s work included land and marine animals and birds, thus turning monstrous humans into a phenomenon that was part of a broader natural history and pathology (Figure 2.2). Such works drew on the prodigy tradition for some of their source materials. Paré outlined the causes of monsters, which ranged from the divine (God’s glory or wrath), to the natural (wrong quantity of semen), to the mechanical (“the mother’s indecent sitting position”) to the diabolical. What distinguished Paré from writers of prodigy literature was the proportion of monsters that were considered to portend something. For Paré, most monsters merely demonstrated nature’s curious mechanisms, and were neither portents, signs, nor errors. Monsters evoked curiosity and wonder rather than fear or horror.

Distinguishing a prodigy from a misbirth was a complex and subjective process. Paré wrote that monstrous misbirths merely appeared to be against the course of nature. Nonetheless, others believed that while the secondary cause of a monster might be natural, this did not preclude the possibility that it had ultimately been sent from God as a sign, since he used nature as an instrument. Thus, the secondary cause of a monstrous birth might be the mother’s impure thoughts, while the primary cause was God’s wrath at her sin. Monsters like the one born in Ravenna, so bizarre that no natural process could be posited, were clearly caused solely by God. The Protestant scholar Caspar Peucer suggested that in order to tell a prodigy from a misbirth, one should pay attention to one’s emotions at the moment of seeing it: monsters that show something “have always terrified human minds, overcome by presages of sad and calamitous events, and affected them with wonder and fear.” Monsters that were not interpreted as portents evoked other emotions, such as wonder.

The close link between emotion and cognition in the case of monsters was part of a broader response to unexplainable phenomena between the medieval period and the eighteenth century. It lies at the center of an important critical approach to responses to monsters, in the seminal Wonders and the Order of Nature by Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park. Focusing on monsters within Europe, the authors

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45 Céard, Nature et les prodiges, p. 304.
46 Ibid., p. 295.
47 Paré lists 13 causes in chapter I. For the list translated, see Marie-Hélène Huet, “Monstrous Medicine,” in Knoppers and Landes (eds), Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities, pp. 127–47, at 129.
49 Caspar Peucer, Commentarius de praecipuis generibus divinationum (Wittemberg, 1560), ff. 442v–3v; translation from Daston and Park, Wonders, p. 193.
suggested that ideas about monsters emerged from “three separate complexes of interpretations and associated emotions—horror, pleasure, and repugnance—which overlapped and co-existed during much of the early modern period.” The particular interpretation made by an individual scholar was culturally contingent, often informed by local political or religious upheaval.50

50 Daston and Park, Wonders, pp. 180, 187–90. For monsters as wonders that evoked pleasure, see p. 73.
Daston and Park assert that ideas about monstrous births underwent several key changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At the turn of the sixteenth century, monsters were increasingly found within Europe, rather than being confined to distant regions. The belief that monsters were signs from God was shared by popular and educated culture. Not only did a plurality of interpretations co-exist in the medieval period—supernatural, divine, portentous and natural—but these continued in many ways in the early modern period. The seventeenth century witnessed the gradual withdrawal of learned culture from prodigious ideas about monsters. This did not come about for epistemological reasons, but rather was encouraged by some for political ones. Monsters began to elicit indifference or repugnance rather than curiosity or pleasure. In 1605, Sir Francis Bacon of the Royal Society in London had argued that monsters were part of the order of nature, and that they could be used to improve the causal explanations that characterized natural philosophy. Despite Bacon’s vision, argue Daston and Park, monsters and other “strange facts” received limited attention by the Society.

Some aspects of this view have been challenged in recent years. It is now clear that monsters played an important part in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century learned culture, particularly natural philosophy. Recent scholarship has indicated the continuing interest of the Royal Society in curiosities and monstrous births. Palmira Fontes da Costa has shown that members of the Royal Society continued to discuss instances of monstrous births in their meetings, to which some beings were even brought along as specimens, well into the 1750s. The subjects and specimens included children born without brains (1697, 1711), various dwarfs and “gigantic” children (1744, 1746, 1750, 1751), a child born with the figure of a robin on its neck after its mother had been frightened by the sight of a dead robin (1751), a monstrous calf (1697, 1706), a monstrous pig (1700), and a monstrous sheep (1752). The Society had its own cabinet of curiosities, the Repository, until 1779.

