

# **Premodern Monsters**

A Varied Compilation of Pre-modern Judeo-Christian  
and Japanese Buddhist Monstrous Discourses

Edited by

**Allan E.C. Wright**

University of Alberta

**Series in Anthropology**



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# Introduction

Allan E.C. Wright

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*The history of all hitherto-existing societies is the history of monsters.  
Homo sapiens is a bringer-forth of monsters as reason's dream. They are  
not pathologies but symptoms, diagnoses, glories, games, and terrors...  
All our moments are monstrous moments.*

China Mieville, *Theses on Monsters*.

While it has been suggested that the genesis of “Monster” studies was J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay “Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics”,<sup>1</sup> academia did not immediately follow suit and engage with the material, concept, and data. Tolkien questioned the idea that *Beowulf* was simply an important historical and linguistic document. As a literary work, he argued that the poem itself outshines its historical content. Tolkien states, “Beowulf is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts (such as the date and identity of Hygelac)”.<sup>2</sup> Tolkien identifies the monsters of the tale as the essential framework to highlight the poem’s ideas. His examination of Beowulf countered the prevailing historical linguistic scholarship at the time and is a significant turning point for the advancement of monster studies.

Monster studies slowly began to gain academic acceptance after Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s famous theses in 1996.<sup>3</sup> Cohen outlined various methodologies that one can use as a theoretical base to examine monsters and monstrosities.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel “Introduction: ‘A Marvel of Monsters.’” in *Classical Readings on Monster Theory: demonstrare. Volume 1*, edited by Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), xi. Mittman and Hensel present and establish the sparse and scarce examinations of Monster Studies before Jeffrey Jerome Cohen.

<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”. In *Classical Readings on Monster Theory: demonstrare. Volume 1*, eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

He states, “the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis”.<sup>4</sup> Cohen argues that monsters are a part of a Cultural Body. The thesis suggests that when a monster is created, it embodies a culture’s time and place that incorporates strong sentiments such as fear and anxiety. His second thesis proclaims that monsters will always escape. In general, monsters will continually reinvent themselves for specific cultural matrixes. A monster might vanish or perish in a particular narrative; however, the same monster, which represents the same fears and possibly adds to them, can reappear in other narratives. Cohen employs vampires as an example, “the undead returns in slightly different clothing, each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event... each reappearance and its analysis is still bound in a double act of construction and reconstitution”<sup>5</sup>. Next, Cohen argues that monsters are harbingers of categories that create a categorical crisis. This thesis suggests that monsters can rebuke, protect, and challenge social boundaries as they reject easy classifications. Cohen elaborates,

This refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is generally true of monsters: 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 threaten to smash distinctions... by refusing easy compartmentalization of their monstrous contents, they demand a radical rethinking of boundary and normality.<sup>6</sup>

Incorporating a monster within a narrative can force one to question and re-examine one’s preconceived notions and biases surrounding social discourses. Cohen’s next thesis states that monsters live and thrive at differences. Cohen argues that differences, whether race, gender, economic, or political, are made into a being, sometimes physically, who makes a home and dwells among the larger population. In other words, Monsters are “outsiders” who have integrated into sociocultural settings. Monsters can be “too much like us” and hidden within plain sight. However, they are still somehow different and seditious. This dichotomy provides populations with a dialectical “other”. The “monsters” threaten to destroy the population and the whole social order itself. Cohen explains, “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

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, preface, x.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, 6.

