

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Maja Bondestam (ed.), *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture*
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Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture: Concepts of Monstrosity before the Advent of the Normal, edited by Maja Bondestam, is the first volume of the ‘Monsters and Marvels: Alterity in the Medieval and Early Modern Worlds’ series of Amsterdam University Press. It offers a rich and compelling investigation of exceptional bodies in Renaissance Europe with the aim to examine ‘how cultural representations and policies incorporated physical deviances before the advent of modernity and its emerging universal standard for the normal body, with its emphasis on health and beauty’ (p. 13). Drawing on a variety of primary sources, the collection brings together various instances of exceptional bodies in the European Renaissance context from the early sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, addressing them from a wide range of critical perspectives. In line with the series’s global scope, it interrogates and broadens the contexts in which alterity is considered, employing an interdisciplinary and intercultural approach that differs from other recent publications on the topic, which tend to offer national and genre-specific readings of monstrosity and physical deviancy in early modern times.

By focusing on ‘exceptional’ bodies, defined as bodies that ‘could be both outstanding and extraordinary in a positive way and, in a more negative sense, deviations from the general picture, ugly, disturbing, frightening or simply irrelevant’ (p. 14), the volume challenges previous critical assumptions which characterise Renaissance monsters as wonders to be admired, portents to be feared, or disruptive beings to be ‘normalized’. In fact, the book dwells on the idea that deviant bodies could also be perceived as boring, and accordingly ignored, in light of a view of the world that often dismissed ‘errors of

nature' as irrelevant. In this sense, the collection makes a convincing case for the need to view early modern treatment of monstrosity not univocally but as a set of complex and competing cultural practices. As claimed by the editor in the introduction, monsters and prodigies did contribute to the creation of dichotomies and binary oppositions in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early-eighteenth centuries but, at the same time, they also 'contributed to its knowledge, moral values and emotional repertoire' (p. 32).

As the introduction makes clear, *Exceptional Bodies* engages with a remarkably rich variety of representations of monsters before 1750, a year taken as a symbolic watershed before the advent of a modern hegemonic norm centred on a masculine, Eurocentric, abled paradigm: before the mid-eighteenth century, the volume argues, physical deviance was not always defined against a set standard, and this multiplicity of attitudes toward alterity needs to be fully acknowledged without replicating critically accepted frameworks according to which the transition from the Middle Ages as the age of the marvels to the eighteenth-century pathologizing craze was a straightforward, uniform, and universally shared process.

The volume is arranged in seven chapters — each of them well-written and accurately presenting a case study of an exceptional body from a very specific historical and geographical perspective — followed by an Afterword and preceded by an extremely useful Introduction by Bondestam. Here, starting from a brief history of monstrosity from the classical age to the Renaissance and a timely survey of the main critical trends in Monster and Disability studies, she illustrates the book's core arguments with a view to creating what proves to be a very fruitful conceptual framework that also accounts for the ways in which the chapters draw into contention some previous critical stands.

In Chapter 1, Maria Kavvadia focuses on *De arte gymnastica* (1569) by Girolamo Mercuriale, the humanist physician of one of the most powerful cardinals in mid-sixteenth-century Rome, Alessandro Farnese. As Kavvadia argues, in this treatise Mercuriale redefines the *moresca* — a highly popular and cherished court dance that made a spectacle of wondrous bodies in an elaborate set of theatrical and pantomimic performances involving several monstrous characters — as an ideal practice for health and moderation through the emphasis on the values of temperance, control and order. In so doing, Mercuriale defied Catholic reformers — who considered some aspects of dance culture unhealthy for both body and spirit, and specifically attacked the *moresca* as deviant — and witnessed to shifting medical and religious attitudes towards body culture.

Chapter 2 explores the multiple medical, allegorical, and religious meanings of the maternal imagery in ‘fugitive sheets’, an innovative category of anatomical printing with cut and pasted paper flaps, and especially in the ‘First Vision’ from Johann Remmelin’s *Catoptrum microcosmicum tryptich* (1619). Here, Rosemary Moore analyses the implications of the monstrous head placed over the genitals of a pregnant torso, which clearly symbolized the monstrous nature of female bodies but whose presence, at the same time, leads us to call into question widespread early modern medical perceptions of maternal imagination and visual imprinting as merely dangerous and corrupting. By reading the printed head as that of Medusa — turned ‘from something monstrous [...] into an emblem of knowledge and power’ (p. 75) — Moore argues for Remmelin’s emphasis on the generative power of female bodies.

In Chapter 3 Pablo García Piñar addresses the perception of bodily deviance in the early-seventeenth-century Spanish Empire through the figure of the Mexican playwright and lawyer Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, who was denied an office in the Hapsburg administration due to his physical deformity and deemed a threat to the Empire’s public image and authority. García Piñar discusses the influence of the Hapsburg administration on bodily regulation based on a perceived connection between bodily shape and the capabilities of the disabled subject. He does so by taking into account several contemporary fellow writers’ public responses against this decision in different literary genres (political treatises, mirrors for princes, satirical poems and plays, novels), as well as Ruiz de Alarcón’s own play *Las parades oyen* (1618), viewed as a site of resistance against ableist politics.

