

## BOOK REVIEW

*Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry*. By DUNSTAN LOWE. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2015. Pp. x + 278. Hardcover, \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11951-6.

Like the figures Lowe explores in this welcome study, *Monsters and Monstrosity* is itself a hybrid text. Veering from the curious social practices of freak-fetishism in Augustan Rome to the metapoetics of sublime gigantomachy in Latin epic, Lowe conducts various explorations of monstrosity through a wide array of methodologies. While parts of the monograph are more successful than others at employing insights from the field of monster studies (see 27–32 for a literature review), all readers interested in the poetic techniques of Vergil and Ovid, as well as the shifting face of Augustan engagement with all that smacks of the “strange,” will find something of interest in this monograph. *Monsters* is particularly valuable for its contributions to the study of gender and monstrosity, a paradigm of analysis that surfaces in several chapters, and is a notable addition to scholarship on metapoetics and sublimity.

Following a brief Introduction, in Chapter One (“Monster Theory”) Lowe defines the ancient monster, wisely eschewing a tidy conception; his analysis is replete with useful interrogation of the Greek and Latin terminology for monstrosity. He depicts the unique cultural context that allowed Roman “monsters” to shift from fear-inducing religious oddities and portentous errors of nature, to objectified commodities embodying an aesthetic akin to that found in Augustan culture more widely. The monster as metaphor—for both text and object—is an extension of this transformation, and when viewed in an Augustan light, it begins to stand for novelty and innovation. Through readings of Horace’s multiform creatures, Neronian grotesques, and Vitruvian strictures, Lowe also delves into the Augustan aesthetics of a monstrous culture war between “ancients” and “moderns.”

In the second Chapter (“Real Monsters”), Lowe turns to the presence of monstrosity and deformed bodies within Roman life, particularly in the urban milieu. His analysis of the museological display culture that circulated around mythical monsters contains much of note. Significant, if digressive, discussion is

also devoted to ancient science concerned with spontaneous generation, environmental determinism, and the landscapes of monstrous birth. For Roman audiences, much of the monstrous production of these “othered” landscapes was considered eastern, exotic, and/or feminine, all features developed by the arguments of later chapters. Subsequent analysis of zoology and ethnography leads Lowe to consider modes of viewing the monstrous; the power of formlessness (and this is key) rests in its intractability.

Lowe turns his gaze in Chapter Three (“Feminine Exteriors”) to Scylla, the Sirens, and Medusa, showing how all were reinvented and “maidenized” by Augustan poets. Psychoanalytic approaches most visibly emerge in this chapter, largely in service of exploring the “monstrous-feminine.” At the risk of generalization, for Lowe the Augustan approach to such figures is to combine misogynistic nightmare with some form of pleasurable curiosity, both visual and psychological. Within the learned poetics of Vergil and Ovid, one also encounters the implications of rationalizing interpretations of Scylla and Charybdis (78–84), while the temptations of the Sirens tell a story particularly redolent of moral allegory (90–96). Medusa’s legacy features diachronic changes similar to those of Scylla and the Sirens, but she largely symbolizes the visual; it is through Medusa that we encounter image-making and ekphrasis, as well as Freud, Cixous, castration, and the un-viewable face. Lowe’s analysis of Medusa in the Perseus episode of Ovid’s *Met.* is particularly strong (106–110).

Chapter Four (“Feminine Interiors”) focuses on the Harpies and Furies, those “nightmares of femininity” (114). Unlike the previous chapter’s Scylla or Medusa, Augustan Harpies and Furies “represent sheer threat, undisguised by beauty or pathos” (115). Lowe incorporates in this chapter Bakhtin’s grotesque and carnivalesque, but the fit with Bakhtin is by no means perfect (122). In line with one of Lowe’s main points concerning monstrosity, there is a further metapoetic slant to reading these negative bodies: the blurry in-between notion exemplified by Horatian satire—the “lower” genre—is akin to a lower creature like a Harpy. Lowe suggests that within Vergil’s epic, the Harpies’ lack of shame and modesty (and their unclean excretions) pollute a poetic world in which they do not belong. Although I have some reservations about his readings of Celaeno as a “fraud” (based largely on the outcome of her “tables” prophecy as “a harmless riddle” (139)), the exploration of the distinctions, or lack thereof, between Harpies and Furies in the *Aeneid* is informative. This chapter also touches on desire, violence, emotional instability, and the wedding as funeral, as well as offering readings of touchstone characters such as Juno, Dido, Amata, and Allecto.

Chapter Five (“Beast-Men”) shows how Centaurs and Minotaurs reinforce a specific male gender stereotype in Augustan poetry (e.g., “Centaurs as failed and uncontrolled versions of alpha-male epic protagonists”, 170), while representing a brand of “sublime” epic from the primitive (i.e. pre-Homeric) past (164). In addition to morally uplifting material, monsters are, perhaps surprisingly, suitable sublime imagery. For first-century poets, engaging with this material was a conflicted enterprise that gave rise to a particular type of epic *recusatio*. In addition, Lowe’s focus on hybrid creatures and contexts leads to explorations of not only the line between man and beast, but also *Kreuzung der Gattungen* and generic enrichment (especially that of elegy and epic). The chapter’s discussion of the culture hero Chiron’s problematic fit within the centaur category is especially worthy of note (180–182).

Chapter Six (“Hyperbolic Monsters”) largely concerns the “anti-Olympians” (Titans, Giants, Aloadae, etc.). Lowe builds on the work of Philip Hardie throughout this chapter. He claims that Augustan poets “not only use Gigantomachic imagery to represent epic but also exploit its individual hyperbolic tropes: monstrous size, mountain-throwing, rock-lifting, and similar motifs” (189–190); for Lowe, “[t]he Gigantomachy is therefore surrounded by a broader metapoetics of monstrosity” (190). Within such a system, poets that attempt the sublime paradigm act on analogy with the Giants’ own hubris, hence “humbler projects” emerge as superior, at least superficially. While numerous themes are packed into this chapter – too many to discuss at present—I draw attention to Lowe’s analysis of the mathematical sublime and the impact of the infinite/incomprehensible (203–206); he also surprises with a novel reading of the well-trodden “many-mouths topos” (199–203).

The return of the Cyclopes in this final chapter adds a further noteworthy dimension, especially with respect to their metapoetic functions (e.g. as smiths they participate in fabrication, 213–216) and their appearance, especially via Polyphemus, in sub-epic settings (216–220). Lowe also focuses on the savagery of monster-killers such as Hercules and the sympathy often evoked by the generically out-of-place monster/victim (220–226). Lowe’s final analysis of Argus in Ovid *Met.* 1 reaffirms the quality of the discussion throughout this monograph and continues his exploration of monstrosity in un/sub-epic settings. Readers may be surprised, however, that he considers the physical and metapoetic connections between Ovid’s many-eyed Argus and the single-eyed Polyphemus of

*Met.* 13 (229–230), but passes on a chance to connect Vergil's other *monstrum horrendum*, the many-eyed Fama.

A four page Conclusion (233–236) clearly restates the main arguments of the book, and thirty pages of bibliography precede a copious general Index. If a separate Index Locorum would have been a welcome addition for a book with such expansive subject matter, its absence is a small quibble. On formal grounds, *Monsters* is generally well written and edited, although the discursive style of argumentation occasionally obscures the theses of larger units within the book. I note only minor mistakes (e.g. “4428 BC” as the building date for the Temple of Divus Julius (19); missing punctuation in a section title (213)).

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