

intersections online

Volume 10, Number 2 (Spring 2009)

Alletta Brenner, “‘The Good and Bad of that Sexe’: Monstrosity and Womanhood in Early Modern England,” *intersections* 10, no. 2 (2009): 161-175.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines constructions of gender in early modern England as a way of understanding the emerging of modernity in a period of extreme social and political upheaval. Through a study of portrayals of women as monstrous in the English popular press in the second half of the seventeenth century, the author describes how fundamental changes in the way that the public made sense of the world—increasingly according to the modernist perception that the universe is made up of an orderly and defined a system of inherent and infallible relationships—led people and things that defied the categories ascribed them to seem monstrous and threatening. Gender, as a contested site upon which questions of culture and politics have often played out over the ages, became a particular focus of attention during this period. In this context, women came to be seen as a threatening force, and described with great frequency in the popular press as monstrous creatures to be feared and loathed.

http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Spring_2009/Alletta_Brenner_Monstrosity_and_Womanhood_in_Early_Modern_England.pdf

© 2009 *intersections*, Alletta Brenner. This article may not be reposted, reprinted, or included in any print or online publication, website, or blog, without the expressed written consent of *intersections* and the author

'The Good and Bad of that Sexe'

Monstrosity and Womanhood in Early Modern England

By Alletta Brenner
University of Oregon

Monsters. In the modern mind, they have come to occupy a mere periphery. Rejected by the orderly nature of our scientific universe, they are either subsumed into the categories of routine, abnormal results, or delegated to that of the supernatural—those things which have no place in our system, and thus cannot exist. However, not so long ago, monsters occupied a very different space. Monsters were evidence of the wondrousness of our world, signs of the vastness and variety of God's creation, and portents of his wrath. Monsters informed and reflected the way we understood our world. Daston and Park, in their extensive work on the history of wonder, have drawn this connection in terms of the heavenly and prodigious qualities perceived of monsters and how this tied to historical circumstance. These scholars, along with several others, have drawn a clear line between the rise of monsters and periods of social, religious, and political unrest.¹

Monsters can be connected to the times in which they appear in other ways as well. Periods of upheaval are also characterized by change and redefinition. Here, the great struggle monsters come to embody is not just located solely in the presence of turmoil, but as well in its resolution and the general human effort to arrive at and justify a consensus about the 'natural order' of the world. For as much as they threaten them, monsters also help to define and signify boundaries and hierarchies. In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", Jeffrey Cohen provides an excellent description of these phenomena:

The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (both ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster only exists to be read... Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.²

¹ For more on the historical dynamic of monsters see Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the order of nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001); Peter G. Platt, *Wonders, marvels, and monsters in early modern culture* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999); and Jeffrey Cohen *Monster theory: reading culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

² Cohen, 4.

As Cohen suggests, through a study of what, how, and why certain bodily characteristics or physical qualities have come to be understood as monstrous, we can observe how over time people have questioned and constructed the limits of the normal, natural world. This epistemological history—what Lorraine Daston has described as the way that “the categories that structure our thought, pattern our arguments and proofs, and certify our standards of explanation” have changed over time—is as much a reflection of human history as a dynamic of it.³

Ultimately, monsters are objects that cross boundaries of what we perceive to be normal, and thus natural. In the modern world, this carries implications that are specifically negative. Monsters are horrible, dangerous, and repugnant. However, prior to the modern period, monstrosity carried a dramatically different epistemological connotation. In the medieval period, Europeans saw themselves as party to a greater scheme of connections. Jerusalem was the physical and conceptual center of the globe, and all that existed was part of God’s creation.⁴ Under this philosophical framework, divisions were present, but only as parts of a greater holistic vision. Even when perceived as awful portents, the emphasis remained that such things came as a message from God. In the pre-modern mind a ‘monster’ might have been wondrous and stupefying, but never repugnant. For, nothing that was part of God’s creation could be viewed as unnatural. Wonders were signs from heaven, evidence of nature’s playfulness, and examples of the vastness of God’s creation, but never perversions of it.⁵ Consequentially, the usage of ‘monstrosity’ to refer to things as horrible and unnatural could not have developed without a significant shift in the conceptual ways in which the world was understood.

