

1 Monster Culture (Seven Theses)

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

What I will propose here by way of a first foray, as entrance into this book of monstrous content, is a sketch of a new *modus legendi*: a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender. In doing so, I will partially violate two of the sacred dicta of recent cultural studies: the compulsion to historical specificity and the insistence that all knowledge (and hence all cartographies of that knowledge) is local. Of the first I will say only that in cultural studies today history (disguised perhaps as “culture”) tends to be fetishized as a *telos*, as a final determinant of meaning; post de Man, post Foucault, post Hayden White, one must bear in mind that history is just another text in a procession of texts, and not a guarantor of any singular signification. A movement away from the *longue durée* and toward microeconomies (of capital or of gender) is associated most often with Foucauldian criticism; yet recent critics have found that where Foucault went wrong was mainly in his details, in his minute specifics. Nonetheless, his methodology—his archaeology of ideas, his histories of unthought—remains with good reason the chosen route of inquiry for most cultural critics today, whether they work in postmodern cyberspace or in the Middle Ages.

And so I would like to make some grand gestures. We live in an age that has rightly given up on Unified Theory, an age when we realize that history (like “individuality,” “subjectivity,” “gender,” and “culture”) is composed of a multitude of fragments, rather than of smooth epistemological wholes. Some fragments will be collected here and bound temporarily together to form a loosely integrated net—or, better, an unassimilated hybrid, a monstrous body. Rather than argue a “theory of

teratology,” I offer by way of introduction to the essays that follow a set of breakable postulates in search of specific cultural moments. I offer seven theses toward understanding cultures through the monsters they bear.

Thesis I: The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body

Vampires, burial, death: inter the corpse where the road forks, so that when it springs from the grave, it will not know which path to follow. Drive a stake through its heart: it will be stuck to the ground at the fork, it will haunt that place that leads to many other places, that point of indecision. Behead the corpse, so that, acephalic, it will not know itself as subject, only as pure body.

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place.¹ The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a 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. These epistemological spaces between the monster’s bones are Derrida’s familiar chasm of *differance*: a genetic uncertainty principle, the essence of the monster’s vitality, the reason it always rises from the dissection table as its secrets are about to be revealed and vanishes into the night.

Thesis II: The Monster Always Escapes

We see the damage that the monster wreaks, the material remains (the footprints of the yeti across Tibetan snow, the bones of the giant stranded on a rocky cliff), but the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else (for who is the yeti if not the medieval wild man? Who is the wild man if not the biblical and classical giant?). No matter how many times King Arthur killed the ogre of Mount Saint Michael, the monster reappeared in another heroic chronicle, bequeathing the Middle Ages an abundance of *morte d’Arthurs*. Regardless of how many times Sigourney Weaver’s beleaguered Ripley utterly destroys the

ambiguous Alien that stalks her, its monstrous progeny return, ready to stalk again in another bigger-than-ever sequel. No monster tastes of death but once. The anxiety that condenses like green vapor into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns. And so the monster's body is both corporal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift.

Each time the grave opens and the unquiet slumberer strides forth ("come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all"), the message proclaimed is transformed by the air that gives its speaker new life. Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them. In speaking of the new kind of vampire invented by Bram Stoker, we might explore the foreign count's transgressive but compelling sexuality, as subtly alluring to Jonathan Harker as Henry Irving, Stoker's mentor, was to Stoker.² Or we might analyze Murnau's self-loathing appropriation of the same demon in *Nosferatu*, where in the face of nascent fascism the undercurrent of desire surfaces in plague and bodily corruption. Anne Rice has given the myth a modern rewriting in which homosexuality and vampirism have been conjoined, apotheosized; that she has created a pop culture phenomenon in the process is not insignificant, especially at a time when gender as a construct has been scrutinized at almost every social register. In Francis Coppola's recent blockbuster, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, the homosexual subtext present at least since the appearance of Sheridan Le Fanu's lesbian lamia (*Carmilla*, 1872) has, like the red corpuscles that serve as the film's leitmotif, risen to the surface, primarily as an AIDS awareness that transforms the disease of vampirism into a sadistic (and very medieval) form of redemption through the torments of the body in pain. No coincidence, then, that Coppola was putting together a documentary on AIDS at the same time he was working on *Dracula*.

In each of these vampire stories, the undead returns in slightly different clothing, each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event: *la décadence* and its new possibilities, homophobia and its hateful imperatives, the acceptance of new subjectivities unfixed by binary gender, a fin de siècle social activism paternalistic in its embrace. Discourse extracting a transcultural, trans-temporal phenomenon labeled "the vampire" is of rather limited utility; even if vampiric figures are found almost worldwide, from ancient Egypt to modern Hollywood, each reappearance and its analysis is still bound

in a double act of construction and reconstitution.³ “Monster theory” must therefore concern itself with strings of cultural moments, connected by a logic that always threatens to shift; invigorated by change and escape, by the impossibility of achieving what Susan Stewart calls the desired “fall or death, the stopping” of its gigantic subject,⁴ monstrous interpretation is as much process as epiphany, a work that must content itself with fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses—signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself).