The anonymous satirical play *Divorce satyrique* (published in 1660), which stages the fake confession of Henry IV, King of France, is the subject of Chapter 4, in which Cécile Tresfels investigates the relationship between female power and monstrosity through the representation of the alleged monstrous sexuality of Henry’s wife, Marguerite de Valois, addressed as ‘the most deformed woman in France’. Tresfels claims that this satire presented Marguerite’s deformed body as the external manifestation of her inner depravity rather than monstrous per se, and implied that her sexual excesses were the main cause for the royal divorce, thus reinforcing early modern vilifying perceptions of transgressive female sexuality and creating ‘a monstrous representation of Marguerite that had long-lasting consequences on the reception of her historical character’ (p. 105).

Chapter 5 moves to the representation of hermaphrodites in *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) by French philosopher Pierre Bayle. Parker Cotton shows how — in light of early modern revivals of the Aristotelian tradition, which valued universal types

more than individual cases — Bayle ‘repeatedly connects the hermaphrodite to mythic tales and language, rather than engaging “real” accounts of intersexed persons’ (p. 123). As Cotton remarks, Bayle employed the hermaphrodite figure and especially the mythical category of ‘the first man’ to challenge the dogmatic theology of his time. By doing so, not only did he voice tendencies to dismiss individual bodies (‘exceptional’ and not) in late-seventeenth-century philosophical thought, but he also revealed alternative perceptions of the monstrous body when related to ideal idyllic and mythological figures.

Chapter 6 by Maja Bondestam offers a detailed discussion of how Johannes Schefferus, a leading German-Swedish intellectual of the late seventeenth century, in his recollection of the wonders he had come across throughout his life, ‘*Variae historiae*’ (1668), countered the penchant of natural philosophers to dismiss monsters as mere and irrelevant ‘errors of nature’, rather endowing wonders with educational and moral value, and seeing them as occasions to reflect on the imperfect nature of human beings. Through the analysis of the references to the so-called ‘prodigious son of a fisherman’, who was born in Sweden in the 1660s and ‘deviated in many ways from the expected shape and size of a newborn child’ (p. 141), Bondestam emphasizes how Schefferus ‘encouraged contact with unique bodies, odd things and remarkable events found in history and nature’ (p. 158), following in the ancient tradition of *exempla*, whereby abominable or imperfect objects were always displayed alongside beautiful and ‘perfect’ ones as warnings with a didactic purpose.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Tove Paulsson Holmberg engages with the late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century birth manuals of the Swedish physician and gynaecologist Johan von Hoorn. She focuses on his pioneering obstetrics methods and on the ambiguous status of his discussions of unborn corporeality and perinatal loss in relation to medical and religious discourses of the time, especially regarding stillbirth as being caused by specific limitations in contemporary birth practices. As clearly stated by Paulsson Holmberg, the aim of the essay is to ‘make concepts of viability part of studies on monstrous and exceptional bodies and practices and to trace the presence of death, decay and transformation in discourses and images of the early modern Swedish perinatal child’ (p. 164).

Kathleen Long’s Afterword closes the volume with a compelling overview of previous chapters, in which she retrieves key concepts such as the assumptions about the relationship between monstrous behaviours and monstrous bodies. In her view, the volume also has the merit of emphasizing and dwelling with historical and cultural

insight on ‘the complexity of early modern discussions of exceptional bodies’ (p. 190), thus offering a perspective on the topic that is significantly different from modern ones.

Exceptional Bodies is an intellectually engaging volume that marks a significant contribution to the understanding of early modern monstrosity and disability through a survey of rigorously documented case studies. Although the chapters deal with very different issues, literary genres, cultural traditions, and disciplines, the book displays considerable unity, as the single instances here described — though distant and apparently unrelated — all provide corroboration for the claims presented in the Introduction. This is a thought-provoking collection that calls into question previous assumptions about the perception and representation of unruly corporeality in early modern European culture. It offers a fresh perspective by advocating for the unique complexity of Renaissance understanding of monstrosity, and by adopting both a very inclusive approach to what pertains to alterity alongside very specific cultural-historical perspectives. In this the volume achieves its stated aim to ‘deepen the historical understanding of this range of meaning and propose a narrative based in historically specific tendencies, competing perspectives and local truths’ (p. 13). Thanks to its broad European and interdisciplinary scope, this collection of essays will pave the way for future research by stimulating discussion not only in the fields of Monster Studies and Disability Studies but also Medical Studies, History of Science, Literary Studies, Visual Culture, Theology, and Print Culture.