I examine one particular historical moment of unrest and redefinition to understand in part how this shift occurred: early modern England from the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth. Perhaps the most complex and turbulent in Britain’s history, this period was witness to a civil war, the overthrow and execution of a monarch, the (then unprecedented) rule of queens, religious upheaval and reformation, the reinstating of both a monarchy

³ Lorraine Daston, “Historical Epistemology,” in *Questions of evidence: proof, practice, and persuasion across the disciplines*, eds. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry D. Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 282.

⁴ A dramatic example of this conceptual framework can be seen in the Mappa Mundi, a medieval world map located in the British Library. It is also available in P.D.A. Harvey, *Mappa mundi: the Hereford world map* (London: Hereford Cathedral & the British Library, 1996).

⁵ See Daston and Park, *Wonders and the order of nature*, Chaps. 1 and 5. See also Platt, *Wonders, marvels, and monsters in early modern culture*. It should be noted that on occasion, monsters were taken to be an expression of evil. However, this was still understood as part of the cosmic dance between God and Satan, and not as something outside of nature. For more see Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, *The monstrous Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

and a religion, and a revolution in science and philosophy. Each of these great shifts were manifest in the appearance and interpretation of the monstrous.

Monsters real and imagined played a crucial role in the early modern mindset—whether they were found in the form of grotesque births or witches, the sexually depraved or creatures with bodies composed of many species.⁶ Through them, we can witness the collective anxieties of a nation as it sought for meaning in a time of vast uncertainty.⁶ By tracing the formation and definition of these monsters, and the epistemological shifts they embodied, we are able to witness the continuing emergence of modernity in British society.

In this period, monsters played a large part on the stage of popular imagination. One of the most intriguing examples of popular conceptions of monstrosity can be found in representations of women as monstrous creatures. In some ways, this was nothing new to the early modern period. After all, “the monster is difference made flesh” and the locating of difference within women’s bodies is a tradition that goes back to the oldest of Christian mythologies, Adam and Eve.⁷ However, throughout the early modern period, there was a profound surge in the idea that women were somehow monstrous creatures—at best gossiping, unreliable, dishonest and dangerous, and at worst literal corruptions of the human flesh.

While femaleness has long been associated with sinfulness, such a widespread indictment of ordinary women as literally *deformed* in body and soul is dramatic. Many have pointed to a rise in misogyny to explain this portrayal, but such explanations are unsatisfactory.⁸ While it may have been true that certain events may have led to a misogynist backlash in early modern England, this does not explain why women would be portrayed in this particular manner, nor what the significance of such portrayals were for the way gender was being understood and defined in that time and place.⁹ Instead, I propose that we examine this

⁶ For more on the monsters and the preternatural and the meaning associated with them in this period see Lorraine Daston, “Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe,” in *Questions of evidence: proof, practice, and persuasion across the disciplines*, eds. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry D. Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 243; also see Daston and Park, *Wonders and the order of nature*, Chapters 1, 5 and 6.

⁷ Cohen, 7.

⁸ It is worth noting here while a rise in misogyny may certainly have occurred, (after all, this period would be witness to the some of the most violent of attacks against women: politically, economically, and certainly physically by way of ‘witch trials’), I argue these events were only a symptom of larger cultural developments, embodied in an overall anxiety about sex and gender.

⁹ For more on the history of anti-feminist writings in the pre-modern period see Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt, and C. William Marx, *Woman defamed and woman defended: an anthology of Medieval texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

phenomena through the lens of epistemological history, and ask instead, what does the portrayal of woman as monstrous tell us about the processes of redefinition and adjustment to which gender was subject in this period? And, how were these processes linked to larger epistemological shifts in English society as a whole?