In eighteenth-century Paris, the Académie Royale de Sciences debated for decades over whether monstrous births were the work of God (through preformed seed) or the result of physical shocks suffered by the foetus after conception. If monsters were the latter, they were effectively accidental—a conclusion that implied that there were limits to God’s power. What was more, such explanations of monsters even allowed for the possibility of new species emerging by chance. This

51 Daston and Park, Wonders, pp. 173–80. This approach constituted a revision of their earlier groundbreaking article “Unnatural Conceptions.” There, they had suggested that there was a progressive shift, between the medieval period and the Enlightenment, of explanations of monstrous births as supernatural portents and punishments, to objects of wonder, to natural phenomena to be subjected to scientific inquiry.

52 Daston and Park, Wonders, pp. 201–5.

53 Sir Francis Bacon, The Two Bookes of the Proficiencie and Advancement of Learning (London, 1605).

54 Daston and Park, Wonders, chapter 5.

conflict over the origin of monsters pitched providentialist physicians, naturalists, and philosophers, such as the king’s physician Joseph Du Verney, against those who favored “accidentalist” theories, such as Louis Lemery. For Enlightenment philosophes like Voltaire, defining the notion of monster was highly problematic. Denis Diderot went so far as to deny the monster’s separate existence, thereby subsuming monstrosity within humanity.

Nevertheless, evidence of the continuing interest of some scholars in monsters as signs is provided by A Discourse Concerning Prodigies (1663) by John Spencer, a Cambridge antiquarian. This hefty tome was clearly aimed at the wealthier sections of the reading market, which must therefore still have entertained the possibility of prodigies and signs. The work is a methodical critique of every possible reason given for prodigies, and attempts to prove at every turn that they are not divine signs. The sophistry and detail of Spencer’s diatribe against prodigies, speckled with numerous Latin and Greek quotations (the latter in Greek script), suggests that it was the educated members of society that he was trying to convince. Spencer urged them to assess prodigies critically, “to let no vulgar notions commence our persuasions, before they have past the scrutiny of our reason, and appear to merit our assent.” For Spencer, the dangers of beliefs in prodigies were clear. He outlined them in his preface: “the common reverence of prodigies doth greatly trespass upon” religion. In addition, it jeopardized political power, for “how mean a value and regard shall the issues of the severest debates, and the commands of authority, find, if every pitiful prodigy-monger have credit enough with the people to blast them, by telling them that heaven frowns upon them and that God writes his displeasure against them, in black and visible characters, when some sad accident befalls the complyers with them?” Spencer asserted that his “book may be profitable to serve the just interest of state,” outlining three key reasons: “it tends to secure the honour of acts of state and the results of publick counsel,” “it ministers to the quiet and tranquillity of the State,” and “as it tends to make men more manageable to the commands of authority, which easy men may quickly be frightened from by such images of straw, as the relations of monsters and strange sights are.” Spencer then laid out natural, non-prodigious explanations for every conceivable type of prodigy. For those who still remain unconvinced, he asserted that: “If God do write Fata hominum in these mystick characters, there is none on earth found able to reade the writing, and (with any certainty) to make known the

57 Ibid., pp. 9–10.
58 John Spencer, A Discourse Concerning Prodigies: Wherein the Vanity of Presages by them is Reprehended, and their True and Proper Ends are Indicated (Cambridge, 1663). For Spencer’s strategies, see Burns, Age of Wonders, pp. 58–68.
59 For example, Spencer, Discourse Concerning Prodigies, p. 4.
60 Ibid., sig. A.3.r.
61 Ibid., sig. A.4.r.–B.1.r.
interpretation thereof.” By stressing the difficulty in reading God’s signs, Spencer hoped to discourage his readers from doing so—or worse, from falling prey to those sign-readers who sought to overturn the rightful church and state.

It is also important to note that there was no consensus in learned circles for the best way of dealing with the political and religious dangers of beliefs about prodigies. The clergy was an important group that continued to write about monsters as portents, into the eighteenth century. Simon Ford, the rector at Old Swinford, compiled ancient and local, contemporary examples of monstrous births in his *Discourse Concerning Gods Judgements* (1678). Ford stressed the value of such births as signs of individual sin, rather than as rhetorical devices for arguing against rival political or religious factions. The Sussex vicar William Turner claimed that his *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences* (1697) would be “useful to ministers in furnishing topicks of reproof and exhortation, and to private Christians for their closets and families.” It includes a substantial section devoted to divine judgement on various transgressions, from cursing to sabbath-breaking. As with Spencer’s volume against prodigies as signs, the book is a large tome, hardly a cheap pamphlet for the masses.