individuality is constituted and allowed”.<sup>7</sup> Thesis five argues that monsters police physical and socially constructed borders. Monsters provide a warning against various realms and domains. They provide a symbolic representation of punishing curiosity, whatever that inquisitiveness might be. The monster, then, polices different boundaries, intellectually, physically, and socially. It can police dangerous and sacred physical locations as well as eliminate potential subversive and perceived immoral thoughts and actions. In other words, Monsters limit, or unequivocally prevent, the fluid motion of already established classification systems. The prohibition demarcates and even prohibits various classification systems to indicate that these borders cannot, and must not, be crossed. Monsters are employed as warnings where “curiosity is more often punished than rewarded...The monster prevents mobility”.<sup>8</sup> Cohen’s sixth thesis claims that the fear of monsters is a form of desire. The monster can move between the various realms and practices. This fluidity can induce escapist imaginations. Monsters can be linked to “forbidden” and taboo actions and thoughts, producing sentiments of escapism. This means that monsters can be appealing because they act as figureheads for rebellion against typical societal constraints. Therefore, some audiences might envy its freedom from classification systems. Cohen states, “We distrust and loathe the monster; at the same time, we envy its freedom”.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Cohen’s conclusion argues that monsters stand at the threshold of becoming. Monsters are human creations, our intellectual “children”. They can provide an in-depth knowledge of history and specific discourses within history. They can ask how humanity perceives their society and the world around them. They can ask us to examine our cultural and individual thoughts and practices to challenge or reinforce them. Monsters “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... These monsters ask us how we perceive the world... They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression”.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Monsters ask why we produced them. Overall, Cohen brought monster scholarship from the fringes of academia into a suitable and important subject for research and analysis. Derived from Cohen’s theses, scholars continue utilizing theoretical approaches to monster studies. Demarcations of physical boundaries<sup>11</sup> or moral inclinations, representations of cultural bodies, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, 20.

<sup>11</sup> For example, forests can be sites of mystery, fear, and disorientation. Numerous forests have been associated with the “fear of the unknown”. Within the mythology of

harbingers of category crisis are a few examples of scholarly theories approaching the subject derived from Cohen.

The subject of monsters is now being tackled without apology. Books, articles, and essays concerning monsters have risen significantly in the past 30 years. Specifically, scholars have examined how monsters in various mediums, narratives, and discourses reflect social/moral proclivities and demarcations, insider/outsider anxieties, and general fears within a population at any given time and location. Stephen T. Asma refers to these tensions as “moral imaginations”. Asma states, “We use imagination in order to establish our agency in chaotic and uncontrollable situations... People frequently underestimate the role of art [and narrative] and imagery in their moral convictions”.<sup>12</sup> Responses can demonize creatures and people that threaten this order, the order of our body, home, community, society, and the cosmos. Monsters reveal what classifications of the “sacred” are deemed “good” and “natural”. This produces strong sentiments within a population, reinforcing specific social structures and moral proclivities. Richard Kearney provides a similar observation in this book, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*.<sup>13</sup> Kearney argues that a critical component of identity is moulded by the monstrous. The monstrous are not simply characters or archetypes in mythologies but a vital component of public imagination and discourse.

The term “monster” can be challenging to define. However, this is not necessarily a negative as it opens various possibilities and interpretations of a “monster”. This ambiguity exhibits the vast potential for monster studies. Latin’s *monstrum*, or *monstrare*, is defined as “to show” or “reveal”, which leads to definitions of the “monstrous” from various perspectives and data sets. A monster can be a hybrid creature comprised of different animals and humans; it can be an utterly unfamiliar creature, and it can also be other people. Stemming

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Robin Hood, the Sheriff of Nottingham’s deputies were anxious about venturing into Sherwood Forest for the fear of what would transpire. Additionally, many folktales, such as Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood, also include a predatory beast living in confines of a forest. Many fictional and supposedly non-fictional narratives have utilized the labels “haunted forest”, and “enchanted forest”, as descriptives for specific locations. The inhabitants who reside in these forests are usually represented by some form of anti-social hermit, witches, trolls, and other mischievous beings. Generally, it is difficult to graph an entire forest and its dwellers. Therefore, if one cannot predict what creatures populate a dense and mystifying landscape, fear follows.