To set a scene for this exploration, we must first go to where most monsters appeared in the popular imagination of the time, the small press. During this same period of unrest, the world of print—ranging from ballads, to books, to broadsides—underwent a vast degree of development. As political adversaries fought for power on the battlefield, ideological battles were fought out in print—a fact indicated by the exponential growth of printed materials during the tumultuous period of 1640 to 1660.¹⁰

In a unique way, the small press brought together all degrees of English society, embodying a whole variety of ideas and experiences, and in turn disseminating them to everyone. In any particular shop, one might find everything from the latest discoveries of Boyle, to the finest work of Shakespeare and the bawdiest pornography, often all sharing and borrowing themes. Thus from its center in London, the press was literally a vast and crucial site for discourse and debate. Here, monsters were recorded and represented, their meanings interpreted, and their ultimate significance determined. Likewise, it is through an analysis of relevant small press that we can observe the developmental course of all kinds of epistemologies, as their meanings were negotiated between the many institutions of English culture and thought, and in works of every genre and price.¹¹

Historically a favorite topic, it is unsurprising that a significant amount of printed material in early modern England dealt with the theme of women. While definitions of sex and gender have always been major objects of contention, this subject had reached new heights, becoming a primary topic of discussion. Beginning with the controversial rein of the Tudors, and marked by the infamous ‘*querelle de femmes*’—the prolonged humanist debate on the status and nature of women—this period would be witnessed to a virtual explosion in misogynist writings dictating everything from the ‘true nature of the feminine sex’, to the

¹⁰ An example of this growth can be seen in the growth of the pamphlets collected by the printer Thomason: 22 in 1640, over 1000 in 1641, and 1966 in 1642, with an overall total of more than 22,000 from 1640 to 1660. For more, see Fred S. Siebert, *Freedom of the press in England, 1476-1776: the rise and decline of government controls* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), 191.

¹¹ For more on the history of the British press and cultural discourse see Jerome Friedman, *The battle of the frogs and Fairford's flies: miracles and the pulp press during the English Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993). Also, Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering in early modern Britain*, Cambridge studies in early modern British history (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

appropriate roles for women in religion, marriage and reproduction.¹² From all aspects of society, thousands of authors would weighed in on the issue, each purporting to know the final 'truth' of the matter, while clearly representing their own individual interests. Though numerically marginal, female authors too participated in this discourse, both condemning and defending their sex with great eloquence and wit.¹³ Further, as was made clear by so many authors' appeals to their audiences, women too were avid readers of these works, often warranting a style aimed particularly to at female audiences. Thus, while the medium of print was definitely circumscribed by relations of power and influence, and though the wealth of material clearly represented the ideals, desires, and interests of men, it nonetheless provides us with an excellent map of the debate as it developed over time.¹⁴

Centered mostly on conceptions of 'true' and 'appropriate' womanhood, these writings focused on a variety of major themes, namely: politics, morality, women's role in history, and appropriate relations between men and women. Common to almost all of these, is an insistence upon the inferiority of the female sex, and broad, virulent attacks upon its perceived defects. Claiming the majority of women to be gossiping, lazy, inconstant, manipulative, and untrustworthy creatures with voracious sexual appetites, much of this literature paints women as inherently evil and troublesome. To this point, one such author even suggests 'hanging' as a preferable alternative to marriage.¹⁵ Others, acknowledging the 'general usefulness' of women, would provide their readers with suggestions of how to secure a 'constant', honest wife, and avoid a 'shrew'.¹⁶ Thus while often positing an argument in terms of merely critiquing certain 'bad' behaviors thought to be typical of women, the authors of these works almost always emphasized their own version of the ideal 'goodwife' who happily and without protest adheres to her rigidly defined, subservient role.

¹² See Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly women and female power in the street literature of early modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 9; also Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering*, Chapter 7, and Friedman, *The battle of the frogs*, Chapter 9.

¹³ For a variety of great examples of women's participation in the printed world, see Suzanne Trill, Kate Chedgzoy and Melanie Osborne, *Lay by your needles ladies, take the pen: writing women in England, 1500-1700* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). Also see Anne Haselkorn and Betty Travitsky, *The Renaissance Englishwoman in print: counterbalancing the canon* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), and Charlotte Otten, *English women's voices, 1540-1700* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ See Wiltenburg, *Disorderly women*, Chapter 3; Friedman, *The battle of the frogs* Chapter 1, and Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering*, Chapter 7.

