

Monstrous Imagination

M A R I E - H É L È N E H U E T



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Introduction

Where do monsters come from, and what do they really look like? In the Renaissance, answers to these puzzles were as numerous and varied as the physiological prodigies they sought to elucidate. Monsters came from God and the Devil, they were caused by stars and comets, they resulted from copulation with other species and from flaws in their parents' anatomies. The cosmic range of speculations also tried to account for the physical aspect of the marvelous beings observed in nature. Some monsters lacked an essential part of the body, others claimed an extra member, some looked like mythical animals, and a few were born with hermetic symbols imprinted on their strange physiology. Thus the much-discussed Ravenna monster was born without arms, but with a beautiful pair of wings, a fish tail, and mysterious markings on his chest: an epsilon, a cross, and, in some accounts, a half-moon as well.¹ But a remarkably persistent line of thought argued that monstrous progeny resulted from the disorder of the maternal imagination. Instead of reproducing the father's image, as nature commands, the monstrous child bore witness to the violent desires that moved the mother at the time of conception or during pregnancy. The resulting offspring carried the marks of her whims and fancy rather than the recognizable features of its legitimate genitor. The monster thus erased paternity and proclaimed the dangerous power of the female imagination. The theory that credited imagination with a deceiving but dominant role in procreation continued to be the object of heated discussions until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Around the same time, literature reappropriated the complex



The Ravenna monster, after Boaistuau, from Ambroise Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges*, 1573.

relationship between imagination and resemblances, between unfulfilled desires and the act of generation. By assigning to the artist as monstrous father the power once attributed to the mother to create singular progeny, the Romantic metaphor of procreation restaged in its own terms the ideology of misguided desires that spawned aberrant offspring. Imagination, already rehabilitated in the 1777 Supplement to Diderot's *Encyclopédie* as a powerful creative agent that "belongs to genius" and spurs poetic "fecundity,"² played a privileged role in the conception of the Romantic *oeuvre*. The first part of this book thus examines the role of the maternal imagination as it was debated in Western Europe from the Renaissance to the end of the Enlightenment. The second part of the book considers the Romantic claim that artistic creation was a monstrous genesis and the work of art a form of teratological disclosure.

In the fourth book of *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle wrote: "Anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type. The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male, though this indeed is a necessity required by Nature, since the race of creatures which are separated into male and female has got to be kept in being; . . . As for monstrosities, they are not necessary so far as the purposive or final cause is concerned, yet *per accidens*."³ These lines make a decisive association between the monstrous and the female as two departures from the norm, as two exceptions to another tenet of Aristotelian doctrine, namely, that "like produces like." The monster and the woman thus find themselves on the same side, the side of *dissimilarity*. "The female is as it were a deformed male," Aristotle also pointed out (II, iii, p. 175). Since she herself is on the side of the dissimilar, it was argued, the female appears to be destined by nature to contribute more figures of dissimilarity, if not creatures even more monstrous.⁴

But the female is a necessary departure from the norm, noted Aristotle, a useful deformity; the monster is gratuitous and useless for future generations. Aristotle's thoughts on generation offered a definition of monstrosity that was primarily linked not to physical imperfections but rather to a deficiency in the natural and visible

link between genitors and their progeny. "Monstrosities," he repeated, "come under the class of offspring which is unlike its parents" (IV, iv, p. 425). But the monster is also monstrous in another important way, one that Aristotle described as a "false resemblance" to another species.

It is not easy, by stating a single mode of cause, to explain . . . why sometimes the offspring is a human being yet bears no resemblance to any ancestor, sometimes it has reached such a point that in the end it no longer has the appearance of a human being at all, but that of an animal only—it belongs to the class of monstrosities, as they are called. And indeed this is what comes next to be treated . . . the causes of monstrosities, for in the end, when the movements (that came from the male) relapse and the material (that came from the female) does not get mastered, what remains is that which is most 'general,' and this is the (merely) 'animal.' People say that the offspring which is formed has the head of a ram or an ox; and similarly with other creatures, that one has the head of another, e.g., a calf has a child's head or a sheep an ox's head. The occurrence of all these things is due to the causes I have named; at the same time, *in no case are they what they are alleged to be, but resemblances only*, and this of course comes about even when there is no deformation involved. (IV, iii, pp. 417–419, emphasis added)

Monstrosities are thus doubly deceptive. Their strange appearance—a misleading likeness to another species, for example—betrays the otherwise rigorous law that offspring should resemble their parents. By presenting similarities to categories of beings to which they are not related, monsters blur the differences between genres and disrupt the strict order of Nature. Thus, though the monster was first defined as that which did not resemble him who engendered it, it nevertheless displayed some sort of resemblance, albeit a *false* resemblance, to an object external to its conception.

