

Introduction

The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies

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Monsters do a great deal of cultural work, but they do not do it *nicely*.¹ They not only challenge and question; they trouble, they worry, they haunt. They break and tear and rend cultures, all the while constructing them and propping them up. They swallow up our cultural mores and expectations, and then, becoming what they eat, they reflect back to us our own faces, made disgusting or, perhaps, revealed to always have been so. It is not only the Doppelgänger of Shelley or Poe that is our evil twin. All monsters – from headless (but human?) blemmyes to bestial dragons to the amorphous, disembodied forces of the virus – all “monsters” are our constructions, even those that can clearly be traced to “real,” scientifically known beings (conjoined twins and hermaphrodites,² for example, as seen through pre-Modern lenses); through the processes by which we construct or reconstruct them, we categorize, name and define them, and thereby grant them anthropocentric meaning that makes them “ours.”

But why should we study them? Why should we read, write and teach about monsters and the monstrous? Why should we use them as theoretical constructs to apply to other subjects? I will here try to offer some initial answers, as well as frame the necessarily heterogeneous contents of this volume. At the very outset, though, I wish to note my amazement that, in the space of a few years, the study of monsters has moved from the absolute periphery – perhaps its logical starting point – to a much more central position in academics.

¹ My thanks to Marcus Hensel for his helpful comments on a draft of this essay.

² These figures are discussed in Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-75*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 66-75

I will begin with an anecdote: during a job interview a few years ago, I was asked “Where do you see yourself in twenty years?” I replied: “I’d like to be the head of the world’s first academic center for Monsters Studies.” After this session of the interview, a member of the department called me into his office. He told me that he had been teaching in the program for fifty years, and that he had some advice for me. In what I think he intended as a gruffly avuncular manner, he leaned on his desk and said, “Listen, Asa, you’ve got to drop all this monster stuff and start doing *real* scholarship.”

I really did not know what to make of this at the time, but have thought about it quite a lot, since. “Drop all this *monster stuff*.” “*Real* scholarship.” What is “real scholarship”? What constitutes a worthwhile subject of study? What was I *supposed* to be working on? As a medieval art historian, perhaps images of Jesus or cathedral architecture or illustrations of saint’s lives would be seen as “real.” But not *monsters*, and certainly not the made-up field of “Monster Studies” or, as Jeffery Jerome Cohen (whose groundbreaking work appears like a leitmotif throughout these essays) first phrased it, “Monster Theory,” a phrase that serves as the title of his collection of essays from 1996 that in some ways can be seen as having inaugurated the field.³

Still, and with all due deference to Cohen (who makes no such claim) and his insightful work, the study of monsters can hardly be said to have begun in 1996. The essays in this

³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, 1996). The study of monsters has gone by a number of terms, including not only the new “Monster Studies” and “Monster Theory.” An older term is “teratology,” from the Greek *τέρας* (monster, prodigy), primarily used in the Enlightenment to refer to the medical study of “unnatural births.” *The Oxford English Dictionary* attests to its usage as early as 1678 to refer to “a discourse of prodigies and wonders.” A century and a half later, in 1842, the term is first attested to refer to its more common usage, “the study of monstrosities or abnormal formations in animals or plants.” (teratology, n., Second edition, 1989; online version November 2010 <<http://oed.com:80/Entry/199333>> accessed March 12, 2011. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1911.) The term has, though, recently returned to its original broader valence, appearing in several essays here to refer to the study of monsters more generally.

