

Monstrosity

'Monstrosity' in early modern Britain incorporated a wide range of bodily and behavioural differences in humans and animals. These were scrutinised from a range of medical, social, political, and religious perspectives. Unusual bodies prompted wonder, disgust, fascination, fear, pity, awe, and much else, prompting questions about the nature of Creation as both a divine and natural phenomenon.

As with so much of early modern medicine, readers could look back to the ancient Greeks for understanding, and for writers whose work had subsequently been built on by classical and medieval authors. Aristotle speculated about the causes of monstrous births in *De generatione animalium* ('On the Generation of Animals'), offering the healthy male body as the ideal result of conception, and surmising that any deviation from replication of the father (including a girl child) was a form of monstrosity. There was also a strong tradition, going back to Pliny the Elder at least, of associating monstrous peoples with far-off places, and using beliefs about deviation in birth to explain human variability on a wider scale. In this train of thought, of which St Augustine was a key proponent, monstrosity was far from automatically negative. Instead, it was evidence of God's capacity for a range of wondrous actions, which humans were incapable of fully understanding.

But people did try to understand these phenomena, and medical practitioners and the public did not need to go so far in time or place to find examples of monsters. When Samuel Pepys saw an ape in 1661, he wrote: "I cannot believe but that it is a monster got of a man and she-baboon". He thus rationalised this 'monster' as a strange but logical result of unnatural, bestial sexual intercourse, and thought it "might be taught to speak or make signs".¹ Monstrosity was a hugely capacious category, but the 'monstrous birth' was an important thread. As such, monstrosity accounts can sometimes offer glimpses of congenital differences that now form part of disability history: dwarfism, limb deformities, conjoined twins, 'hermaphrodites', and so on. Monstrosity could also be collapsed with the 'unnatural' to challenge people's behaviour, whether sexual, religious, political, violent, or even just extravagant fashion that some people thought an insult to God's intentions for a modest appearance.² Stories of monstrosity were often ways of explaining or warning about crisis and conflict, with peaks in tumultuous periods like the British Civil Wars.³

¹ Samuel Pepys, 24 August 1661, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1661/08/24>.

² See for example the "Monstrous Apparel" condemned in the anonymous pamphlet *Englands vanity or The Voice of God against the monstrous sin of pride, in dress and apparel wherein naked breasts and shoulders, antick and fantastick garbs, patches, and painting, long perriwigs, towers, bulls, shades, curlings, and crispings, with an hundred more fooleries of both sexes, are condemned as notoriously unlawful* (London: printed for John Dunton, 1683).

³ See for example Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); David Cressy, "Lamentable, Strange, and Wonderful: Headless Monsters in the English Revolution," in Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes (eds), *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 40–63.

'Monsters' were sometimes exposed for public display or discussion, including by medical practitioners, and we often learn about them from advertising materials. One advertisement from 1696⁴ offers "two monsters" for public view:

AT the [space left blank] is to be seen Two *Monsters*, which by Medicines prescribed (by Madam *Goodin*, in *Goodman's-Fields*) to *Robert Cobb*, Labourer who Lives in *White Horse-Ally* in *Barbican* [sic], Labouring under an unknown Distemper for *several* Years; And after having been given over by many *Physitians*, was by her Medicines, and Gods Assistance, *delivered* of one *Monster* the 9th of *October* 1695. *like a Lyon*: And of one other the 5th of *June* 1696. *like a Fox*, Both which he Vomited up at his *Mouth*, and are now to be here seen.

In this case, the 'monsters' are the vomited products of illness. The large space left for the location would have allowed the flyer to advertise displays across the country, with whichever local tavern or other business was involved added to the information. The details of name and occupation of the ill man and of the female practitioner whose purge has expelled the monsters was designed to add credibility to the story. Similarly, physician Edward May and surgeon Jacob Hendon recruited the testimonies of John Pennant's relatives for their illustrated account of a snake-like monster found in the deceased young man's heart in 1636.⁵ They needed their testimonies, because John's mother had insisted that the creature be returned into his body and buried with him, so there was no longer physical proof. While these accounts might sometimes capture real experiences (of an internal parasite, perhaps?), it is always possible that a monstrous tale is exaggerated, or completely fictitious. Historians are therefore very careful when using these sources.

Medical texts anthologised stories and illustrations of monsters and speculated on the causes of them. The populist sexual and reproductive health manual *Aristotle's Masterpiece*⁶, which went through many editions in the early modern period, gathered examples of monstrous births from across Europe. It borrowed freely from texts in different genres—from French surgeon Ambroise Paré's medical wonders⁷, to Martin Luther's account of a 'Monk Calf' that he interpreted as an omen of Catholic error.⁸ It captures the two key explanations for such births: the 'divine', wherein God was using the birth to send a message, and the 'natural', which here includes bestiality, faults in the womb, or too eager copulation including during menstruation. These naturalistic explanations also included a phenomenon referred to as the 'maternal imagination', which held that things that the mother saw, felt, thought, etc, could shape or imprint on the developing foetus. Where once historians traced a shift over the period from supernatural to naturalist explanations of monstrosity, most now agree that these different explanations coexisted and fluctuated over the early modern period, and were utilised by different people to different ends.⁹ A good example from late in the period is the 'monstrous births' of Mary Toft, who was alleged to have given birth to rabbits in 1726. This was ultimately revealed as a hoax, but not before many physicians and natural

⁴ <https://reademed.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/index.php/book/r231340>

⁵ <https://reademed.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/index.php/book/s112479>

⁶ <https://reademed.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/index.php/book/r230121>

⁷ <https://reademed.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/book/r31063>

⁸ Peter Melancthon and Martin Luther, *Deutung der zwo gewlichen figuren Bapstesels zu Freyburg en Meyssen funden, mit anzaygung des jungstentags* (Wittenberg, 1523).

⁹ See e.g. Katherine Park and Lorraine J. Daston, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998).

philosophers argued seriously and vigorously about the potential causes of the monstrous births.¹⁰

Further reading:

A. W. Bates, *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005).

Elizabeth B. Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space, and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

Maja Bondestam (ed.), *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture: Concepts of Monstrosity Before the Advent of the Normal* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

William Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics, and Providence in England, 1657–1727* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002).

Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes (eds) *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004)

Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (eds) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Kevin Stagg, 'Representing Physical Difference: the Materiality of the Monstrous', in David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg (eds) *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006): 19–38.

¹⁰ Karen Harvey, *The Impostress Rabbit Breeder: Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).