¹⁵ Raymond, 284. Also see Barbara McManus, Barbara, *Half humankind: contexts and texts of the controversy about women in England, 1540-1640* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985).

¹⁶ Raymond, 279-288

One of the earliest works of the period to proclaim the monstrosity of women was John Knox's famous *First blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* in 1558. Regaling the recent phenomena of female rulers as abhorrent to nature, it built upon the misogynist sentiments typical of his day and, to make the argument that women who stepped outside the role God created for them were unnatural and repugnant:

To promote a Woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion, or empire above any realme, nation, or citie, is repugnant to Nature; contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance; and finallie, it is the subversion of good order, of all equitie and justice.¹⁷

Its primary theme, that women were created by God to be subservient to men and were thus unfit to rule over them, set the premise for a whole litany of writings to come, as authors would continue to emphasize the 'unnaturalness' of powerful females. Invoking immediate and fierce debate about female capability, Knox's piece brought to a head one of the major debates of his time.¹⁸ Though the subsequent succession of Queen Elizabeth would soon force Knox to recant, and make attacks against female rulers impossible, the general theme of natural hierarchy, and violations of it as monstrous, would remain steadfast.

Perhaps the most infamous of these brutal, tongue-in-cheek arraignments of womankind, would be the notorious pamphlet by Joseph Swetnam, *The arraignment of lewde, idle, forward, and unconstant women: or the vanitie of them, choose you whether. With a commendacion of wise, vertuous and honest women*, in 1615. Consisting of misogynistic stereotypes in scathing tone, Swetnam's pamphlet emphasized the comical nature of women's faults, calling females 'necessary evils' who could all use some adjustment. Short and inexpensive, it would run at least 10 editions by 1637, with others as late as 1807, prompting many angry responses, and even a play titled *Swetnam the woman hater, arraigned by women A new comedie*, in 1620.¹⁹ Though considered by many to be repetitive, contradictory and unimaginative, the lasting power of Swetnam's pamphlet in the fast moving world of print indicates the fact it must have carried some resonance with its readers.

¹⁷ Josephine A. Roberts, Josephine, "Radigund Revisited: Perspectives on Women Rulers in Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania*," in *The Renaissance Englishwoman in print: counterbalancing the canon*, eds. Anne M. Haselkorn and Betty Travitsky (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 187. For more on common conceptions about women in this period see Antonia Fraser, *The weaker vessel* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984).

¹⁸ For more on "The First Blast of the Trumpet" and its responses see, Carroll Camden, *The Elizabethan woman* (Houston: The Elsevier Press, 1952), Chap. 9. See also Shepard, *Gender and authority in sixteenth-century England*.

¹⁹ See Camden, 255-257; Raymond 284-290.

Like Knox's *First Blast*, Swetnam's *Araignment* spurred intense controversy, sparking and setting the style for decades of debate and commentary.²⁰ One of the most prominent refutations of Swetnam's argument would be against his insistence that all women were bad, as demonstrated by his failure to truly provide an example of a 'good' woman to counter his criticisms. While his case met frequent attacks against his blindly misogynist claims,; none of these threatened his and others' essential assumptions about the feminine ideal.²¹ Though sweeping judgments were made in both cases, declaring on one side the general badness and inferiority of women, and on the other, the general goodness and equality of women, neither challenged the fundamental idea that women should be relegated to a particular, limited role of bearing children and serving their husbands, nor that chastity and lack of passion should be preferable.²² In almost every pamphlet to follow Swetnam, on either side of the issue, this dichotomy would remain, with few actual challenges to the structures of femininity and masculinity that underlined it. Thus And while Swetnam never directly declared women monstrous, his work is an important contribution in a long vein of misogynist literature that does. The deepened hierarchical divisions and attitudes that emerged from the debate were fundamental additions to the construction of feminine monstrosity, making the notion of a 'natural', 'good' woman in opposition to the 'unnatural', 'bad' (and thus monstrous) woman, all the more rigidly defined.

