

‘The Good and Bad of that Sexe’:  
Monstrosity and Womanhood in Early Modern  
England

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Monsters. In the modern mind, they have come to occupy a mere periphery. Rejected by the orderly nature of our scientific universe, they are either subsumed into the categories of routine, abnormal results, or delegated to that of the supernatural—those things which have no place in our system, and thus cannot exist. However, not so long ago, monsters occupied a very different space. Monsters were evidence of the wondrousness of our world, signs of the vastness and variety of God’s creation, and portents of his wrath. Monsters informed and reflected the way we understood our world.

In recent times, historians have increasingly looked to monsters as ways of understanding the historical periods in which they appear. Daston and Park, in their extensive work on the history of wonder, have drawn this connection in terms of the heavenly and prodigious qualities perceived of monsters, and how this tied to historical circumstance. These scholars, along with several others, have drawn a clear line between the rise of monsters and periods of social, religious, and political unrest.<sup>1</sup> For whenever war, famine, or discord have come to pass, monsters, as virtual embodiments of uncertainty and strife, have swelled in quantity, growing at times to such numbers as to become even strikingly ordinary.

Monsters can be connected to the times in which they appear in other ways as well. Periods of upheaval are also signs of change and redefinition. Here, the great struggle monsters come to embody is not just located in the presence of turmoil, but in its resolution and the effort to arrive at and justify a consensus about the ‘natural order’ of the world. For as much as they threaten them, monsters also help to define and signify boundaries and hierarchies. In the essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, scholar Jeffrey Cohen provides an excellent description of these phenomena:

The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (both ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster only exists to be read... Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the historical dynamic of monsters see Daston, Lorraine and Katherine Park Wonders and the Order of Nature, (New York: Zone Books, 2001). Also Platt, Peter ed., Wonders, Marvels, and Monsters in Early Modern Culture, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), and Cohen, Jeffrey ed., Monster Theory: Reading Culture, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.<sup>2</sup>

As Cohen suggests, though a study of what, how, and why certain things have come to be understood as monstrous, we can observe how over time people have questioned and constructed the limits of the normal, natural world. This epistemological history—what Lorraine Daston has described as the way that “the categories that structure our thought, pattern our arguments and proofs, and certify our standards of explanation” have changed over time—is as much a reflection of human history as a dynamic of it.<sup>3</sup>

In this work, it is my aim to make a study of one important historical moment of unrest and redefinition: early modern England from the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth. Perhaps the most complex and turbulent in Britain’s history, this period would be witness to a civil war, the overthrow and execution of a monarch, the (then unprecedented) rule of queens, religious upheaval and reformation, the reinstating of both a monarchy and a religion, and a revolution in science and philosophy. Each of these great shifts would be manifest in the appearance and interpretation of the monstrous. From grotesque births, to witches, the sexually depraved, to creatures with bodies composed of many species’, monsters real and imagined played a crucial role in the early modern mindset. Through them, we can witness the collective anxieties of a nation as it sought for meaning in a time of vast uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> Further, by tracing the formation and definition of these monsters, and the epistemological shifts they embodied, we are able to witness the development of an undercurrent manifest in all aspects of the period—the continuing emergence of modernity.

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Jeffrey, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in Jeffrey Cohen ed., Monster Theory: Reading Culture, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Daston, Lorraine, “Historical Epistemology,” in James Chandler ed., Questions of Evidence, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 282.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the monsters and the preternatural and the meaning associated with them in this period see Daston, Lorraine, “Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe,” in Questions of Evidence, 243; also see Wonders and the Order of Nature, Chaps. 1, 5, and 6.

Here, I am going to explore this emergence through one of the many monsters that marked it: woman. As odd as such a statement appears it is not so far-fetched. “The monster is difference made flesh”<sup>5</sup>, and the locating of difference within women’s bodies is a tradition that goes back to the oldest of Christian mythologies, Adam and Eve. Indeed, throughout the modern period, women were often thought at best, to be gossiping, unreliable, dishonest and dangerous, and at worst, corruptions of the human flesh (attributes that ironically, were often attributed to women’s bodily and spiritual inheritance as ‘granddaughters of Eve’). The conception of woman as monstrous was in fact very real for these early moderns, though how, why and to what degree this was so was hotly debated and hardly established.