Thesis III: The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis

The monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization. Of the nightmarish creature that Ridley Scott brought to life in *Alien*, Harvey Greenberg writes:

It is a Linnean nightmare, defying every natural law of evolution; by turns bivalve, crustacean, reptilian, and humanoid. It seems capable of lying dormant within its egg indefinitely. It sheds its skin like a snake, its carapace like an arthropod. It deposits its young into other species like a wasp. . . . It responds according to Lamarckian *and* Darwinian principles.⁵

This refusal to participate in the classificatory “order of things” is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.

Because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes—as “that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis.”⁶ This power to evade and to undermine has coursed through the monster’s blood from classical times, when despite all the attempts of Aristotle (and later Pliny, Augustine, and Isidore) to incorporate the monstrous races⁷ into a coherent epistemological system, the monster always escaped to return to its habitations at the margins of the world (a purely conceptual locus rather than a geographic one).⁸ Classical “wonder books” radically undermine the Aristotelian taxonomic system, for by refusing an easy compartmentalization of their monstrous contents, they demand a radical rethinking of boundary and normality. The too-precise laws of nature as set forth by science are gleefully violated in

the freakish compilation of the monster's body. A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a "system" allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration—allowing what Hogle has called with a wonderful pun "a deeper play of differences, a nonbinary polymorphism at the 'base' of human nature."⁹

The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world.¹⁰ In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble. The monstrous is a genus too large to be encapsulated in any conceptual system; the monster's very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure; like the giants of *Mandeville's Travels*, it threatens to devour "all raw & quyk" any thinker who insists otherwise. The monster is in this way the living embodiment of the phenomenon Derrida has famously labeled the "supplement" (*ce dangereux supplément*):¹¹ it breaks apart bifurcating, "either/or" syllogistic logic with a kind of reasoning closer to "and/or," introducing what Barbara Johnson has called "a revolution in the very logic of meaning."¹²

Full of rebuke to traditional methods of organizing knowledge and human experience, the geography of the monster is an imperiling expanse, and therefore always a contested cultural space.

Thesis IV: The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.

The exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrous aberration is familiar enough. The most famous distortion occurs in the Bible, where the aboriginal inhabitants of Canaan are envisioned as menacing giants to justify the Hebrew colonization of the Promised Land (Numbers 13). Representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement

or extermination by rendering the act heroic. In medieval France the *chansons de geste* celebrated the crusades by transforming Muslims into demonic caricatures whose menacing lack of humanity was readable from their bestial attributes; by culturally glossing “Saracens” as “monstra,” propagandists rendered rhetorically admissible the annexation of the East by the West. This representational project was part of a whole dictionary of strategic glosses in which “monstra” slipped into significations of the feminine and the hypermasculine.

A recent newspaper article on Yugoslavia reminds us how persistent these divisive mythologies can be, and how they can endure divorced from any grounding in historical reality:

A Bosnian Serb militiaman, hitchhiking to Sarajevo, tells a reporter in all earnestness that the Muslims are feeding Serbian children to the animals in the zoo. The story is nonsense. There aren’t any animals left alive in the Sarajevo zoo. But the militiaman is convinced and can recall all the wrongs that Muslims may or may not have perpetrated during their 500 years of rule.¹³

In the United States, Native Americans were presented as unredeemable savages so that the powerful political machine of Manifest Destiny could push westward with disregard. Scattered throughout Europe by the Diaspora and steadfastly refusing assimilation into Christian society, Jews have been perennial favorites for xenophobic misrepresentation, for here was an alien culture living, working, and even at times prospering within vast communities dedicated to becoming homogeneous and monolithic. The Middle Ages accused the Jews of crimes ranging from the bringing of the plague to bleeding Christian children to make their Passover meal. Nazi Germany simply brought these ancient traditions of hate to their conclusion, inventing a Final Solution that differed from earlier persecutions only in its technological efficiency.

Political or ideological difference is as much a catalyst to monstrous representation on a micro level as cultural alterity in the macrocosm. A political figure suddenly out of favor is transformed like an unwilling participant in a science experiment by the appointed historians of the replacement regime: “monstrous history” is rife with sudden, Ovidian metamorphoses, from Vlad Tepes to Ronald Reagan. The most illustrious of these propaganda-bred demons is the English king Richard III, whom Thomas More famously described as “little of stature, ill fetured

of limmes, croke backed, his left shoulder much higher then his right, hard faououred of visage. . . . hee came into the worlde with feete forward, . . . also not vntothed.”¹⁴ From birth, More declares, Richard was a monster, “his deformed body a readable text”¹⁵ on which was inscribed his deviant morality (indistinguishable from an incorrect political orientation).