collection – exemplary rather than encyclopedic⁴ – examine a wide range of significant texts, images and other forms of important cultural representations, some scholarly and others not, from literary and artistic to scientific and geographical, from theoretical to theological to mythological, and ranging from the most ancient of history to the present day, and from Africa to Europe to Asia to the Americas. The Epic of Gilgamesh, replete with monstrosity as a central theme, is the world’s earliest extant epic, written in Sumerian around 2000 BCE.⁵ Debbie Felton examines the vast range of monstrosity in the Classical world, from Gilgamesh, forward. Karin Myhre opens her study of China with monsters contemporaneous to those in the ancient West, focusing on *taotie* masks that “function as a central decorative motif” in Shang Dynasty (ca. 1600–1000 BCE) art, and carries her discussion up to the twentieth century. Matthew Looper finds monstrous figures in the art of the Maya of the Classic (ca. 250-900 CE) and Postclassic (ca. 450-1500 CE) periods, more or less equating to the period covered by Karl Steel in his work on the European Middle Ages, and with much chronological overlap with Francesca Leoni’s essay on the monstrous in the Islamic visual tradition from the tenth through the sixteenth century. Surekha Davies examines the Early Modern period, and Abigail Lee Six and Hannah Thompson cover the fertile nineteenth century. Michelle Li focuses on Japanese monsters in the eighth through the sixteenth century, and Michael Dylan Foster then carries them through to the present, where they are juxtaposed with Jeffrey Weinstock’s work on present day monstrosity in the West. Persephone Braham tackles the monstrous Caribbean, beginning in 1492, also concluding in the present. Henry Drewal examines the monstrous in modern Africa. And this list only covers the first part of this collection, containing a series of geohistorical essays.

⁴ Other volumes are in progress of more encyclopedic nature, such as the forthcoming Ashgate *Encyclopedia of Literary Monsters*.

⁵ Maureen Gallery Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Stanford, 1989), xxiii.

What are we to make, then, of the assertion that the study of monsters is not “real scholarship,” in light of this tremendous breadth of global cultural interest? In the European tradition, for example, some of the most influential scholars of the Early Christian and medieval periods sweated over the definition and etymology of *monstra* [monster], and the problem of the presence of monsters within God’s supposedly perfect creation. Influential passages by Augustine and Isidore are cited in many works that cover the subject, and by Chet Van Duzer, Karl Steel and Debbie Felton, here.

We can, though, tread further back, to the Roman period, when, in the first century of the common era, Pliny the Elder could be said to have been a scholarly practitioner of Monster Studies, writing at length about the wonders at the edges of the known world as well as others closer to home,⁶ and we might travel back to his source for these, Herodotus, the putative “Father of History,” himself; and back to two of *his* sources, Megasthenes (ca. 350 – 290 BCE), Greek ambassador to India, and Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek writer of the fifth century BCE, who probably journeyed to the ‘East,’ where he claims to have seen wondrous peoples and animals. Both wrote now fragmentary texts called *Indica*.⁷

Of course, as a modern academic field of study and theoretical discipline, Monster Studies is relatively new on the horizon, the most recent in a long series of thematic fields from Women’s Studies to Gender Studies to Transgender Studies, from Africana Studies to Peace Studies to Jewish Studies. But Jeffrey Cohen’s *Monster Theory* is fifteen years old, and a great

⁶ See, especially, Book VII of Pliny, *The Natural History*.

⁷ See Van Duzer’s essay in this collection, as well as William Latham Bevan and H. W. Phillott, *Mediæval Geography. An Essay in Illustration of the Hereford Mappa Mundi* (London, 1873; Reprint: Amsterdam, 1969), p. 159, and John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), p. 5, among others. See Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, p. 212, n. 2, for detailed references.

wealth of scholarly literature on the monstrous is available. The challenge of this volume, and this introduction, then, is not a paucity of scholarship – as it might have been twenty years ago – but an overabundance thereof.

Still, there is one apparent difference between Monster Studies and these other thematic disciplines: Monsters, of course, do not exist. To assert that they do is to enter into the realm of cryptozoology, as carefully articulated by Peter Dendle, co-editor of this collection. I am often asked if medieval people believed that the monsters – the one-legged men, elves, dragons and so on – were real. My colleagues working on monsters in other subject areas meet the equivalent questions. The short (if slightly misleading) answer is generally yes, they did.⁸ This binary of real and unreal, though, is as problematic when applied to monsters as it is when applied to scholarship. In both cases, there are two troubling implications: First, they suggest that fictitious or constructed subjects are not worthy of study (though who questions the study of Shakespeare’s Puck, or of Beowulf himself?). Second, they imply that the “real” and “unreal” exist in a binary arrangement, while careful consideration of the monstrous reveals a great deal of what Cohen has termed (in another context) “difficult middles.”⁹

The reality of monsters (or the belief therein) has been discussed in several studies. Cohen, arguing for the “simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster’s composition,” directly answers the question:

Perhaps it is time to ask the question that always arises when the monster is discussed seriously ... Do monsters really exist?

