

WOLFF, ÉTIENNE, éd. *Monstres et monstruosités de l'Antiquité à nos jours: En Occident et en Orient*. L'Harmattan, 2022. ISBN 9782140300035. Pp. 427.

Mirroring the malleability of its subject matter—namely the universality and plasticity of monsters—this compilation of presentations from a conference held at the Université de Paris-Nanterre and L'École Normale Supérieure surveys the multifaceted embodiments of monstrosity across ages, civilizations, and media.



Although by no means earth-shattering in their theses—the monster can crystallize political unrest, societal mutations, divine omens, or suppressed psychopathic impulses deeply nestled in each of us—each article quite impressively substantiates its claims with compelling arguments and manifold exemplifications. Consequently, reading through the pages of *Monstres et monstruosités* cannot simply be regarded as a journey back in time, an exploration of our ancestors' beliefs or, worse, the exoticization of foreign cultures. In fact, its numerous ontological questions will naturally speak to the reader: are we all inherently monsters owing to the primordial Fall (in the first three chapters, 9–31)? How can one adjust to social structures in disarray (69)? How can one logically construe natural phenomena beyond one's understanding (307)? Is there a beautification of infectious hyperviolence through the depiction of monsters in our modern societies (395)? It is no easy task to tease out the pith of a collection made up of twenty-seven presentations. Hence, I will spotlight here only a few noteworthy texts. In "Political Monsters in Greek Art," Catalin Pavel reconsiders human-animal hybrid monsters in Greek iconography through the lens of political symbolism (67–80). Monsters thus act as foils in the self-definition of the ideal Greek individual. As entities of chaos, typifying the jolts of an ever-brittle social order, monsters must be obliterated for the *polis* to prevail. This intermingling of chaos and socio-political subversion is echoed in Laurie Lefèbvre's "Déclinaison complète du monstrueux: le paradigme Néron" (195–209). As a Roman Emperor transgressing social norms through heinous acts such as the rape of a Vestal or matricide, Nero becomes in anti-Julio-Claudian propaganda a figure of hubris for which Roman society should atone. Specific attention should be given to the parts by Ballanfat and Amir and Shakeri that transcend the European cultural space, respectively in India and South Iran. While Ballanfat brilliantly shows how Buddhist priests were recast as monstrous anthropophagic threats to Brahmanical societies in the Indian *Râmâyana* (227–33), his ideological deciphering of the epic reminds us of how often religious rivalry has worked as the perfect breeding ground for the emergence of the monster throughout human history. That same history left its imprint on Iran under the guise of malevolent spirits redolent of social traumas such as slavery or the high death rate in childbirth (369–73). There is much left to be said about this volume. As previously mentioned, the collection sheds light on cultural territories relatively obscure to our Western societies such as *yokai*/monsters resisting Western rationalization in Edo Japan (325–42), and many others. Monsters are a species of signs and as such their elusive polymorphism in this work renders their nature perfectly. In this regard, the lack of a general cohesive conclusion, although somewhat regrettable, speaks volumes.