The almost obsessive descanting on Richard from Polydor Vergil in the Renaissance to the Friends of Richard III Incorporated in our own era demonstrates the process of “monster theory” at its most active: culture gives birth to a monster before our eyes, painting over the normally proportioned Richard who once lived, raising his shoulder to deform simultaneously person, cultural response, and the possibility of objectivity.¹⁶ History itself becomes a monster: defeating, self-deconstructive, always in danger of exposing the sutures that bind its disparate elements into a single, unnatural body. At the same time Richard moves between Monster and Man, the disturbing suggestion arises that this incoherent body, denaturalized and always in peril of disaggregation, may well be our own.

The difficult project of constructing and maintaining gender identities elicits an array of anxious responses throughout culture, producing another impetus to teratogenesis. The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith (“die erste Eva,” “la mère obscure”),¹⁷ Bertha Mason, or Gorgon.¹⁸ “Deviant” sexual identity is similarly susceptible to monsterization. The great medieval encyclopedist Vincent of Beauvais describes the visit of a hermaphroditic cynocephalus to the French court in his *Speculum naturale* (31.126).¹⁹ Its male reproductive organ is said to be disproportionately large, but the monster could use either sex at its own discretion. Bruno Roy writes of this fantastic hybrid: “What warning did he come to deliver to the king? He came to bear witness to sexual norms. . . . He embodied the punishment earned by those who violate sexual taboos.”²⁰ This strange creature, a composite of the supposedly discrete categories “male” and “female,” arrives before King Louis to validate heterosexuality over homosexuality, with its supposed inversions and transformations (“Equa fit equus,” one Latin writer declared; “The horse becomes a mare”).²¹ The strange dog-headed monster is a living excoriation of gender ambiguity and sexual abnormality, as Vincent’s cultural moment defines them: heteronormalization incarnate.

From the classical period into the twentieth century, race has been almost as powerful a catalyst to the creation of monsters as culture, gender, and sexuality. Africa early became the West's significant other, the sign of its ontological difference simply being skin color. According to the Greek myth of Phaëton, the denizens of mysterious and uncertain Ethiopia were black because they had been scorched by the too-close passing of the sun. The Roman naturalist Pliny assumed nonwhite skin to be symptomatic of a complete difference in temperament and attributed Africa's darkness to climate; the intense heat, he said, had burned the Africans' skin and malformed their bodies (*Natural History*, 2.80). These differences were quickly moralized through a pervasive rhetoric of deviance. Paulinus of Nola, a wealthy landowner turned early church homilist, explained that the Ethiopians had been scorched by sin and vice rather than by the sun, and the anonymous commentator to Theodulus's influential *Ecloga* (tenth century) succinctly glossed the meaning of the word *Ethyopum*: "Ethiopians, that is, sinners. Indeed, sinners can rightly be compared to Ethiopians, who are black men presenting a terrifying appearance to those beholding them."²² Dark skin was associated with the fires of hell, and so signified in Christian mythology demonic provenance. The perverse and exaggerated sexual appetite of monsters generally was quickly affixed to the Ethiopian; this linking was only strengthened by a xenophobic backlash as dark-skinned people were forcibly imported into Europe early in the Renaissance. Narratives of miscegenation arose and circulated to sanction official policies of exclusion; Queen Elizabeth is famous for her anxiety over "blackamoores" and their supposed threat to the "increase of people of our own nation."²³

Through all of these monsters the boundaries between personal and national bodies blur. To complicate this category confusion further, one kind of alterity is often written as another, so that national difference (for example) is transformed into sexual difference. Giraldus Cambrensis demonstrates just this slippage of the foreign in his *Topography of Ireland*; when he writes of the Irish (ostensibly simply to provide information about them to a curious English court, but actually as a first step toward invading and colonizing the island), he observes:

It is indeed a most filthy race, a race sunk in vice, a race more ignorant than all other nations of the first principles of faith. . . . These people who have customs so different from others, and so opposite to them, on making signs either with the hands or the head, beckon when they mean that

you should go away, and nod backwards as often as they wish to be rid of you. Likewise, in this nation, the men pass their water sitting, the women standing. . . . The women, also, as well as the men, ride astride, with their legs stuck out on each side of the horse.²⁴

One kind of inversion becomes another as Giraldus deciphers the alphabet of Irish culture—and reads it backwards, against the norm of English masculinity. Giraldus creates a vision of monstrous gender (aberrant, demonstrative): the violation of the cultural codes that valence gendered behaviors creates a rupture that must be cemented with (in this case) the binding, corrective mortar of English normalcy. A bloody war of subjugation followed immediately after the promulgation of this text, remained potent throughout the High Middle Ages, and in a way continues to this day.

Through a similar discursive process the East becomes feminized (Said) and the soul of Africa grows dark (Gates).²⁵ One kind of difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram, abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster. This violent foreclosure erects a self-validating, Hegelian master/slave dialectic that naturalizes the subjugation of one cultural body by another by writing the body excluded from personhood and agency as in every way different, monstrous. A polysemy is granted so that a greater threat can be encoded; multiplicity of meanings, paradoxically, iterates the same restricting, agitprop representations that narrowed signification performs. Yet a danger resides in this multiplication: as difference, like a Hydra, sprouts two heads where one has been lopped away, the possibilities of escape, resistance, disruption arise with more force.

