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MEARCSTAPA: TEN YEARS OF TERATOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

Melissa Ridley Elmes, Guest Editor

Ten years ago, back in 2008, a group of scholars interested in a diverse range of cultural figures at that point in time typically marginalized as subjects for serious critical study—werewolves, ghosts and revenants, giants, fairies and elves, vampires, the monsters on medieval *mappa mundi*, in medieval texts, in manuscript marginalia, and in premodern artwork and architecture—gathered in fellowship at a Kalamazoo watering hole during the 43rd annual International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMS).

Over the course of the conversation that ensued, a consensus was reached that in order to legitimize the study of such preternatural subjects in academia there needed to be regular opportunities for scholars to organize and attend conference panels and subsequently to publish their work on such topics; and that in order to facilitate those panels and publications, there needed to be an interdisciplinary scholarly society supporting these aims. After a lively discussion, with many possibilities tossed around as to what one might actually name such an organization—"The Society for Monster Studies"? "The Interdisciplinary Association for the Study of Monsters and Monstrosity"? "The Society for the Advancement of Critical Scholarship on the Study of the Preternatural"?—another consensus was reached: that it would be difficult to come up with a name for such an organization that would not sound absurd, or like a joke, to scholars not engaged in such studies and unaware of their often deeply serious nature. The group decided they might as well try to have some fun with it while also coming up with a final name that said something about its members' interests. At some point towards the end of the evening, a napkin from the bar bore, scribbled out in Asa Simon Mittman's distinctive scrawl: *monsters: the*

experimental association for the research of cryptozoology through scholarly theory and practical application. Or, MEARCSTAPA for short. That spring, the fledgling association put in its first successful bid for a session at the 44th International Congress on Medieval Studies. Ten years later, MEARCSTAPA has hosted panels at every ICMS, most of the International Medieval Congresses hosted at Leeds University, and annually at several regional conferences, including the Southeastern Medieval Association, the Medieval Association of the Pacific, and the Popular Culture Association. These sessions, in turn, have catalyzed a number of scholarly projects on preternatural topics, culminating in graduate theses, dissertations, monographs, edited collections, journal articles—and now, this: “Ten Years of Teratology,” a special issue of *Preternature* dedicated to MEARCSTAPA’s ten-year anniversary.

The organization was founded by scholars primarily engaged with the study of premodern subjects, and bears as its name an acronym formed from the word describing the most famous monsters in Old English literature: the *mearcstapa*, or march-dwellers—Grendel and his mother, who wander the desolate borderlands in the epic *Beowulf*. Yet, from the outset, the organization has always been an interdisciplinary and transhistorical society, its membership as interested in modern as in ancient and medieval iterations of monsters, monstrosities, the supernatural, and the preternatural. As its guest editor, my goal for this issue of *Preternature* was to include work that, first and foremost, centers the critical interest, modern relevance, and ethical concerns of monster studies, and also both honors MEARCSTAPA’s past and gestures toward the future of preternatural studies in which the organization hopes to play a part. This special issue thus includes both articles revised from papers given in MEARCSTAPA-sponsored conference panels and also new and emerging scholarship. In keeping with the organization’s interdisciplinary and transhistorical emphasis, these articles represent a range of interests—from monsters in a thirteenth-century manuscript to dragons in late-medieval hagiography; from monstrous medievalism to the vampires of modern novels.

Diane Heath’s article, “Boundary Blurring between the Monstrous, the Marvelous, and the Miraculous: The Battle between Virtues and Vices in a Thirteenth-Century Theological Miscellany,” started out as a truly memorable presentation given with great humor and wonderful images at the 45th annual International Congress on Medieval Studies, in one of our earliest MEARCSTAPA-sponsored sessions, “The Monstrous, the Marvelous, and the Miraculous.” I was fortunate both to have organized that session and to have been in the audience for her presentation, and am absolutely delighted that Diane

elected to revise and publish it in this guest issue honoring MEARCSTAPA's role in generating and promoting monster scholarship. In its revised form as an article, this study provides a rich example of the multiple functions of illustration programs in medieval manuscripts generally, and of monsters in such programs, specifically. Looking at British Harley ms. 3244, a manuscript on penance and pastoral care that is rich in monstrous illuminations, Heath reassesses claims made by earlier scholars that the manuscript's image program emphasizes the depiction of a militarization of the medieval Christian ethos. Rather, Heath claims that the bi-folio images form both a pictorial narrative and an early septenary for meditation; that the Seven Deadly Sins in the central diagram are anthropomorphic and monstrous allegorical figures embodying symbolic sinfulness and indicating social and religious tensions; and that the importance of these grotesque figures lies in their engagement both with Christian sinfulness and also the perceived enemies of Christian authority, including Jews, Muslims, and heretics. Heath's article engages with the depiction of Christian ideals and their perceived enemies in non-Christian figures visually and textually represented as monsters and monstrous beings—a foundation for modern racist ideologies, and one of the ongoing critical scholarly concerns of medieval monster studies and their medievalism counterparts.

