

Reframing Monstrosity as Disability in Early Modern Art and Literature

Review of *Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space, and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability* (2019)

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research on early modern literary and visual representations of infirmity, which often focuses on diseases, treatment practices or the spiritual implications of suffering.¹ Despite these insightful studies, few contend with how such representational strategies produced concepts and experiences of disability. With her ambitious book, *Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space, and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2019), Elizabeth B. Bearden aims to write the first «book-length study of transnational early modern literary representations of disability» (p. 6). While forthrightly acknowledging the marginalization of people with disabilities in the period, *Monstrous Kinds* not only focuses on the ways that disability was othered, but rather on how monstrosity, as constructed through literature, could serve as an identity category, normalize disability and thus function as a framework for cross-cultural engagement.²

Though intentionally limited to primarily European sources, the book's approach is premised on the global circulation of texts, images and ideas, and gathers a rich selection of literary and visual materials that were widely reproduced and translated. By addressing images as well as literature, Bearden builds upon her previous research on ekphrasis to examine how the two work together to produce categories and experiences of disability that traversed geographic and cultural boundaries.³ Throughout, «representation» is used broadly to discuss the depiction and description of monstrosity across media and artistic forms. Occasionally the images perform a supporting role to literary arguments, but nevertheless the integrated analysis of visual and textual works allows for fruitful examination of the ways in which diverse cultural production shaped monstrosity in the early modern period.

The reader benefits from Bearden's careful attention to language in her engagement with both contemporary and historical sources. The introductory chapter provides useful definitions of key terms and a brief outline of the state of modern disability studies, offering a generous critical bibliography. Here, the author summarizes her approach to the fraught term «monstrosity». Noting a modern resistance to the word as moralizing and antiquated, Bearden instead positions early modern monstrosity as a «precursor to modern concepts of disability» that «teaches us much about our tendency to ascribe disability with [sanctifying and discriminatory] meaning» (p. 6).⁴ The resonance between then and now is one of the most stimulating aspects of the book, which is demonstrated throughout as Bearden identifies early modern antecedents to contemporary policies and formulations of disability.

As the subtitle indicates, *Monstrous Kinds* is organized into three thematic sections, addressing different but intersecting ways that early modern disability was

represented in literature: «monstrous embodiment,» the «location of monstrosity across space» and «monstrous narrative forms» (p. 5). Each section contains individual chapters that offer case studies of well-known texts from particular genres – conduct manuals, also called «institute texts,» that regulated bodily comportment; travel accounts that described the spatial confinements and liberties of people with disabilities; and wonder books that recounted miracles and travails of marvellous monsters. Organized in this way the chapters also function well as discrete case studies, and for teaching purposes could be productively assigned as individual readings.

Body

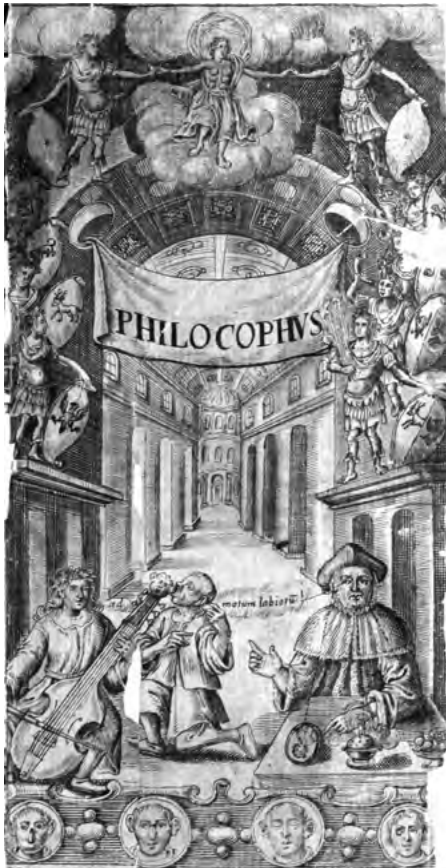
The first section comprises two chapters that investigate how physical norms were constructed through representations of «ideal» and «natural» bodies. Two theories of embodiment frame these chapters: Merleau-Ponty's concept of incarnate subjectivity, and the more period-specific term «passability» or the human body's universal susceptibility to change and suffering.⁵ Together, they offer intersubjective models of identity formation, in which the body and mind are deeply connected, and selfhood is shaped through bodily experience. This section analyses institute texts that prescribed ideals of behaviour, comportment and education often formulated in relation to disability.