⁸ For a full discussion of this in regard to the European Middle Ages, see Asa Simon Mittman and Susan Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* (Tempe, ACMRS, forthcoming), chapter 6: “Framing ‘the Real’: Spatial Relations on the Page and in the World.”

⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* (New York, 2006).

Surely they must, for if they do not, how could we?¹⁰

I would like to briefly tackle the question again, from two angles, the localized beliefs of individual societies and the utility of a notion of belief in current academic studies. Part of the trouble (if that is what it is) that inspires the question over and over again may be located in the term “monster,” which bears a varying host of culture-specific associations. In seeking authors for the collection, we found scholars working in some periods to be very receptive to the term, whereas others were either hesitant about or resistant to applying the label to phenomena in their areas of subject. It is my hope, though, that this volume will work to expand productively the scope of the monstrous, a subject that is, by its nature, heterogeneous or even heterodox.

Though there is considerable study of the etymology of “monster” in the volume, and its period-specific meanings at prior points in history, there is little discussion, directly, of its *present scholarly* valence, of its meaning in the volume’s title. Modernity would, I think, generally define a literal “monster” (in contrast with the more metaphorical use of the term to refer to particularly depraved people, such as the serial killers discussed by Weinstock) as that

¹⁰ Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, 1996), p. 20. This article, foundational to the field, was the subject of a roundtable I organized at the 44th International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2009, “Monster Culture: Seven Theses (A Roundtable),” featuring Larissa Tracy, Mary Kate Hurley, Karma de Gruy, Stuart Kane, Jeff Massey, Derek Newman-Stille, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Each thesis was examined and discussed, and the influence of the work as a whole considered. The standing-room only attendance spoke to the interest in the subject and the positive tone and tenor of the discussion confirmed the inclusive nature of the article and the field. The roundtable was sponsored by MEARCSTAPA (Monsters: the Experimental Association for the Research of Cryptozoology through Scholarly Theory and Practical Application), an academic association that takes its acronymic title from the Old English for border-walker, one of the terms applied to Grendel and his mother in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* (R.D. Fulk, Robert Bjork, and John Niles, eds. *Klaeber’s Beowulf*. 4th ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008], line 1348). Note all quotations from *Beowulf* are from this edition, and all translations are my own.

which is horrible, but *does not actually exist*: silly sea monsters, in contrast to terrifying but real creatures like the oarfish or frilled shark.¹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, for example,

Originally: a *mythical* creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any *imaginary* creature that is large, ugly, and frightening. The centaur, sphinx, and minotaur are examples of “monsters” encountered by various mythical heroes; the griffin, wyvern, etc., are later heraldic forms.¹²

This suggests that the difference between animal and monster is not the degree of terror it induces, how horrible it is, how hodgepodge in appearance or apparent construction, but its reality or lack thereof.

As a point of contrast, the Middle Ages might well have defined a monster as “a creature” with such qualities, leaving out the qualifiers that it be “mythical” or “imaginary.” We are thus faced with two approaches to the question of the “reality” of the monsters in other periods, neither one of which we wish to accept here—either that medievals, or whomever the group in question might be, like us, wisely and rationally viewed sea serpents and *oni* and centaurs and *yōkai* and the like as metaphors, and never *really* believed all that nonsense, or that they were “superstitious” and “benighted” products of a dark age, unable to arrive at rational conclusions in the same manner as modern people. However, as David Stannard argues in respect to the Puritan period:

¹¹ Photographs can tellingly be found at both *National Geographic* (“Rare ‘Prehistoric’ Shark Photographed Alive,” October 28, 2010 <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/01/photogalleries/frilled-shark/index.html>> accessed March 12, 2011) and *Deep Sea Monsters* (“Frilled Shark,” no date <<http://www.deepseamonsters.com/component/content/article/59-frilled-shark.html>> accessed March 12, 2011).