We may never be able to ascertain the extent to which members of the clergy believed that monsters were portents, or merely wished their flock to improve their ways through fear of portents. Nevertheless, their approach for increasing the authority of the church included the strategic encouragement of belief in prodigies. As such, the clergy’s publication, into the eighteenth century, of both pamphlets and large treatises demonstrating the meanings of prodigious births must be understood as an important approach to monsters in this period, which was at odds with that of certain other sectors of learned culture (emblematized by Spencer’s view), which considered any belief in the portentous nature of prodigies to be dangerous. By the eighteenth century, beliefs in prodigies as signs seem to have been primarily linked to sins of individuals rather than of political and religious groups. If that is the case, it would suggest that there was a return, in some ways, to pre-Reformation perceptions of monstrous births as natural, wondrous, or indicators of individual sin, rather than as devices of political polemic.

Understanding the relationship of monstrous births to the order of nature was highly problematic in this period. In terms of interpreting their significance, there was an uneasy continuum between births that heralded general misfortune or divine punishment, births that were in themselves punishments for an individual (their mother), and births that were caused by natural accidents during pregnancy. Learned culture was divided over the proper way to explain monstrous births. While, on the one hand, these births might hold the keys to a better understanding of nature and generation, and could even be used to make political arguments, the malleability of observations to different political and religious agendas made them

62 Ibid., p. 4.
64 Turner, *Compleat History*. 
highly unpredictable tools for social control. As John Spencer put it, they opened
the doors for “every pitiful prodigy-monger” to deceive people.

Monstrous Peoples at the Ends of the Earth

Until the sixteenth century, individual monstrous births and exotic monstrous
people belonged to different traditions and were largely understood through
distinct explanations. During the Renaissance and the early modern period,
monstrous births and monstrous races began to converge in several discourses,
particularly in the context of natural history, as we have seen. Nevertheless, ideas
about monstrous races that had been prevalent in classical antiquity and the
medieval period continued to inform European thought between the Renaissance
and the Enlightenment. During the first two centuries of printed books, beings
such as apple-smellers, troglodytes, anthropophagi, and sciapods, who had
sniffed, huddled, chomped, or hopped their way across medieval manuscripts of
the Marvels of the East and Pliny the Elder’s Historia naturalis, continued to pass
through the hands and minds of European writers, readers, and viewers. Of the
classical sources, Pliny was the most widely cited authority on monstrous races in
the early modern period. Also popular in the sixteenth century were encyclopedic
texts such as St Augustine’s City of God and Isidore’s Etymologies. The books of
Marco Polo and John Mandeville were printed widely into the seventeenth century.
Mandeville’s fictional narrative, for instance, was one of the earliest of all works to
be printed, and the most popular incunable by a medieval prose writer. Outlining
his alleged pilgrimage to the Holy Land, it had appeared in at least 72 printed
editions by the end of the sixteenth century. While the majority of the vellum-
inches in Marco Polo’s and Mandeville’s accounts were devoted to folk who were
not monstrous, Mandeville in particular was frequently cited as an author who
described monsters dwelling in the furthest parts of the world, as we shall see.

Traditional ideas about monstrous peoples also circulated via contemporary
geographies and maps. These selected and reformulated information from travel
accounts, encyclopedias, biblical works, and other sources. One example is a

65 Isidore, Etymologies, XI.iii.12–30.
66 Mary B. Campbell, The Witness and the Other World: Exotic Eastern Travel Writing 400–
67 Rosemary Tzanaki, Mandeville’s Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the Book of
Sir John Mandeville (1371–1550) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 1, n. 1; this study focuses
on manuscripts.
68 See also, in this collection, Braham, “The Monstrous Caribbean,” p. 18.
69 For mapmakers’ contributions to the shaping of ethnographic knowledge, including
ideas about monstrous races, see in particular Surekha Davies, “Representations of
Amerindians on European Maps and the Construction of Ethnographic Knowledge,
1506–1624,” PhD dissertation, University of London, 2009. This research is the basis of
a forthcoming monograph provisionally entitled America’s Inhabitants on Maps and the
The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous

globe produced in 1492 (before Columbus’s return from his first landfall in the Caribbean) by Martin Behaim, a Nuremberg mapmaker and merchant. It refers to Marco Polo and Mandeville in the light of both ancient writings and contemporary travels. Behaim makes precise references to Marco Polo’s Description, giving book and chapter references.\textsuperscript{70} A legend in the south-eastern Indian Ocean states that “in the last book of Marco Polo in the sixteenth chapter it is written that the people of this island, Angama, have heads, eyes and teeth like dogs, and are thoroughly misshapen, and savage, for they prefer human flesh to other flesh.”\textsuperscript{71}