The first chapter, «The Ideal Monster: Disability, Courtliness and Civilizing Body Talk» addresses two well-known manuals – *Il cortegiano* (*The Courtier*) by Baldassare Castiglione, published in 1528, and *Tre dialoghi della vita civile* written by Giovanni Giambattista Giralaldi Cinthio in 1565 and later translated by Lodowick Bryskett in 1606 as *A Discourse of Civill Life*. These texts present different 16th-century strategies for living with bodies that diverge from the norm. In her analysis of *Il cortegiano*, which occupies the bulk of the chapter, Bearden observes that the manual establishes a courtly bodily ideal against the «monstrous» (p. 39). Rather than accepting the passability or changeability of the body, a courtier must possess *mediocrità*, meaning that he varies as little as possible from the ideal. The graceful courtier is advised to compensate for a lack of *mediocrità* with *sprezzatura*, a central tenet of *Il cortegiano* that is fascinatingly re-evaluated as originating in embodied experiences of disability. In the book's dedication Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, is described as valiantly resisting the symptoms of his gout («*sprezzando con l'animo valoroso le procelle quella*» – *despising* [its] storms with staunch heart) (p. 56). *Sprezzatura* resurfaces throughout *Il cortegiano* to refer to the practice of masking bodily deficiencies with apparent ease. Bearden poignantly connects the subjectivity produced by *sprezzatura* to the modern-day concept of passing, acknowledging that many disabled people face particular «pressures and consequences of passing for nondisabled» that find cultural antecedents in Castiglione's valorisation of effortlessly compensating for one's flaws.⁶

The following discussion of *Tre dialoghi* (1565) and its later English translation (1606) offers a different understanding of disability that does not advocate for masking and erasure, demonstrating a kind of proto counter-eugenic logic, Bearden suggests. Rather, *Tre dialoghi* promotes the value of human biodiversity by arguing against the rejection of infants with disabilities, and for the spiritual benefit of the body's passible, vulnerable nature. While the analysis of this text is brief in comparison to that of *Il cortegiano*, the point is made that there was not one unified view

of bodily norms in the 16th century, nor were impairments always deserving of concealment or condemnation.

Concluding the section on embodiment the second chapter, «Before Normal, There Was Natural: John Bulwer, Disability, and Natural Signing in England and Beyond,» examines the writing of John Bulwer (1606–1656), an English physician and advocate for Deaf people. Aligning more with Giraldi's *Tre dialoghi* than Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, Bulwer attempted to naturalise diversity in sensory abilities.⁷ Contrary to prevalent 17th-century ideas that impairments were aberrant exceptions proving nature's rule, Bulwer argues that deafness is accounted for in the natural order because the senses are interrelated and interchangeable: «for what [Nature] taketh away in some of the senses, she allows, and recompenseth in the rest» (p. 87). This fluid relationship among the senses is illustrated in the emblematic frontispiece of Bulwer's treatise *Philocophus: The Deafe and Dumbe Man's Friend* (1648), in which he makes a case for an academy for the Deaf that would offer instruction in «ocular audition» (Fig. 1). As demonstrated through engaging extended quotes included in this chapter, Bulwer argues that while Deaf people may have auditory impairment, their command of sign language and/or lipreading demonstrates an equal if not enhanced linguistic capability to hearing people. Although Bulwer's plans for a Deaf academy were never broadly embraced, his prolific writ-



1 Emanating from the mouth of the seated musician are the words «ad motum labioru[m]» meaning «by the movement of the lips,» suggesting that the song can be enjoyed through lipreading.

ings reveal conscientious attempts to normalize deafness within the early modern framework of the natural. This chapter supports Bearden's broader point that contemporary attitudes towards disability have roots in early modern thinking, even some «positive» concepts such as disability gain.

This discussion of the beneficially interchangeable relationship among the senses in John Bulwer's writings provokes consideration of the lack of disabled perspectives in theories of early modern image reception. Art historical scholarship has broadly accepted that «visual» works were perceived with multiple senses, especially in the context of devotional and collecting practices.⁸ While this research productively challenges the primacy of vision in engaging with a work of art, the experiences of those with sensory impairments are rarely addressed. Further pursuing the gain rather than deficit of comprehending sculpture and painting through touch, taste, smell or sound would acknowledge perceptual diversity, and would contribute to centring disabled observers in the study of reception history. In the spirit of Bearden's thoughtful connections between past and present, such explorations of historical multisensory engagement with art objects would productively and critically resonate with developments in museum programming, which, in an effort to be more accessible to visitors with disabilities, have increasingly offered experiences beyond the visual.⁹

Space

In the following section, also subdivided into two chapters, Bearden examines how 16th- and 17th-century European travel accounts represented disabled people in Aztec and Ottoman imperial courts. Building on previous discussions of socially constructed embodied experience, Bearden's investigation of these texts reveals the ways in which disability was given monstrous significance through spatial representation.

