



Zakiya Hanafi. *The Monster in the Machine: Magic, Medicine, and the Marvelous in the Time of the Scientific Revolution*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. xii + 272 pp. \$56.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2568-0.

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## Thinking with monsters

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In his *Summa* on Early Modern demonology, Stuart Clark taught us few years ago how to “think with demons”[1]. Among numerous other points he established that seemingly irrational beliefs in, for instance, the powers of demons were an integral part of the Early Modern world view. More than that, he convincingly argued that there is no reason for denying a scientific status to contemporary discussions about the extraordinary physical capacities of demons. There were things that demons admittedly could not do, such as—the most referred to example—generating life. On the other hand, there were many other things beyond human reach that they were able to perform owing to their genuinely angelic qualities. Yet, the demons’ nature was, extraordinary as it may have appeared, bound to comply with the laws of the physical world.

In tandem with Stuart Clark’s book, one can read Zakiya Hanafi’s *The Monster in the Machine* as an insightful lesson in Early Modern “thinking with monsters.” Both Clark and Hanafi—who does not refer to Clark in her publication—consider the object of their intellectual curiosity within the limits of its own time and its own logic, thus avoiding the danger of abusive and anachronistic conclusions. Their overall approach, however, differs considerably. Clark’s carefully crafted construction contrasts with Hanafi’s much looser thread. As she puts it in the preface, she wanted to assemble a “mosaic of texts and ideas that offers a colorful, suggestive picture

of monstrosity and humanity” (p. xi) in seventeenth-century Italy, notifying the public in advance of the fact that her “nomadic eye might seem undisciplined to some readers and exciting to others” (ibid.).

Exciting it is, even if the chapters of the book form different facets of something other than a whole. The author’s definition of monstrosity is increasingly extended, being applied to (and at the same time derived from) “monstrous matter,” “monstrous machines,” the “monstrous body,” and “monstrous metaphor.” In the brief look back at Antiquity, which opens the book, the “monster” appears as a counterpart to the human “at both its ‘lower’ and ‘upper’ thresholds: half-animal or half-god” (p. 2). As Hanafi’s study progresses, the definition becomes more and more intricate, monstrosity ending up as a metaphor applied to a particular way of histrionic preaching in *seicento* Italy (preachable conceits requiring a “monstrously hybridized coupling of terms and material,” p. 208). What all the references to “real” or metaphorical monstrosity have in common is that the monster is “something other,” delimiting in one way or another the self. This statement may seem overly general, yet it serves as a leading thread through a fascinating account of some potentially neglected areas of Early Modern intellectual history of Italy.

At that place and time, monstrosity had lost—at least among the students and practitioners of philosophy, medicine, and natural magic, to which Hanafi is referring—its fearful and awe-inspiring character. In-

stead, monstrosity became the object of scientific curiosity, leading to the dissection, description, and exhibition of monstrous bodies. This change of attitude reminds us of the partial “naturalisation” of demons, to which we have hinted at the beginning of this review. It implied the question, to cite Hanafi, “whether nature produces monsters intentionally or randomly, or whether she simply ‘slips up’ occasionally” (p. 27). This topic, which leads the author to an instructive presentation of ideas inherited from Antiquity on the generation of life, stimulated the imagination of natural philosophers wondering about the possibility of creating monsters intentionally. Giambattista della Porta, for instance, evokes in his *Magia Naturalis* the mixing of different semen in one womb: a “monstrous” thought indeed that is likely to make us think of genetic engineering.

In the subsequent chapter on “monstrous machines,” Hanafi stretches the boundaries of the concept of monstrosity, applying it to things one would approach in terms of simple curiosity. Yet in doing so, the author complies with contemporary categories: “technological creations [such as mechanical birds], monstrous races [i.e., New World “savages“], and demonic idols [for instance speaking statues] are often grouped together in early modern Italian texts” (p. 63). In other words, the monstrous other is not only to be found in nature, it equally inhabits man-made prodigies, the least sophisticated of which may have been distorting mirrors. However, these mirrors were not just amusing, innocent optical devices: indeed, the author points at the fact that “illusion, mirrors, deception, and diabolic intervention are a common cluster of attributes to be found in seventeenth-century treatises on artificial magic” (p. 75). The monstrous other is thus looming behind the distorted self that

appears in the mirror. This example (only one of all those quoted) leads us in the following chapter on medicine to the discipline—or should it be termed art?—of physiognomy and to the disturbing insights it may offer disclosing the “beast within.”

In a subsection of this chapter, Hanafi takes a step further in her discussion of monstrosity. It is less a matter of weirdness regarding for example the number of not enough or too many limbs. Instead monstrosity is, as she writes, “defined by natural or unnatural relations between inanimate matter and an animate life force,” inanimate matter moving of its own accord being a “fundamental violation of natural law” (p. 121). This approach prompts a fascinating review of then state-of-the-art medicine centering on the question of the principle of life, and, particular, how the impulses of the will are communicated to the extremities. In some passages the links with the book’s “monstrous” topic may have been overstretched, the discourse entering into its own dynamic. On the other hand, Zakiya Hanafi provides her readers with enlightening pages on seventeenth-century physiological thought, on Giambattista Vico’s medico-political conceptions and his own physical suffering, and on the art and dangers of ingenious preaching. As a whole, *The Monster in the Machine* stands out as an exceptionally readable and enjoyable essay on *seicento* (mostly) Italian intellectual history, guiding its readers through a great number of colorful places.

#### Note

[1]. Stuart Clark. *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. Oxford, England, and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1997.

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