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## INTRODUCTION: HAUNTING BOUNDARIES

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It's under the bed; it's in the closet. It's the thing in the basement, but it's also the thing in the mirror, hot breath on the back of your neck, cold eyes staring at you with loathing and hunger. The monster sometimes inspires heroes: a community's bravest members rise up and defend people's livelihoods against an indescribable threat. But in the dead of night, when no one can hear, even a hero might admit that a monster inspires one thing more than any other: fear.

Really? American culture of the last century has produced plenty of monsters that are more cuddly than blood-curdling. The title character in *Shrek* (2001) proves himself lovable, not despite being a monstrous ogre but in part because his monstrous appearance relegates him to the status of a misunderstood outcast. Even Count Dracula, originally one of the modern era's most dreaded creatures, becomes kid-friendly via *Sesame Street*'s The Count ("I love to count: one, two, three!") and the sugary cereal Count Chocula ("Have a monster for breakfast today!"). While some vestiges of scariness survive—Shrek's overpowering size, the Count's neck-piercing fangs—these domesticated monstrosities nevertheless challenge the notion that the monster's sole purpose is to cause fear.

The monster's fearfulness is only the beginning of its significance. Monsters have appeared



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across cultures and throughout history, and their meanings change with their contexts. The dragon, for example, was an ill omen in medieval England, but in imperial China, it heralded good luck. The diversity of monsters literally reflects the diversity of humanity, but what makes a monster monstrous is still the *difference* that sets it apart. Whether its appearance inspires fear or admiration, the monster always stands apart from the human, either at the enormous distance of the gigantic, serpentine dragon or the uncomfortable closeness of the human-looking vampire that only reveals its inhumanity when it is ready to feed on human blood. Defined both by humanity's cultural and historical contexts and by a difference that sets them apart, monsters are boundary-dwellers that help to define "us" by providing an identifiable "them." Their relationships with familiar contexts make them recognizable even as differences in their appearances, behaviors, and abilities allow us to claim that their faces in our mirrors are not our own. The closer we look, however, the more we might see that those faces are uncannily similar, and that similarity might be the most frightening thing of all.

### MONSTROUS HISTORY

Monsters have always been symbolic creatures, generally representing darkness or evil, providing foils for the heroes of myth and legend. However, the etymology of the term *monster* points toward broader significance. The Latin word *monstrum*, which refers to both a monster and a portent, derives from *monere*, to warn. Most people today do not readily connect monsters with warnings, but in mythology and religion monsters often function in this manner. In Greek mythology, they warned of the power and anger of the gods. Lycaon attempted to serve Zeus the flesh of a child; in punishment, the god turned him into a wolf. Charybdis angered Zeus by flooding land on behalf of her father, Poseidon, and in response Zeus transformed her into a monstrous whirlpool. Monsters in religious literature, often defeated in combat by the good of heart, warn against the evils of sin. For example, giants appear often in medieval Christian literature, and their immense size, unnatural and outside of the human norm, acts as a warning against *moral* monstrosity. The size of giants often symbolizes pride, although their primitive nature, violent behavior, and aggressive sexuality could also emphasize wrath or lust. The Golem of Prague, one of several golems (artificial earthen creatures intended as guards) from Jewish tradition, expresses excessive wrath that becomes indiscriminately destructive and violent. Likewise, the wrath of Grendel, the

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giant man-eater from the medieval epic *Beowulf*, threatens social order with insatiable bloodlust. Monsters of folklore, on the other hand, may warn of the dangers of certain locations or activities. Knockers, who live in mines, make knocking noises before cave-ins or similar mining disasters, while parents use fear of the Grindylow, a long-armed monster known for killing children in marshes, to keep their children away from small bodies of water. The trend continues with modern monsters, though we do not always recognize the association. When Jason Voorhees and his mother (from the *Friday the 13th* films) kill camp counselors as punishment for teenage irresponsibility and excessive sexuality, they warn viewers not to make the same mistakes when they go to camp.