What was new about monstrous races during the long sixteenth century was the nature of their march across the globe. The mid-fifteenth century had heralded the age of oceanic expansion: European navigators began to sail south along the coast of West Africa and around it to India, and west across the Atlantic to what became known as the Americas. As the theoretical span of the world laid out by scholars started to be traversed by men in ships, the possibility of meeting monsters theoretically became increasingly likely. Contemporary travel literature became an important new source for monsters. A key question in the minds of these travelers and their readers was the relationship between the monsters they expected to see and the beings newly being observed in the field. Their expectations were informed by broad ethno-geographical ideas. One related to the roundness of the world:\textsuperscript{72} if you sailed west for long enough, you would eventually reach the east. Thus Columbus and other travelers to America considered the peoples they encountered in the light of their expectations about the Far East—which included the possibility of monstrous races.\textsuperscript{73}

The anthropophage was the first monstrous being to be identified in America. Of the inhabitants of the Antilles islands, Columbus wrote to Luis de Santángel, Escribano de Ración (keeper of the royal privy purse) that:

\begin{quote}
In these islands I have so far found no monstrous people [ombres monstrudos], as many expected … except on one island … which is inhabited by people who are held in all the islands to be very ferocious and who eat human flesh.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{70} This precision allows us to identify the redaction that Behaim used; see my “The Wondrous East in the Renaissance Geographical Imagination: Marco Polo, Fra Mauro and Giovanni Batista Ramusio,” History and Anthropology 23/2 (2012, forthcoming), near n. 56.

\textsuperscript{71} For transcription and translation, see E.G. Ravenstein, Martin Behaim: His Life and His Globe (London: G. Philip & Son, 1908), p. 88.

\textsuperscript{72} Contrary to popular belief, medieval scholars were well aware that the earth was spherical. See Louise M. Bishop, “The Myth of the Flat Earth,” in Stephen J. Harris and Bryon Lee Grigsby (eds), Misconceptions about the Middle Ages (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), pp. 97–101.

\textsuperscript{73} Columbus also sailed south: for the broader implications of this, see the important study, Nicolás Wey-Gómez, The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{74} Christopher Columbus, Letters from America: Columbus’s First Accounts of the 1492 Voyage, ed. and trans. B.W. Ife (London: King’s College London, School of Humanities,
Not only were monstrous people what “many expected,” but Columbus himself reflected on the islanders within this tradition. He uses the widest definition of *monstruos*, encompassing behavioral aberrations. In his unpublished journal known as the *Diario*, he also raises the possibility of physical monsters. On November 4, 1492, in conversation with the inhabitants of Cuba known today as the Taíno, Columbus “understood that, far from there, there were one-eyed people and others with dogs’ muzzles who ate human beings; and that upon seizing a person, they cut his throat and drank his blood and cut off his genitals.”

Several traditional monsters appear here: the one-eyed cyclops of classical mythology, the dog-headed *cynocephalus*, and the *anthropophage*. Columbus reports their existence on the basis of indigenous testimony, but one cannot help wondering how much of the Indians’ speech he could have understood after a few weeks in the region. His interpreter spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and some Arabic, languages Columbus expected to hear when he reached Asia. Even the interpreter was absent here, having been sent on a reconnaissance mission on November 2. These monsters seem to be as much about what Columbus expected to find as anything the Taíno might have said. An important feature here is that it is not a first-hand observation, but rather an attempt to substantiate a point on the authority of *earwitnessing* something: hearing it from someone who had witnessed it first-hand—an eyewitness.

Early modern audiences were divided over the credibility of monstrous peoples in distant regions. After all, it was widely known that travelers, along with the old, were able to fabricate safely, since few could collaborate their testimony. Maximilianus Transylvanus, secretary to Charles V of Spain, had been present at the Spanish court at Valladolid when the members of the Magellan circumnavigatory expedition (1519–22) were interviewed. Maximilianus’s letter to his father, the

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75 Christopher Columbus, *A Synoptic Edition of the Log of Columbus’s First Voyage*, ed. Francesca Lardicci (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), DB48.8 (includes English translation to which I have made minor changes): “Entendió … que lexos de allí avía hombres de un ojo, y otros con hoçicos de perros que comían los hombres, y que en tomando uno lo degollavan y le bevían la sangre, y le cortavan su natura.”

76 For Columbus’s (mis)understanding of situations, see, for example, Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 101.


78 This point is also made in David Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 153.

79 For the concept of earwitnessing in the early modern period, see, for example, Andrea Frisch, *The Invention of the Eyewitness: Witnessing and Testimony in Early Modern France* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 22–3.

80 See, for example, Davies, “Representations of Amerindians,” chapter 7.

Cardinal-Archbishop of Salzburg, dated October 22, 1522, wrote approvingly of the explorers’ testimony: “they appeared in their narrative, not merely to have abstained from fabulous statements, but also to contradict and refute those made by ancient authors.” Moreover, he added, “who ever believed that the Monosceli, the Sciapodes, the Scyrites, the Spithamaei, the Pygmies or other of this kind were rather monsters than men?” Maximilianus does not rule out the possibility that such beings exist, but considers that the traditional Plinian races—if they existed—were most likely both human and non-monstrous.