The genesis of that false resemblance played a crucial role in one of the most ancient and enduring theories of generation, namely, the tradition that credited the mother's imagination with the shape of her progeny. A lost text, attributed to Empedocles, first suggested what was to become one of the most popular beliefs in the study of procreation. Empedocles was said to have stated that "progeny can be modified by the statues and paintings that the

mother gazes upon during her pregnancy."⁵ Far from being discarded by medical thought when discoveries on generation redefined the respective roles of the father and mother in procreation, the view that the maternal imagination was responsible for the shape of progeny gained a growing number of followers in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. In 1621, Maître André du Laurens, the chancellor at the University of Montpellier as well as first physician to the king of France, expanded on Empedocles' suggestion as follows:

Empedocles the Pythagorean links [resemblance] to imagination alone, whose power is so great that, just as it often changes the body of one who has some deep thought, so it inscribes its form on the fertilized seed. The Arabs granted imagination so much power that, through it, they thought the soul could act not only on its own body, but on that of another. It seems that Aristotle recognized the imagination's power in the act of conception, when he asked why individuals of the human species are so different from each other, and answered that the quickness and activity of human thought and the variety of the human mind leave different marks of several kinds upon the seed.⁶

As late as 1788, Benjamin Bablot reminded his readers that "the philosopher Empedocles, from Agrigenta in Sicily, who, according to received opinion, died at a very old age when he fell into the sea and drowned in 440 B.C., acknowledged no other cause for dissemblance between children and their parents than the imagination of pregnant women. According to Amyot, Plutarch's naive translator, Empedocles held that it was through the woman's imagination during conception that children were formed, for often women have been in love with images and statues and have given birth to children resembling them."⁷ Thus, following Empedocles' theory, it was long believed that monsters, inasmuch as they did not resemble their parents, could well be the result of a mother's fevered and passionate consideration of images. More specifically, monsters were the offspring of an imagination that literally imprinted on progeny a deformed, misshapen resemblance to an object that had not participated in their creation. They were products of art rather than nature, as it were. Of course, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the mother's imagination was only one of several elements believed to cause monstrous births: others in-

cluded sex with the devil or animals, as well as defective sperm or a deformed womb. Yet no theory was more debated, more passionately attacked or defended, than the power of the maternal imagination over the formation of the fetus.⁸

Several traditions linked the word *monster* to the idea of showing or warning. One belief, following Augustine's *City of God*, held that the word *monster* derived from the Latin *monstrare*: to show, to display (*montrer* in French). *Monster*, then, belongs to the etymological family that spawned the word *demonstrate* as well.⁹ For Renaissance readers, this tradition confirmed the idea that monsters were signs sent by God, messages showing his will or his wrath, though Fortunio Liceti gave it a simpler meaning in 1616: "Monsters are thus named, not because they are signs of things to come, as Cicero and the Vulgate believed . . . but because they are such that their new and incredible appearance stirs admiration and surprise in the beholders, and startles them so much that everyone wants to show them to others [se les *monstre* réciproquement]." ¹⁰ Another tradition, the one adopted by current etymological dictionaries, derived the word *monster* from *monere*, to warn, associating even more closely the abnormal birth with the prophetic vision of impending disasters. These etymologies gave monstrosity a pre-inscribed interpretation. They also justified its existence by including the monster within the larger order of things. Monstrous births were understood as warnings and public testimony; they were thought to be "demonstrations" of the mother's unfulfilled desires. The monster was then seen as a visible image of the mother's hidden passions. This theory gained a greater audience in the seventeenth century and culminated in the hotly debated Quarrel of Imaginationism, which lasted through the eighteenth century.