Many have pointed to a rise in misogyny to explain this portrayal, but such an answer is hardly satisfactory.<sup>6</sup> It does not explain why such a rise occurred, nor does it examine the particular significance of the portrayal, for ‘monstrous’ women were only a part of a whole parade of creatures that seemed to defy nature. Likewise, misogyny was nothing new to early modern England, but part of a long tradition of anti-feminist writings and sentiments.<sup>7</sup> However, while females have long been associated with sinfulness, such a widespread indictment of ordinary women as literally *deformed* in body and soul seems to have been a relatively new development. What changed, or, in some cases didn’t, that led to this? One interpretation that has been that gender itself was under threat at during this period, due to a proliferation of women

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<sup>5</sup> Cohen, 7.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting here while a rise in misogyny may certainly have occurred, (after all, this period would be witness to the some of the most violent of attacks against women: politically, economically, and certainly physically by way of ‘witch trials’), I argue these events were only a symptom of larger cultural developments, embodied in an overall anxiety about sex and gender.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the history of anti-feminist writings in the pre-modern period see Blamires, Alcuin ed., Woman Defamed, Woman Defended, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

taking up the roles of men in politics and society.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the notion of a gender backlash does not fully explain things. After all, it was arguably during the modern period that European women lost the most power. Another theory has been that due to the resurgence of classical writings and ideals during the Renaissance, ideas of womanhood became drastically more negative. However, such a theory does not account for the complexity of the means by which monstrosity came to be applied to women's bodies. Finally, some have suggested that such images of 'dirty women' may have simply been a male response to a feminine ideal that all the more demanded sex-less, desire-less women. While it may be true that sinfulness might make certain women more sexually appealing, why would these women end up as monsters? Did men take pleasure in monstrous women? Instead, I would like to pose the question differently: what processes of redefinition and adjustment was gender subject to during this period? In particular, what conceptual changes occurred in the scientific and social realms in terms of how gender would be defined? Finally, what did these changes mean for the emergence of modernity?

To set scene for this exploration, we must first go to where most monsters appeared in the popular imagination of the time, the small press. During this same period of unrest, the world of print, ranging from ballads, to books, to broadsides, underwent a vast degree of development. As political adversaries fought for power on the battlefield, ideological battles were fought out in print—a fact indicated by the exponential growth of printed materials during the tumultuous period of 1640 to 1660.<sup>9</sup> In a unique way, the small press brought together all degrees of English society, embodying a whole variety of ideas and experiences, and in turn disseminating them to

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<sup>8</sup> See Shephard, Amanda, Gender and Authority in Sixteenth Century England, (Keele, Staffordshire, UK: Keele University Press, 1994); and Cressy, David, Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England: Tales of Discord and Dissension, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 97-14.

<sup>9</sup> An example of this growth can be seen in the growth of the pamphlets collected by the printer Thomason: 22 in 1640, over 1000 in 1641, and 1966 in 1642, with an overall total of more than 22,000 from 1640 to 1660. For more, see Siebert, F.S., Freedom of the press in England 1476-1776, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), 191.

everyone. In any particular shop, one might find everything from the latest discoveries of Boyle, to the finest work of Shakespeare, to the bawdiest pornography, often all sharing and borrowing themes. Thus from its center in London, the press was literally a vast and crucial site for discourse and debate. Here monsters were recorded and represented, their meanings interpreted, and their ultimate significance determined. Likewise, in it is in the press that we can observe the developmental course of all kinds of epistemologies, as their meanings were negotiated between the many institutions of English culture and thought in works of every genre and price.<sup>10</sup>

Historically a favorite topic, it is unsurprising that a significant amount of printed material in early modern England dealt with the theme of women. While definitions of sex and gender have always been major objects of contention, this subject would reach new heights, becoming a primary topic of discussion. Beginning with the controversial rein of the Tudors, and marked by the infamous '*querelle de femmes*'—the prolonged humanist debate on the status and nature of women—this period would be witness to a virtual explosion in misogynist writings dictating everything from the 'true nature of the feminine sex', to the appropriate roles for women in religion, marriage and reproduction.<sup>11</sup> From all aspects of society, thousands of authors would weigh in on the issue, each purporting to know the final 'truth' of the matter, while clearly representing their own individual interests. Though numerically marginal, female authors too would participate in this discourse, both condemning and defending their sex with great eloquence and wit.<sup>12</sup> Further, as made clear by so many authors' appeals to their audiences,

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the history of the British press and cultural discourse see Friedman, Jerome, *The Battle of the Frogs and Fairford's Flies: Miracles and the Pulp Press during the English Revolution*, (New York: St. Martins Press, 1993). Also, Raymond, Joad, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> See Wiltenburg, Joy, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 9; also Raymond, Chap. 7, and Friedman, Chap. 9.