Therein lay the greatest problem in understanding monstrous races: how could you be sure that they were truly monstrous races of the Plinian sort, rather than 1) one-off monstrous births; 2) slightly unusual people; or 3) merely fabulous fabrications. In 1596, the English mathematician Thomas Blundeville produced a tirade against accounts of monstrous races:

> they are meere lies that are woont to be told of the pigmeans, in that they should bee but a foote and a halfe high, and like wise that which hath bene spoken of people, that should have their heads, their noses, their mouthes, and their eies in their breastes, or of those that are headed lyke a dog, or of those that have but one eie, and that in their forehead, or of those that have but one foote and that so great, as that it covereth and shadoweth all their bodie, or of those that have greate eares hanging downe to the ground. All these are meere lies, invented by vain men to bring fooles into admiration, for monsters are as well borne in Europe, as in other partes of the world.

Blundeville’s list of unlikely beings echoes the list of monstrous peoples in Pliny’s *Historia naturalis*. Perhaps most interesting is the reason given for not believing in them: “for monsters are as well borne in Europe, as in other partes of the world.” For Blundeville, European monsters were singular individuals; there was no reason for aberrations in distant lands to be any different, either in frequency or characteristics. The explanations for domestic monsters were sufficient to explain any distant ones; any observations that did not fit must have been “invented.” Blundeville’s and Maximilianus’s reservations point to a key ontological ambiguity: the uneasy boundary between monsters in Europe and monsters abroad. Not even the criterion of inherited, widespread prevalence
of a monstrous characteristic was sufficient to fully separate European and
distant monsters in practice. Just as monstrous portents and natural misbirths
could not be distinguished by observation alone, so were the characteristics of
monstrous races also elements found among monstrous individuals in Europe.
For Blundeville, this dissolved the alleged monsters of the Plinian tradition until
they no longer constituted a category of their own.

Figure 2.3 Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia* (Bologna, 1642), p. 18, one
of the Gonzales sisters, Classmark M.13.43 (reproduced by kind
permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library).
The family of Petrus Gonzales was a case in point. Inheritors of a genetic condition now termed *hypertrichosis universalis*, their bodies and much of their faces were covered in hair (Figure 2.3).⁸⁶ Petrus was born on the Canary Islands—arguably a distant land, but one that had come under Spanish rule in the late fifteenth century.⁸⁷ Their hairiness meant that they were also explicable via traditional beliefs about wild folk who were deemed to be hairy and to live in forests and mountains in Europe. Notions of wild people appeared in Christian and folkloric traditions. While St Augustine and most medieval writers considered them to be descended from Adam and Eve, and therefore human, they were generally viewed as non-human and dangerous in medieval and fifteenth-century popular culture.⁸⁸

During the sixteenth century, the wild man was often portrayed positively. He became a family protector on coats-of-arms. Perhaps the most extreme example of this was the idea of the wild man as the ancestor of civilized Germans. Tacitus’s *Germania*, written in the first century CE, had described the Germans as wild people who lacked many of the civilized practices of the Romans. The text was unknown during the medieval period, but was re-discovered in 1420, and began to circulate in print in the 1470s. During the early sixteenth century, German humanists began to associate wild people with a heroic stage in the evolution of contemporary Germans.⁸⁹ By implication, wildness had become a state between the monstrous and the human.

Just as monstrous births in Europe could be given multiple meanings in different social contexts and discourses, monstrous races could be rationalized in a variety of ways. Indeed, monstrous races and non-European peoples existed on an ethnological continuum: the more different a people’s customs and physical appearance, the more likely it was that terms such as monstrous, wild, savage, and barbarous would be applied to them. The term “monstrous” might be used for social practices, such as body-piercing, tattooing, or the eating of human flesh. Those who inflicted monstrosity upon themselves constituted a category distinct from both monstrous individuals and monstrous races. At this point, monstrosity began to blur into savagery and barbarism. The Tartars of north-east Asia were said to have physical and behavioral deformities. In 1636, Donald Lupton drew from this the inference that: “The Tartarians are [the] most deformed of all men.”⁹⁰ Such approaches to alterity were nothing new; the ancient Greeks had, of course, used the term *barbaroi* to denote people who did not speak Greek, but who, from the Greek perspective, merely babbled incomprehensibly in a monstrous simulation.