¹² “monster, n. and adv. and adj.” Third edition, August 2010; online version November 2010 <<http://oed.com:80/Entry/121738>> accessed March 12, 2011. An entry for this word was first included in *New English Dictionary*, 1908. Emphasis added.

We do well to remember that the [pre-modern] world ... was a rational world, in many ways more rational than our own. It is true that this was a world of witches and demons, and of a just and terrible God who made his presence known in the slightest acts of nature. But this was the given reality about which most of the decisions and actions of the age, throughout the entire Western world, revolved.¹³

Belief in monsters was common throughout the premodern world, and continues, as Dendle, Foster and Weinstock demonstrate, today. Their importance, their significance, extends well beyond the base question of their reality, though. Whether we believe or disbelieve the existence of a phenomenon is not what grants it social and cultural force. The question is therefore not “Did people believe in monsters?”—they did, and still do—but rather, “What is a monster?”

I wish to argue here that a monster is not really known through observation; how could it be? How could the viewer distinguish between “normally” terrifying phenomena and abnormally terrifying monstrosity? Rather, I submit, the monster is known through its *effect*, its impact.¹⁴ Therefore, from this perspective, all the monsters are real. The monsters in all of the traditions discussed here had palpable, tangible effects on the cultures that spawned them, as well as on neighboring and later cultures. Beliefs die very slowly, and while it is a common trope that we

¹³ David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (Oxford, 1977), 69.

¹⁴ Several of our contributors have argued related points, explicitly and implicitly, most especially Patricia MacCormack: “Defined through this word ‘marvel,’ teratology describes a study of relation more than of an object;” Cohen: “It is true that some of us have never glimpsed a monster. Yet none of us have beheld time, or oxygen, or the wind. We vividly perceive their effects, and from this evidence we postulate agency and cause. The effects of the monster are undeniable;” and Jeffrey Weinstock: “The recurring concern underlying contemporary monster narratives is that, through a sort of retroactive causality, we now can only determine the monster’s presence through its effects.” See also Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), esp. 14: “Like suspense novels or mystery novels, novels are denominated horrific in respect of their intended capacity to raise a certain affect. Indeed, the genres of suspense, mystery, and horror derive their very names from the affects they are intended to promote—a sense of suspense, a sense of mystery, and a sense of horror. The cross-art, cross-media genre of horror takes its title from the emotion it characteristically or rather ideally promotes; this emotion constitutes the identifying mark of horror.

live with the ghosts of the past, so too, we live with the monsters of the past. We still live with the horned Jew and the giant Saracen, with Japanese water monsters, with Frankenstein's monster and (over and over again) the vampire. We live with the *vagina dentata*, the cyborg, the hostile alien living beyond our reach (though we live within its). As we cannibalize the Others of others, as we tear them apart and stitch them back together, we continually redefine the parameters of the monstrous.

Finding and Defining the “Monstrous”

How might we locate the monstrous, how might we, like the casual art observer, “know it when we see it?” I would argue that the monstrous does not lie solely in its embodiment (though this is very important) nor its location (though this is, again, vital), nor in the process(es) through which it enacts its being, but also (indeed, perhaps primarily) in its *impact*. Yes, the paradigmatic Grendel is larger than a man (“næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer”¹⁵ [except he was greater than any other man]); yes, he has a claw or talon of some sort (“hæþenes handsporu”¹⁶ [heathen’s claw]); and yes, he lives at the periphery of civilization, far from the mead hall (“hælærna mæst; scop him Heort naman”¹⁷ [greatest of halls; he assigned it the name ‘Heorot’]), in a churning, dragon-filled mere (“Nis þæt heoru stow!”¹⁸ [That is not a pleasant place!]); but this is costume and set-design, whereas the heart of the monstrosity lies in the missing head of Aschere:

¹⁵ *Beowulf*, line 1353. All translations are mine.

¹⁶ *Beowulf*, line 986.

¹⁷ *Beowulf*, line 78.