The etymology of *monster* challenges the assumption that monsters are necessarily evil because, as warnings, they can benefit humanity by teaching moral lessons. Similarly, scholars in the middle ages could not reconcile themselves to the singular categorization of monsters as evil creatures; many scholars, in search of definitive definition, questioned monsters' humanity and God's reasons for creating them. In fact, some medieval monsters were connected not to evil portents but to "miraculum," or miracles (Gilmore 55). Ronald Finucane explains the medieval notion of miracles: "Aquinas (d. 1274), the archetypal thirteenth-century theologian, defined miracle as whatever God did outside or beyond the order commonly determined or observed in nature" (51–52). Despite the seeming contradiction, monsters can be miracles if their appearances evoke the power of the divine.

The variety of monsters from myth, religion, folklore, and popular culture makes forming a singular definition of *monster* very difficult. Monsters take numerous forms. Some are full-fledged beasts, while others are hybrids, mixtures of animals and humans. These forms have so many different purposes, characteristics, and qualities that they barely have anything in common. For example, many of the beasts of the Bible (Leviathan and Behemoth) and from classical mythology (the Kraken, the Nemean Lion, and the Roc) are noted for their size, their immense power, and sometimes their indestructibility. However, some "monsters" seem physically frail and weak—certain fairies, for instance, or China's Dropa, which according to *Monstropedia.com* are ugly cloud-men whose giant heads contrast with their tiny, weak bodies. Many of the most well-known mythological monsters are hybrids—a bit from one animal, a bit from another. The Chimera (a lion with a snake for a tail and with a second

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head, a goat's) and the hydra (which is usually just a many-headed serpent but sometimes has a dog's body) directly oppose heroes, acting as obstacles that they must overcome on their adventures in order to rise in power and notoriety. Other monsters are mostly mischievous, such as Japan's Kappa, sometimes pictured as a monkey with a tortoise shell, scales, and webbed appendages, as well as a cavity of liquid on the top of its head. The Kappa's behavior ranges from harmful (drownings) to merely puckish (rude noises and vulgar behavior). However, not all hybrids are considered "bad." Griffins, which combine lions and eagles, are noble beasts that represent wisdom and strength, so respected that they often appear in heraldry—like unicorns, musimons (ram/goat hybrids), and similar beasts. Good, bad, or somewhere in between, these monsters' animal characteristics emphasize their difference from humanity.

However, some of the most terrifying monsters are those with primarily human attributes. They emphasize similarity between the monstrous and the human, and thus they comment on the behaviors of humankind. The manticore, with the body of a lion, tail of a scorpion, and head of a man, was known for its brutally sharp teeth and voracious appetite; the minotaur, part bull and part man, for its violence; and harpies, with the bodies of vultures and the faces of women, for their cruelty. Over-sexual women, such as Medusa, the Lamia, and Error, were combined with snakes in order to emphasize the supposedly sinful nature of women and the temptations of their bodies (and thus Error, born from the Christian tradition, connects women with the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden). Each of these monsters, as part human, draws attention to humanity's propensity for wickedness and ruthlessness. On the other hand, even though many monstrous humanoids embody elements of pure destruction and evil, they almost always retain vestiges of humanity. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the savage Caliban, despite his evil purposes, has a poetic nature that calls into question the relationship between man and monster, as does the behavior of Shakespeare's protagonist,



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Prospero, who says of Caliban, “This thing of Darkness I acknowledge mine.” In our studies of monstrosity, we are compelled to acknowledge our relationship with monsters and to question what separates us from them.

Over time, the humanoid monster has become the norm; most of the monster stories that hold our attention today (with a few famous exceptions such as Godzilla and some of Tolkien’s fantastic creations) have a mostly human form: Frankenstein’s creature; undead such as zombies, mummies, and vampires; devils and witches; and psychotic murderers. Even shapeshifters spend most of their time in a human form. Since monsters throughout history have embodied such a variety of shapes, why do modern monsters have such a direct tie to humanity? The proliferation of humanoid monsters and monstrous humans has forced us to recognize increasingly that monsters, however distorted, reflect on who we are.

The range of monsters across cultures and histories is too vast for any single book to cover thoroughly, so the editors of this volume have chosen to focus on monsters born in the “modern” era, primarily the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, and in western cultures, primarily England, Ireland, and the United States. While the relative narrowness of this focus won’t allow you to explore all of history’s most famous monsters, it will encourage you to analyze some of today’s most talked-about monsters in depth, from nineteenth-century superstars such as Frankenstein’s Creature, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and Dracula, to more recent phenomena such as flesh-eating zombies and the *Twilight* series’ kinder, gentler vampires.