Hagiography is among the medieval literary genres most populated with monsters and the monstrous, typically placed in juxtaposition against a Christian saint to demonstrate the saint's piety and holiness (and humanness) in comparison to the monstrous and demonic opposition, much as in the presentation of monsters in Heath's Harley manuscript study. In "Margaret and the Dragon: Lydgate's Adoption of the Apocryphal," Lesley Kordecki turns an ecofeminist's eye to the well-known hagiographic tale in which Saint Margaret of Antioch makes the sign of the cross and bursts forth unharmed from the belly of the dragon that has swallowed her. Kordecki notes that in the version of the story inherited and told by John Lydgate in the fifteenth century, there is an ironic presentation of the woman/saint and the dragon/demon, all marginalized figures in their own right; when Margaret is swallowed by the dragon, she is reborn with the dragon's power, which allows her, now centered as a saint rather than marginalized as a woman, to defeat Satan. However, being centered as a saint means she is also ultimately martyred as a Christian woman; though a virgin, she prays as she is led to her execution that her power be given as an aid to women during childbirth. Kordecki points out the irony in Margaret's role as patron saint of childbirth, though she is a virgin; the dragon, having "given birth" to Margaret, is technically better suited to that role. Kordecki's examination of the

ambiguities and, ultimately, the apocryphal nature of Lydgate's representation of Margaret and the dragon, conflates the marginalized categories of woman and monster, giving voice to the tensions between sex and gender, human and nonhuman, which often underscore literary depictions of monstrosity and lie at the heart of many feminist critical studies of the preternatural.

In Kordecki's study, we see what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has called "category crisis" occur with the conflation of human and dragon, saint and demon, gender and monstrosity.¹ This same idea of the often ambiguous narrative roles played by monsters guides Suzy Woltmann's Kristevan study, "'Pointless, Ridiculous Monster': Monstrous Abjection and Event in 'The House of Asterion' and *Grendel*," with the category crisis here being that between monster and protagonist. Woltmann examines two modern stories—Jorge Luis Borges's "The House of Asterion" and John Gardner's *Grendel*—for how they update the originally and traditionally monstrous figures of the Minotaur of classical Greek mythology and the Old English *mearcstapa*, respectively, into not antagonists, but protagonists, of their stories. Woltmann notes that these adaptations disrupt the conventional self/other binary, which consequently affords the audience an opportunity of empathetic abjection with the monster. By rewriting myth and legend as "aesthetic rather than spiritual endeavors," Borges and Gardner remove the original sacral plot identified at the heart of the earlier version of each tale, rendering their versions profane and permitting the abjection of their now-protagonist, which leads to and conflates with the sublime denouement, the Event, in their stories. These adaptations, as retellings, expand the narrative tradition by defining the monster not as an opposition, but as a self, a subversion that "shows how interdependent the abject and the self are in transcendental moments of accessing the sublime through Event." Woltmann's work brings monster studies in conversation with one of the twentieth century's most influential semiotic, feminist, and psychoanalytical critics, demonstrating that the examination of monsters is not incompatible with "serious scholarship." As those of us who regularly work with monstrous materials know well, "monsters are good to think with." Indeed, we have said this so often and in so many ways that it's impossible to trace the phrase back to its original utterance.

The fourth and final article in this special issue, Laura Davidel's "Agency in the Ricean Vampire's Compulsion to Feed," challenges further any seeming incongruity between monster studies and serious theoretical scholarship, employing Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, Sigmund Freud's ideas concerning the compulsion to repeat actions, and Brooke Kroeger's theory of passing, in an examination of the relationships between vampires and humans

in Anne Rice's vampire novels. Davidel points out that Rice's vampires negotiate between their compulsion to feed and their self-loathing at failure to withstand that compulsion; that they seek to mediate this inner conflict through judicious selection of mortals to transform into vampires, going to considerable lengths to refashion and pass themselves as human; and that the choices they make in this regard demonstrate the development of "an impressive agentic power to introduce variations, if not loopholes, that blur the horror of their feeding patterns." The agentic shift Davidel notes between Anne Rice's vampires and earlier iterations of this literary figure, in particular the moral compass Ricean vampires display, renders them sympathetic and tragic, because for all their efforts, they cannot escape their experience. Try as they do, they cannot avoid feeding, and thus they cannot avoid their inherent monstrosity. It also provides a paradigm shift for other modern vampire reimaginings, such as the Cullen family in the *Twilight* saga.