As the gender debate climaxed between 1640 and 1670, images of monstrous women proliferated. Vast numbers of books, broadsides and pamphlets presented tales of horrendous, monstrous women who tyrannically dominated the men in their lives, causing them to commit acts of terrible sin, and even going so far as to murder their families (or in some cases, clients).²³ For some, these ubiquitous 'whores', 'witches' and 'shrews' and the ultimate sins they embodied were signs of God's wrath against a nation that had sinned. For others, they were signs of how corrupted a nation Britain had become.²⁴ But for more still, they were the very incarnation of the fear that Britain itself had been

²⁰ For more on the history of controversies over women, including that surrounding Swetnam, see Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: literature and the nature of womankind, 1540-1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

²¹ Raymond, 285-286. See Ann Rosalind Jones, "Counterattacks on "The Bayter of Women": Three Pamphleteers of the Early Seventeenth Century," in *The Renaissance Englishwoman in print: counterbalancing the canon*, eds. Anne M. Haselkorn and Betty Travitsky (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990): 45-62.

²² Raymond, 285-286.

²³ For more examples see Roger Thompson, *Unfit for modest ears: A study of pornographic, obscene, and bawdy works written or published in England in the second half of the seventeenth century* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979).

²⁴ Friedman, 179-200, 255-261.

‘cuckolded’, literally losing control of its subjects and in doing so becoming an emasculated, headless nation.²⁵ In this tradition, some of the fiercest attacks would be reserved for sectarians and activists such as the Quakers, Adamites, Anabaptists, Levelers and Diggers, whom were perceived as giving too much power to women, becoming sexually depraved and dominated by ‘religious whores.’

Imagining these women as devilish minions of Satan, these authors emphasized the righteousness of their own political and social agendas, and with it the unequivocal sense that powerful women gained their dominance only through unnatural, evil workings. As one such pamphlet envisioned: “But ye of all whores, there is no whore to a Holy Whore, which when she turns up the white of her eye and the black of her tail, when she falls flat on her back, according as the spirit moves her, the fire of her zeal kindles such a flame that the devil can not withstand her...she can cover her lust with religion.”²⁶ In all, the theme would be the same: English women were stepping outside their proper roles, with disastrous results.

One particular pamphlet, entitled *A brief anatomie of women: being an invective against, and apologie for the bad and good of that sexe*, provides us with an excellent example of feminine monstrosity as it was envisioned and debated. Like others of its time, it closely followed the form and the sentiments of its predecessors, invoking many of the same arguments and images. Women are deformed creatures, filled with the trickery of Satan:

If we but observe their actions and undertakings, it will manifestly appear that they are... humane creatures merely metamorphosed, seeming to be that which truly and really they are not, and in a word, it is most apparent that they onely are the greatest and most powerful temptations to evill of all other.²⁷

However, this work goes beyond the simple misogynistic rants of some earlier works. Published anonymously in 1653, dead center in the highpoint of debate,

²⁵ See William Burns, “The Kings Two Monstrous Bodies: John Bulwer and the English Revolution,” in *Wonders, marvels, and monsters in early modern culture*, ed. Peter G. Platt (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 188-189. Interestingly, this fear of national emasculation was also expressed by John Knox in “First Blast of the Trumpet.”

²⁶ Friedman, 185. Friedman quotes *A Strange wonder, or, A wonder in a woman, wherein is plainly expressed the true nature of most women. Especially of some eminent women in this citie. Likewise a plaine description of many mad tricks and slights lately performed by a zealous sister which was overcome with the spirit* (London, Printed for I.T., 1642). For more on the misogynistic use of print for political purposes see Thompson, *Unfit for modest ears*.

²⁷ *A Brief anatomie of women: being an invective against, and apologie for the bad and good of that sexe* (London: printed for E. Alsop, 1653), 3. This text is available in the Thomason Tract Series (microform) from University Microforms of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

it existed on a cusp between two radically different understandings of gender: woman as a version of man, and woman as an entirely distinct creature. Thus in *A brief anatomie*, we can observe the workings of some of the major epistemological shifts that marked its time, as Britain became increasingly invested in a modern worldview, and a very different vision of monstrosity emerged.