Although the mother's imagination was never considered the *only* possible cause of monstrosity, and did not receive exclusive medical attention at any time in the history of thought on the process of generation, it nevertheless haunted centuries of medical research. In fact, the theory that the mother could be responsible for monstrous births persisted despite all possible evidence to the contrary. In the nineteenth century, discoveries in the fields of embryology and heredity provided scientists with new ways of explaining resemblances. But if the mother's imagination was no longer perceived by the medical field to be a factor in resem-

blances, its role as the shaper of progeny was never totally forgotten. The idea that imagination could give life and form to passive matter became a central theme of Romantic aesthetics, and to this day popular beliefs still attribute birthmarks to maternal desires during pregnancy.

The theory that confers on the maternal imagination the power to shape progeny also suggests a complex relationship between procreation and art, for imagination is moved by passion and works in a mimetic way. "Nature," wrote Claude de Tesserant in 1567 in *Histoires prodigieuses*, "portrays after a living model, just as a painter would, and tries to make children resemble their parents as much as possible."¹¹ For Paracelsus, "By virtue of her imagination the woman is the artist and the child the canvas on which to raise the work."¹² In 1731, François-Marie-Pompée Colonna noted: "It is true that the semen is the visible agent, but we can also say that like the Painter, the Sculptor, and other Artisans who use certain instruments to fashion their materials into desired shape, similarly this invisible workman uses the male's seminal matter as the instrument that leads the female to generate an animal."¹³ In 1812 in *Tableau de l'amour conjugal*, Dubuisson added, "The semen is to generation what the sculptor is to marble; the male semen is the sculptor who gives shape, the female liquor is the marble or matter, and the sculpture is the fetus or the product of generation."¹⁴ From this point of view, the mother could be said to have taken over the male role of the artist when, overwhelmed by gazing at images or by unchecked desires, she let her imagination interfere with the creative process and reproduce strange figures, or monstrosities. If Art must imitate Nature, in cases of monstrous procreation Nature imitates Art. Treatises on the role of the mother's imagination received very little attention after the theory was set aside by the medical world in the early 1800's. Yet these texts offer a striking reassessment of the maternal role in procreation and at the same time elucidate the relationship between imagination and art, nature and mimesis.

Thus when the thesis that the maternal imagination played an important role in the formation of monstrosities was finally abandoned toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, it remained an important part of literary aesthetics. In many texts, we

find explicit reference to the power of imagination in procreation. In *Elective Affinities*, for example, Goethe describes the birth of a child who displayed the effects of his parents' imagination, thereby betraying their moral adultery. Charlotte and Edward's son is the striking image not of his parents, but of those they love secretly: "People saw in it a wonderful, indeed a miraculous child . . . what surprised them more . . . [was] the double resemblance, which became more and more conspicuous. In figure and in the features of the face, it was like the Captain; the eyes every day it was less easy to distinguish from the eyes of Ottilie."¹⁵ E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Cardillac*, the monster of his short story "Mademoiselle de Scudéry," attributes his fateful passion for jewels to "the strange impressions which afflict pregnant women, and . . . the strange influence these impressions from outside can have on the child."¹⁶ "What vision of a tiger haunted my mother when she was carrying me?" asks Musset's dramatic hero Lorenzaccio.¹⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his best-known novel, *Elsie Venner* (1859), describes his heroine as the monstrous result of her mother's imagination, the mother having been terrorized by an encounter with a deadly snake, "an antenatal impression which had mingled an alien element in her nature."¹⁸

But if many nineteenth-century writers explicitly referred to this all-but-discarded theory of monstrosity, their implicit reappropriation of the idea of the monstrous imagination was more striking still. In theories of monstrosity the maternal element repressed the legitimate father. The maternal imagination erased the legitimate father's image from his offspring and thus created a monster. In the constitution of the modern *episteme*, the silent father regains his place. Romantic aesthetic theory sketched out a model genealogy for the work of art and the procreative role of the artist.¹⁹ In so doing, Romanticism reassigned the *vis imaginativa* to the father alone. Romantic aesthetics reaffirmed the seductive power of the monstrous as aberration, and the creative role of the scientist, or the artist, as visible father. Imagination was reclaimed as a masculine attribute, and just as theories of generation had long been theories of Art, Romantic Art became a theory of generation. For the Romantics, imagination was no longer the faculty to reproduce images, but the power to create them. Imagination did not imitate, it generated, and in doing so, it also produced monstrous art. The