### MONSTROUS LITERATURE

The literary tradition that gave rise to the well-known wave of monsters that starts with Frankenstein’s Creature is usually referred to as “Gothic” fiction, a type of fiction that focuses on the experiences of terror and horror and thus involves monstrosity in almost every text. Traditional histories of the Gothic trace it back to Horace Walpole’s novel *The Castle of Otranto*, first published in 1764. The first edition claimed that the story was a translation of a recently rediscovered medieval romance, which links it to the centuries-old tradition of using inhuman and supernatural monsters not only as sources of fear but as portents of possibly miraculous origin. The monster in *Otranto* is a ghost so big that its helmet crushes to death the intended heir of a man who has wrongly usurped a noble’s title and property. The reappearance of the ghost

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asserts a kind of divine justice that restores the proper aristocratic line. Thus the monster initially seemed to have all of the right medieval trappings of size and moral meaning, which is one of the reasons why critics felt scandalized when, in 1765, Walpole republished his novel, appended the subtitle “A Gothic Story,” and admitted that he made the whole thing up. Suddenly what seemed to be a superstitious relic from more barbaric times in which people believed in monsters had to be read as a product of the era known as “the Age of Reason.” This reappearance of monstrosity proved that humanity hadn’t gotten quite as far from its monstrous fears as civilized people wanted to think.

Walpole’s literary experiment proved hugely popular and became the first of many Gothic stories. Other eighteenth-century novelists, notably Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe, wrote tales that tamed the supernatural, minimalizing or ultimately consigning the apparent monstrosity of threats to characters’ over-active imaginations. On the other hand, writers such as Matthew “Monk” Lewis, whose *The Monk* was even more scandalous than *Otranto*, gave eighteenth-century readers ghosts, demons, murderers, and other monstrosities that served up more sexual and moral perversion than many readers could stand. Meanwhile, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft—the parents of Mary Shelley—used Gothic tales to make political points about the exploitation of society’s disempowered groups, often framing powerful men as the world’s real monsters. When Mary Shelley decided to have aristocratic Victor Frankenstein defy God by creating new life, she was building on the tradition that her parents helped to define, a tradition taken up by Robert Louis Stevenson in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Bram Stoker in *Dracula* as well as by twentieth-century American writers in the vein of H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King.

### READING AND WRITING ABOUT MONSTERS

This volume offers selections that represent many of the achievements within the Gothic tradition, emphasizing particularly popular categories of monsters such as the undead and shapeshifters as well as magical, demonic, and psychotic forces. The examples in this book prompt you to think critically about monsters of many kinds, which provides the opportunity not only to learn about a phenomenon that stretches across multiple cultures and time periods but also helps you to participate in a conversation about the issues that surround monsters and the monstrous. Participating in this conversation will ultimately give you a better understanding of both cultural history and the world today. For example,

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because monsters deviate so drastically from the norms of society, they draw attention to the process of Othering, dividing people into two categories, the supposedly good “us” and the evil, other “them.” From racism to xenophobia, from economic divisions to gender and sexual stereotyping, Othering enhances negative perceptions of difference; therefore, reading and writing about monsters could help you to explore how destructive Othering can be.

In addition, reading and writing about monsters could help you better understand monstrosity in everyday life. According to Bruno Bettelheim and Gerard Jones, overcoming monsters in literature, film, and the imagination can have a cathartic effect: people can face the darkness within themselves by embodying it in a monstrous form and finding ways to conquer it. Similarly, people can demonize the problems of the world today in order to help deal with them. The nightly news tells stories—of war and terrorism, of murder and assault, and of bullying and cruelty—that illustrate the violence, hatred, and anger of the world. Monsters provide a vocabulary to help define feelings on these issues, and critical thinkers can avoid the Othering of the past by learning to use that vocabulary to demonize acts rather than individuals: monsters can symbolize terrorism, not the terrorist, prejudice and not difference. The ambiguity of monsters acknowledges that these issues are more complicated than they may seem, and examining how the issues of the day connect to monstrosity can help to avoid repeating mistakes of the past.