¹⁸ *Beowulf*, line 1372.

Ne frin þu æfter sælum! Sorh is geniwod Denigea leodum./Dead is Æschere.¹⁹

[Ask you not after joy! Sorrow is renewed among the people of the Danes. Dead is Æschere.]

No study could hope to pin down the monstrous in terms of physicality, though this is its most obvious marker. That which is “monstrous” in one culture (dark skin according to some medieval Christian texts, light skin according to some medieval Muslim texts, and so on) does not translate to others’ Others. Certainly, hybridity is common, as are giantism and dwarfism, and other forms of excess or lack (too many arms, too few, though these can just as well be markers of divinity), as well as certain activities, like anthropophagia, but the common ought not be substituted for the constitutive. I could not hope to describe the physical, behavioral or geographic parameters of the monstrous, here or anywhere. By definition, the monster is outside of such definitions; it defies the human desire to subjugate through categorization. This is the source, in many ways, of their power. Instead, then, I would look to the impact(s) of the monstrous. This might be manifest in the horror of excessive violence, but is rooted in the vertigo of redefining one’s understanding of the world. As Noël Carroll writes, “monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge.”²⁰ Massimo Leone writes relatedly about the process of religious conversion, arguing that such moments of destabilization draw our attention to the “stability” we thought we had, producing a vertigo that

¹⁹ *Beowulf*, lines 1322-1323.

²⁰ Carroll, p. 34.

reveals that what is called equilibrium is nothing but a zero degree of the presence of the body in a given space. Nevertheless, it is only through a pathological condition, an alteration of normality, that this point of departure of perception can itself be perceived.²¹

Above all, the monstrous is that which creates this sense of vertigo, that which calls into question our (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us (often with fangs at our throats, with its fire upon our skin, even as we and our stand-ins and body doubles descend the gullet) to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization.

The above deals with how cultures define monstrosity from within. As some of our authors remind us, though, monsters are defined from without, as well. Again, there are real impacts, as when external perspectives declared Indian²² or Maya²³ or African²⁴ deities to be monstrous. Similar processes are enacted within individual cultures to marginalize segments of their own populace: sexual, gender,²⁵ ethnic and religious²⁶ minorities, or the disabled. Monster theory can be, for marginalized groups and cultures, empowering, much as the closely related project of postcolonial theory has been, as a means of understanding and describing the tools used to abject, to reject and exclude people from the warmth of the mead hall.

²¹ Massimo Leone, *Religious Conversion and Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts* (New York, 2004), pp. x-xi. See also Massimo Leone, "Literature, Travel, and Vertigo," *Cross-Cultural Travel: Papers from the Royal Irish Academy Symposium on Literature and Travel, National University of Ireland, Galway, November 2002*, ed. Jane Conroy (New York, 2003): pp. 513-22.

²² See Mitter's essay in this collection.

²³ See Looper's essay in this collection.

²⁴ See Drewal's essay in this collection.

²⁵ See Oswald's essay in this collection.

²⁶ See Strickland's essay in this collection.

Inclusion and Exclusion

In a volume on monsters and the monstrous, inclusion and exclusion are vital, reoccurring themes. Location inside, at the heart of a culture is predicated on the banishment of others. Peter Dendle and I were sharply aware of this issue, as we considered how to construct and frame this collection, since any act of framing is, in a sense, an establishment of boundaries, an act of violence. As John Gillies writes of Heidegger, “the act of enframing ruptures as much as it encloses.”²⁷ With the acknowledgement that total inclusivity would not be possible, we nonetheless aimed, in defining our subject, to cast as broad a net as we could, striving to find scholars working on monsters and monstrous subjects throughout global history. Sometimes, there was an embarrassment of riches (as with the European Middle Ages and the nineteenth century), sometimes a small number of scholars working boldly, without a large network of monster-focused colleagues (Middle Eastern Studies, China), and in a few cases, we were simply unable to find scholars working on the subject (South-East Asia, Australia). This may well be our failings and language limitations; perhaps there is good work out there, in local and regional languages, that does not appear in our databases, that is not turned up by our searches. And perhaps in some areas, the term “monster” is simply not very meaningful, or even is a rejected term of colonial imperialism (India, as discussed elegantly by Partha Mitter here²⁸ and elsewhere).