René Girard has written at great length about the real violence these debasing representations enact, connecting monsterizing depiction with the phenomenon of the scapegoat. Monsters are never created *ex nihilo*, but through a process of fragmentation and recombination in which elements are extracted “from various forms” (including—indeed, especially—marginalized social groups) and then assembled as the monster, “which can then claim an independent identity.”²⁶ The political-cultural monster, the embodiment of radical difference, paradoxically threatens to *erase* difference in the world of its creators, to demonstrate

the potential for the system to differ from its own difference, in other words not to be different at all, to cease to exist as a system. . . . Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality. . . . Despite what is said around us persecutors are never obsessed with difference but rather by its unutterable contrary, the lack of difference.²⁷

By revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed. Because it is a body across which difference has been repeatedly written, the monster (like Frankenstein's creature, that combination of odd somatic pieces stitched together from a community of cadavers) seeks out its author to demand its *raison d'être*—and to bear witness to the fact that it could have been constructed Otherwise. Godzilla trampled Tokyo; Girard frees him here to fragment the delicate matrix of relational systems that unite every private body to the public world.

Thesis V: The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible

The monster resists capture in the epistemological nets of the erudite, but it is something more than a Bakhtinian ally of the popular. From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes. The giants of Patagonia, the dragons of the Orient, and the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park together declare that curiosity is more often punished than rewarded, that one is better off safely contained within one's own domestic sphere than abroad, away from the watchful eyes of the state. The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself.

Lycaon, the first werewolf in Western literature, undergoes his lupine metamorphosis as the culmination of a fable of hospitality.²⁸ Ovid relates how the primeval giants attempted to plunge the world into anarchy by wrenching Olympus from the gods, only to be shattered by divine thunderbolts. From their scattered blood arose a race of men who continued their fathers' malignant ways.²⁹ Among this wicked progeny was Lycaon, king of Arcadia. When Jupiter arrived as a guest at his house,

Lycaon tried to kill the ruler of the gods as he slept, and the next day served him pieces of a servant's body as a meal. The enraged Jupiter punished this violation of the host-guest relationship by transforming Lycaon into a monstrous semblance of that lawless, godless state to which his actions would drag humanity back:

The king himself flies in terror and, gaining the fields, howls aloud, attempting in vain to speak. His mouth of itself gathers foam, and with his accustomed greed for blood he turns against the sheep, delighting still in slaughter. His garments change to shaggy hair, his arms to legs. He turns into a wolf, and yet retains some traces of his former shape.³⁰

The horribly fascinating loss of Lycaon's humanity merely reifies his previous moral state; the king's body is rendered all transparency, instantly and insistently readable. The power of the narrative prohibition peaks in the lingering description of the monstrously composite Lycaon, at that median where he is both man and beast, dual natures in a helpless tumult of assertion. The fable concludes when Lycaon can no longer speak, only signify.

Whereas monsters born of political expedience and self-justifying nationalism function as living invitations to action, usually military (invasions, usurpations, colonizations), the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, evaluating others. It is possible, for example, that medieval merchants intentionally disseminated maps depicting sea serpents like Leviathan at the edges of their trade routes in order to discourage further exploration and to establish monopolies.³¹ Every monster is in this way a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves. The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—*must* not—be crossed.

Primarily these borders are in place to control the traffic in women, or more generally to establish strictly homosocial bonds, the ties between men that keep a patriarchal society functional. A kind of herdsman, this monster delimits the social space through which cultural bodies may move, and in classical times (for example) validated a tight, hierarchical system of naturalized leadership and control where every man had a

functional place.³² The prototype in Western culture for this kind of “geographic” monster is Homer’s Polyphemos. The quintessential xenophobic rendition of the foreign (the *barbaric*—that which is unintelligible within a given cultural-linguistic system),³³ the Cyclopes are represented as savages who have not “a law to bless them” and who lack the *techne* to produce (Greek-style) civilization. Their archaism is conveyed through their lack of hierarchy and of a politics of precedent. This dissociation from community leads to a rugged individualism that in Homeric terms can only be horrifying. Because they live without a system of tradition and custom, the Cyclopes are a danger to the arriving Greeks, men whose identities are contingent upon a compartmentalized function within a deindividualizing system of subordination and control. Polyphemos’s victims are devoured, engulfed, made to vanish from the public gaze: cannibalism as incorporation into the wrong cultural body.

The monster is a powerful ally of what Foucault calls “the society of the panopticon,” in which “polymorphous conducts [are] actually extracted from people’s bodies and from their pleasures . . . [to be] drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated, by multifarious power devices.”³⁴ Susan Stewart has observed that “the monster’s sexuality takes on a separate life”;³⁵ Foucault helps us to see why. The monster embodies those sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster. *She and Them!*: the monster enforces the cultural codes that regulate sexual desire.

