A GENESIS OF MONSTERS AND THEIR ARTIFICIAL CREATION. FROM FICTION TO CONTEMPORARY MEDICINE

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Abstract:This paper is intended on pointing out the various means through which human imagination has, in the course of time, created the things that go bump in the night. What are the things that we fear? They are, most likely, figments of our collective imagination, derived from our inability, at a certain point in history, to comprehend a deviance from what it was thought of as normal, natural. This paper will outline the evolution of monstrosity from zoomorphism to humanoids and to the more recent medical advances.

Keywords: monster, zoomorphism, humanoid, anthropomorphism, genetic engineering, transplant

Mythological Monsters

Mythology is what must be taken into account when outlining a history of the unnatural body. The basis for European monstrosity lies in the stories of Greek and Christian mythology. Most of the monsters of the ancient Greeks were born into this world by the gods and by other monsters. On the other hand, some of them are created by the gods, to inspire awe and fear to mortal men. Hesiod's Theogony describes the birth of the Mother of monsters, as she has been known throughout history, with her zoomorphic characteristics:

"And in a hollow cave she bare another monster, irresistible, in no wise like either to mortal men or to the undying gods, even the goddess fierce Echidna who is half a nymph with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half again a huge snake, great and awful, with speckled skin, eating raw flesh beneath the secret parts of the holy earth." (Hesiod: 295-305)

The next lines of the Theogony describe Echidna's 'fierce offspring': Orthus the hound of Geryones, 'Cerberus who eats raw flesh, the brazen-voiced hound of Hades, fifty-headed, relentless and strong', the Hydra of Lerna, the Chimaera, the deadly Sphinx and the Nemean lion. (Hesiod: 306-332). All of her offspring were used by the gods with one purpose or another, usually to remind men of their mortality and frailty in comparison to their makers. The unusual aspect of all of these second-generation monsters is that they have no human characteristics.

If we go seven-eight centuries past Hesiod, to the period of Pliny, we find that the depiction of monsters changes to a large extent. Zoomorphism is still present, but a vast majority of anthropomorphic monsters come into being. They are catalogued John B. Friedman as being the Plinian Races, since he based his research on Pliny's work.

The monstrous races are situated to the far ends of the known world of the first century – India, Africa. They are, nonetheless, human races: the Amyctyrae (large-lipped, eating raw meat), the Anthropophagi (bluntly put, savage cannibals), the Artibatirae (walk on all fours), the Astomi (have no mouth, live on smell, can be killed by foul smells), the Blemmyae (with their faces on their chests), the Cynocephali (dog-headed men), the Garamantes (do not practice marriage), the Giants, the Hippopodes (with hooves instead of feet), the Pandae (give birth to only one child during their life, large ears, eight fingers and toes), the Pygmies, the Scipods (only one large foot, they use it for shade) and the list could go on. Many of these

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monsters have a natural explanation – such as the Amyctyrae (there are some African tribes in which it is customary for women to pierce their lips and insert round clay discs of up to 12 centimetres in diameter[1]) or the Anthropophagi which were, as their name states it, man-eaters. Thus, the basis for monstrosity shifts from the animals that inspired fear and awe to humans with characteristics that do not fit a common, natural matrix.

This is yet another evidence to sustain the idea that monsters are the solution that humanity has found in order to explain things that are different from the cultural and/or physiological frames of a certain group, in this case the Europeans. These Plinian monsters abounded in European culture from late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, when they reached their peak, being depicted at the edge of the world in virtually every map created in the period. (Friedman 2000: 1)

The Inner Monster

The other major source of monstrous imagination for the Europeans is derived from Christian belief. In fact, when saying Christian belief I should point out that reference is made to the Old Testament in particular, thus to the Judaic belief system, but since the Hebrew Torah is part of the Christian Bible, it is to this belief system that reference will be made to henceforth.

The genesis of Christian monsters is to some respects different from that of the Greek ones. Monstrosity receives another dimension; it becomes, in a way, self-generated. The main Christian monster is the Devil and his host of former angels that were dark within: "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast [them] down to hell, and delivered [them] into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment." (2 Peter 2:4)

A major source for monstrosity in the Christian tradition is the lineage of Cain, the slayer of his own kin. "Some writers argued that the races were distorted in form because they were descendants of the children of Adam who disregarded his warnings not to eat certain herbs. Others took them to be the descendants of Cain or of Noah's son Ham, who had been guilty of crimes that earned them exile." (Friedman 2000: 89) This is directly linked to the idea that disrespect of the rules instituted by divinity or by the ruler is a monstrous act in itself and will lead to the banishment of the culprit, which will be reflected even in his appearance and in that of his successors.

From this moment onward, Europeans begin to view monstrosity as something more related to humanity than ever before. Of course, monsters proper still exist, (dragons, manticores, giant octopi etc.), but some of the most fierce and feared are those that were human beings once. This is due to the fact that that which can come from within yourself or from within those around you inspires more fear than a dragon or any other creature you can easily notice and protect yourself from.