Frequently, we negotiated with our authors as we came to understand the role of the monstrous in their geohistorical periods of study. In some cases, the monster is all body, in others, disembodied spirit. In some cases, the “monsters” are quite real in the conventional sense,

²⁷ John Gillies, “Posed Spaces: Framing in the Age of the World Picture” in *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Paul Duro (Cambridge, 1996), p. 25.

²⁸ See Mitter’s essay in this collection.

even if amplified, and in others, clearly fictional or mythical. In some cases, they very closely mirror their creators, while in others they are non-anthropomorphous. Again, the defining features cannot be considered essential, as it were, as the sources are too varied, too wonderfully divergent to be summarized or contained by such characteristics. We have therefore encouraged contributors to find their own definitions, rather than to ascribe to our preconceptions. It is through my reading of these excellent essays that the present thesis regarding monstrous impact was derived, rather than from a preexisting mandate.

The volume is divided into two halves, “Part I: History of Monstrosity” and “Part II: Critical Approaches to Monstrosity.” The first Part seeks to contextualize monsters, seeing how they function within individual cultures. The second strives to find theories by which we might understand them, and also to use the monsters, themselves, as theoretical constructs by which we might gain greater understanding of the cultures by which they are produced. Part II should also serve to extend the coverage beyond the geohistorical periods we were able to cover in Part I, as these broad themes can be found in monsters, wherever and whenever they arise. There is, of course, a great deal of productive overlap between these sections, and among essays within them. Ordering such material presents challenges. Cohen, in his preface to *Monster Theory*, notes:

The most obvious organization for a book of this kind would perhaps be a chronological ordering of the contents, but such a valorization of time as the primary determinant of meaning goes against what much of this collection asserts. The monster as a category that is not bound by classificatory structurations, least of all one as messy and inadequate as time. To order the contents of the volume diachronically would implicitly argue for a progress narrative that ... does not – *cannot* – exist.²⁹

²⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Preface: In a Time of Monsters,” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. ix.

As our collection ranges across the globe (East Asia, South Asia, Europe, the Caribbean, Mesoamerica, the Middle East, North America, Africa) as well as across time (ancient civilizations to the contemporary world), and with some essays treating very particular historical moments, while others cover many centuries, and all of them with start- and stop-points that cannot be linked up one after another or neatly placed in parallel, a simple chronological arrangement – desirable or inappropriate – simply would not be possible. We might have presented loose groupings (The Ancient World, The Middle Ages), but to do so would be to superimpose western chronological divisions – arbitrary enough in the context for which they were designed – upon the rest of the world in a way that does not arise organically from each culture’s internal history and progression.

We have therefore arranged the geohistorical essays alphabetically by author name, which will impose on them an order no more arbitrary, and hopefully less embedded in traditional narratives than other systems we might have chosen. We have designed the collection to be read as a whole, as each essay bears implications for the others, and we invite our readers to seek out associations that are individual, idiosyncratic, and speculative. To order them by period or group them by geography would be to discourage readers to look beyond their own research areas. As editor of the collection, reading the full range of essays has been a pleasure and, at times, a thrill.

Though it has remained largely peripheral in the broader context of most humanities, the monstrous has not been wholly ignored. In the past two decades, some scholars have begun the critical work of understanding the monstrous in a number of disciplines and for a number of periods, especially the Middle Ages. Medieval monstrosity has received great attention in the

past two decades, including Cohen's several publications,³⁰ but also Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills' collection on *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (2003)³¹ and Andy Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (1995).³² It also serves as the focus of a few earlier, highly influential texts that have proven seminal, such as John Block Friedman's *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (1981),³³ Rudolf Wittkower's "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters" (1942),³⁴ and even J.R.R. Tolkien's "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" (1936).³⁵ Arguably, the Middle Ages represented an especially fertile period for the forging of cultural constructions in recognizably modern formulations. But this important approach has much to tell us, potentially, about many other periods and cultures, and it is my hope that the scope, the insights, and the promise of the current collection can help spur fresh research and stimulate further discussion on this challenging yet crucial topic. My hope is that these essays cohere enough for the volume as a whole to maintain some measure of integrity, rather than that for it to become a straightforward and harmonious whole. As Cohen writes, "hybridity is a fusion *and* a disjunction, a conjoining of differences that

