

*The Ashgate Research Companion to
Monsters and the Monstrous*
Ed. By Asa Simon Mittman with Peter
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Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012
(ISBN: 9781409407546). 558 pp.

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In the past three decades the field of monster studies or monster theory has expanded exponentially. Critics from a vast variety of academic disciplines have analyzed the monster from historical, theoretical and psychological perspectives and yet despite this, monster studies as an area of critical research has often been ridiculed. The publication of this first research companion marks the recognition of the merit of studying monstrosity. This is not the only way, however, in which this book is unique. As John Block Friedman, author of *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, states in his foreword, no previous book ‘has the cultural, geographic, and temporal range of the present volume.’ (p.xxv) Not only does it cover from around 2000 BCE to the present day, but it crosses continents from Europe, to Asia and the Americas.

As such it would seem appropriate to describe this collection as ambitious. The essays it contains are equally so, with many spanning lengthy time-frames. An excellent example of this is Karin Myhre’s paper discussing monsters in China from the Shang Dynasty up until the twentieth century. Perhaps it should not be surprising to find this collection so ambitious considering that its editors and several of its contributors are amongst the most prestigious names in the field. Certainly, as the first companion to monsters, ambition is

necessary if also dangerous. The precept Ashgate declares for all its research companions is to unite the articles of a group of experts demonstrating the key issues of their field. However, as Mittman (president of ‘Monsters: the Experimental Association for the Research of Cryptozoology through Scholarly Theory and Practical Application’) states, ‘total inclusivity would not be possible.’ (p.9) The difficulty in tackling any subject which crosses into so many different disciplines (for in this way as in every other the monster does not respect boundaries) is how to select your material.

It is precisely here that this collection succeeds, for while it would be impossible to have a book analyzing monstrosity from every area that it affects, with contributors from fields as varied as African studies, Islamic art, and gender studies, the versatility of the monstrous is made perfectly clear. Split into two parts, ‘history of monstrosity’ and ‘critical approaches,’ the book reflects the two main camps that recent research into monsters has fallen into. The only noticeable exclusion is the lack of contribution from the field of disability studies in which critics such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have been doing some fascinating work using the concept of the monstrous as a way of looking at the past treatment of people with disabilities. The subject is touched upon, however, in several of the essays. Despite this omission, within this collection we are shown how the monster can be a figure of fear or be playful like Pokémon in contemporary Japanese culture, and how the language of monstrosity can be used both to demonize or police boundaries between ‘normal’ and Other in systems of oppression, and to empower.

It is this use of language that is the focus of Persephone Braham in her essay ‘The Monstrous Caribbean.’ Braham gives a

historical account of the role monstrosity has played in the development of Latin America from Columbus up until the present day. She starts by demonstrating the purpose monstrosity served in the colonization of Latin America. She describes the manner in which its explorers created an image of monstrous natives within the European consciousness through accounts of cannibalism. She then goes on to reveal how in the nineteenth century through to the 1920s and the start of the *antropofagia* movement in Brazil, Latin American intellectuals developed a sense of national identity by describing Latin America itself as monstrous. She ends by demonstrating how postcolonial writers such as Jean Rhys have used zombiism in their literature as a metaphor for the erasure of women and the postcolonial Other within the Western cultural imagination. Thus, Braham demonstrates a process in which monstrosity, initially used as a means of oppression, became accepted and used as a means of empowerment.

This collection also demonstrates that monstrosity can be embodied or, as is generally done now, can be envisioned metaphorically. This is a conflict which, as Mittman demonstrates in his introduction, often leads to an argument about the reality of monsters. Noting that the term ‘monster’ has been applied at different points in history to both dragons and conjoined twins, he illustrates how all monsters are ultimately cultural constructions and always subject to renegotiation. As such, he argues that the monster problematizes the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ and the supposed binary arrangement of these two terms. He makes an important distinction between the monster (embodied) and the monstrous (metaphorical), one real, the other not.

It is this distinction that Abigail Lee-Six and Hannah Thompson argue occurred in the nineteenth century. Their essay 'From Hideous to Hedonist' mapping out the changes the monster undergoes in the nineteenth century, is long overdue. Here they bring to the forefront what has been an underlying yet largely unstated theme within nineteenth-century monster studies: that representations of the monster underwent a significant shift during the course of the century. Looking at the relationship between moral and physical monstrosity in a range of texts from Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), to Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) and *L'Homme qui rit* (1868) and finally Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886) and Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1890), they chart a series of turning points. Using these they reveal a transition to a vision of monstrosity that we recognize today, wherein it has 'become invisible and potentially ubiquitous, for it lurks within seemingly normal respectable people.' (p.238) It is this idea of modern monstrosity as ubiquitous that Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock picks up on, going on in his groundbreaking essay 'Invisible Monsters' to list what he views as our contemporary monsters.

Since these two chapters do pair together particularly well, they are a good example of the general cohesion which the book possesses. Throughout, the essays refer to and expand on themes and ideas discussed elsewhere. By the end of the collection what we are faced with is an excellent example of the research in progress within the field of monster studies, in depth enough and with sufficient variety to appeal to monster scholars yet equally accessible to the newcomer to the field.

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