A brief anatomie contributed to the discourse on womanhood in several important ways relevant to the development of modernity. The foremost of these, was a shift in the way that gender divisions were drawn and affirmed. Such divisions are an essential element to a modernist worldview. Bruno Latour, in his critical work *We have never been modern*, describes this function succinctly as a process he calls “purification.” According to Latour, one of the main directives of modernism is not simply the division of objects into separate and distinct groups, but what moderns perceive as the *purification* of them into their essential meanings, allowing for each object to then be placed into its respective category of existence.²⁸ In this way, boundaries do more than delegate (and separate) groupings of objects—they determine their *possibilities* of existence. While it is certain that this ‘purification’ is only an illusion (Can we ever really determine the essential qualities of anything?), its impact on the way we see the world is powerfully evident in the historical formation of modern epistemologies of sex and gender. The upsurge of monsters in the early modern period can be seen as related to this emerging process; for by the very nature of their contradictory bodies, they “resist all attempts to include them in any systematic structure.”²⁹

In England, an emphasis on the delegation of all things, including the sexes, into rigid and separate categories of meaning had begun as early as the sixteenth century. However, because the purifying force of the scientific method was still only in its early stages during the early modern period, the lines drawn were often confusing and contradictory. John Bulwer, one of the most significant authors on monstrosity during the mid seventeenth century, provides an excellent example of this relationship in his encyclopedic work *Anthropometamorphosis*.³⁰ Bulwer’s principal concern was that of deformity. For Bulwer, monstrosity not just the result of “licentiousnesse of inordinate concupiscence,” but the incarnation of “very wickedness”—the perverse crossing of essential and fundamental lines of division. For Bulwer, the traversing of

²⁸ Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1-37.

²⁹ Cohen, 6.

³⁰ Burns, 197-198; Also see Mary Campbell, “Anthropometamorphosis: John Bulwer’s Monsters of Cosmetology and the Science of Culture,” in *Monster theory: reading culture*, ed. Jeffrey Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

gender lines was one of the most monstrous of acts. Bulwer described castration with particular rage, as ‘high treason’ against nature.

What things determined the essential nature of each sex was still hotly debated, and Bulwer, attempting to clear up such ambiguity, often found himself stuck at extremes. For example, Bulwer considered even shaving a deformity as it made a man too effeminate, a point that most of his fellow men would have rejected.³¹ Contemporary to Bulwer’s work, both the desire to and difficulty of ‘setting things straight’, are strongly evident in the way gender is defined and described within *A brief anatomie*.

Like Bulwer, the author of *A brief anatomie* also pushes to extremes. From the very beginning, the author makes a significant point of emphasizing divisions:

For if there were not deformity how could their be beauty [?]; and if there were not sin, how could righteousness appear[?]. The Antipathy therefore between good and evil, is as great as the visible difference betwixt the most resplendent light and obscurest darkness.³²

Following the legacy of Swetnam’s pamphlet, this kind of sharp line is extended to what the author identifies as two different breeds of woman, “the good and bad of that sexe”: the first of which is “abundant [with] goodness and magnificent virtues”, and a second, which is made up of deformed women “whose corrupt natures and evil dispositions render [them] odious in the sight of God and man.”³³ Likewise, he states: “We must also acknowledge that women (in their natural inclinations) are all in extreams, for they that are good are really good indeed, and they that are bad are usually extremely evill.”³⁴ These dichotomies are evidence of what was a conscious societal effort to construct clear boundaries upon a division that was inherently (and only increasingly so) problematic. Because it was almost impossible for women to cross over these lines, they were locked into positions of ‘essentially good’ or ‘essentially bad.’ Together, this virtual splitting of womanhood into two opposing camps created a powerful requisite for monstrosity, for if only one can be natural, all else is unnatural and thus ‘deformed.’