After outlining the entwined relationship of ethnography, monstrosity and geography in travel accounts more broadly,¹⁰ Bearden offers a fresh interpretation of Hernán Cortés's *Cartas de relación* (1520–1525), by analysing how descriptions of disability were used to engage the European imagination in a specific colonial moment. The book's third chapter, «Moctezuma's Zoo or Cortés's Courtiers: Geographies of Disability in Mexica and European Courts,» particularly addresses the *casas de placer*, or pleasure houses, of Moctezuma II where disabled people lived and were displayed as monstrous marvels, similar to European courts. Cortés's description of disabled people as «confined and elevated» provided a familiar indication of Moctezuma's power over his own subjects, in turn making him a worthy subject to Spain's absolute authority (p. 132). Bearden makes the interesting observation that Cortés neglects to mention that Moctezuma's personal entourage included disabled attendants. This close relationship is described in indigenous sources like the writings of Nahua intellectual Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin (1579–1660), and the Nuremberg map of Tenochtitlan (1524), likely made in collaboration with a Mexica mapmaker. Cortés omits the proximity granted to disabled people, Bearden argues, because such a fluid relationship between Moctezuma and his disabled subjects would diminish the authority Cortés wished to assign to the ruler, despite the fact that such fluidity also existed in European courts. Drawing on a variety of comparative sources, this analysis of Cortés's *Cartas de relación* offers an intriguing study of how the spatial positioning of dis-

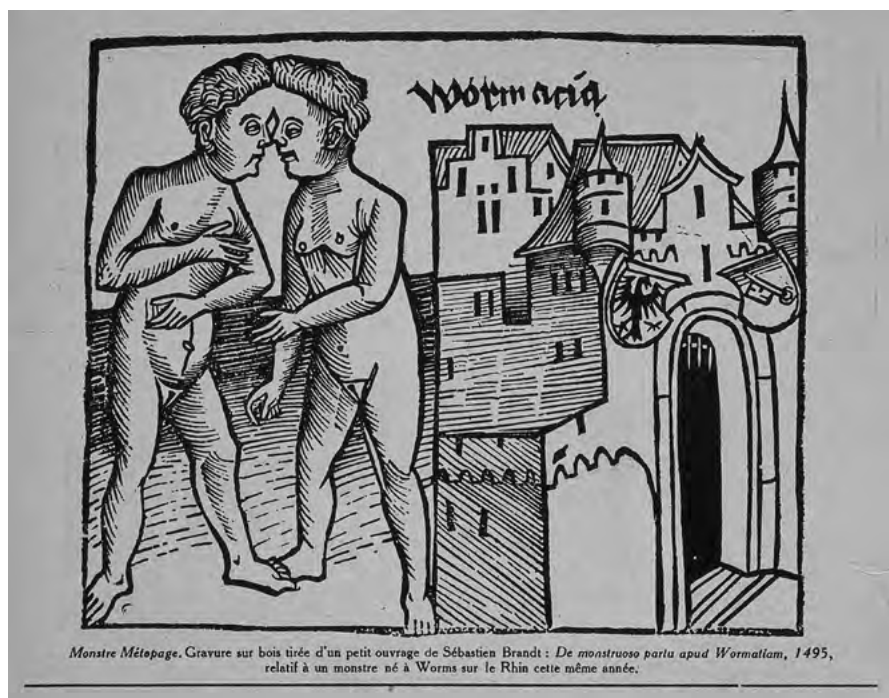
abled bodies created meaning – in this case, supporting a colonial narrative that made Tenochtitlan recognisable to Spaniards as a comparable, yet conquerable, foreign power.