"Monstrous births were understood as warnings and public testimony; they were thought to be 'demonstrations' of the mother's unfulfilled desire. The monster was then seen as a visible image of the mother's hidden passions." (Huet 1993: 6) This is how monstrous births were seen in the 17th century. This supports the idea that humanoid monsters had lost their normal traits due to internal deviations from the norm. These deviations could have taken place either in the mother, during the pregnancy, imbuing the offspring with faulty characteristics as a public proof of the mother's trespasses, or in the human itself – as is the case of witches. It is common knowledge that witches gained their monstrous characteristics only after indulging in their craft, communing with the Devil himself. The warts, the elongated nose, their shrieks, their overall sickly looks were the direct cause of their dealing with the dark powers.

As I have stated before, Lucifer's monstrosity lies mainly in the constitution of his soul – a perverted, sinful one. He is depicted in art as a horrendous creature, half man, half goat,

[1] For more information, visit < http://www.mursi.org/introducing-the-mursi/Body%20Art/lip-plates >

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with features that inspire fear, precisely due to the medieval conception that the outside reflects that which lies within.

Therefore, the great shift in the origins of the monstrous takes the fears of mankind from the zoomorphic to the anthropomorphic, from the physical to the spiritual. Interestingly enough, mankind seems to be constantly afraid of the unknown and so, has a seemingly endless supply of sources for fear.

The Monstrosity of Science

So far, I have described three of the major ways in which monsters came to be – divine creation, birth (of other monsters or humans) and outer monstrosity derived from the inner one. But there is another highly productive manner through which monsters come to see the light of day and that is science.

The two precursors to artificially created monsters are the Jewish golems (creatures made of clay and under the control of a rabbi) and Victor Frankenstein's monster – the humanoid jig-saw puzzle conceived through the assembling of body-parts taken from corpses and revived in a science laboratory. "When Victor Frankenstein animates the lump of flesh and skin and bones that he has assembled in his 'filthy workshop of creation', he brings to life body horror." (Halberstam 2000: 28) This is evidence to another change in what the source of monstrosity is. We witness a return to the bodily monstrosity per se, irrespective to any correlation to the soul. This outer monstrosity is definable as a deviance from the standard body, as anything grotesque: "By focusing on the body as the locus of fear, Shelley's novel suggests that it is people (or at least bodies) who terrify people, not ghosts or gods, devils or monks, windswept castles or labyrinthine monasteries." (Idem)

Going over a century into the future, the perception of monstrosity is made from an entirely fresh perspective: that of science. Developments in science have ensured a new dimension and an infinite array of possibilities to create monsters.

The two main topics I would like to discuss here are genetic engineering and transplants. Genetic engineering is possibly the first monstrosity of science since it implies altering the natural state of a being, in order to imbue it with new characteristics (iridescent animals, more productive plants etc.) or toying with genetics in order to recreate a living being (as was the famous case of Dolly).

The main debate concerning genetic engineering is centred on its ethics, or lack thereof. (Hodge 2009: 151) It is clear that this scientific advancement can be put to good use, but to what cost? The main international concerns of this being not ethical are those that arise from humanity's fear of undermining divinity, no matter its form. The fact that one could create various body parts in a laboratory, organs that would prove vital for some terminally-ill patients, fades in importance to the fact that this would mean that the scientist plays the part of a god in this process. As far as monstrosity goes in terms of its unnaturalness, human body parts (ears) have been grown on mice, DNA sequences from various species have been mixed (LeVine 2006: 1), clearing the path for infinite possibilities in terms of monstrous creations.

The biggest fear that this emergent field of research has risen in humanity is that of cloning another human being. In 2004, claims were made on a successful human cloning, which were proven false. Then, 2008 brought about the creation of embryos from a researcher's own skin cells that survived for five days. (Hodge 2009: 151) This was indeed a breakthrough for science, whereas for society it meant that the imagination could go astray. Sci-Fi movies and public opinion seemed to go hand in hand from that point onward.

It is clear that advancements in science and technology have been made and that they will continue to be made in a more and more alert rhythm in the near future, but their pros and cons are surrounded by uncertainty.

As far as transplants are concerned, medicine seems to be perfecting Victor Frankenstein's work. The possibility of performing liver, kidney, heart transplants delight the

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public opinion due to their life-saving character. They are not viewed as monstrous acts, since they do not leave visible marks on the body, except for a scar. But recently, transplants have taken a step further into murky waters. Limbs and faces are being transplanted ever since the brink of the new millennium.

Transplants of both arms[2] or both legs[3] have been successfully performed in Europe and the United States, as well as face transplants. Transplanting another person's face, as well as limbs, involves high physical and psychological risks. The ethics of these procedures are not that controversial, since the family of the donor has to agree to the transplant and since the receiver undergoes extensive psychological therapy. Nonetheless, this is one of the major developments in science that instantaneously make a person find monstrosity in the act. This is probably due to Shelly's monster, which is, to some respects, the precursor image of the result of a transplant.

Thus, it is safe to conclude that monstrosity is not something that lingers merely in the mists of history, but rather an ever-evolving concept, adapting to the realities of its time and, more accurately, to the vision of society.

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[2] For instance, view the case of Brendan Marrocco < http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/9835400/US-soldier-undergoes-successful-double-arm-transplant.html>

[3]< http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/8979693/Patient-with-worlds-first-dual-leg-transplant-takes-first-steps.html >

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