In addition to the boundary between ‘good and bad’ women, perceptions of feminine monstrosity also emerged from perceived boundaries between the

³¹ Burns, 197-198.

³² *A brief anatomie*, Introduction.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

sexes that sought to define man and woman as oppositional in nature. Such an emphasis reveals an important contradiction between the modern conception of sex, and older conceptions of gender that existed at the time. For while the modernist emphasis on boundaries encouraged placing men and women at opposite poles, the reasons cited for women's deformities relied upon an older, more flexible understanding of the interrelation of the sexes. This understanding of feminine monstrosity focused instead on the interrelatedness of the sexes; making the case that from Eve's literal birth from the 'crooked rib' of Adam, to the formation of gender in the womb,³⁵ women are created by God as 'deformed' men, monstrous in their own right by their physical and mental inadequacies. By the early seventeenth century, however, the physiological distinctness of women's bodies had become firmly established in the scientific realm and was gaining traction in popular conceptions of gender also. Evidence of this new oppositional view of gender is present in the *A brief anatomie*, albeit in constant tension with pre-modern conceptions of gender which are also present. Thus, while the author goes to great pains to distinguish women from their male 'counterparts', he explains female difference and monstrosity in the language of deformity, returning often to the idea of original sin as the source of feminine badness.

The author begins with the moral and historical context of the Eve, making a special point of noting that women are a group which has almost exclusively gone against the interests of men (that is, of 'all mankind'):

If we but consider the nature and qualities of the generality of that sex, even in all ages from the fall of man unto this present, we may well perceive that they have not only been extremely evil in themselves but have also been in the main instruments and immediate causes of murder, idolatry, and a multitude of other heinous sins.³⁶

Following this line of reasoning, the author then provides a long list of female biblical characters that committed enormous acts of sin, or more importantly, like Eve, led to the downfall of men. While a few examples of 'good' women are cited, the general sense given is that women, by their own initial instincts, are not. This point is only emphasized in the work's conclusion: "For we find (by sure and infallible arguments) that the number of the righteous are but few, and

³⁵ According to Aristotle, women were created when male babies failed to reach their full development; Thus women in essence, were deformed men. This made them less than perfect, being faulty models of the perfect human, man. For more on this conception of physiology in the early modern period see Kate Aughterson, *Renaissance woman: a sourcebook : constructions of femininity in England* (London: Routledge, 1995), 41-66.

³⁶ *A brief anatomie*, 1.

the wicked very numerous.”³⁷

This tendency for badness is given to be a result of woman’s weaker mind and morals, consequence of an inferior degree of development inherited all the way back from her ‘grandmother Eve’.³⁸ If we follow the general argument of most contemporary guidebooks on femininity and morality, female goodness was only possible with the moralizing influence of religion and the social constraints of propriety.³⁹ And even then, while a few women could overcome their tendency toward badness, the vast majority apparently would not, a fact emphasized by *A brief anatomie*’s insistence upon the utter rarity of ‘good women.’ The clear conclusion of such a definition, is that women are the dark counterpart to an inherently good (read: pure) male sex, and that all transgressions on the part of men, result from the ‘pollution’ of women.

While drawing upon an older understanding of the interrelatedness of the sexes based on biblical narrative, the author of *A brief anatomie* also draws upon more modern conceptions of difference that aim to delineate and separate the sexes. However, unlike those medical anatomies that were developing in the same era, it serves not to normalize and naturalize the female body, but rather to reinforce its function as a monstrous creation:

The golden tresses of their amorous hair... doth manifestly express the true performance of their dutie to their great Lord and master Lucifer, in observing so well his livery... Their roling eies,⁴⁰ like shining pearl, seem to be the baits that insnare men in their love, whole fruit is destruction... Their bodie it self is a magazine of corrupt and ill humors, which hath continual recourse to all the rest of the members: Their thighs are the ascent unto this frail fabrick of corruption, their legs the supports, and their feet swift guides to the waies of vanity, for from the crown of their head to the sole of the foot, there is not a good member, no not one.⁴¹

In this process, the author attempts to pursue the aim of laying out and exposing

³⁷ Ibid., 5.