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⁸⁷ For European contact with indigenous Canary Islanders, see Abulafia, *Discovery of Mankind*, chapter 4.


of “true” language. In the medieval period, Islam had offered an antithesis to many inhabitants of Latin Europe; Saracens were sometimes identified with dog-headed beings. Such anxieties were at least partly based on the difficulty of establishing the relationships between religions, peoples, and their histories and thus of delineating where the self ended and the other began.

The ascription of monstrosity (broadly defined to include aberrant practices) to inhabitants of distant regions had implications for European colonial and imperial objectives. In the 1580s, the first English observers of the Algonquian tribes of present-day Virginia and North Carolina had stressed their fine physical form. Their simple but ordered ways of life were seen as evidence that they lived in an earlier state of civility, as had Britain’s own Pictish ancestors, and could be “raised to civility.” Such views chimed well with the promotional purpose of early colonial literature, which was aimed at encouraging English settlers. During the early seventeenth century, after the massacre of English colonists at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1622, English writing about the Algonquians changed radically, now arguing that these peoples were barely human. Edward Waterhouse, a first-hand witness and Virginia official, used arguments grounded on their “savage” practices to suggest that these “rude, barbarous, and naked people” should be hunted down with horses and bloodhounds, “and mastiues to teare them, which take this naked, tanned, deformed sauvages, for no other then wild beasts.” Waterhouse and other commentators read the Algonquians’ customs and manners as barbarous in the light of their resistance to English colonists and to the true religion. The negative interpretations of Algonquian life in turn led to negative portrayals of their physical appearance. European perceptions of non-European monstrosity were thus inextricably linked to broader approaches to interpreting human diversity on the basis of customs, appearance, and religion.

For some commentators, one need not be born a monster; one could choose to become one. Put another way, religious, moral, or political transgressions were monstrous, figuratively speaking. In the years following the appearance of the

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91 This lack of intelligible speech was linked to limitations in reasoning power and social practices. See Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 16–18.


93 See especially Thomas Harriot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (Frankfurt am Main, 1590), which contained fine engravings derived from watercolors produced by a first-hand observer, the artist John White. The Report was first published in 1588 as an unillustrated pamphlet.


96 Andrew Curran, “Afterword,” in Knoppers and Landes (eds), *Monstrous Bodies/Political*
Lutheran Monk Calf engraving, similar monsters began to appear in a variety of textual genres as “fashion monsters.” These metaphorical creatures served to critique the morals of those who wore particular items of clothing, such as slashed hose and smart ruffs. For those Protestants who would come to be termed Puritans, not only were the vestments of “popish” heresy problematic, but so too were secular sartorial excesses, which could be signs of lecherousness or vanity—moral/behavioral rather than physical monstrosity.97 In both cases, the monstrosity hinged on the power of clothing to transform its wearer.98 Those who chose to preen themselves into “fashion monsters” were seen to be no better than non-Europeans. Such views were held, for example, by Samuel Purchas, an Anglican clergyman and editor of travel accounts. He devoted a chapter of his Historie of Man (1619) to “The vanitie of the whole bodie together in divers vices; and of fashions in generall.”99 In a swingeing critique of “moderne fashions,” Purchas noted that a vain person “strives to cut, race, pinke, print, iagge and fashion himselfe out of humane feature, to put off a man, and put on a monster, in a humour of gallantrie.” Such fashions were hardly better than the nose- and lip-rings of the Amerindians, who “esteeme themselues gallants, thus accoultred.” In this way, both the “ethnicke” and the Christian “stripped himselfe of his best clothing”—the naked body that God had bestowed upon him, which “clothed him with beautie admired of angels.”100 Monstrosity, then, could be a(n im)moral choice, rather than a physical characteristic present since birth. Directives against this brand of monster often brought together distant savages and European gallants. The French Protestant Jean de Léry had asserted that the embarrassment of rich clothing preferred in Europe was no less immoral than the widespread nudity he encountered among the inhabitans of Brazil.101

The practices of distant nations could be used to critique practices closer to home. In his Anthropometamorphosis (1650), the London physician John Bulwer discussed physical alteration—inborn or self-inflicted. For Bulwer, the English interest in cosmetic fashion, particularly “cosmetical conceits from barbarous nations,” threatened to corrupt English nature.102 Bulwer paid particular attention

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97 Crawford, Marvelous Protestantism, pp. 31–55.
98 For the cultural import of clothing in this period, see, for example, Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
99 Samuel Purchas, Microcosmus or The Historie of Man (London, 1619), chapter XXV.
100 Ibid., pp. 225–6.
101 Jean de Léry, Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil, 1557 [1580], ed. Frank Lestringant (Montpellier: Max Chaleil, 1992), chapter VIII.
102 John Bulwer, Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transform’d; or, the Artificial Changeling (London, 1650).
to deformations of the head, such as the painting of spots and shapes on the face, in order to make claims about the dangers of “deforming” the body politic, particularly its head. Indeed, those who deformed themselves were, in Bulwer’s eyes, guilty of treason against the law of nature.

