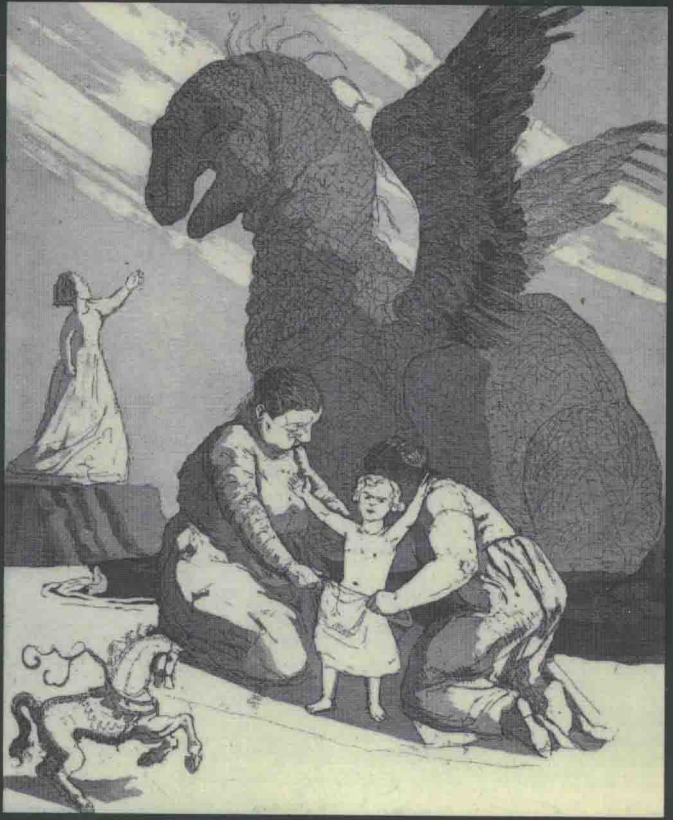


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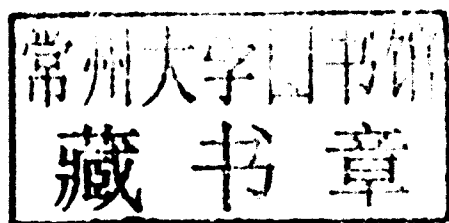
Monsters &  
their Meanings  
in Early Modern Culture  
Mighty Magic

WES WILLIAMS

# Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture

*Mighty Magic*

WES WILLIAMS



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MONSTERS AND THEIR  
MEANINGS IN EARLY MODERN CULTURE

For Deana, Elsie Mae, and T. J.

## *Preface and Acknowledgements*

'Pour effrayant que soit un monstre, la tâche de le décrire est toujours un peu plus effrayante que lui.' Paul Valéry, 'Au sujet d'Adonis'

This book has been a long time in the making and I have incurred many debts in the process. Without the generosity of the AHRC Research Leave Scheme it might never have been completed. I am also very grateful to the Faculty of Modern Languages at the University of Oxford, to New College, and to St Edmund Hall, for granting me periods of sabbatical and extra leave to get the work done. I should like to thank the staff of several libraries for their assistance throughout the course of the project: the Taylor Institution; the Cambridge University Library; the Bibliothèque Mazarine; New College, Oxford; the Codrington Library, All Souls College, Oxford; the Bibliothèque nationale de France; the Wellcome Institute; and the British Library. The organizers and audiences of the many conferences and seminar series that gave me the opportunity to explore, present, and discuss some of the material that found its way into the book also contributed to this work, not least in making fine sense of the conversational nature of our collective enterprise.

Earlier versions of parts of some chapters that follow have appeared in the following publications: 'Back to the Future: "Les Enfantements de Nostre Esprit"', in *Pre-Histories and Afterlives: Studies in Critical Method*, eds. Anna Holland and Richard Scholar (Oxford: Legenda, 2009), pp. 121–133; 'For Your Eyes Only: Corneille's View of Andromeda', *Classical Philology*, 102 (2007), 110–23; "'Tant de monstres difformes": Les animaux, les anormaux et les misères de ce temps', in *L'Animal sauvage à la Renaissance*, eds. Philip Ford, Dominique Bertrand et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge French Colloquia and SFDES, 2007), pp. 399–409; 'Being in the Middle: Translation, Transition, and the Early Modern', *Paragraph* 29:1 (March 2006), 27–39; 'Some Monsters: Montaigne, Heliodorus, and Some Others', in *Proceedings of the Seventh Cambridge French Renaissance Colloquium 7–9 July 2001: Self and Other in Sixteenth-Century France*, eds. Kathryn Banks and Philip Ford (Cambridge French Colloquia, 2004), pp. 143–57. Permission to reuse this material is gratefully acknowledged.