Davidel notes that, ultimately, "one of the reasons why Rice's vampires have secured their place in popular culture is the fact that their supernatural beauty is inherently monstrous in that it points to how we, as humans are limited, flawed, vulnerable, aging." I would go further and make the claim that, as with all of the monsters examined in this issue of *Preternature*, Rice's vampires reflect audience preoccupations with the things that monsters simultaneously reveal to us and challenge us with: our collective concerns with and uncertainties over good and evil, virtue and vice, human and nonhuman, self and not-self, mortality and immortality; issues involving sex and gender, class, race and ethnicity, and ability; and, I think always, our own fears, desires, and limitations on an individual, as much as a societal, level. I wrote above that monsters are good to think with. Now, more than ever perhaps, we need to be thinking with them.

In his Foreword to this special issue of *Preternature*, Asa Simon Mittman, President of MEARCSTAPA, lays out the stakes of the study of the preternatural, particularly concerning monsters and monstrosity. As he writes, today "the tools of monstrosity remain as potent as ever, from anti-LGBTQ attacks in Chechnya to marchers in Charlottesville to the mistreatment of migrant children at the US border." Where many scholars have seemed to feel that monster studies is a self-indulgent enterprise, somehow not as serious as the study of other subjects, those of us who do engage with preternatural subjects understand their relevance and immediate importance in current sociopolitical affairs, especially concerning issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and disability. Scholars engaged in monster studies, premodern through today, in every field, are scholars engaged in an ethical enterprise as much as an academic one: an

interdisciplinary and transhistorical effort to help modern society look in the mirror at what is delightful and grotesque, interesting and disturbing, wonderful and terrible, regarding our attitudes towards what seems unfamiliar, terrifying, or threatening; yet, is so often a reflection not of reality, but of the monsters we all harbor within.

For ten years, MEARCSTAPA has made room in academic circles and public forums alike for these conversations; we look forward to many more years, many more forums, and many more conversations. As Asa writes below in his introductory remarks, "We have much work left to do. Let's get to it." It is my hope that the articles in this issue of *Preternature* form a stimulating and energizing praxis for that work going forward.

LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY

FOREWORD

Asa Simon Mittman, President of MEARCSTAPA (2008–present), Member of Preternature Editorial Board (2011–present)

In a lower margin of the Luttrell Psalter, alongside images of saints, of Mary and Christ and the angels, of kings, lords, and jousting knights, of racist images, of impaired figures seeking divine cures, of snakes and snails, sheepfolds, seed sowers and stags, of ploughmen and pageants, of falcons and fisheries, of musicians and monks, of nuns, bishops, and martyrs, of all the grit and glory of medieval life and aspiration, the illustrator has included a pair of monstrous figures (Fig. 1).² On the right is a glowering, malevolent thing, a hybrid gryllus, a figure with a head conjoined directly to its legs, leaving out any torso in between. This one bears furry, blue, bespotted legs ending in long, sharp talons and a head something like a deranged, razor-beaked cock, with a large, pendulous, beige wattle that seems a barely veiled allusion to male genitalia. Art historian Michael Camille wrote of another gryllus that it "is an incarnation of scopic obsession—having a head between his legs instead of a prick. His look is an ejaculation."³ Everything about this bizarre, obscene beast strikes me as delightful and diverting.

The gryllus chases a figure that may or may not be human. Though hunched up awkwardly, the figure is not hybrid. While it at first glance appears to have a bird's head, this is just a hat. The figure's own head might be on its chest, in which case this would be an unusually clothed blemmye, but the figure might

just as well be ducking down, obscuring its neck. The mouth is wide, but not inhumanly so. The figure has darkish skin, a tall, pointed, bird-headed hat, exposed legs, bare feet, a contorted pose, and an extreme facial expression. These are all tropes used to "other" various medieval groups, most notably Jews but also Muslims, Africans, Mongols, heretics, the poor, and the insane. Monstrosity, like the gryllus's beak, is sharp and barbed.

FIG. 1 *Bas-de-page Monsters*, The Luttrell Psalter. London, British Library, Additional MS 42130, England, 1325-1340, f. 145r. By permission of the British Library.