The majority of the material in Anthropometamorphosis was ethnographic, insofar as it comprised descriptions of distant peoples, culled from a variety of sources that can often be traced to some sort of eyewitness. As Mary Campbell has noted, for Bulwer, the foreign and the monstrous overlapped almost completely. One might add that they also overlapped with the seditious and the immoral. In this way, ethnology and teratology were part of a continuum for describing both selves and others. The anxiety caused by monsters and their possible meanings lay in the implications of positioning individuals, groups, and selves along that continuum.

The superficial characteristics of distant monstrous peoples with physical deformities—headless men, giants, and the like—were, at one level, indistinguishable from those of monstrous individuals. In addition, readers of travelers’ accounts also had to contend with the possibility that their sources contained fabrications that they could not easily verify independently.

The slipperiness of the category of monstrous people extended to those with behavioral deformities. Behavioral monstrosity lay between and blended Europeans with others, metaphorical aberrations and physical ones. Monstrous, barbarous, and civil behaviors existed on a continuum; reconfiguring one had the potential to disrupt the others. When mid-seventeenth century Englishmen turned against the Virginia Algonquians, they characterized their minds and bodies as savage and deformed. Less than 50 years previously, these very minds and bodies had been seen as pleasing, partly civilized—and similar to those of the ancient Britons.

Monsters Amalgamated

The catalog of monsters compiled by Ulisse Aldrovandi, a sixteenth-century naturalist and encyclopedist, was published in 1642. Despite its focus on individual monsters, mostly coming from first-hand observation or eyewitness accounts, it begins with an array of monstrous beings from distant lands, such as the “four-eyed Ethiopian” (Aethiops quatuor oculis) (Figure 2.4). Aldrovandi

103 Burns, “King’s Two Monstrous Bodies”; Crawford, Marvelous Protestantism, chapter 4.
104 For further discussion of Bulwer’s state/body metaphors, see Burns, “King’s Two Monstrous Bodies,” pp. 192–9, especially 195.
107 Aldrovandi, Monstrorum historia, p. 9.
drew on a variety of classical, medieval, and contemporary sources, from Pliny to Antonio Pigafetta, a supernumerary on the Magellan circumnavigatory voyage. He also included the hairy family of Petrus Gonzales and human–animal hybrids such as a fish resembling a monk. He covered monsters as anatomical misbirths and as prodigies, and monstrous animals.\textsuperscript{108} The \textit{Monstrorum historia} is one of a number of sources that indicates that, between Paré’s \textit{Des Monstres et prodiges} of 1573 and the

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., pp. 16–18, 28, 34–8.
The mid-eighteenth century, the category of monster expanded enormously, while its subdivisions became less pronounced.

Such admixtures of phenomena mirrored a wider interest in the unnatural or unusual as a source of wonder and pleasure. From at least the sixteenth century, in cabinets of curiosity, monstrous births jostled with corals, creatures of the deep, and even artifacts and costumes of distant peoples. Members of a wide range of social groups would have heard of or seen such beings at fairs and shows. The wealthy could pay for these performers to entertain them and their select friends in the privacy of their own homes. The audiences for such entertainment included members of the general public with limited education, scholars, naturalists, and the aristocracy. Members of the Royal Society, including John Evelyn, Samuel Pepys, and Robert Hooke, attended exhibitions of monsters. The monsters displayed at fairs, like those to be found in cabinets of curiosity, ranged from malformed humans to non-European others (notably Native American Indians) to exotic or deformed animals and aquatic creatures. Such spaces constructed monsters and marvels through what one scholar has called “practices of enfreakment.”

One such fair was Bartholomew Fair in West Smithfield, London, which was first chartered in 1133 and ran, amazingly, until 1855. This three-day summer fair attracted all manner of marvelous, curious, and grotesque exhibits and entertainments. A 1641 pamphlet noted its popularity among “people of all sorts, high and low, rich and poore, from cities, townes, and countrys, of all sects ... and of all conditions, good and bad, vertuous and vitious, knaves and fooles, cuckolds and cuckholdmakers ...” In 1802, William Wordsworth wrote of Bartholomew Fair’s:

*allbinos, painted Indians, dwarfs, the Horse of knowledge, and the learned pig*

*The stone-eater, the man that swallows fire, giants, ventriloquists, the Invisible Girl ...*

*All freaks of nature, all Promethean thoughts*

*Of man; his dulness, madness, and their feats*

*All jumbled up together to make up*

*this Parliament of monsters.*

This jumble of monstrous births, unusual folks, animals, talented individuals, and non-Europeans that constituted a palette of “freaks of nature” in Wordsworth’s

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eyes underlines the blurriness of the boundaries between the traditional typology of monsters. From the mid-sixteenth century, such fairs exhibited inhabitants of America, Africa, and even Asia with increasing frequency.  

