

Maja Bondestam, ed., *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture: Concepts of Monstrosity before the Advent of the Normal*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 201 pp, cloth. \$110.00.

*Exceptional Bodies* examines various different examples of exceptional bodies – meaning, in this case, those bodies which were considered by observers to 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” (11). Similar to Daston and Park’s *Wonder and the Orders of Nature 1150 – 1750* but with greater focus on the human body, the individual chapters analyze the ways in which extraordinary bodies were related to ordinary ones – both positively and negatively – in the works of individual authors.

The subject of the first chapter is the *moresca*, an acrobatic, theatrical dance style that often had narrative and monstrous elements within it. Branded vulgar along with many dances by spiritual reformers in Counter-Reformation Rome, Kavvadia’s chapter argues that Girolamo Mercuriale’s *De arte gymnastica* places the *moresca* within a medical context (and thus salubrious for physical health and bodily temperance), an act which reveals tensions in perceptions of the body and how the desire to view exceptional bodies was placed in conflict with reformative impulses.

Moore’s chapter argues that previous scholarly perspectives on the “First Vision” in Johann Remmelin’s *Catoptrum microcosmicum* have missed the essential subversive and spatial nature of the work’s “fugitive sheet” medium, printed books with flaps that reveal the body and other subjects in layers. Previous research has suggested that the Medusa-like image covering the genitals of a pregnant torso reinforces the perceived monstrosity of the female reproductive system for its intended readers. However, Moore complicates this reading by suggesting that the layered images of the fugitive sheet are more complicated than their surface might suggest. For example, one image of the Tetragrammaton is layered underneath with a cherub, a bearded man in bishop’s garb, and finally – and most shockingly – a devil’s face! Moore concludes that the Medusa’s head is more complicated than it appears and could stand for multiple meanings, such as the power of the maternal imagination, knowledge, creation, and a warning for the male gaze.

“The Optics of Bodily Deviance” follows the life and work of Mexican playwright Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Mendoza and his attempts to secure an administrative position in 17<sup>th</sup> century Spain. This attempt was complicated by the perception of bodies and authority in the Hapsburg administration, which viewed Ruiz de Alarcón’s body as “unfit” (Piñar argues on textual evidence that he suffered from hyperkyphosis). While he did not receive the position that he sought, the chapter argues that he was noteworthy for another reason: producing what may be the first disabled character written from the vantage of someone who was themselves disabled.

The *Divorced satyrique* proclaims Marguerite de Valois to be “the most deformed woman in France,” and the like named chapter argues that this deformity is articulated through essentializing Marguerite’s sexuality. As with many monstrous depictions of women, Marguerite’s deformity relies upon a notion of femininity that she either fails to live up to or superfluously exceeds.

The following chapter addresses the theologically useful figure of the hermaphrodite in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire*. Parker Cotton argues that this theological use is in the hermaphrodites ability to provide challenges to and reconsideration of the original and perfect state of humanity prior to the Fall.

Bondestam's own chapter – an evaluation of the work of Johannes Schefferus with particular attention paid to the “prodigious” elements of a fisherman's son – is one of the more thought-provoking pieces. In it, she argues that Schefferus neither normalized nor naturalized his monsters. Rather, the prodigies of which he wrote were intended as remarkable *exempla* that encouraged the reflection of the audience. This attitude may have been widespread in Sweden, calling into question the commonly deployed binary of wonder-nature for the time period.

The final essay in the collection – “Ambiguous and Transitional Bodies” – evaluates the birthing manuals of Johan von Hoorn, arguing that the transitional bodies of infants in instructive images are sharply contrasted by the descriptions of mothers: the former being passive and silent, the latter active and pleading for aid. This implicitly encouraged manual intervention to aid mothers in the birthing process, privileging the extent life over the possible.

Finally, though not necessarily an article unto itself, Kathleen Long's afterword links the contributions together. Long forges this connection by noting that all the bodies in the volume deviate from a perceived order of things to which the human belongs. The idealized body represents stability and structure, while the extraordinary body generates anxiety but also contemplation and reflection.

As with many edited volumes, there are questions of coherence that arise. The chapters on the *moresca* dance and stillbirth for instance – though excellently argued and well-written – do not connect to the ideas of “extraordinary bodies” to the same degree that the other chapters do. Bondestam's introduction – exceptionally focused on the issue of monstrosity – does little to remedy this connectivity. However, this is a rather small quibble, and the volume will certainly be of interest to those involved in monster studies and those interested in the period before the introduction of one of the most threatening terms in the English language: “normal.”

Michael E. Heyes, Lycoming College