³⁰ Among numerous articles and other related books, see: Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain; Hybrids, Monsters, Borderlands: The Bodies of Gerald of Wales* (New York, 2000); and *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 1999).

³¹ Robert Mills and Bettina Bildhauer, eds., *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (Cardiff, 2003).

³² Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995).

³³ Friedman, *Monstrous Races*.

³⁴ Rudolf Wittkower, "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942).

³⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1936), reprinted in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, eds. John Ronald Reuel and Christopher Tolkien (Boston, 1984).

cannot simply harmonize.”³⁶ Such should be the nature of a collection on monsters and the monstrous.

Conclusion

I would like to close with another anecdote, this one darker than the one with which I began. Last year, toward the end of my extended unit on monsters in my medieval survey, we covered depictions of Jews. We read the relevant chapter of Debra Strickland’s compelling *Demons, Saracens and Jews*,³⁷ and were discussing the images of the twelfth-century Winchester Psalter. This is a work that appears in the major global art historical survey textbooks, which showcase the compelling Hellmouth scene, rather than the shockingly anti-Semitic images of the Passion. Here, the Jews are literal monsters, with sharp fangs and distorted, grimacing faces, savages with great, hooked noses carrying not only rough clubs but even weapons made of giant bones (See Figure 17.7). Having set the Psalter in the context of the *Wonders of the East* and related monster texts, I believed that I had set the stage for a thoughtful discussion of the careful manner in which illuminators, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, subtly altered the narrative of the Passion by substituting grotesquely caricatured Jews in the place of the Romans throughout the story. Through the use of images, since the scriptural text could not be altered, Pontius Pilate becomes a Jew, and Roman soldiers become Jews; according to the Gospel of John, Jesus was arrested by a group consisting of both Roman soldiers and Jewish temple police, but all figures here are caricatured Jews.³⁸ Moreover, through the frequent use of contemporary

³⁶ Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain*, 2.

³⁷ Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, 2003).

³⁸ John 18:3. The medieval designers of this image and others like it would have been working from the Latin Vulgate, which reads “Iudas ergo cum accepisset cohortem et a pontificibus et Pharisaeis ministros venit illuc cum lanternis et facibus et armis”

clothing, the figures become contemporary Jews, rather than those of over one thousand years earlier. This fostered the narrative that the Jews were, *and remained*, the killers of Christ, a very important pillar in anti-Jewish rhetoric and action throughout the Middle Ages and well beyond, leading to the Blood Libel claims, claims of host desecration, and other entirely fictional acts of defamation that suggested that, in the medieval present, Jews carried ceaselessly on, killing Christ through ritual reenactments of the crucifixion.³⁹

One of my students raised her hand after this discussion, with a look of confusion and anger on her face. She said that she did not understand what I was “trying to get at,” what my point was, since, she said, with a quaver of emotion in her voice, with the Winchester Psalter’s image of the Arrest of Christ on the screen (See Figure 17.7), that I was making too much out of nothing, since this *is* what Jews look like, more or less. And anyway, she continued, the Jews *are* Christ-Killers. She then screamed out the text of John 19:15, saying “the Jews shouted, ‘Kill him! Kill him! Crucify him!’” She was quoting, interestingly, from the “God’s Word Translation,”⁴⁰ the most violent English translation I have been able to find, since most read “take him” or “away with him,” where this one version reads “kill him.” The comparative accuracy of translation from the Greek is irrelevant, here, since she was not inspired by reading

[Therefore Judas having accepted a division of soldiers along with police and servants of the chief priests and Pharisees came there with lanterns and torches and arms] (*Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. Bonifatius Fisher, Robert Weber and Roger Gryson [Stuttgart, 1994], p. 1690). As clarified by a note in the New Oxford Annotated Bible, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, new revised standard version (Oxford, 1994), p. 153, “Both Roman *soldiers* and the Jewish temple *police* made the arrest.” Emphasis original.

