Reviews

We Are All Monsters: How Deviant Organisms Came to Define Us, by Andrew Mangham. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023. pp. 345.

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Yeşim İpekçi*
Fırat University

Andrew Mangham's monograph entitled *We Are All Monsters: How Deviant Organisms Came to Define Us* (2023, The MIT Press) explores the polyvocal nature of monster science across the period 1750-1900 and its dialogue with nineteenth-century literature. Mangham's "monsters," as defined in biological sciences, are "organisms … born with at least one permanent physiological defect" (p. 1). Guided by the approach disability studies takes towards the term "disability," he explores how monster science defines monstrosity "not as a failure, but as an embodiment of, or a cog in the machine of, organic law" (p. 2). Monsters with their corporeal singularities and differences are integral to the laws of nature. They are not "by-products of the laws of natural development which they had failed in varying ways to embody," but "the adaptive workings and the dynamic forces to which all life forms, normal and abnormal, owe their being" (p. 2). In other words, congenital anomalies or corporeal deviations are structural variations which are not the antithesis of what is "normal" or "natural," but significations of life's variety and the ingenuities of nature. Mangham's choice of literary works from the long nineteenth century helps explore the interplay between monster science and literary or imaginary monsters, emphasizing how they represent monstrosity as central to the interpretation of nature's diversity and creativity. Offering an in-depth survey of monster science across the period and its literary reverberations in nineteenth-century novels, *We Are All Monsters* interrogates the causes and meanings of monstrosities with the claim that congenital structural deformities or differences are not failures or violations of nature's laws, but symbols of vital creativity. With this claim at the center of his work, Mangham explores how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841), and Lucas Malet's *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901) engage in dialogue with the ideas developed in monster science and problematize the meanings of difference and normalcy.

Mangham presents an in-depth survey of the scientific explorations on monstrosity formed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and elaborates on the transition from the benighted interpretation of the term "sport of nature," defining birth defects to be portents signifying divine wrath or looming catastrophe, to its scientific reinterpretation as "*creative* sort of play" (p. 2). During this period, the various scientific laws of development and morphology, including spontaneous generation, epigenesis, the inheritance of acquired

*Res. Asst., Dept of Western Languages and Literatures, Fırat University
PhD Candidate, Dept of English Literature, Middle East Technical University
ORCID# 0000-0002-9343-9770; yipekci@firat.edu.tr; https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss
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characteristics, arrested development, saltationism, natural selection, and mutation theory, "*proved monstrosity* ("the exception") to be a fundamental part of the ordinary" (p. 4). While the tendency among some theorizers of the period was to interpret monstrosity as a proof of the laws of nature in relation to the "normal" with the dictum "exception proves the rule," Mangham inverts the dictum in a way that "the rule proves the exception" (p. 4). In doing so, he emphasizes the difference between viewing monsters as integral to nature's processes and as exceptions that help us understand how nature created the "normal."

Mangham anticipates a question that readers might have about how his approach to monstrosity differs from some other contemporary theoretical approaches in the field of monster theory. Mangham's approach differs from Michel Foucault's conceptualization of a system of "normalization" that appeared in the 18th century and from the idea of the monster as "repressed psychic energy" commonly used in psychoanalytic studies. Mangham's problem with the Foucauldian monster is that for Foucault, "the monstrous in history is made a 'violation of the laws of nature,' a combination of 'the impossible and the forbidden,' a clear 'exception'" (p. 11). His monster functions "to legitimize and permit civic acts of surveillance and control" (p. 11). Mangham, in opposition to Foucault's technologies of discipline, argues that "the period's science and literature saw monstrosity as present in the *ordinary* laws of development" (p. 12). The problem with the psychoanalytical approach embraced by various critics including Elizabeth Grosz and Margrit Shildrick is that its monster as a conceit "reveals the latent abnormalities within the supposedly normal or normative" (p. 20). This interpretation of the monster defines it negatively and figuratively as "other" (p. 13). Such formulations recondition the monster as fundamentally "other" and presuppose the presence of a normative embodiment. Even the radical potential associated with the monster can be perceived as traumatic and disturbing in psychoanalytical studies. Mangham argues that the monster of nineteenth-century literature and science shows that the concept of corporeal singularity can be "radical and transformative without its being traumatic for the one who sees, discovers, or experiences it" (p. 13). He adds further that "we are ourselves monsters. Recognizing this fact was not about facing up to some latent phantom in one's heart of hearts but rather challenging the prejudices that had differentiated self from other in the first place" (p. 14). Mangham's approach, grounded in the scientific investigations of the period, considers monstrosity as a vital part of every one of us.