Anyone familiar with the low-budget science fiction movie craze of the 1950s will recognize in the preceding sentence two superb films of the genre, one about a radioactive virago from outer space who kills every man she touches, the other a social parable in which giant ants (really, Communists) burrow beneath Los Angeles (that is, Hollywood) and threaten world peace (that is, American conservatism). I connect these two seemingly unrelated titles here to call attention to the anxieties that monsterized their subjects in the first place, and to enact syntactically an even deeper fear: that the two will join in some unholy miscegenation. We have seen that the monster arises at the gap where difference is perceived as dividing a recording voice from its captured subject; the criterion of this division is arbitrary, and can range from anatomy or skin color to religious belief, custom, and political ideology. The monster’s destructiveness is really a deconstructiveness: it threatens to reveal that difference originates in process, rather than in fact (and that “fact” is

subject to constant reconstruction and change). Given that the recorders of the history of the West have been mainly European and male, women (*She*) and nonwhites (*Them!*) have found themselves repeatedly transformed into monsters, whether to validate specific alignments of masculinity and whiteness, or simply to be pushed from its realm of thought.³⁶ Feminine and cultural others are monstrous enough by themselves in patriarchal society, but when they threaten to mingle, the entire economy of desire comes under attack.

As a vehicle of prohibition, the monster most often arises to enforce the laws of exogamy, both the incest taboo (which establishes a traffic in women by mandating that they marry outside their families) and the decrees against interracial sexual mingling (which limit the parameters of that traffic by policing the boundaries of culture, usually in the service of some notion of group “purity”).³⁷ Incest narratives are common to every tradition and have been extensively documented, mainly owing to Lévi-Strauss’s elevation of the taboo to the founding base of patriarchal society. Miscegenation, that intersection of misogyny (gender anxiety) and racism (no matter how naive), has received considerably less critical attention. I will say a few words about it here.

The Bible has long been the primary source for divine decrees against interracial mixing. One of these pronouncements is a straightforward command from God that comes through the mouth of the prophet Joshua (Joshua 23:12ff.); another is a cryptic episode in Genesis much elaborated during the medieval period, alluding to “sons of God” who impregnate the “daughters of men” with a race of wicked giants (Genesis 6:4). The monsters are here, as elsewhere, expedient representations of other cultures, generalized and demonized to enforce a strict notion of group sameness. The fears of contamination, impurity, and loss of identity that produce stories like the Genesis episode are strong, and they reappear incessantly. Shakespeare’s Caliban, for example, is the product of such an illicit mingling, the “freckled whelp” of the Algerian witch Sycorax and the devil. Charlotte Brontë reversed the usual paradigm in *Jane Eyre* (white Rochester and lunatic Jamaican Bertha Mason), but horror movies as seemingly innocent as *King Kong* demonstrate miscegenation anxiety in its brutal essence. Even a film as recent as 1979’s immensely successful *Alien* may have a cognizance of the fear in its underworkings: the grotesque creature that stalks the heroine (dressed in the final scene only in her underwear) drips a glistening slime of K-Y Jelly

from its teeth; the jaw tendons are constructed of shredded condoms; and the man inside the rubber suit is Bolaji Badejo, a Masai tribesman standing seven feet tall who happened to be studying in England at the time the film was cast.³⁸

The narratives of the West perform the strangest dance around that fire in which miscegenation and its practitioners have been condemned to burn. Among the flames we see the old women of Salem hanging, accused of sexual relations with the black devil; we suspect they died because they crossed a different border, one that prohibits women from managing property and living solitary, unmanaged lives. The flames devour the Jews of thirteenth-century England, who stole children from proper families and baked seder matzo with their blood; as a menace to the survival of English race and culture, they were expelled from the country and their property confiscated. A competing narrative again implicates monstrous economics—the Jews were the money lenders, the state and its commerce were heavily indebted to them—but this second story is submerged in a horrifying fable of cultural purity and threat to Christian continuance. As the American frontier expanded beneath the banner of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century, tales circulated about how “Indians” routinely kidnapped white women to furnish wives for themselves; the West was a place of danger waiting to be tamed into farms, its menacing native inhabitants fit only to be dispossessed. It matters little that the protagonist of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* did not rape and butcher his employer’s daughter; that narrative is supplied by the police, by an angry white society, indeed by Western history itself. In the novel, as in life, the threat occurs when a nonwhite leaves the reserve abandoned to him; Wright envisions what happens when the horizon of narrative expectation is firmly set, and his conclusion (born out in seventeenth-century Salem, medieval England, and nineteenth-century America) is that the actual circumstances of history tend to vanish when a narrative of miscegenation can be supplied.

The monster is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed. The repressed, however, like Freud himself, always seems to return.

Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire

The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce. The monster also attracts. The same creatures

who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity, for the fact that the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic (thesis, antithesis . . . no synthesis). We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.

Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture. When contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self. The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality. We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light.³⁹ Likewise, the story on the page before us may horrify (whether it appears in the *New York Times* news section or Stephen King's latest novel matters little), so long as we are safe in the knowledge of its nearing end (the number of pages in our right hand is dwindling) and our liberation from it. Aurally received narratives work no differently; no matter how unsettling the description of the giant, no matter how many unbaptized children and hapless knights he devours, King Arthur will ultimately destroy him. The audience knows how the genre works.

Times of carnival temporally marginalize the monstrous, but at the same time allow it a safe realm of expression and play: on Halloween everyone is a demon for a night. The same impulse to ataractic fantasy is behind much lavishly bizarre manuscript marginalia, from abstract scribblings at the edges of an ordered page to preposterous animals and vaguely humanoid creatures of strange anatomy that crowd a biblical text. Gargoyles and ornately sculpted grotesques, lurking at the cross-beams or upon the roof of the cathedral, likewise record the liberating fantasies of a bored or repressed hand suddenly freed to populate the

margins. Maps and travel accounts inherited from antiquity invented whole geographies of the mind and peopled them with exotic and fantastic creatures; Ultima Thule, Ethiopia, and the Antipodes were the medieval equivalents of outer space and virtual reality, imaginary (wholly verbal) geographies accessible from anywhere, never meant to be discovered but always waiting to be explored. Jacques Le Goff has written that the Indian Ocean (a “mental horizon” imagined, in the Middle Ages, to be completely enclosed by land) was a cultural space

where taboos were eliminated or exchanged for others. The weirdness of this world produced an impression of liberation and freedom. The strict morality imposed by the Church was contrasted with the discomfiting attractiveness of a world of bizarre tastes, which practiced coprophagy and cannibalism; of bodily innocence, where man, freed of the modesty of clothing, rediscovered nudism and sexual freedom; and where, once rid of restrictive monogamy and family barriers, he could give himself over to polygamy, incest, and eroticism.⁴⁰

The habitations of the monsters (Africa, Scandinavia, America, Venus, the Delta Quadrant—whatever land is sufficiently distant to be exoticized) are more than dark regions of uncertain danger: they are also realms of happy fantasy, horizons of liberation. Their monsters serve as secondary bodies through which the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs can be explored. Hermaphrodites, Amazons, and lascivious cannibals beckon from the edges of the world, the most distant planets of the galaxy.

The co-optation of the monster into a symbol of the desirable is often accomplished through the neutralization of potentially threatening aspects with a liberal dose of comedy: the thundering giant becomes the bumbling giant.⁴¹ Monsters may still function, however, as the vehicles of causative fantasies even without their valences reversed. What Bakhtin calls “official culture” can transfer all that is viewed as undesirable in itself into the body of the monster, performing a wish-fulfillment drama of its own; the scapegoated monster is perhaps ritually destroyed in the course of some official narrative, purging the community by eliminating its sins. The monster’s eradication functions as an exorcism and, when retold and promulgated, as a catechism. The monastically manufactured *Queste del Saint Graal* serves as an ecclesiastically sanctioned antidote to the looser morality of the secular romances; when Sir Bors comes across a castle where “ladies of high descent and rank” tempt him to sexual

indulgence, these ladies are, of course, demons in lascivious disguise. When Bors refuses to sleep with one of these transcorporal devils (described as “so lovely and so fair that it seemed all earthly beauty was embodied in her”), his steadfast assertion of control banishes them all shrieking back to hell.⁴² The episode valorizes the celibacy so central to the authors’ belief system (and so difficult to enforce) while inculcating a lesson in morality for the work’s intended secular audience, the knights and courtly women fond of romances.

Seldom, however, are monsters as uncomplicated in their use and manufacture as the demons that haunt Sir Bors. Allegory may flatten a monster rather thin, as when the vivacious demon of the Anglo-Saxon hagiographic poem *Juliana* becomes the one-sided complainer of Cynewulf’s *Elene*. More often, however, the monster retains a haunting complexity. The dense symbolism that makes a thick description of the monsters in Spenser, Milton, and even *Beowulf* so challenging reminds us how permeable the monstrous body can be, how difficult to dissect.

This corporal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice. A certain intrigue is allowed even Vincent of Beauvais’s well-endowed cynocephalus, for he occupies a textual space of allure before his necessary dismissal, during which he is granted an undeniable charm. The monstrous lurks somewhere in that ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction, close to the heart of what Kristeva calls “abjection”:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, fascinates desire, which, nonetheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. . . . But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.⁴³

And the self that one stands so suddenly and so nervously beside is the monster.

The monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities—personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, universal, particular (even if that “particular” identity is

an embrace of the power/status/knowledge of abjection itself); as such it reveals their partiality, their contiguity. A product of a multitude of morphogeneses (ranging from somatic to ethnic) that align themselves to imbue meaning to the Us and Them behind every cultural mode of seeing, the monster of abjection resides in that marginal geography of the Exterior, beyond the limits of the Thinkable, a place that is doubly dangerous: simultaneously “exorbitant” and “quite close.” Judith Butler calls this conceptual locus “a domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible effects,” but points out that even when discursively closed off, it offers a base for critique, a margin from which to reread dominant paradigms.⁴⁴ Like Grendel thundering from the mere or Dracula creeping from the grave, like Kristeva’s “boomerang, a vortex of summons” or the uncanny Freudian-Lacanian return of the repressed, the monster is always coming back, always at the verge of irruption.

Perhaps it is time to ask the question that always arises when the monster is discussed seriously (the inevitability of the question a symptom of the deep anxiety about what is and what should be thinkable, an anxiety that the process of monster theory is destined to raise): Do monsters really exist?

Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?

Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming

“This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.”

Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.

Notes

1. Literally, here, *Zeitgeist*: Time Ghost, the bodiless spirit that uncannily incorporates a “place” that is a series of places, the crossroads that is a point in a *movement* toward an uncertain elsewhere. Bury the *Zeitgeist* by the crossroads: it is confused as it awakens, it is not going anywhere, it intersects everyplace; all roads lead back to the monster.

2. I realize that this is an interpretive biographical maneuver Barthes would surely have called “the living death of the author.”

3. Thus the superiority of Joan Copjec’s “Vampires, Breast-feeding, and Anxiety,” *October* 58 (Fall 1991): 25–43, to Paul Barber’s *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988).

4. “The giant is represented through movement, through being in time. Even in the ascription of the still landscape to the giant, it is the activities of the giant, his or her legendary actions, that have resulted in the observable trace. In contrast to the still and perfect universe of the miniature, the gigantic represents the order and disorder of historical forces.” Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 86.

5. Harvey R. Greenberg, “Reimaging the Gargoyle: Psychoanalytic Notes on *Alien*,” in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, ed. Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 90–91.

6. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 11. Garber writes at some length about “category crisis,” which she defines as “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave.... [T]hat which crosses the border, like the transvestite] will always function as a mechanism of overdetermination—a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another. An analogy here might be the so-called ‘tagged’ gene that shows up in a genetic chain, indicating the presence of some otherwise hidden condition. It is not the gene itself, but its presence, that marks the trouble spot, indicating the likelihood of a crisis somewhere, elsewhere” (pp. 16–17). Note, however, that whereas Garber insists that the transvestite must be read *with* rather than *through*, the monster can be read only *through*—for the monster, pure culture, is nothing of itself.

7. These are the ancient monsters recorded first by the Greek writers Ktesias and Megasthenes, and include such wild imaginings as the Pygmies, the Sciapods (men with one large foot with which they can hop about at tremendous speed or that they can lift over their reclining bodies as a sort of beach umbrella), Blemmyae (“men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders,” in Othello’s words), and Cynocephali, ferocious dog-headed men who are anthropophagous to boot. John Block Friedman has called these creatures the Plinian races, after the classical encyclopedist who bestowed them to the Middle Ages and early modern period. *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

8. The discussion of the implication of the monstrous in the manufacture of heuristics is partially based upon my essay "The Limits of Knowing: Monsters and the Regulation of Medieval Popular Culture," *Medieval Folklore* 3 (Fall 1994): 1-37.

9. Jerrold E. Hogle, "The Struggle for a Dichotomy: Abjection in Jekyll and His Interpreters," in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde after One Hundred Years*, ed. William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 161.

10. "The hermeneutic circle does not permit access or escape to an uninterrupted reality; but we do not [have to] keep going around in the same path." Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Belief and Resistance: A Symmetrical Account," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991): 137-38.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

12. Barbara Johnson, "Introduction," in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xiii.

13. H. D. S. Greenway, "Adversaries Create Devils of Each Other," *Boston Globe*, December 15, 1992, 1.

14. Thomas More, *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 2, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), 7.

15. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1988), 30. My discussion of Richard is indebted to Marjorie Garber's provocative work.

16. "A portrait now in the Society of Antiquaries of London, painted about 1505, shows a Richard with straight shoulders. But a second portrait, possibly of earlier date, in the Royal Collection, seems to emblemize the whole controversy [over Richard 's supposed monstrosity], for in it, X-ray examination reveals an original straight shoulder line, which was subsequently painted over to present the raised right shoulder silhouette so often copied by later portraitists." *Ibid.*, 35.

17. I am hinting here at the possibility of a feminist recuperation of the gendered monster by citing the titles of two famous books about Lilith (a favorite figure in feminist writing): Jacques Bril's *Lilith, ou, La Mere obscure* (Paris: Payot, 1981), and Siegmund Hurwitz's *Lilith, die erste Eva: Eine Studie über dunkle Aspekte des Weiblichen* (Zurich: Daimon Verlag, 1980).