<sup>12</sup> For a variety of great examples of women's participation in the printed world, see Trill, Suzanne, Kate Chedgzoy and Melanie Osborne eds., *Lay by Your Needles Ladies, Take the Pen: Writing Women in England, 1500-1700*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). Also see Haselkorn, Anne and Betty Travitsky eds., *The Renaissance*

women too were avid readers of these works, often warranting a style aimed particularly to a female audience. Thus, while the medium of print was definitely circumscribed by relations of power and influence, and though the wealth of material clearly represented the ideals, desires, and interests of men, it nonetheless provides us with an excellent map of the debate as developed over time.<sup>13</sup>

Centered mostly on conceptions of ‘true’ and ‘appropriate’ womanhood, these writings focused on a variety of major themes, namely: politics, morality, women’s role in history, and appropriate relations between men and women. Common to almost all of these, is an insistence upon the inferiority of the female sex, and broad, virulent attacks upon its perceived defects. Claiming the majority of women to be gossiping, lazy, inconstant, manipulative, and untrustworthy creatures with voracious sexual appetites, much of this literature paints women as inherently evil and troublesome. To this point, one such author even suggests ‘hanging’ as a preferable alternative to marriage.<sup>14</sup> Others, acknowledging the ‘general usefulness’ of women, would provide their readers with suggestions of how to secure a ‘constant’, honest wife, and avoid a ‘shrew’.<sup>15</sup> Thus while often positing an argument in terms of merely critiquing certain ‘bad’ behaviors thought to be typical of women, the authors of these works almost always emphasized their own version of the ideal ‘goodwife’ who happily and without protest adheres to her rigidly defined, subservient role.

One of the earliest works of the period to proclaim the monstrosity of women was John Knox’s famous First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women in 1558.

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Englishwoman in Print: Counterbalancing the Canon, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), and Otten, Charlotte ed., English Women’s Voices, 1540-1700, (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Wiltenburg, Chap. 3; Friedman Chap. 1, Raymond, Chap. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond, 284. Also see McManus, Barbara, Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Raymond, 279-288

Regaling the recent phenomena of female rulers as abhorrent to nature, it built upon the misogynist sentiments typical of his day, to make the argument that women who stepped outside the role God created for them were unnatural and repugnant:

To promote a Woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion, or empire above any realme, nation, or citie, is repugnant to Nature; contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance; and finallie, it is the subversion of good order, of all equitie and justice.<sup>16</sup>

Its primary theme, that women were created to be subservient to men and were thus unfit to rule over them, set the premise for a whole litany of writings to come, as authors would continue to emphasize the ‘unnaturalness’ of powerful females. Invoking immediate and fierce debate about female capability, Knox’s piece brought to a head one of the major debates of his time.<sup>17</sup> Though the subsequent succession of Queen Elizabeth would soon force Knox to recant, and make attacks against female rulers impossible, the general theme of natural hierarchy, and violations of it as monstrous, would remain steadfast.

Perhaps the most infamous of these brutal, tongue-in check arraignments of womankind, would be the notorious pamphlet by Joseph Swetnam, The Araignment of Lewde, Idle, Forward, and Unconstant women: Or the Vanitie of Them, Choose you whether. With a Commendacion of Wise, Vertuous and Honest Women, in 1615. Consisting of misogynistic stereotypes in scathing tone, Swetnam’s pamphlet emphasized the comical nature of women’s faults, calling them ‘necessary evils’ who could all use some adjustment. Short and inexpensive, it would run at least 10 editions by 1637, with others as late as 1807, prompting many angry responses, and

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted from Roberts, Josephine A., “Radigund Revisited: Perspectives on Women Rulers in Lady Mary Wroth’s *Urania*,” in The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print, 187. For more on common conceptions about women in this period see Fraser, Antonia, The Weaker Vessel, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> For more on “The First Blast of the Trumpet” and its responses see, Camden, Carroll, The Elizabethan Woman, (Houston: The Elsevier Press, 1951), Chap. 9. Also Shephard, Gender and Authority in Sixteenth Century England.



even a play titled Swetnam, the Woman-Hater, arraigned by Women, in 1620.<sup>18</sup> Though considered by many to be repetitive, contradictory and unimaginative, the lasting power of Swetnam's pamphlet in the fast moving world of print indicates the fact it must have carried some resonance with its readers.