Unlike the *Cartas de relación*, which claimed to reveal the inner workings of Moctezuma's court, European accounts of Constantinople indicate that the authors had restricted access to the royal complex known as the Seraglio. The fourth chapter, «Signing in the Seraglio: Global Disability in European Travel Accounts of the Ottoman Court,» examines how European descriptions of disability at court shaped an imagined Ottoman Empire from the limited and therefore «disabled» perspectives of foreign visitors. Such accounts by frustrated travellers circulated widely, fuelling foreign speculation about the nature of Ottoman spaces. Bearden observes that Europeans were fascinated by the access granted to disabled people, particularly mutes who also were often Deaf and communicated in a courtly sign language shared with hearing members of the royal family (p. 157). More than elucidating the role of disabled servants in the Seraglio, as other studies have done,¹¹ the primary contribution of this case study is to reveal how early modern disability could be defined as much by social and spatial constructions as by actual physical impairment. Europeans represented the Ottoman court through the lens of disability, Bearden argues, in part due to their own disabled status as outsiders. «European travellers to the Ottoman Empire cannot and do not conquer,» and unlike Spanish colonisers did not bring back disabled courtiers as curiosities, but rather attempted to cultivate their friendship (p. 177). While these travellers do not identify themselves as disabled or monstrous in their accounts, their fascination with the bodies and behaviours of disabled attendants reveals an anxiety about the status of their own bodies in the unfamiliar spatial system of the Ottoman court.

A comment on terminology: referring to the Nuremberg map of Tenochtitlan, Bearden invokes the concept of hybridity, calling the European-Mexica map a «monstrous representation,» and a «hybrid creature whose origins and ontology are unclear» (p. 135). This draws a parallel between constructions of disability and intercultural production, which is particularly loaded in this context given that the concept of hybridity has been contentiously applied to the arts of New Spain in postcolonial scholarship.¹² Examining the historiography of colonial images considered through the framework of hybridity – a biological term with connotations of impurity – would have enriched this chapter's investigation of the intersection of disability, artistic production and colonialism, as well as the book's overall consideration, and in some ways reclamation, of the word monstrosity as a device for framing both bodily experience and modes of representation.

Narrative

Moving from representational formulations of disability to representations that are themselves «monstrous,» the final chapter, «Unnaturall Order: Conjoined Twins and Monstrous Narration in the Wonder Book,» examines how the non-normative narrative patterns of wonder books and the reproduction of their printed illustrations «naturalized the prevalence of monstrosity as the human experience of disability» (p. 182) (Fig. 2). The resulting analysis is compelling in the careful way Bearden seeks to identify how disability was centred and normalised in a collection of texts that at face value are deeply marginalising. Using the formal categories of chronotopes, interlace and meme – which are helpfully defined – Bearden argues



2 Sebastian Brandt, broadside woodcut from *De monstuoso partu apud Wormaliam* (1495, reproduced in 1933)

that the structure and propagation of wonder books «resisted norms of time and space» (p. 203). These illustrated texts introduced readers to a plurality of disabled experiences by using narrative constructions that situated different «monsters» in relationship to one another despite in reality being geographically and temporally distant. While it is difficult to know if these books created a sense of shared identity for the protagonists, Bearden nevertheless convincingly argues that the widespread circulation, translation and adaptation of wonder books and their images adjusted readers' «horizons of expectations,» acclimating them to the «proliferation of monsters» in their own communities (p. 211).

Beyond its literary scope, this chapter offers a valuable model for the study of monstrous images and their affective power in the early modern period. Bearden's discussion of the maternal imagination, or the belief that an image when seen through the impressionable eyes of a pregnant woman could change an unborn child's physical form, rightly connects the potentially disabling status of gender to larger period anxieties about the harmful effects of monstrous representations. Interrogating the implications of the transformative power of monstrous forms, however, Bearden proposes a more positive outcome, arguing that such representations can reshape cultural expectations about monstrosity and contribute to its normalization. The potentially beneficial power of monstrous images has been differently addressed by Frances Gage, who argues that there was a «cultural investment in representations of the monstrous,» which provided intellectual delight and wonder, not only at the depicted monsters, but also the aesthetic qualities of the representations themselves.¹³ Such paintings, perhaps like wonder books,

were collected to stimulate conversation and even provide health benefits like alleviating melancholy, particularly for educated male audiences.¹⁴ While Gage's cultural and medical analysis expands traditional art historical discussions of the relationship between monstrosity and form – such as studies of ornamentation and grotesques¹⁵ – Bearden's present chapter invites historians of visual representation to go further in centring the depicted individuals, and asking how images of monstrous bodies shaped perceptions and lived experiences of disability in the early modern period.

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Throughout the book, Bearden adheres to three primary objectives: first, to show that monstrosity was constructed through various representational means that can provide insight into early modern experiences of disability; second, to demonstrate that monstrosity as a represented and lived identity category was used to create meaning across temporal, geographical and cultural distances; and third, to address the legacy of monstrosity in modern-day formulations of disability.