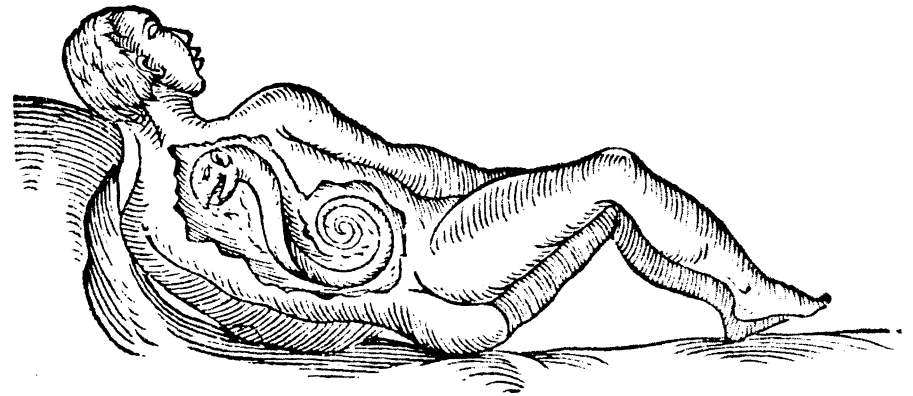
notion of monstrosity that emerged shifted its emphasis from the maternal to the paternal but kept intact the key elements of singular progeny. The act of artistic creation thus appeared as an imitation of a monstrous genetic process: as painted models, fatal passions, striking resemblances, and creatures that were as frightening for their deformities as for their perfection. The erasure of the maternal role in procreation and new forms of mechanical engendering were also echoed in the myth of the Romantic artist as lone genitor in awe of his own creation. If the theory that credited the maternal imagination with the birth of unnatural progeny implied a theory of art as imitation, Romanticism, in turn, reinterpreted art as teratology. The vision of the Romantic artist as creator borrowed a metaphor of creation from the theory that long ascribed the birth of monstrous progeny to the maternal imagination.

This reappropriation in literature of an idea associated primarily with medical beliefs was anticipated in treatises of the Renaissance which quoted with equal regard poets, physicians of Antiquity, hearsay, and personal testimonials. Tales of monstrous births caused by the maternal imagination could be found in legends, philosophy, and medical essays. For this reason, my exploration of the belief that the mother's imagination was to be held responsible for monstrous births could not be confined to a discussion of embryology, though the notion was, at one time, a topic of passionate debate among embryologists. Nor are my examples drawn only from the history of medicine, since this tradition reappropriated nonmedical materials such as legends and myths as acceptable evidence. Moreover, the belief in the power of the maternal imagination was also relevant to literature and art, inasmuch as it was primarily defined and understood in terms of imitation and resemblances. This book will thus examine the idea of the monstrous imagination in areas as diverse as those from which it first emanated. In the Renaissance, this theory was an intrinsic part of the literature on prodigies; at other times it was debated in courts of law or by ecclesiastical authorities. It appears intermittently in scientific speculations, philosophical reflections, and texts of medical observations. No doubt contemporary medical history could provide the reader with many insights into the individual pathologies sometimes discernible in testimony from

scientists and physicians of the past. But although the development of the theory of the monstrous imagination may have been affected by specific considerations at different times in history, the theory itself never belonged to a single corpus or to a particular medical belief. The texts considered here are varied and represent both canonical views on imagination and popular reevaluations of monstrosity. In this perspective, Ambroise Paré, Malebranche, Spallanzani, Camille Dareste, and Nathaniel Hawthorne all contributed equally to the expression of an enduring idea that reflected in various ways the belief that progeny was art and art a monstrous progeny.

Part I

The Mother's Fancy



A child with a live snake eating its back, from Ambroise Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges*, 1573. This drawing was reproduced in *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (1896) by George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle with the following legend: serpent in a fetus.