<sup>12</sup> See Stephen T. Asma “Monsters and the Moral Imagination” in *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 289-294, 291.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003).



from Sigmund Freud,<sup>14</sup> the Monster can also be perceived as an embodiment or representation of the *unheimlich*, or “uncanny”. It’s the awareness of a so-called threatening “presence” towards our *Heimlich*, our sentiments of security. The threat should be “outside”, but somehow, it has manifested itself within the home comforts. This notion of “home” is vast. It can be related to the physical body, a physical dwelling, a small community, or larger cultural systems and even extend to the cosmos. The “uncanny” invades this supposed safe space, creates sentiments of fear, and reveals individual and social insecurities and anxieties. The uncanny, and monsters by extension, “is that which invades one’s sense of personal, social, or cosmic order and security”.<sup>15</sup> In other words, monsters are something unwelcome that invades our individual and social sense of the “sacred”. Timothy K Beal’s general definition states, “Monsters are conglomerations of many different forms of otherness—cosmological, political, psychological, and religious otherness”.<sup>16</sup> I would also add physical differences to this list. Overall, the definition of “monster(s)” is wide-ranging and refers to something specific. Asma argues that the term “monsters” and the socio-cultural constructions surrounding it are vital for lexicons. As Asma states, “...the concept of monster cannot be erased from our language and thinking. Other, more polite terms and concepts cannot replace them because they still refer to something that has no satisfactory semantic substitute or refinement. The term’s imprecision, within parameters, is part of its usefulness”.<sup>17</sup>

This collection exclusively focuses on the monstrous pre-modernity within Judeo-Christian and Japanese Buddhist discourses. While meaningful, engaging, and fascinating, many monster studies have generally revolved around monsters post-eighteenth century. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui’s *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*<sup>18</sup> is a primary example. The reader is a collection of essays focused on the topics of modern monstrous identities and monstrous technologies. There are, of course, exceptions, such as Brandon R. Grafius’s “Text and Terror: Monster Theory and the Hebrew Bible”.

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<sup>14</sup> See Sigmund Freud “The Uncanny” In *The Standard Editions of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. XVII, Translated by James Strachey, Anna Freud, et al (London: Hogarth Press, 1955).

<sup>15</sup> Timothy K. Beal. *Religion and its Monsters*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Beal, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Asma, 293.

<sup>18</sup> Marina Levina, & Diem-my T. Bui, eds. *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). For another example, see Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008). There is, of course, notable exceptions. For example, see

Additionally, Heather Macumber's *Recovering the Monstrous in Revelation (Horror and Scripture)* provides an analysis of the Book of Revelation through the context of its monsters.<sup>19</sup> This collection aims to follow the pre-modern monstrous examinations, including discourses from various periods and cultures, to provide a slight glimpse of its socio-historical diversity. It is an eclectic compilation that attempts to provide a variety of time, location, culture, etc., and demonstrates the diversity in the approaches to monster studies from two distinct traditions.

In chapter one, Heather McCumber examines the ancient combat motif and the Hebrew Bible. McCumber argues that within the Hebrew Bible, there is a lack of a distinct combat motif. In other words, there is *no* definitive clash between a deity and a chaos monster. The lack of a combat myth is intentional. By downplaying or omitting the monstrous, the outcome of such a battle is already predetermined and assured. Therefore, the "dragon" of empire (Babylonian or Greek) in the Hebrew Bible threatens the social body, but it is ultimately deemed feeble due to God's power. In her essay, McCumber states, "The monstrous body in these prophetic and apocalyptic texts is not a symbol of chaos; instead, the dragon's destruction represents Israel's hope for communal renewal from attempted efforts at colonization outlines the vital function of traversing social identities and systematic boundary markers.

In chapter two, Greg Lamb looks at the "monstrous" language, primarily employed in the New Testament text Philippians. He argues that the author, Paul, uses monstrous and dehumanizing language, such as his warnings to "Beware!" to demarcate perceived "outsiders" to the new *Ekklesia*. In other words, Lamb suggests that Paul utilizes monstrous and dehumanizing terminology to identify potential outsiders who, according to Paul, might attempt to disrupt and unsettle the newly found communities. Therefore, Paul employs monstrous language to mark the social boundaries of those he deems subversive.