Drawing on methods from literary and visual studies with forays into histories of sociological and statistical analyses, Bearden engages in the interdisciplinary work she advocates for in the study of disability. She likens this practice to the feminist concept of an ethics of care, which emphasises relational interdependence and, particularly for historical work, a recognition of the entwined relationship of past and present. This ethics of care extends to the organisation of *Monstrous Kinds*, which provides clear definitions of terms with the expectation that readers will approach the text from diverse fields. The book's digital format prioritised accessibility where possible by including links to online resources for disability initiatives, and features for those using a text reader.

In tackling the term monstrosity head on, this book succeeds in establishing a nuanced understanding of early modern disability rooted in an intersectional approach that resonates with the study of disability in our current moment. This will be an important text for anyone interested in early modern histories of representation, health, embodiment and selfhood. As the author states, «[t]his study has sought to discern kinds of disability in the Renaissance through an analysis of the representation of monstrosity. It does not aim to be exhaustive but energizing» (p. 232). Indeed, it is a challenge to reconstitute disabled identities when such experiences are often absent or erased from the documentary record, but in approaching well-known sources through a monstrous frame, Bearden has produced a deeply thought-provoking and well-researched book, leaving the reader with rich possibilities for future study, and an appreciation for the historical roots of our contemporary understanding of disability.

Notes

- 1 Recent studies include Frances Gage, *Painting as Medicine in Early Modern Rome: Giulio Mancini and the Efficacy of Art*, University Park, PA 2016; *Visualizing Sensuous Suffering and Affective Pain in Early Modern Europe and the Spanish Americas*, ed. by Heather Graham a. Lauren G. Kilroy-Ewbank, Leiden 2018; *Representing Infirmary: Diseased Bodies in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by John Henderson, Fredrika Jacobs a. Jonathan K. Nelson, London/New York 2021, in press.
- 2 As does Bearden, I will alternate between person-first and identity-first constructions («people with disabilities» and «disabled people»). For a discussion of the history and significance of these terms see Bearden, p. 8 and Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, New York 1998, pp. 8–33 and pp. 117–32.
- 3 Elizabeth B. Bearden, *The Emblems of the Self: Ekphrasis and Identity in Renaissance Imitations of Ancient Greek Romance*, Toronto 2012.
- 4 Concerned with the moral connotations of the term «monstrous», for instance, Godden and Mittman are less willing to directly elide early modern concepts of monstrosity with modern constructions of disability. See *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World*, ed. by Richard H. Godden a. Asa Simon Mittman, Cham 2019.
- 5 Bearden elaborates the concept of passability in her previous book on ekphrasis. See Bearden 2012 (as Note 3).
- 6 For a recent anthology addressing experiences of in/visibility see *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Alice Wong, New York 2020.
- 7 Bearden acknowledges scholarship that interrogates the racist leanings in Bulwer's writings on skin color. See for instance Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama*, New York 2003, pp. 83–86, and Sujata Iyengar, *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia 2005, pp. 134–5, 205–8.
- 8 Among these studies see *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Wietse de Boer a. Christine Göttler, Leiden 2012; Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections*, New York 2017; *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church*, ed. by Marcia B. Hall a. Tracy Elizabeth Cooper, New York 2013; Adrian Randolph, *Touching Objects: Intimate Experiences of Italian Fifteenth-Century Art*, New Haven 2014; *Das Haptische Bild: Körperhafte Bilderfahrung in der Neuzeit*, ed. by Markus Rath, Jörg Trempler a. Iris Wenderholm, Berlin 2013; *Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice*, ed. by Alice E. Sanger a. Siv Tove Kulbrandstad Walker, London 2017.
- 9 For an exploration of blind experiences in cultural institutions see Georgina Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*, New York 2018.
- 10 Citing, for instance, Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters*, Cambridge 2016.
- 11 See for instance M. Miles, Signing in the Seraglio: Mutes, Dwarfs and Jestures at the Ottoman Court, 1500–1700, in: *Disability and Society*, 2000, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 115–34, from which Bearden adapted the title of this chapter.
- 12 For a historiography of hybridity in Latin American postcolonial studies and a discussion of the term's biological and political connotations, see Carolyn Dean a. Dana Leibsohn, Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America, in: *Colonial Latin American Review*, 2003, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 5–35.
- 13 Gage 2016 (as Note 1), p. 99.
- 14 Ibid., p. 104.
- 15 There is nevertheless room for important art historical contributions within this line of questioning, demonstrated by the recent volume *Ornament and Monstrosity in Early Modern Art*, ed. by Chris Askholt Hammeken a. Maria Fabricius Hansen, Amsterdam 2019.