³⁸ Fraser, 1-4.

³⁹ For a few excellent examples of these texts see Lloyd Davis, *Sexuality and gender in the English Renaissance: an annotated edition of contemporary documents*. Garland reference library of the humanities, v. 2011 (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1998); Aughterson, *Renaissance woman: a sourcebook*; and Fraser, *The weaker vessel*.

⁴⁰ Eies (eyes), may be also read as synonymous with vagina. For more on early modern slang see James T. Henke, *Gutter life and language in the early "street" literature of England: a glossary of terms and topics, chiefly of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1988.)

⁴¹ *A brief anatomie*, 2-3.

the 'truth' of womanhood for observation.⁴² This is a theme expressed throughout early modern writing, in the language of "opening, uncovering or bringing to light something at the same time characterized as 'monstrous' or 'obscene.'"⁴³ Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, it was widely believed that the human corporeal exterior acted as a representation of God's judgment upon its interior. By this, an emphasis on the social functions of the parts of a woman's body as embodiments of deformity reinforced the claim of that her nature was in fact monstrous.⁴⁴

While boundary crossing and abnormality certainly existed in earlier times, such events provoked responses strikingly different responses in the early modern period. Monsters became unequivocally understood as threatening and dangerous, something to be controlled and eliminated. Critical to this change would be the superimposition of a structure of the 'natural order of things', of 'God's natural laws' upon all his creation. Almost a century before *A brief anatomie* was written, John Knox argued that women became monstrous when they violated the infallible descending order of God, man, and woman. Though at the time it may have been somewhat unorthodox, by the seventeenth century his emphasis on the fundamental order of the world was becoming increasingly coming to representative of the dominant view.⁴⁵ As demonstrated by prolific and accessible literature of the early modern press, early moderns of all kinds were coming to see their world as defined by a system of inherent and infallible relationships.⁴⁶ At the same time, those people and things that defied such categories were increasingly seen as monstrous.

This shift towards a rigid structuring of reality is powerfully evident in the way that many came to understand women in early modern England as monstrous creatures. For only when 'natural' is confined to strict limits, can something become monstrously 'unnatural'.⁴⁷ Prior to this era, popular conceptions of gender tended to emphasize the homogeneity between male and females. For

⁴² Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 70.

⁴³ Patricia A. Parker, "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender'", in *Women, "race," and writing in the early modern period*, eds. Patricia A. Parker and Margo Hendricks (London: Routledge, 1994), 87.

⁴⁴ David Williams, *Deformed discourse: the function of the monster in mediaeval thought and literature* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 107-176.

⁴⁵ Daston and Park, 202

⁴⁶ Latour, 29-35.

⁴⁷ For more on this progress of monstrosity from the middle 17th century onward, see William Burns, *An age of wonders: prodigies, politics, and providence in England, 1657-1727* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002).

example, anatomists painted even the female reproductive system as a mere morphing of the male. However, by the seventeenth century, divisions became increasingly important and the emphasis would no longer be on the similarity between the sexes, but rather the supposed differences between them.⁴⁸

Within this construction of increasing difference, a paradox began to emerge between what was perceived as the natural order of the world, and that which was ideal. Increasingly, the idea that women were by nature inferior and prone to badness came into conflict with the growing belief that the world was composed of orderly and purposeful hierarchies—the ‘natural’ order of things. As the definition of proper and ‘natural’ womanhood narrowed, the list of behaviors, and of women, that defied these confines grew, and so, it seemed the world was overrun with monstrous women.

Alletta Brenner graduated from the University of Oregon, where she wrote this paper, in 2006 with degrees in both History and Women’s and Gender Studies. She later attended the University of Edinburgh on a Marshall Scholarship, where she earned a Master’s degree in International and European Politics. Brenner also earned a Master’s Degree in Human Rights at the London School of Economics. A major focus of her work has continued to be constructions of gender in discourse and politics. She plans pursue a career as a lawyer working on issues related to human rights and gender.

⁴⁸ See Laqueur, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*