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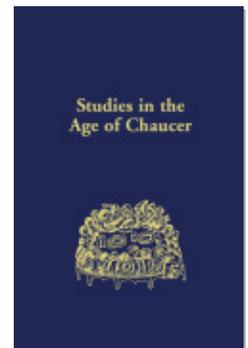
*Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval
Thought and Literature* by David Williams (review)

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realizations are a fashionable precaution for the ideologically circum-spect author; here Theresa Tinkle convincingly displays the multiple, discordant, and creatively chaotic nature of her subjects and the deep historical roots of their conflicted meanings, while in no way dissolving, but on the contrary strengthening, her readers' awareness of the profundity of medieval poets' engagement with the figures of Venus and Cupid and the philosophical importance of the poetic structures centered upon them.

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DAVID WILLIAMS. *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. Montreal and Kingston; London and Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996. Pp. xiv, 392. \$55.00.

David Williams's challenging study of the monster in medieval thought and literature goes well beyond the catalog-style discussion that seems to be a typical feature of books and articles in this subject area. Williams offers a framework of understanding for monstrosity, contending that in medieval cosmology, and specifically in Pseudo-Dionysian thought, the idea of the monster has a centrality to the scheme of things that postmedievales have to recover. The monster is not *contra naturam*, but rather *extra naturam*. Williams quotes Isidore's *Etymologiae* 11.3.1–2: "Varro says that portents are things which seem to have been born contrary to nature, but in truth, they are not born contrary to nature, because they exist by the divine will, since the Creator's will is the nature of everything created. . . ." The monstrous can be seen to have a major function within the scheme of things because of a series of moves Pseudo-Dionysius offers in his cognitive system that effectively constitute a deformed discourse, or the proper interpretation of sacred symbols. Pseudo-Dionysius, readers of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and related treatises will remember, offers the negative path to God: what God is not is easier to consider than what He is. Operationally this negation yields to paradoxical utterances and the failure to make any positive predication about God; this failure, how-

ever, liberates the knower from the “logical” limits of predication and points to a transcendent possibility. As Cusa has it, God is the coincidence of opposites. The monster is similarly a sign of negation, pointing to the paradox of “what is” and “what is not” or the transcendent. Amplifying John Scotus Eriugena and his *Periphyseon*, Williams can argue that in Eriugena’s worldview “God the Creator is also seen as monster.” Eriugena is a key figure for Williams because he sees the ninth-century thinker as creating a teratological symbolism based on a liberal interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Having established the philosophical basis for his book in negative theology, Williams goes on to the second part of his grand argument, which part gives the necessary links between the general theory of monsters and the specific representations of them in select texts. Part 2, “Taxonomy,” is, in one sense, the catalog of monsters so often seen in scholarship, but here it comes forward not as a descriptive inventory of things that go bump in the night but in the context of a considered theory of forms, based on the history of ideas. Williams does not lose sight of the foundation he established earlier, repeating the central ideas of negative theology and paradoxical utterances from time to time in his taxonomy with good rhetorical effect. Admittedly such a taxonomy is “a system of categories of nothing,” a contradictory “structuring of disorder,” and yet the “requirement of an affirmative discourse that attempts to understand the negative.” Foucault’s famous comment on the Chinese encyclopedia and its taxonomy of animals is a proper motto to this theme that the “exotic charm of another system of thought” makes us understand “the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.” Williams’s first taxonomic divide is “The Body Monstrous,” wherein size (i.e., pygmies, giants), locus and position (antipodes, shape-shifters), the head (multi-, bi-, tri-, a-cephalic, as well as the human-headed animal), the mouth, the eyes, ears, and lips, and the genitals (disembodied, *vagina dentata*, and the hermaphrodite) are ordering categories. Since the body as *mikrokosmos* in Neoplatonic thought contains the world in miniature, Williams, like Isidore before him, chooses an apt model for his system. Polyphemus and Ulysses, for example, reenact the Pseudo-Dionysian monstrous moment when the former asks “Who are You?” and the latter responds “I am/I am not”; the female saints who disguise themselves as monks and enter monasteries are encoded examples of the Divine as androgyne. The second divide is “Nature Monstrous”: animal (man and animal combined, one animal

with another of a different species), various denizens of earth, air, fire, water, vegetal combinations, and mineral combinations. As with monsters of the human body, Williams offers Pseudo-Dionysian profiles of centaurs, satyrs, dragons, sirens, the vegetable lamb, the wak-wak tree, etc. The final divide of "Monstrous Concepts," an interesting but comparatively undeveloped taxonomy suggesting that the Anthropomorphic Alphabet and Prodigious Numbers, where monsters reside in zoomorphic initials or where Boethius discusses numbers likened to monsters, respectively, belong as part of the monstrous world.

All these preliminaries prepare for the analysis of texts on three heroes (Alexander, Orpheus, and Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* [SGGK]) and three saints (Christopher, Denis of Paris, and Wilgefortis). Though much of the monster theory comes from late antique and early medieval periods, the focus on mainly later medieval texts is a little surprising. Williams does not, for example, capitalize on his earlier study of *Cain and Beowulf* here, and his choice of texts suggests a Mediterranean view of the Middle Ages (rather than a Northern one) where, of course, Neoplatonic thinking might be seen to be more at home. Clearly the analysis of Gawain in SGGK is the text comparatively more isolated from the others in this selection of six, given its sources. Williams offers a reading of SGGK that emphasizes many good, strong formalist features, however, rather than Pseudo-Dionysian elements. In the bustling SGGK industry there will be readers who will dispute points of detail in Williams's discussion (for example, the reading of the old hag), but the spirit of play and game in SGGK is perhaps the most notably absent major theme.

Deformed Discourse is an important "thesis book." Williams makes it clear that he is not attempting a full-scale history of ideas; that there were other, competing perspectives on cosmology, such as the Thomistic; and that the Pseudo-Dionysian view did not prevail as culture became early modern. Properly, he sets out to prove what he sets out to prove, and this clarity should mollify those who fear the "totalizing" tendencies of the thesis-book genre or who might wonder why sometimes the exposition of the Pseudo-Dionysian seems to be only more broadly Neoplatonic, or why, finally, Pseudo-Dionysian elements help us to understand the phenomenon of Wilgefortis better than other approaches. After all, finding transcendental meaning hidden under the surface of things is a basic medieval move animating even the Robertsonian reading of medieval culture, and the existence of mon-

sters, furthermore, may be a function of human psychology of whatever stripe, Freudian, Jungian, or Lacanian. The Danes would take no comfort from the Pseudo-Dionysian view of things as Grendel approached the door, nor does the terror in *Grettissaga* seem cosmological. Still the perspective Williams presents will find its necessary place in any thoughtful approach to medieval monsters and their place in the medieval scheme of things, for he brings our time closer to the medieval worldview than any mere descriptive study.

Minor points: there are some 90 black-and-white illustrations, some murky and lacking sharpness. There are a bibliography and an index, but footnotes tend to be understated. There are also occasional odd lapses, e.g., the identification of the ox with Matthew (p. 12), proofing errors, etc.

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