To engage with the diversity of monstrosity in both historical and contemporary representations, this volume discusses examples from multiple media, providing selections from classic novels as well as overviews of films and references to video games and other media that you might choose to explore as well. While many of the examples come from fiction, the volume also includes nonfiction descriptions of real-life serial killer and a variety of essays about monsters and monstrosity. The combination of fiction and nonfiction will help you to articulate your ideas about monsters by providing both material for reflection and models for writing. Each selection appears alongside assignments that you might think through on your own or complete as part of a class. These assignments are multimodal—that is, they involve writing and other traditional forms of composition, but they also ask to you to make arguments in oral presentations, visual displays, and other forms. The modes and media you use for your communication about monsters might ultimately be as diverse as the monsters themselves.

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### MONSTROUS POLITICS: AN EXAMPLE

While many monsters exist across the boundaries of modes and media, few monsters have had the rich (un)lives of Frankenstein's Creature, so an example of a contemporary use of this monster demonstrates the strong connection between monstrosity and multimodal communication. As this book's selection from Mary Shelley's novel demonstrates, the Creature has always had strong political resonance. That resonance has continued through stage and film adaptations and through other media as well, including political cartoons.

Political cartoons use both humor and seriousness to comment on topical concerns and often use distortion and ambiguity to analyze and reveal the contradictions and problems that define political controversies. For example, Figure 1 presents the political cartoon "Health Care Monster" (2009), which highlights the issue of health care reform as pursued by the administration of Democratic President Barack Obama. The cartoon casts President Obama as Dr. Frankenstein and the Republicans (represented by their common symbol, the elephant) as his helper, Igor. Obama's gleeful shout of "It's Alive!" contrasts with Igor's "I'm not getting a pulse," emphasizing the opposition between political parties and their disagreement over the viability of reform. However, since Igor is assisting Frankenstein while disagreeing with him, the Republicans are shown to be complicit in the creation of the Democratically spearheaded reform effort, which is represented by the Creature itself, whose shirt proclaims his identity as "Some Kind of Health Care Reform."



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**Figure 1.** “Health Care Monster:” A political cartoon uses Frankenstein’s Creature to reflect on the monstrosity of political disagreements over health care in the United States.

The vagueness of the monster’s identity, reflected in the uncertainty of “Some Kind” in the T-shirt, illustrates uncertainty about the form this *reform* will take. This uncertainty relates to ambiguity inherent to Frankenstein’s Creature: as an assembly of corpses brought back to life, the Creature is the living dead, which calls its status as “alive” into question. Like the the health care reform effort, which seems to have produced *something*, the Creature is a huge presence that doesn’t have a discernible pulse, or recognizable claim to vitality. All the political disagreements involved in the efforts to bring the reform to life, represented in the cartoon by Frankenstein/Obama and Igor/Republicans, have left the reform pulse-less on the floor of Congress. The reform itself, represented by the Creature, exists on the boundary between political parties as well as on the boundary between old and new political approaches to health care. Thus, like virtually all monsters, this version of Frankenstein’s Creature is a boundary dweller, which makes him an apt tool for articulating some of the political challenges we face today.

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Before reading any of the selections in this book, define the term “monster” in your own words. Your definition should be a brief paragraph that explains what a monster is—taking into account physical and behavioral characteristics—and why the monster is culturally significant.



In small groups, list monsters *not* mentioned in this introduction. Do the monsters on your list fit into particular categories? If so, what are those categories, and what commonalities make specific monsters fit specific categories? How might these commonalities add to or challenge the general claims the introduction makes about monsters?



Draw a cartoon that uses one or more monsters to express your views on a contemporary political issue. After you finish the drawing, write a reflective paragraph that answers these questions:

- Did you use a familiar monster (such as Frankenstein’s Creature) or invent a new monster? What difference does (un)familiarity make in your cartoon?
- Does your representation of the monster(s) create “Othering”—does it frame any ideas or people, perhaps those opposed to your own position, as a bad “them” in relation to a good “us”? If so, what or who is framed as the Other, and what problems might this Othering pose? If not, who or what does your monster represent, and how does it avoid Othering them?
- Finally, how might your use of monstrosity in your cartoon serve as a warning about society approaching the issue you’ve chosen in a dangerous or misguided way?