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Research Paper

Close encounters: “Monstrous” bodies and literary knowledge in early modern France



Rencontres : corps « monstrueux » et savoir littéraire en France au seuil de la modernité

Timothy Hampton

Department of Comparative Literature, University of California, 4125 Dwinelle Hall, 94720 Berkeley, CA, USA

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I study a series of moments from early modern literature in which characters confront “monstrous” bodies or abnormal bodies. I study how these scenes raise issues about the reading of the non-normal body. I trace the ways in which the interpretation of the non-normal body poses problems for fiction, and for the relationship between epistemological authority, on the one hand, and the knowledge generated by literature, on the other hand. I suggest that one way to understand the enduring appeal of the “monstrous” is as a motivating factor that generates innovation, both thematic and formal, in art. I argue that the “monstrous” both motivates literary originality and threatens the categories through which literary authority is articulated. My general argument is that we cannot understand the history of the monstrous without attention to the history of literature – and vice versa.

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E-mail address: thampton@berkeley.edu

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R É S U M É

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Dans cet article, j'analyse une série de moments dans la littérature au seuil de la modernité dans lesquels des personnages affrontent des corps « monstrueux » ou anormaux. J'analyse les questions soulevées par ces scènes concernant la lecture du corps non normal. Je retrace les manières par lesquelles l'interprétation du corps non normal pose des problèmes pour la fiction et pour la relation entre l'autorité épistémologique, d'un côté, et la connaissance générée par la littérature, d'un autre côté. Je suggère qu'une manière de comprendre l'attrait persistant du « monstrueux » est de le voir comme une force mobilisatrice et génératrice d'innovation, à la fois thématique et formelle, dans l'art. Je soutiens que le « monstrueux », en même temps, mobilise l'innovation littéraire et met en question les critères par lesquels l'autorité littéraire est articulée. Mon argument général est qu'on ne peut saisir l'histoire du monstrueux qu'à travers l'histoire de la littérature – et vice versa.

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1. Bodies and Texts

Francesco Guicciardini is one of the major philosophers of history of the Italian Renaissance. Like those of his friend Machiavelli, his works analyze politics as a game of power played out in what we might now call the “secular” world – a world beyond religious mystification, supernatural phenomena, or miracles. Yet, his 1537 masterpiece, the monumental *History of Italy*, begins with a story of monsters. The opening chapters offer an account of the 1494 French invasion of the Italian peninsula. This terrible event, which, Guicciardini says, brought ruin and years of instability to the Italian peninsula, was preceded by a series of monstrous births: “Everywhere human monsters and other animals were born. These and other things beyond the natural order took place, which filled the people with incredible terror” (Guicciardini, 1969: 32).¹ The French invasions, which ushered in the world of modern state-centered politics and precipitated the northward diffusion of Italian culture – our very notion of the “civilizing role” of Renaissance Italy – are, like the origins of Guicciardini's great narrative itself, presaged by the “unnatural” phenomenon of monstrosity.

The monstrous births that accompany the French invasions of Italy may be located in a somewhat larger proliferation of the monstrous in Europe around the end of the fifteenth century. As Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park have shown in their seminal work *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998), the arrival of cultural modernity in Europe – that moment that we conventionally call the Renaissance – was accompanied, in the social sphere, by a veritable epidemic of monstrosity. Monstrosity, which had traditionally been relegated in much medieval art and literature to the margins of “civilization”, suddenly made its appearance at the center of European society, with celebrated cases appearing in France, in Germany and in Italy. The new technology of the printing press, along with increased communication through trade, spread the stories of such cases quickly to every corner of the Continent. Given the fact that Guicciardini's own text marks an innovation in history writing by virtue of its focus on a “national” space and its analysis of power, we might ask what the relationship might be between the proliferation of monstrous forms and the development of the new forms of writing through which “modern” experience is shaped and given expression.² In other words, how does literature absorb and

¹ On the importance of this moment of linked monstrosity and politics see Jean Céard's seminal study, *La Nature et les prodiges: l'insolite au XVIe siècle*, 2nd edition (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 86–96.

² See Daston and Park (1998) chapter 5, especially pp. 173–180. When I mention Guicciardini's innovative historiography in the same breath as my larger interest in imaginative writing, I follow the classical discussions of historiography, which understood it, in its pre-19th century form, not as a “social science,” but as a part of what we now call “literature.”

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