This essay began with Samuel Pepys’s discussion of a baboon/monster. But Pepys was not the only person in his household who had an interest in the monstrous. Pepys’s manservant, James Paris du Plessis, created his own illustrated manuscript compendium of monsters, and sold it to Sir Hans Sloane around 1733. The first few monsters illustrate the variety across the volume: a child with two heads born at Pithiviers in France; a Tartar with a horse’s head; and “a man with a monstrous goiter ... being a terreur to all big belleyed women that saw him.”  

“A spotted negro prince was sold in London and show’d publickly at the age of 10 years in 1690.” James Paris saw him then, and again in 1725. The prince was taught to speak English quite well, his monstrosity presumably limited to the fact that his “jet black” body was “intermixt with a clear and beautifull white, spotted all over.” By contrast, a black wild man from the East Indies, “covered all over the body and arms and hands with very thick long black hair, could never larn to speak, read nor rite.” He, too, “was sold to a company of rope dancers.”  

Paris’s extensive interest in collecting stories about monsters might have been prompted by a childhood encounter in Pithiviers. A “gentlemans wife” who saw a two-headed monster in an almanack gave birth, in Paris’s mother’s house, to a dead two-headed child. This was buried with great secrecy in Paris’s own bit of the garden, where he accidentally dug it up. As if that were not enough, Paris also relates a tale about his own mother-in-law, who gave birth to “a child in the form of a lobster” after seeing a lobster in Leadenhall Market.

Conclusion

Between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, monsters could be categorized according to either secondary causes or deeper significances. These two methods cut across one another: they might bring together innocent victims of circumstance, like pregnant mothers frightened by lobsters, and individuals who had deliberately challenged the social order, as in the case of adulterers. One consequence was that it was difficult to determine even a monster’s secondary cause—could one be sure that a mother had committed adultery with the person whom her child resembled, rather than having merely been surprised by him during pregnancy? The warrants connecting observed monsters to both secondary causes and meanings were

113 See Altick, Shows of London, pp. 45–8, for examples.
114 London, British Library, Department of Manuscripts, MS Add. 5246, ff. 6r–8v.
115 Ibid., ff. 11r–14v.
116 Ibid., ff. 53v.
117 Ibid., f. 5r.
118 Ibid., ff. 13r. –18r.
subjective and contested, the consequence of observation, analysis, comparison with precedent, realpolitik, and emotional responses. From the Reformation onwards, as the meanings ascribed to prodigious births became increasingly specific, particular interpretations of monsters—notably the Papal Ass and the Monk Calf—were used to critique religious and political opponents.

Monster-sceptics doubted both the existence of certain types of monster—notably monstrous races—and the significance of their monstrosity. Whether a monster was deemed to be an omen, an error, or a natural wonder of distant lands, observable evidence of monster-genesis was hard to come by. In many cases, there were few eyewitnesses. It is perhaps for this reason that, with the emergence of natural history as a discipline in the Renaissance, and the increasing importance of observational evidence in the late seventeenth century, learned circles focused on individual cases of monsters that they could see with their own eyes.

The mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the increasing assimilation of discussions of monstrosity within a number of independent textual genres and intellectual disciplines. These included travel writing, moralistic and exemplary tales, anatomy, embryology, and comparative ethnology. By the mid-eighteenth century, numerous types of monster appeared in a variety of spaces in Western culture and intellectual thought, where different explanations of their meanings and causes were posited. Cabinets of curiosity, popular fairs, and James Paris’s collection of monsters all drew together misbirths, distant peoples, and animals. They indicate how the category of “monster” expanded to perhaps its greatest extent in the decades around 1800. The late medieval division of monsters into natural, prodigious, and distant types was modified by the close interaction of monsters with discussions about the rest of nature, and about human society and (un)civility. Monstrosity could also be either actual or metaphorical, forming a continuum that stretched from one-legged wonders to “fashion monsters.” The monstrous hairiness of Petrus Gonzales’s family linked it to the wild ancestors of Europe, who were in turn linked to inhabitants of distant lands by their ways of life. In effect, a new liminal category, comprising those beings that could not be definitively identified as either monstrous or normal, became an accepted part of Western thought.