18. "The monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay 'his' anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained 'place' and thus generates a story that 'gets away' from its author." Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 28. The "dangerous" role of feminine will in the engendering of monsters is also explored by Marie-Hélène Huet in *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

19. A cynocephalus is a dog-headed man, like the recently decanonized Saint Christopher. Bad enough to be a cynocephalus without being hermaphroditic to

boot: the monster accrues one kind of difference on top of another, like a magnet that draws differences into an aggregate, multivalent identity around an unstable core.

20. Bruno Roy, "En marge du monde connu: Les races de monstres," in *Aspects de la marginalité au Moyen Age*, ed. Guy-H Allard. (Quebec: Les Éditions de l'Aurore, 1975), 77. This translation is mine.

21. See, for example, Monica E. McAlpine, "The Pardoners Homosexuality and How It Matters," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 8–22.

22. Cited by Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, 64.

23. Elizabeth deported "blackamoores" in 1596 and again in 1601. See Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in Othello," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), 148.

24. See Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernae (The History and Topography of Ireland)*, trans. John J. O'Meara (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1982), 24.

25. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

26. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 33.

27. Ibid., 21–22.

28. Extended travel was dependent in both the ancient and medieval world on the promulgation of an ideal of hospitality that sanctified the responsibility of host to guest. A violation of that code is responsible for the destruction of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, for the devolution from man to giant in *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*, and for the first punitive transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This popular type of narrative may be conveniently labeled the fable of hospitality; such stories envalue the practice whose breach they illustrate through a drama repudiating the dangerous behavior. The valorization is accomplished in one of two ways: the host is a monster already and learns a lesson at the hands of his guest, or the host becomes a monster in the course of the narrative and audience members realize how they should conduct themselves. In either case, the cloak of monstrousness calls attention to those behaviors and attitudes the text is concerned with interdicting.

29. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Loeb Classical Library no. 42), ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916, rpr. 1984), I.156–62.

30. Ibid., I.231–39.

31. I am indebted to Keeryung Hong of Harvard University for sharing her research on medieval map production for this hypothesis.

32. A useful (albeit politically charged) term for such a collective is *Männerbunde*, "all-male groups with aggression as one major function." See Joseph Harris, "Love and Death in the *Männerbund*: An Essay with Special Reference to the *Bjarkamál* and *The Battle of Maldon*," in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute/Western Michigan State University, 1993), 78. See also the *Interscripta* discussion of "Medieval Masculinities," moderated and edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, accessible via WWW: <http://www.george>

town.edu/labyrinth/e-center/interscripta/mm.html (the piece is also forthcoming in a nonhypertext version in *Arthuriana*, as “The Armour of an Alienating Identity”).

33. The Greek word *barbaros*, from which we derive the modern English word *barbaric*, means “making the sound *bar bar*”—that is, not speaking Greek, and therefore speaking nonsense.

34. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 47–48.

35. Stewart, *On Longing*. See especially “The Imaginary Body,” 104–31.

36. The situation was obviously far more complex than these statements can begin to show; “European,” for example, usually includes only males of the Western Latin tradition. Sexual orientation further complicates the picture, as we shall see.

Donna Haraway, following Trinh Minh-ha, calls the humans beneath the monstrous skin “inappropriate/d others”: “To be ‘inappropriate/d’ does not mean ‘not to be in relation with’—i.e., to be in a special reservation, with the status of the authentic, the untouched, in the allochronic and allotropic condition of innocence. Rather to be an ‘inappropriate/d other’ means to be in critical deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)ality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination.” “The Promises of Monsters,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 299.

37. This discussion owes an obvious debt to Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

38. John Eastman, *Retakes: Behind the Scenes of 500 Classic Movies*, 9–10.

39. Paul Coates interestingly observes that “the horror film becomes the essential form of cinema, monstrous content manifesting itself in the monstrous form of the gigantic screen.” *The Gorgon’s Gaze* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 77. Carol Clover locates some of the pleasure of the monster film in its cross-gender game of identification; see *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). Why not go further, and call the pleasure cross-somatic?

40. Jacques Le Goff, “The Medieval West and the Indian Ocean,” in *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 197. The postmodern equivalent of such spaces is Gibsonian cyberspace, with its MOOs and MUSHes and other arenas of unlimited possibility.

41. For Mikhail Bakhtin, famously, this is the transformative power of laughter: “Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great internal censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, fear of the prohibitions, of the past, of power.” *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 94. Bakhtin traces the moment of escape to the point at which laughter became a part of the “higher levels of literature,” when Rabelais wrote *Gargantua et Pantagruel*.

42. *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, trans. Pauline Matarasso (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 194.

43. Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

44. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York:

Routledge, 1993), 22. Both Butler and I have in mind here Foucault's notion of an emancipation of thought "from what it silently thinks" that will allow "it to think differently." Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1985), 9. Michael Uebel amplifies and applies this practice to the monster in his essay in this volume.