



Luca Baratta
“A Marvellous and Strange Event”
Racconti di nascite mostruose nell’Inghilterra
della prima età moderna

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Characterized by an unquenchable thirst for supernatural and marvellous events, the Early Modern Age saw the proliferation of catalogues, stories, and chronologies focusing on extraordinary events. Curiosity and morbidity towards uncommon phenomena, such as the birth of human beings with congenital physical deformities were the object of many works, from Fenton’s *Certaine Secrete Wonders of Nature* (1569) to Batman’s *The Doome warning all Men to the Judgemente* (1581), which mostly drew on continental works, such as Konrad Wolffhart Lykosthenes’s *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum Chronicon* (1557) and Pierre Boaistuau’s *Histoires prodigieuses* (1560).

In this context, Luca Baratta’s «*A Marvellous and Strange Event*». *Racconti di nascite mostruose nell’Inghilterra della prima età moderna* is a noteworthy contribution offering a repertoire of ‘prodigious’ cases and events. Far from taking a cultured and encyclopaedic look at the monster, Baratta’s volume proposes direct contact with ‘real’, contemporary events narrating physical deformities, according to the different



historical phases and contexts of their production. At issue are monstrous births and the different ways they were considered and interpreted, based on the different ideological and religious factions that interpreted them as supernatural signs of divine wrath against human behaviour. Thus, the birth of deformed human beings became one of the most popular instruments of religious propaganda between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, marked by the controversy between Protestantism and the Catholic Counter Reformation and amplified by the publication of leaflets, ballads, and pamphlets.

As clearly perceivable from its methodological introduction, Baratta outlines the shifting perceptions of 'monsters' as natural marvels and sources of entertainment in the 1640s, to objects of scholarly research in the late seventeenth century. After investigating the etymology of the word 'monster', in the first chapter Baratta emphasizes how, besides the modern idea of the birth of "extraordinary" human beings as "unique, supernatural, and usually ephemeral creation[s]" (29), a completely different collective imagination surfaces in the documents he analyses, drawing from the Greek and Latin cultural heritage. This imagination focuses on the idea of a sort of monstrous 'invasion' carried out by exotic, "marvelous species", once relegated to faraway, barbaric lands, beyond the borders of the known world: "human deformities made their presence felt within the boundaries of civilized society, positing [...] new ideological and conceptual problems debated by philosophers and physicians" (40).

The chapter opens with an analysis of Aristotle's *De Generatione Animalium*, Cicero's *De Divinatione*, and Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*; it then proceeds to discuss the theological design of Augustine and Isidore of Seville, the *Liber Monstrorum* and *The Letter of Prester John* alongside the representation of monsters in thirteenth-century encyclopaedias and the discredit of monstrous breeds in the travel literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Baratta's illuminating analysis closes with an overview of the epistemological debate on the Marvellous between the late Middle Ages and Humanism, and the conceptual re-evaluation of monstrous births at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

By emphasizing the deep connection between the monster and the world, as the monster revealed "ye State & Conditio[n] of this Present World" (Erasmus [1543?] [STC, 2nd ed., 10507]), in the second chapter Baratta documents the history of the monstrous in England during the reign of Henry VIII. Most significantly, the English translation of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Sileni Alcibiadis* (1536), printed in London in 1543, is indicative of perceptions of vile, poor or monstrous subjects as mediators of a higher intelligence, which is not directly intelligible.

Each of the following five chapters is concerned with contextualising and examining documents of *street literature* reporting the births of monstrous human beings. Baratta's investigation attempts to show the propagandistic use the authors of these texts made of the events narrated, so that each text would represent and be used to support a particular ideological stance. The third chapter, for instance, sheds light on the exploitation of monstrous birth to promote, spread and consolidate Protestantism under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

In the following chapter, Baratta looks at how, in times of moral rigour and



austerity of customs, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these births were used instrumentally to control and police 'unruly' women's bodies. In chapter 5, the phenomenon of the 'monster' as show business is viewed in conjunction with the display of monstrosity to entertain the general public, and its 'ludic', if somewhat abhorrent, consequences. Reaching its peak in the 1640s and 1650s, when some of the most famous 'monsters' in the history of teratology made their successful appearance before the London crowds, the growth of this phenomenon is contrasted with the closure of theatres and with one of the most troubled times in British history, the Civil War. Historical moments characterised by great social tensions provide a fitting context for the political use of 'monsters' to sustain the ideals of competing factions, as shown by the sixth chapter of Baratta's study.

The volume closes with an analysis of monstrous births seen through the eyes of famous early physicians and anatomists. As these scholars, who often belonged to the *Royal Society*, abandoned popular beliefs and superstitions, they came to the conclusion that the birth of monstrous human beings was a rare event in a 'natural' setting. By means of a detailed historical overview, Baratta investigates scientists' opinion as the only acknowledged voice that was able to discuss the (unanswered) question posed by the birth of a deformed human being in Early Modern England. That the birth of a monstrous individual would later be read as a scientifically explicable exception, as was the case during the Enlightenment, is but a small step in the development of an issue that is still far from being resolved. What Early Modern England considered dark, ungraspable, mysterious, and ambiguous signs whose many meanings and attendant ideologies could be exploited to manipulate public opinion cemented the belief that a 'monster' was anathema for religious allegiance, a morally safe society uncorrupted by deviant female bodies, and political stability.

Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the birth of monstrous individuals has belonged to the field of scientific research. Yet, although these births came to be seen and examined as 'natural anomalies', their prodigious aura prevailed. And so it was, for instance, that in 1715 the birth of a monstrous individual could still be exploited for religious and moral purposes, as indicated in the last document analysed by Baratta. As he stresses in the last few lines of his work, the event of monstrous births, resistant to every attempt at logic and 'normality', indefinitely incarnates an unresolved enigma; it is the source of marvel and strangeness.

Two appendices at the end of the volume complement this research with reproductions of broadside ballads and frontispieces of the different pamphlets examined, and a register of births of monstrous human beings as documented in the sources analysed (including the date and place of birth along with a description of the deformity).

This book is a stimulating and challenging contribution to English history and culture, as well as literature in the Early Modern Age. Supplying an overall picture of the ways in which the births of monstrous human beings were perceived, interpreted, and used in England during the Early Modern Age, by means of solid historical and cultural contextualisation, Baratta's study is a much needed addition to the existing critical literature (see Bates 2005; Crawford 2005, a.o.) on the topic.



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