My bibliography is a record of some of the encounters, debates, and arguments that have shaped this project as it has progressed. I have also benefited immeasurably from discussions, information, conversations, notes, queries, reminders, and practical help from many, many people. In particular, I should like to thank Nick Whitfield, Emily Woof, Ed Gaughan, Katherine Ibbett, Tony Nuttall, Andrew Kahn, Kate Tunstall, Richard Parish, Richard Cooper, Emma Webb, Marie-Chantal Killeen, Eddie Greenwood, Neil Kenny, Jess Shaw, John O'Brien, James Attlee, Marina Warner, Ben Morgan, Jean Céard, Anna Holland, Michael Moriarty, Frank Lestringant, Jas Elsner, Patricia Palmer, Mary McKinley, Karen Leeder, Catriona Kelly, Alex Marr, Françoise Lavocat, Philippe Desan, Alexis

Tadié, Joan Williams, Jake Wadham, Alon Shoval, Mark Woolhouse, Lana Gligic and family. I am especially grateful to Paula Rego for permission to use her version of Andromeda as the image on the cover of this book.

Ann Jefferson, Michael Hawcroft, Conrad Leyser, Rowan Tomlinson, Tim Chesters, Timothy Hampton, Kathryn Banks, Emma Herdman, Amy Wygant, Richard Scholar, Alain Viala, Elizabeth Tepper, Deana Rankin, Terence Cave, and Ian Maclean all deserve special thanks for having read and commented on drafts of parts (or in some cases the whole) of what follows.

My monsters were also, and especially, born of teaching. The book is the fruit of many years of tutorials and seminars—first at New College, and then at St Edmund Hall—on the papers known in the Oxford University Modern Languages Faculty as ‘Paper VII’ and ‘Paper X’. The first is a crazily all-inclusive ‘period’ paper that corresponds to a three-hundred-year chunk of writing variously classed as ‘the middle period’, ‘French Literature from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment’, and, more recently, ‘Topics in the Early Modern Period’. The second is a ‘special authors’ paper that fosters engagement in close study of a single author (including almost all of those whose names head my chapters). That I have felt it both necessary and possible to cross the at times heavily policed professional border between the lands of the ‘seiziémistes’ and the ‘dix-septiémistes’ is in part due to the old-fangled demands of these two papers. But it is mainly thanks to the inspiration provided by generations of students with whom I have explored and discussed many of the questions addressed in what follows. That I have not pursued the story told here into the eighteenth century is largely due to the book’s argument concerning the connectedness of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French culture, particularly in respect of the attention paid to monsters in certain conflictual contexts, and in the wake of the civil wars. But it is also because I do not regularly teach beyond Racine. I am enormously grateful to Andrew McNeillie for suggesting that these monsters might find a home at OUP, to the Press’s anonymous readers for their suggestions and encouragement, to my deftly expert and Argus-eyed copy-editor, Richard Mason, and to both Ariane Petit and Kathleen Kerr for their patient shepherding of the manuscript to completion.

My greatest debt is recorded in the dedication; our children have made particular and wondrous sense of a project that ostensibly predates their arrival; Deana Rankin has been there from the beginning, and has stayed with it: without her, none of this would have been possible.

W. W. 2010

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All quotations retain their original punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, except in rare cases when confusion would arise. The uses of *i* and *j*, *u* and *v*, however, have been modernized, and standard early modern abbreviations and contractions have been silently expanded. Long titles have been curtailed, in footnote references especially. Page numbers for Montaigne's *Essais* refer first to the standard French edition, edited by Pierre Villey and V-L. Saulnier, and then to Donald Frame's translation; I have noted those rare occasions when I have altered Frame to better represent the particular sense of the passage under discussion. All other translations are mine unless otherwise indicated in the footnotes.