Like Knox's First Blast, Swetnam's Araignment spurred intense controversy, sparking and setting the style for decades of debate and commentary.<sup>19</sup> One of the most prominent refutations of Swetnam's argument would be against his insistence that all women were bad, as demonstrated by his failure to truly provide an example of a 'good' woman to counter his criticisms. Thus while his case met frequent attacks against his blindly misogynist claims; none of these threatened his and others' essential assumptions about the feminine ideal.<sup>20</sup> Though sweeping judgments were made in both cases, declaring on one side the general badness and inferiority of women, and on the other, the general goodness and equality of women, neither challenged the fundamental idea that women should be relegated to a particular, limited role of bearing children and serving and placating their husbands, nor that chastity and lack of passion should be preferable.<sup>21</sup> In almost every pamphlet to follow Swetnam, on either side of the issue, this dichotomy would remain, with few actual challenges to the structures of femininity and masculinity that underlined it. Thus while Swetnam never directly declared women monstrous, his work is an important contribution in a long vein of misogynist literature that does. The deepened hierarchical divisions and attitudes that would emerge from the debate would be fundamental additions to the construction of feminine monstrosity, making the notion of a

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<sup>18</sup> See Camden, 255-257; Raymond 284-290.

<sup>19</sup> For more on the history of controversies over women, including that surrounding Swetnam, see Woodbridge, Linda, Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Raymond, 285-286. Also Jones, Ann Rosalind, "Counterattacks on "The Bayter of Women": Three Pamphleteers of the Early Seventeenth Century," in The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print, 45-62.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond, 285-286.

‘natural’, ‘good’ woman in opposition to the ‘unnatural’, ‘bad’ (and thus monstrous) woman, all the more rigidly defined.

As the gender debate climaxed between 1640 and 1670, images of monstrous women proliferated. Vast numbers of books, broadsides and pamphlets presented tales of horrendous, monstrous women who tyrannically dominated the men in their lives, causing them to commit acts of terrible sin, and even going so far as to murder their families (or in some cases, clients).<sup>22</sup> For some, these ubiquitous ‘whores’, ‘witches’ and ‘shrews’ and the ultimate sins they embodied were signs of God’s wrath against a nation that had sinned. For others, they were signs of how corrupted a nation Britain had become.<sup>23</sup> But for more still, they were the very incarnation of the fear that Britain itself had been ‘cuckolded’, literally losing control of its subjects and in doing so becoming an emasculated, headless nation.<sup>24</sup> In this tradition, some of the fiercest attacks would be reserved for sectarians and activists such as the Quakers, Adamites, Anabaptists, Levelers and Diggers, whom were perceived as giving too much power to women, becoming sexually depraved and dominated by ‘religious whores.’ Imagining these women as devilish minions of Satan, these authors emphasized the righteousness of their own political and social agendas, and with it the unequivocal sense that powerful women gained their dominance only through unnatural, evil workings. As one such pamphlet envisioned: “But ye of all whores, there is no whore to a Holy Whore, which when she turns up the white of her eye and the black of her tail, when she falls flat on her back, according as the spirit moves her, the fire of her zeal

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<sup>22</sup> For more examples see Thompson, Roger, Unfit for Modest Ears, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> Friedman, 179-200, 255-261.

<sup>24</sup> See Burns, William, “The Kings Two Monstrous Bodies: John Bulwer and the English Revolution,” in Wonders, Marvels and Monsters in Early Modern Culture, 188-189. Interestingly, this fear of national emasculation was also expressed by John Knox in “First Blast of the Trumpet.”

kindles such a flame that the devil can not withstand her...she can cover her lust with religion."<sup>25</sup>

In all, the theme would be the same: English women were stepping outside their boundaries, with disastrous results.

One particular pamphlet, titled A Brief Anatomie of Women, Being an Invective Against, and Apologie for the Good and Bad of that Sexe, provides us with an excellent example of feminine monstrosity as it was envisioned and debated. Like others of its time, it closely followed the form and the sentiments of its predecessors, invoking many of the same arguments and images. Women are deformed creatures, filled with the trickery of Satan:

If we but observe their actions and undertakings, it will manifestly appear that they are... humane creatures merely metamorphosed, seeming to be that which truly and really they are not, and in a word, it is most apparent that they onely are the greatest and most powerful temptations to evill of all other.<sup>26</sup>

However, this work goes beyond the simple misogynistic rants of some earlier works. Published anonymously in 1653, dead center in the highpoint of debate, it existed on a cusp between two radically different understandings of gender: woman as a version of man, and woman as an entirely distinct creature. Thus in A Brief Anatomie, we can observe the workings of some of the major epistemological shifts that marked its age, as Britain became increasingly invested in a modern worldview, and a very different vision of monstrosity emerged.

A Brief Anatomie contributed to the discourse on womanhood in several important ways relevant to the development of modernity. The foremost of these, was a shift in the way that boundaries were drawn and affirmed. Such divisions are an essential element to a modernist worldview. Bruno Latour, in his critical work We Have Never Been Modern, describes this

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<sup>25</sup> A Strange Wonder, or, A Wonder in a Woman, (1642), quoted in Friedman, 185. For more on the misogynistic use of print for political purposes see Thompson, Unfit for Modest Ears.