Mangham's book embraces a historical approach to the study of monstrosity and emphasizes that it is historically possible to locate different and changing interpretations and conceptualizations of monstrosity. He organizes his argument around the fundamental ideas as they emerged roughly in chronological order by focusing on major contributors and key debates. Mangham categorizes the six chapters of his book into two distinct sections: as science-oriented chapters 1, 3, and 5 and literature-focused chapters 2, 4, and 6. In the science chapters, he introduces the teratological ideas formulated after a thorough exploration of monster science. In contrast, the literature chapters analyze fictional works in the context of these teratological ideas. Mangham argues that "[i]n the long nineteenth century, literature was another laboratory in which monstrosity was subjected to intense, inspired, and open-minded curiosity" (p. 19). *We Are All Monsters* allows readers to explore both the developmental history of monster science and the fictional discourses that contributed to "the rediscovery of monstrosity as an emblem of the complex yet normative ways of nature" (p. 19). Mangham portrays how the nineteenth-century novels as "large, loose, baggy monsters"

managed "to pull apart the meanings of normalcy and difference" as the monsters in science did. Mangham particularly chooses Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841), and Lucas Malet's *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901) as the literary monsters because they narrated "a story of symbiosis between the abnormal self and the laws of nature" and "allowed for both the coexistence of multiple subjectivities and a vital creativity" (p. 20).

The first chapter of *We Are All Monsters* unfolds under the title "Monstrous Germs and Perpetual Formation," providing an account of the scientific advances in monster science between, roughly, 1750 and 1810. The major disagreement during this period was "the question whether monstrosity was present in the earliest stages of an organism's gestation, and was thus natural and intended by God, or whether it was a response to an external event (such as a shock experienced during the mother's pregnancy), and thus aberrant" (p. 21). Despite this disagreement between theories of preformationism and material redevelopment, the common idea was that monstrosities were key to understanding the development of the "normal" organism. Reinterpreting the works of the savants of the period including Comte de Buffon, John Hunter, and Erasmus Darwin, Mangham sheds light on the idea that monstrosities are integral to the ways of nature and could only be declared "abnormal" from the perspective of the "normal." Mangham argues that the polarization between monstrosity and normalcy started to lose traction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and was replaced by the idea that monstrosity "was not an unnatural phenomenon; it was a component within the shifting and developing interconnections of nature" (p. 36). Monstrosities, malformations, and mutations could no longer be confined to traditional perceptions of the ordinary. In Chapter 2, titled "'Monster That I Am': *Frankenstein*'s Filthy Creation," Mangham examines Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through the lens of the major claim discussed in the previous chapter, which challenges the idea of normalcy as artificial and asserts that monstrosity represents a permanent state of development for all organisms. Reading the novel through the science of monstrosity, Mangham critiques the common assumption in *Frankenstein* studies that the Creature is artificial, aberrant, and destructive since it violates the common order of things or the laws of nature. Contrary to the pattern of thinking, embraced by the theorizers such as William Lawrence, in which monstrosity is a price to pay for civilization, *Frankenstein*'s Creature reveals that "there could be no interrogation of humanity and selfhood without the creation of a being who is both human and monstrous" (p. 74). Mangham discusses how Frankenstein the monster questions the artificiality of the binary oppositions and offers a deep insight into the modern subject's sense of self as already a monster.

Chapter 3 "Arrested Developments and Aborted Archetypes" investigates the scientific discussions in natural history, in which monstrosity plays a key role, surrounding the transmutation of species during the period of 1810-1859. Against the claim of "final causes" that monstrosity is predesigned perfectly by God before gestation, Lamarck and Geoffrey argued for the accidental causes in which the abnormal belongs to or results from nature's plasticity. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theories discussing parallelism between the human and the animal define monstrosities as "the mutations, variations, and abnormalities that seemed typical as a possibility in all organic matter" and suggested that the monster's differences "symbolized ordinary laws of dynamic change and variation" (p. 100). Richard Owen's idea of the morphological archetype, on the other hand, puts forward that organisms are created based on an archetypal state and their differentiation is preordained.