Chapter 3 examines an insider/outsider dichotomy concerning the important classification of the "monstrous". In general, the separation between the designations of Orthodoxy and Heresy are socially constructed classifications. This examination looks at the Nestorius controversy and the resulting built classification lines of what is deemed Orthodoxy and Heresy, with the latter becoming deemed monstrous. In other words, the classification lines that labelled Nestorius a heretic are an example of socially constructed classification lines created by employing discourse and ingenuity.

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<sup>19</sup> Heather Macumber, *Recovering the Monstrous in Revelation (Horror and Scripture)* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Press/Fortress Academic, 2021).

In chapter 4, Helena Martin examines “monstrous birth” narratives from the early English Reformation. Coinciding with these narratives is a newer form of communication, pamphlets. Pamphlets provide an insight into the complicated social imagination. In other words, pamphlets and other sources regarding these “monstrous births” were utilized for the population as a possible interpretation of their social incongruities. Martin argues that early scholarly (theological) work has only partially examined the narrative. Previously, the primary concern was for a select group of readers who did not provide information to the common population. Martin then examines various sources and argues that they are exposed while reinforcing social boundaries.

Within chapter 5, Dunja Jelesijevic examines a fifteenth-century play, *Dōjōji*. Jelesijevic analyzes the *Noh Dōjōji* in relation to folk legends and illustrated Buddhist scrolls of the Kiyohime narrative. Specific emphasis is placed on how the play muddles gender and gender dynamics. Meaning the play redirects the focus to the female character. Through ritual and performance, the play subverts the anticipated resolution present within the other legends. Jelesijevic then argues that the importance of the woman’s serpent costume indicates how the protagonist is continually constructed through carefully constructed identities. These identities scrutinize and dispute the various ways these identities conglomerate in the narrative. Ritual contexts navigate these discourses surrounding Buddhist concepts and folk legends. The *Dōjōji* provides a performative element to highlight the narrative of the Kiyohime legend. Therefore, the performance transforms the tale into a nuanced discourse revolving around various concepts about suffering and navigating social boundaries.

In chapter 6, Laura Nuffer examines narratives surrounding the Japanese monsters *Yamauba*, or “mountain hags.” Nuffer argues that modern scholars have attempted to retrieve the “mountain hags” by redescribing them to be rebellious entities who challenge the traditional patriarchal society. Nuffer, however, argues that earlier sources contradict this interpretation. Instead, Nuffer suggests that the *yamauba* narratives reinforce the existing cultural, and thus, patriarchal standards. Nuffer examines two narratives that present female ageing as monstrous. Ultimately, these narratives are utilized to demonstrate to women that a fulfilling life, one of “safety and happiness,” are not found with a liberator archetype, but by remaining steadfast within the realm of the household.

Finally, in chapter 7, Kevin Bond examines a genre of Japanese literature known as *engi* (Buddhist temple foundation legends). Specifically, this literature describes high-ranking Buddhist monks employing spells in order to tame and conquer malevolent spirits. Bond focuses on the supernatural antagonists, the

*oni* and *yōkai*. Bond examines the Buddhist tactics to establish and reinforce “sacred geography” to exhibit spiritual power.

Cultural Monster studies are continuing to grow and hold academic interest. This collection is an addition to these engaged voices. It comprises essays that share an interest in the “monstrous” and the category of monsters. The point of such a collection is to enlarge the corpus of the growing academic subject of monsters and to provide a snippet of its diversity and possibilities. Monster studies should not be limited to a narrow socio-historical and cultural period. Scholars can dive into any historical period within any culture and examine what the populations consider monstrous. As Cohen suggests:

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 minds, 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... These monsters ask us how we perceive the world.<sup>20</sup>

Cohen states that if one can understand, or at least attempt to understand, a society’s constructed monsters, one can better understand the specific cultural fears, desires, fascinations, and anxieties. Kearney highlights the importance of monster studies: “They, [monsters], subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again. And because they threaten the known with the unknown, they are often set apart in fear and trembling”.<sup>21</sup> Cultural monster studies will continue to grow as long as social fear, anxieties, and uncertainties exist.

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<sup>20</sup> Cohen, 20. *Original emphasis*.

<sup>21</sup> Kearney, 3.

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