<sup>26</sup> A Brief Anatomie of Women, Being an Invective Against, and Apologie for the Good and bad of that Sexe, (London: E. Alsop, 1653), 3. Available in the Thomason Tract Series (microform) from University Microforms of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

function succinctly as a process he calls “purification.” According to Latour, one of the main directives of modernism is not simply the division of objects into separate and distinct groups, but what moderns perceive as the *purification* of them into their essential meanings, allowing for each object to then be placed into its respective category of existence.<sup>27</sup> In this way, boundaries do more than delegate (and separate) groupings of objects—they determine their *possibilities* of existence. While it is certain that this ‘purification’ is only an illusion (Can we ever really determine the essential qualities of anything?), its impact on the way we see the world is powerfully evident in the historical formation of modern epistemologies of sex and gender. The upsurge of monsters in the early modern period can be directly related to this emerging process; for by the very nature of their contradictory bodies, they “resist all attempts to include them in any systematic structure.”<sup>28</sup>

In England, an overall emphasis on the reshaping of boundaries would begin as early as the sixteenth century. However, because a science based on empirical evidence and the scientific method—the purifying force that would come to be the ultimate boundary marker centuries later—was still only in its early stages during the early modern period, the lines drawn were often confusing and contradictory. John Bulwer, one of the most significant authors on monstrosity during the mid-seventeenth century, provides an excellent example of this relationship in his encyclopedic work *Anthropometamorphosis*.<sup>29</sup> Bulwer’s principal concern was that of deformity. For Bulwer, monstrosity was not just the result of “licentiousness or inordinate concupiscence,” but the incarnation of “very wickedness”—the perverse crossing of essential and fundamental lines of division. Gender was a significant part of that threat, and the

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<sup>27</sup> Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1-37.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Burns, 197-198; Also see Campbell, Mary, “*Anthropometamorphosis*: John Bulwer’s Monsters of Cosmetology and the Science of Culture,” in Jeffrey Cohen ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*.

traversing of gender lines some of the most monstrous of acts. Bulwer described castration with particular rage, as ‘high treason’ against nature. Yet, while these boundaries were so fundamentally important, their actual locations were somewhat unstable. Indeed, what things determined the essential nature of each sex was still hotly debated, and Bulwer, attempting to clear up such ambiguity, often found himself stuck at extremes. For example, Bulwer considered even shaving a deformity as it made a man too effeminate, a point that most of his fellow men would have rejected.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary to Bulwer’s work, both the desire to and difficulty of ‘setting things straight’, are strongly evident in the way gender is defined and described within A Brief Anatomie.

Like Bulwer, the author of A Brief Anatomie also pushes to extremes. From the very beginning, the author makes a significant point of emphasizing divisions:

For if there were not deformity how could their be beauty [?]; and if there were not sin, how could righteousness appear[?]. The Antipathy therefore between good and evil, is as great as the visible difference betwixt the most resplendent light and obscurest darkness.<sup>31</sup>

Following the legacy of Swetnam’s pamphlet, this kind of sharp line is extended to what the author identifies as two different breeds of woman, “the good and bad of that sexe”: the first of which is “abundant [with] goodness and magnificent virtues”, and a second, which is made up of deformed women “whose corrupt natures and evil dispositions render [them] odious in the sight of God and man.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, he states: “We must also acknowledge that women (in their natural inclinations) are all in extreams, for they that are good are really good indeed, and they that are bad are usually extremely evill.”<sup>33</sup> These dichotomies are evidence of what would be a conscious societal effort to construct clear boundaries upon a division that was inherently (and

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<sup>30</sup> Burns, 197-198.

<sup>31</sup> A Brief Anatomie, Introduction.

<sup>32</sup> A Brief Anatomie, Introduction.

<sup>33</sup> A Brief Anatomie, 5.

only increasingly so) problematic. Because it was almost impossible for women to cross over these lines, they were locked into positions of ‘essentially good’ or ‘essentially bad.’ Together, this virtual splitting of womanhood into two opposing camps created a powerful requisite for monstrosity, for if only one can be natural, all else is ‘deformed’, and thus unnatural.