³⁹ It bears mention that only in 2011 did the current pope, Benedict XVI, declare, as one headline put it, “Jesus’ death cannot be blamed on Jewish people” (John Thavis, Catholic News Service, March 2, 2011, xxxi

<<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1100846.htm>> accessed March 12, 2011).

⁴⁰ God’s Word to the Nations Bible Mission Society, *God’s Word* (Grand Rapids, 1995).

the original, but rather, a modern English version. David Burke, former Director of Translations for the American Bible Society, has critiqued this translation, noting that “‘poorly informed’ readers are likely to interpret the polemic against ‘the Jews’ in the New Testament as if ‘Jews of all time are somehow implicated.’”⁴¹ In this way, the modern translation and the medieval image are in concert with one another, and the resulting impression, conveyed by my student, was that the Jewish monster was real. The impact of these imagined monsters has been all too real, from the Middle Ages, onward.

I was struck temporarily speechless, but as I soundlessly worked my jaw in an effort to formulate a reply, I saw in the eyes of all the other students a shocked recognition that, in essence, answers the question posed at the outset, here: All of this *matters*. All of this is *relevant*. I was trying to show how medieval images were designed to allow *medievales* to confuse one group of Jews from the first century with *all* Jews in their own day, and here, in twenty-first-century America, my students saw this same notion quite alive. Their horror at the spectacle served to demonstrate that images of monsters from another time and place are not just curios, dead relics of a lost age. And that it was images of Jews that brought this out ought not be given too much weight. We could have had the same sort of outburst based on images of Muslims, or of “Africans” or “Indians.” Indeed, it is the latter two groups that are most often depicted as deeply monstrous, since *all* of the Wonders of the East, covered at length by Felton, Davies and Van Duzer – the lying, homophagic Donestre, giant-eared Panotii, ass-bodied Onocentaur, and on – are all peoples who are supposed to dwell in India and Africa.

⁴¹ Michael Marlowe, “Against the Theory of ‘Dynamic Equivalence’” (Revised, August 2009) <<http://www.bible-researcher.com/dynamic-equivalence.html#nota41>>, with interior quotes from David G. Burke, “Translating *Hoi Ioudaioi* in the New Testament,” *TIC Talk* 24 (1993).

I close with an account of this very disturbing class episode not because contemporary racism, often rooted in millennium-old bigotry, is the only or even the most important relevance for our study of monsters. Rather, it should serve to demonstrate the vast spread of the aftershocks that follow the arrival of the monstrous, the power and durability of its impact and import. In their distorted aping of their creators and their world, monsters show us how a culture delimits its own boundaries, how it sees itself; what it respects and desires is revealed in these portraits of scorn and disgust. This classroom moment of hate and fear, uncomfortable as it was for my students and me, should also remind us that when we study the monsters of the past, we study our own demons, as well.

How might we begin to move beyond the demonization of one another? MacCormack turns the lens back on the reader, writing “in the most reduced sense then, through concepts of adaptability and evolution itself, all organisms are unlike – *we are all, and must be monsters* because nothing is ever like another thing, nor like itself from one moment to the next.”⁴² Perhaps, in answer to the question above, we might begin with an examination of the monstrous, which time and again highlights the porous nature of the boundary that ought separate “us” from “them.”

Whatever one can say about monsters past and present, one thing is certain: This field is a renewable and self-sustaining one, and the subject of our study will be available for a long time to come. The monster has shown its enduring importance within a wide range of cultural landscapes, from the Ancient Near East to the contemporary Digital Age, and though it is hunted over and over again, shows no danger of being hunted to extinction. The protean nature of the

⁴² MacCormack’s essay in this collection, emphasis added.

monstrous is among its key traits, and no doubt our contemporary societies—whether we know it or not—hold the nascent, embryonic kernels of monsters for future generations.