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## Introduction: 'Mighty Magic'

*Othello*: By your gracious patience,  
I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver  
Of my whole course of love; what drugs, what charms,  
What conjuration and what mighty magic,  
For such proceeding I am charged withal,  
I won his daughter.

*Duke of Venice*: Say it, Othello.

(*Othello*, I, 3, 89–94)

### I. OTHELLO'S DEFENCE: NARRATIVE AND THE DOMESTICATION OF MONSTERS

To call something 'monstrueux' in the mid-sixteenth century is, more often than not, to wonder at its enormous size. It is to call to mind, as Rabelais's narrator does when announcing the imminent arrival of the 'grand et monstrueux Physeter' at the start of the thirty-third chapter of the quest narrative that is his *Quart Livre*, something like a whale. By the late seventeenth century the term 'monstrueux' is more likely to denote hidden intentions, unspoken desires. Racine's *Phèdre* acknowledges its heroine's incestuous passion for her stepson and political rival Hippolyte as monstrous long before the sea monster emerges from the enfolded waves to kill the boy, offstage, at the conclusion of the play.

Several shifts are at work in this word history, shifts which can be described in a number of ways. The clearest, and perhaps most compelling, is a topographical romance, narrating a process of increasing internalization: one which follows the migration of monsters from natural history to moral philosophy, their wandering out of the external world and into the drama of human motivation, of sexual and political identity. This is, broadly speaking, the migratory narrative—from Rabelais to Racine, by way of Montaigne, Shakespeare, and a host of others—traced in the course of this book, as it charts the ways in which monsters come to adopt a central position in early modern culture's imagination of itself. Put most schematically, monsters move off the maps and into the home, move from being literally out there, other in some external sense, to being metaphorically in here, interior, constitutive of the self.



This thematic narrative of internalization is accompanied by a formal movement in directions at once inverse and opposite. Monsters proper migrate away from Christian Europe's categorical understanding of nature, of God's work within it and at its borders, and of the words with which to speak of such things; they take flight into metaphor, story, and rumour. Spoken of only in the several tenses of the past, or in the fiction of the conditional, monsters find themselves characterized as in a strict sense unrepresentable, banished offstage, somehow obscene. The movement of monsters is emblematic, then, of that larger story whereby a poetics of obsessive inclusion, of variety, *copia*, and generic instability is displaced by one of apparent simplicity, purity, and rule-bound precision. The Rabelaisian world of words is finally cleared of its monsters by that Hercules of poetics, Racine.

'Je n'ay veu,' Montaigne claims, 'monstre ou miracle au monde plus expres que moy-mesme.' [I have seen no more evident monster or miracle in the world than myself.]<sup>1</sup> This, just one of the many points where Montaigne talks monsters, exemplifies a particular turn taken by the language of monstrosity in the early modern period: a turn inward, towards a philosophical (as opposed to natural historical, political, or otherwise allegorical) investigation of human identity, towards what we now call 'the self'. Readers have long seen in this inward turn the mark of Montaigne's proto-modernity: there are, he seems to say, no monsters in nature, other than those which lie within the divided and fractured human self. And yet it is far from the case that monsters are altogether domesticated as 'mere' metaphor over the course of the early modern period; still less that they leave the natural world, never to return. Indeed if monsters move over the course of the early modern period, then they do so from what we might call the geographical and generic margins to the very centre of vernacular writing. Sloughing off the maps and rising out of the sea, they migrate into the courtroom, into the (medical) theatre, into religious polemic, women's imagination, the home, the marriage bed.

This study reads against the grain of over-hasty assimilations of Montaigne and his imagined heirs to the realm of 'mere' metaphor, and so to modernity. It does so not least in order to gain a more historically specific sense of the figure of the monster as one inextricably linked with the force of the imagination, a force which Montaigne understands, in common with others of his time, to be the *différend* distinguishing humans from other animals. At once social and physiological, the imagination proves, throughout the early modern period, alarmingly fertile in monsters. To understand its power in any kind of detail is to engage in a project which is—can only be—programmatically reflexive; it must both establish the shape of the transformation in the location and meanings of monsters, and ask questions about how cultural change comes to be represented. It must, then, both seek to write the history of significant cultural change, and present a series of careful, contextual readings of the ways in which literary texts both represent and enact such change.

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, 'des Boyteux' (III, 11), p. 1,029/787 [translation altered]. For more on this claim, see below, Chapter Three.