Within this formation of boundaries lies another element of extreme division, and thus female monstrosity: the placing of woman in opposition to man. Such an emphasis on the opposition between the sexes reveals an important contradiction between the modern conception of sex, and older conceptions of gender that existed at the time. For while the modernist emphasis on boundaries encouraged placing men and women at opposite poles, the reasons cited for women’s deformities relied upon an older, more flexible understanding of the interrelation of the sexes. This understanding of feminine monstrosity focused instead on the interrelatedness of the sexes; making the case that from Eve’s literal birth from the ‘crooked rib’ of Adam, to the formation of gender in the womb,<sup>34</sup> women are created by God as ‘deformed’ men, monstrous in their own right by their physical and mental inadequacies. Although the physiological distinctness of women’s bodies was firmly established in the scientific realm by the early seventeenth century, elements of this view remained a significant in popular conceptions of gender, a fact illustrated by its presence in A Brief Anatomie.

Here, the author goes to great pains to distinguish women from their male ‘counterparts.’ Beginning with the moral and historical context of the Eve’s original sin, he makes a special point of noting that woman are a group which has almost exclusively gone against the interests of men (that is, of ‘all mankind’):

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<sup>34</sup> According to Aristotle, women were created when male babies failed to reach their full development; Thus women in essence, were deformed men. This made them less than perfect, being faulty models of the perfect human, man. For more on this conception of physiology in the early modern period see Aughterson, Kate, ed., Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook, (London: Routledge, 1995), 41-66.

If we but consider the nature and qualities of the generality of that sex, even in all ages from the fall of man unto this present, we may well perceive that they have not only been extremely evil in themselves but have also been in the main instruments and immediate causes of murder, idolatry, and a multitude of other heinous sins.<sup>35</sup>

Following this line of reasoning, the author then provides a long list of female biblical characters that committed enormous acts of sin, or more importantly, like Eve, led to the downfall of men. While a few examples of ‘good’ women are cited, the general sense given is that women, by their own initial instincts, are not. This point is only emphasized in the work’s conclusion: “For we find (by sure and infallible arguments) that the number of the righteous are but few, and the wicked very numerous.”<sup>36</sup>

This tendency for badness is given to be a result of woman’s weaker mind and morals, consequence of an inferior degree of development inherited all the way back from her ‘grandmother Eve’.<sup>37</sup> If we follow the general argument of most contemporary guidebooks on femininity and morality, female goodness was only possible with the moralizing influence of religion and the social constraints of propriety.<sup>38</sup> And even then, while a few women could overcome their tendency toward badness, the vast majority apparently would not, a fact emphasized by A Brief Anatomie’s insistence upon the utter rarity of ‘good women.’ The clear conclusion of such a definition, is that women in their ‘natural’ state (that is, without male intervention), are deformed counterparts to an inherently good (read: pure) male sex, and that all transgressions on the part of men, result from the ‘pollution’ of women. This creates an inherent tension, because if women are simply deformed men, how can their essential nature be in

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<sup>35</sup> A Brief Anatomie, 1.

<sup>36</sup> A Brief Anatomie, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Fraser, 1-4.

<sup>38</sup> For a few excellent examples of these texts see Davis, Lloyd ed., Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance: An Annotated Edition of Contemporary Documents, (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1998); and Aughterson, Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook, Constructions of Femininity in England. Also see Fraser, The Weaker Vessel.

opposition to them? Further, if women's appropriate (and thus natural) role is that of the good women, how can all women be a monstrous pollution in their natural state (that is, without male interference)? This conflict is evident of the way modernism—and with it the scientific revolution—was still in its infancy during this period. For, as a fully modern, scientific worldview became popularized in the centuries to follow, such contradictions would be greatly minimized. Women's supposed inferiority would be justified instead by their 'smaller brains', weaker physical constitutions, and undeveloped sexualities.

Another function of this tendency toward 'purification', and the historical development of modernity it represents, is visible in the author's emphasis upon anatomy. Conceptually, the idea of anatomy would undergo significant changes during the early modern period. Anatomy had been long understood as the defining of the parts that make up the individual, a game of interpretation and illustration of 'higher truths' as much as one of science. Basing their observations upon a philosophical understanding of the human body, these early anatomists emphasized the homogeneity between male and female organs, painting the female reproductive system as a mere morphing of the male. However, in the seventeenth century this would change dramatically. Instead of basing their work on purely social meanings, anatomists focused on an exacting analysis of the structure and function of the parts that make up the whole. In this way, the divisions between the different parts of the body would become more important than the whole, the body envisioned instead as an orchestra of separately functioning parts. Likewise, the emphasis would no longer be on the similarity between the sexes, but rather the differences.<sup>39</sup>

While the 'anatomy' described in A Brief Anatomie, specifies the social functions of the parts of a woman's body, not the physical, its essential purpose is the same as the physiological

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<sup>39</sup> See Laqueur, Thomas, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).



anatomies of its time—to make a clear distinction between the sexes. However, unlike its medical counterparts, it serves not to normalize and naturalize the female body, but rather to reinforce its function as a monstrous creation:

The golden tresses of their amorous hair... doth manifestly express the true performance of their dutie to their great Lord and master Lucifer, in observing so well his livery... Their roling eies<sup>40</sup>, like shining pearl, seem to be the baits that insnare men in their love, whole fruit is destruction... Their bodie it self is a magazine of corrupt and ill humors, which hath continual recourse to all the rest of the members: Their thighs are the ascent unto this frail fabrick of corruption, their legs the supports, and their feet swift guides to the waies of vanity, for from the crown of their head to the sole of the foot, there is not a good member, no not one.<sup>41</sup>

Another way the use of an anatomy connotes a modern worldview, is in its emphasis on laying bare to view the truth of nature. That is, the belief that by the opening and displaying of the body, it is possible to gain a knowledge of the ultimate truths of science.<sup>42</sup> This is a theme expressed throughout early modern writing, in the language of “opening, uncovering or bringing to light something at the same time characterized as ‘monstrous’ or ‘obscene.’”<sup>43</sup> The author of A Brief Anatomie follows in this assumption, claiming that we can see the truth of their nature by the examination of women’s ‘particular characters’, and that these facts are made “most apparent” by their “actions and undertakings.”<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the ultimate goal of his work is expressed as, to “anatomize in feminine sex in generall” providing his readers with “a further knowledge what it is to make a choice” of either a good or wicked woman, so that, knowing the

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<sup>40</sup> Eies (eyes), may be also read as synonymous with vagina. For more on early modern slang see Henke, James, Gutter Life and Language in the Early “Street” Literature of England, (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1988.)

<sup>41</sup> A Brief Anatomie, 2-3.

<sup>42</sup> Laqueur, 70.

<sup>43</sup> Parker, Patricia, “Fantasies of ‘Race’ and ‘Gender’”, in Margo Hendricks ed., Women, “Race” and Writing in the Early Modern Period, (London: Routledge, 1994), 87.

<sup>44</sup> A Brief Anatomie, 3. Here it is worth noting that throughout the medieval and early modern periods, it was widely believed that the human corporeal exterior acted as a representation of God’s judgment upon its interior. By this, an emphasis on a woman’s physical self as a deformity reinforced the claim of her monstrous nature. For more on this subject see William, David, Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature, (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 107-176.

essential truth of each, a man might choose well.<sup>45</sup> In this way, the use of an ‘anatomy’ to dissect and exemplify the monstrous qualities of woman is in of itself an ironic twist. For, such dissections would be the very means by which monsters would eventually be ‘understood’, categorized, naturalized and today, virtually annihilated but for the occasional fantasy of the ‘supernatural.’ Monsters are only truly monsters when they step outside the boundaries of the ‘natural order,’ a notion that would increasingly come to mean the world as categorized by man and science.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, this leads us to the third and the most important element of modernity’s emergence for the purposes of our study: the way that it ended up changing the very meaning of the term ‘monster.’ Monsters are objects that cross boundaries of what we perceive to be normal, and thus natural. In the modern world, this carries implications that are specifically negative. Monsters are horrible, dangerous, and repugnant. However, prior to the modern period, monstrosity carried a dramatically different epistemological connotation. Under the pre-modern system, Europeans saw themselves as party to a greater scheme of totalities, connections. Jerusalem was the physical and conceptual center of the globe, and all that existed was part of God’s creation.<sup>47</sup> Under this philosophical framework, divisions were present, but only as parts of a greater holistic vision. Even when perceived as awful portents, the emphasis remained that such things came as a message from God. In the pre-modern mind a ‘monster’ might have been wondrous and stupefying, but never repugnant. For, nothing that is part of God’s creation can be unnatural. Wonders were signs from heaven, evidence of nature’s playfulness, and examples of

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<sup>45</sup> A Brief Anatomie, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Note here the distinction between the world as created and defined ‘scientifically’ in the modern period, and earlier, more holistic visions of the world as created and defined by God. (For more on this discussion see Daston and Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature).

<sup>47</sup> A dramatic example of this conceptual framework can be seen in the Mappa Mundi, a medieval world map located in the British Library. It is also available as a publication: Harvey, P., Mappa Mundi : the Hereford World Map, (London : Hereford Cathedral & the British Library, 1996). Also see Williams, 178-227.

the vastness of God's creation, but never perversions of it.<sup>48</sup> Consequentially, the usage of 'monstrosity' to refer to things as horrible and unnatural could not develop without a significant shift in the conceptual ways in which the world was understood.