Despite the disagreement between these theories, the predominant idea during this period is that monstrosity is explicable within the ordinary laws of development. It can be a form of arrested development yet not against the laws of nature or development. Mangham's fourth chapter "'Fantastic and Monkey-Like': Dickens's Curiosities" argues that the oddness and difference in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* "are evidence that Dickens was aware of monster science and its place within the broader science of natural history as early as 1840" (p. 128). Dickens's grotesque character, Daniel Quilp, is a dwarf, embodying a form of arrested development. Quilp's deformity reconfigures the scientific discussion of whether malformations like him represent or violate nature's laws. The virtuous Little Nell's anomaly or "beautiful monstrosity" consists of her failure to adapt to the environment she lives in. Yet the Marchioness, Mangham claims, offers the new perception of monstrosity in which the monster belongs to the ordinary laws of development in line with Lamarckian and Geoffroyan science. Dickens's novel "joins the debate over what physical difference means, both as a predeterminant in any individual's life story and as a marker of what is possible in terms of development" (p. 130). Mangham's interpretation of the novel's ending is particularly insightful when considering Dickens's familiarity with monster science: "[t]hat Dickens transplants the book's happy ending from its conventional place with the heroine to one of his curiosities is a mark, I believe, of the influence of monster science" (p. 156).

Chapter 5 "Recapitulations, Leaps, and Memories" focuses on the influence of Darwinism on the development of monster science and the ideas of ancestral recapitulation, saltationism, and unconscious memory. Contrary to the ideas of the earlier theorizers discussed in the previous chapters, Darwin considered monstrosity to be an error with no progressive presence within the natural order. He related transmutation and monstrosity to "the inheritance of ancestral influences" (p. 158). Mangham elaborately explains that the proponents of Darwin's theory in Germany convinced Darwin to accept the theory of "Ancestral Recapitulation." According to this theory, an organism goes through the evolutionary development of species during gestation, which follows the logic of arrested developments drawing a parallel between monstrosities and "lower" organisms (p. 164). Darwin considered monstrosities to be radical, regressive, reiterative, and eliminable, not useful and creative. The theory of "saltationism" challenged Darwin on this point by suggesting that abnormalities that have nothing to do with natural or sexual selection can be progressive and may create new variations. Darwin still rejected sudden morphological changes: "monstrosities have no relation to the production of species" (p. 172). However, Darwin's commitment to "natural infinitude" endows his theory of natural selection with "infinite variety, infinite diversity, infinite time" (p. 176). Towards the end of the century, the prevailing notion was that monstrosities resulted from "unconscious memory" and were manifestations of inventive nature. The final chapter of the book, titled "Lucas Malet's 'Faculty of Actualizing'" examines *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* by the novelist Lucas Malet. Lucas Malet was the pseudonym of Mary St. Ledger Kingsley. A serious reader and follower of Darwin's ideas and an admirer of George Eliot's artistry, Malet chooses a character with structural abnormalities as her protagonist suffering psychologically and socially. Richard Calmady "belongs to the tradition of the represented dwarf" due to his height (p. 191). While he is depicted as an ill-fit from the Darwinian perspective and confirms the Darwinian law of descent, Mangham's "reading of Malet's novel alongside the scientific literature on teratology suggests we are wrong to look upon the protagonist's 'deformed body' as a symbol of perversity" (pp. 206-207). Malet's representation of his body from the perspective of the mnemegeneticist Samuel Butler's memory theory, Mangham argues,

indicates that his body embodies "the faculty for actualizing the complex, diversity-making laws of nature" because it is a memory of a specific event that occurred in the past, in his ancestry (pp. 222-224).

This extensive research on monster science and the imaginary monsters in Shelley's, Dickens's, and Malet's novels will particularly appeal to scholars engaged in monster science, teratology, disability studies, natural history, and mutation theory, as well as more general readers of the long nineteenth-century science and literature. To satisfy a possible expectation on the part of the reader, Mangham offers a coda entitled "Modern Difference" at the end of his book to explain how monster science evolves in the twentieth century and to "consider some of the ways the history of the monster in literature and science broadens and sheds light on some contemporary debates relating to corporeal difference" (p. 226). Referring to WHO's registry of "abnormal births" and the practices of prenatal screening, Mangham observes how the association of bodily divergences or atypicality with risks or problems recalls the traditional dichotomy of healthy/unhealthy or normal/abnormal. Such associations steal "our attention from the enterprise of reading difference as indicative of the laws which have a direct bearing on our need to understand who we are, where we come from, and what our destination will be" (p. 230). The science and literature of long nineteenth century guide us to interrogate the meanings of monstrosities and read "the freaks of nature" such as Shelley's Frankenstein, Dickens's Marchioness, and Malet's Calmady as part of life's rich tapestry. With this book, Mangham invites us all to embrace our monstrosity and its potential: "A vital starting point for understanding the true power of difference, whatever its cause, is the acknowledgment that, in a certain sense, we are all monsters" (p. 236).