

Wes Williams. *Monsters and Their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 344 pp. \$110. ISBN: 978-0-199577-026.

This is an ambitious, complex, and erudite study, covering the significant place of the monsters in early modern French literature, science, and politics. The sheer quantity of material brought to bear on the topic sometimes threatens the coherence of the project with a sort of centrifugal force — or perhaps the more appropriate image is one of a labyrinth with many detours. One of the guiding threads of this study, then, is the myth of Andromeda and its many versions and resonances in the early modern period. This myth itself brings the material itself into the realm of larger questions such as the role of spectacle and of the imagination in early modern French society. For example, the chapter on Rabelais rightly raises the issue of the role of the imagination in accounts of the encounters with the western hemisphere, as well as in accounts of monstrous births, and traces the debate over the proper representation of nature, the role of religion in accounts of the monstrous, and the issue of marriage in a dynastic context.

The analysis circles around Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, particularly the story of Chariclea, the white girl born to Ethiopian parents, and its use of the myth of Andromeda to resolve the various threads of the plot. Chariclea's mother, Persina, had been contemplating a painting of Andromeda when she conceived her daughter; her imagination imprinted this representation on her daughter. The question of whether a mother's imagination could affect her children's form was still being debated in the pre-teratological phase of early modern science. The Andromeda myth and its echoes encapsulate the strange cohabitation of science, religion, sexuality, and politics as represented, often critically, in the literature of the period. This chapter itself represents the strengths and the weaknesses of the project, as it is thin in references to other critical material on Rabelais, and occasionally makes a mistake that reveals unfamiliarity with the sixteenth-century material. For example, Williams conflates Bringuenarilles and Quaresmeprenant, two giants in Rabelais's *Quart livre*, without any explanation as to why.

In his chapter on Ronsard, Williams brings his account of the debates concerning the monstrous into the realm of the Wars of Religion in France, and this is where his study takes on greater force. One of the fundamental arguments of the book is that the tone of monster narratives in every discipline becomes darker over the course of early modern French history; while I do not personally agree with his readings of monsters purely as reflections of "increasingly darkening, disputatious, and dangerous times" in *Le Quart livre*, I do agree that by the end of the sixteenth century, monsters must be read in the context of the violence overwhelming the nation. This violence revises the questions surrounding the monstrous, questions as to what constitutes the human, the problematic nature of the public/private divide, etc. From Ronsard, through Montaigne, to Pascal, Williams traces the evolution of the monster from an external phenomenon defining our relationship to and understanding of the world, to an internal phenomenon of self-definition. This is

not merely a movement from physical to moral monstrosity, but from an understanding of the self as bounded, coherent, and potentially saved or salvageable, to a vision of the self as permeable, internally incoherent, and essentially fallen.

From the chapters on Montaigne and Pascal to that on Corneille's *Andromeda*, which contains brilliant readings of this play, Williams moves from inside the monster back to an externalized representation of the monster as spectacle. Here, he weaves the literary text in neatly with scientific treatises and pamphlets; the question of spectacle and of the humanity of the monster resonates effectively between these two domains. This move echoes the duality of monster narratives that will carry through to the modern period: the monster as externalized spectacle, perhaps with a moralizing component but nonetheless primarily seen as entertainment and as distinct from the viewer, and the monster as a human with its own subjectivity. This move is itself echoed in Williams's chapter on Racine by the constant subversive allusions to romance in the context of tragedy, allusions that hint at alternatives to tragic and monarchical dictates concerning lineage. The monster not only patrols the boundaries of culture and of the permissible, but exists within the state, the family, and the individual as a disruptive force that both conveys and questions the law (of nature as well as of culture). The possibility of monstrous births among us calls into question our notions of nature and of culture, as well as of the distinction between the two, but it also calls into question our notion of ourselves as superior beings. While I might have wished for more allusions to other critical works on early modern monsters, the coherent overarching argument of this book is compelling, and beautifully presented, and makes this well worth reading.

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