Thus while boundary crossing and abnormality certainly existed in the pre-modern period, such events provoked responses that are strikingly different from those in modern times. Critical to this change would be the superimposition of a structure of the 'natural order of things', of 'God's natural laws' upon all his creation. Beginning as an intensification of existing philosophical frameworks, this structure would eventually grow to be so rigid that by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even religion itself would hardly fit. God would have to be pushed to the periphery as a mere observer, while the world, dictated by a long list of physical and biological laws, would continue by its own predictable, mechanical accord.<sup>49</sup> This shift towards a rigid structuring of reality is powerfully evident in the way monsters would come to be understood. For only when 'natural' is confined to strict limits, can something become monstrously 'unnatural'—horribly repugnant because it flies in the face of all that we assume to be true in the world, literally negating the reality we take for granted. In this way, monstrosity not only became repugnant, but moved beyond the physical realm.<sup>50</sup> Monstrosity became a metaphorical label, a slur for anything that threatened the 'natural order.' Suddenly the list of monsters exploded before us, for as the rigidity of nature grew, those things that defied it only become more apparent.

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<sup>48</sup> See Daston and Park, Chaps. 1 and 5. Also see Platt, Wonders, Marvels and Monsters in Early Modern Culture. It should be noted that on occasion, monsters *were* taken to be an expression of evil. However, this was still understood as part of the cosmic dance between God and Satan, and not as something outside of nature. For more see Bildhauer, Bettina and Robert Mills eds., The Monstrous Middle Ages, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Latour, 29-35.

<sup>50</sup> For more on this progress of monstrosity from the middle 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, see Burns, William, An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics, and Providence in England, 1657-1727, (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002).

This shift toward a more rigid understanding of reality is visible throughout A Brief Anatomie. From sharply defined boundaries between good, bad, male and female, to the use of division and exposure via ‘anatomy’, the author employs a number of modern structures to define and explicate his position. In all of these, we can see evidence of a system in development. Almost a century earlier in the work of John Knox, women became monstrous because they violated the infallible order of God, man, and woman. Though at the time it may have been somewhat unorthodox, in the seventeenth century his emphasis on the fundamental order of the world would come to dominate virtually all aspects of the modern worldview. As Daston and Park state so clearly:

[Here] we find one of the earliest expressions of the attitude that was increasingly to dominate the reaction to monsters announced by the self-consciously learned in the seventeenth century—not only medical theorists and natural philosophers, but also theologians, humanists, and other men of letters. Monsters inspired repugnance because they violated the standards of regularity and decorum not only in nature, but also in society and the arts. *A monstrous birth undermined the uniform laws God had imposed upon nature; the ‘monstrous regiment of women’ rulers threatened the order of civil society; the intrusion of marvels into poems and plays destroyed literary verisimilitude.* [emphasis added]<sup>51</sup>

This attitude would not only be limited to the world of intellectuals. As demonstrated by prolific and accessible literature of the early modern press, early moderns of all kinds would soon come to see their world as defined by a system of inherent and infallible definitions and relationships.

Ultimately, the ideological impact that modernism would have on the way we envision ourselves and one another would be enormous. Even at its earliest stages, we would become so invested in our orderly vision of the world, that we couldn’t (and continue today, for that matter) help imitating it in our social and political structures too. The ‘monstrous’ women of early modern England were casualties of this change. From an early modern worldview, a repugnant response to these ‘outlaw women’ was necessary; for only by the affirmation of such women’s

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<sup>51</sup> Daston and Park, 202.

unnatural, abhorrent status could the threat be negated. And the threat they posed was far reaching. Sixteenth and seventeenth century authors imagined monstrous females at every turn, on every corner. Whether or not the world was truly overcome with 'lewd, forward, and inconstant women' is uncertain, but that some women resisted an increasingly restrictive image of ideal femininity is.

Gender relations are some of the most fundamental to the way we interact with one another. It is no surprise that they would become a subject of such dire concern in the effort to define and affirm the 'natural order of things.' In this way, the discourse on monstrous women was not just about monstrosity, it was about the very definition of gender itself. The construction of an oppositional two-gender system that placed men and women in two radically different spheres of existence would become an essential foundation to this new perspective, and the ramifications would be broad. One of these would be the evolution of a vastly increased emphasis on public and private spheres, that is, male and female worlds of existence. Another would be the eventual annihilation of monsters altogether except in the parallel world of the 'supernatural.' Today, to call a hermaphrodite or couple of conjoined twins, or even a lesbian woman, monsters, would be startling and disconcerting for most of us. To us fully developed moderns, each one of these creatures has its place in nature. By this, the monstrous women of early modern England can teach us a valuable lesson: Though it is said that philosophy seeks to understand the true nature of our existence, in the sense of philosophical viewpoints, as embodied in our epistemological worldview, it can also determine it.

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