I wrote this brief preface on my flights home from Cleveland, where I had flown to give a few talks about an exhibition I curated with Sherry C. M. Lindquist, *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders*, which opened at The Pierpont Morgan Library & Museum in New York (8 June to 23 September 2018), and then traveled to the Cleveland Museum of Art (7 July to 13 October 2019), with a final appearance at The Blanton Museum of Art in Austin (27 October 2019 to 12 January 2020). We spoke about what was, for me, the most difficult and most important subdivision of the show, the “aliens” section, which focused on the pernicious visual strategies used in the Middle Ages to denigrate, demonize, and dehumanize individuals and groups outside the fiercely restrictive medieval European normate human: light-skinned, European, Christian, able-bodied, healthy, aristocratic, heterosexual, male. Since this normate comprised a vanishingly slim minority, since it was emphatically anything but “normal,” the vast preponderance of peoples living in the world in the period were potentially subject to monsterization.

The exhibition has proven very popular, which indicates the strong interest in monsters and the monstrous. Indeed, I doubt the popularity and appeal of monsters has ever been in question among the general public. The fight to legitimize interest in the subject—the founding goal of MEARCSTAPA, whose ten-year anniversary this special issue celebrates—was only ever needed in academia. When we founded MEARCSTAPA, we named it after the monstrous “march-steppers,” the “border-walkers”—Grendel and his nameless mother, from the Old English epic *Beowulf*—because those of us who study monsters often find ourselves treading the internal and external borders of academia.

In Cleveland, Prof. Lindquist and I gave a talk on the visual rhetoric of othering, with a focus on negative fantasies about Africans, Muslims, and Jews. We placed strong emphasis on the contemporary stakes of such images, and of the work we are attempting to do, the ethical concerns of which are the starting point for the majority of my research and teaching. Afterward, we wound up in a lengthy conversation with a scholar who argued politely but unwaveringly that ethical concerns are somehow not also art historical concerns. Voicing a widely held position that is fundamental to the academic training of many scholars in the humanities, he contended that while we might have personal feelings on various subjects, scholarship should be “neutral,” that it should not “render judgments.” He resisted my arguments that neutrality is not only impossible (we choose the subjects of our studies, the sources we rely upon, the inclusions and exclusions, framing, ordering, rhetoric, and on), but also that claims to neutrality are in fact ideological stances that favor the powerful and the status quo that those adopting the pose of neutrality maintain, often out of self-interest.

The night of that conversation, I slept poorly and woke ill rested. I remain troubled as I write this. Monsters are tremendous, glorious fun. They are wonder and marvel and joy and fascination, which is what drew me to them in the first place. But they are also fear and exclusion and hate. And, in both cases, they are often tools of the powerful. As Ibram X. Kendi argues in his monumental study of the history of racism in America, racist ideas do not result in economic and political advantage; they are actively, willfully generated in order to create and preserve these advantages.⁴ So, too, with monsters, who do not arise on their own. The tools of monstrosity remain as potent as ever, from anti-LGBTQ attacks in Chechnya to marchers in Charlottesville to the mistreatment of migrant children at the US border. Monsters are created by those who, whatever their claims to neutrality, to scientific or historical disinterest might be, have a stake in the results. They do because we *all* do: those who are victimized by the monsterization of groups, and those who benefit—whether they wish to or not—from it.

My friends, my fellow *mearcstapans*, we have been at it for ten years, but we have much work left to do. Let's get to it.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, CHICO

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Thea Tomaini, Associate Editor, Preternature

For the past ten years I have had the pleasure, and the honor, of being a member of MEARCSTAPA. I have been a member of the Executive Board of MEARCSTAPA since its founding, and over the years I have organized, presided over, and presented research for the society at many of its sessions at academic conferences. I am proud of the society's mission and dedication to its goals, and I believe that the field of preternatural studies has been made more relevant, more accessible, and more widely recognized in academia because of the efforts of MEARCSTAPA and its members.

The four articles in this special issue represent the continuing work of MEARCSTAPA, and they also reflect the mission of *Preternature*: to provide a scholarly forum for the publication of critical research on the preternatural. I extend my thanks to the authors for their efforts in writing and revising their work for this special issue. Many thanks to Debbie Felton, Editor of *Preternature*, for her support of MEARCSTAPA, the special issue, and its contributors.

I extend my personal thanks to Asa Simon Mittman, president of MEARCSTAPA, whose vision has allowed the society to flourish; and to Melissa Ridley Elmes, guest editor of the special issue, for her work in soliciting and vetting the articles, and for her contributions in managing reviewers and revisions. Every paper in this issue underwent a double-blind review process, and we are all very grateful to the many anonymous reviewers for their time and comments.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the members of MEARCSTAPA's Executive Board for their support of the special issue and its contributors.

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NOTES

1. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture; Seven Theses," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 3–25, here 6–8.

2. London, British Library, Additional MS 42130, England, 1325–1340. For a full digital facsimile, see: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_42130. My thanks to James Davidson for reminding me of this image.

3. Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 41.

4. Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).