Review Essay

Category Crisis in Monster and Queer Theory

Texts under review:

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge, 1996.

Bychowski, M.W. "The Isle of Hermaphrodites: Disorienting the Place of Intersex in the Middle Ages." Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies, vol. 9, no. 2, 2018, pp. 161-78.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, editor. *Monster Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

DeVun, Leah. *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*. Columbia University Press, 2021.

Framing Agnes. Directed by Chase Joynt, performances by Angelica Ross, Jen Richards, and Zackary Drucker, Fae Productions and Level Ground, 2022.

Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland, University of California, 2018.

Hird, Myra J. *Queering the Non/Human*. Routledge, 2008.

Mittman, Asa Simon, and Peter J. Dendle, editors. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Ashgate Publishing, 2016.

Steel, Karl. *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages*. The Ohio State University Press, 2011.

Steel, Karl. *How Not to Make a Human: Pets, Feral Children, Worms, Sky Burial, Oysters*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

In 1996, Jeffrey Cohen founded the discipline of monster theory in his anthology *Monster Theory*. The origin of queer theory is not as easily pinned down, due in part to its roots in the study of gender and sexuality – although I will also begin in 1996 with Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* – and this is in fact quite appropriate. Together, monster and queer theory represent a trend in reconsidering the issue of category crisis as expressed between dominant and minority identities, or the center and margins. Monster theory explores how categories of identities are defined along lines of acceptability, while Butler dissolves the essential nature of these categories. Both are necessary because you cannot dissolve boundaries if you haven't first found them. The question I ask for this literature review is: How do queer and monster theory challenge and redefine categories of identity, particularly in relation to transgender representations in medieval texts?

Although many of the theorists I discuss are modern, I apply them to the medieval, following the necessary collapsing of time as proposed by Carolyn Dinshaw and José Esteban Muñoz. In multiple works, including *Getting Medieval* and *How Soon is Now?* Dinshaw looks for the undefinable "queer touches" that draw together modern and medieval figures. Modern theorists also allow us to gain new insights and perspectives that might otherwise be lost when focusing only on the medieval. Although many centuries divide the discipline of queer theory, and modern queer theory in particular, from medieval subjects, there are "queer touches" between not only modern theory and medieval subjects, but the scholars who practice theory and the subjects they study. In order to access the medieval, a boundary-crossing is necessary. While Dinshaw looks to the past, Muñoz looks to the future, an ever-expanding and unattainable horizon. To attain a complete queerness, Muñoz argues, is impossible, and yet we continue to

move toward it. Dinshaw and Muñoz remind us that queerness necessitates a stretching across time, one that recognizes the incompleteness of what we stretch for.

In *Monster Theory*, Cohen presents seven theses that would define how scholars approached the study of monsters for decades. Most prominent among these are two theses, thesis III: "The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis," meaning that "they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration," and thesis V: "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible," which is to say that monstrous bodies are used to define all realms of acceptable behavior in society by standing outside of it (6, 12). Cohen argues that monsters are defined by and define boundaries, and yet their liminality makes them a point of anxiety. By refusing easy categorization, monsters become dangerous, "threaten[ing] to smash distinctions" (6). They embody the possibility of escaping from normative regimes, not only offering a different route but questioning the validity or stability of that which they oppose. Such is the case of the hermaphrodites in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, who are meant to enforce a gender binary, but as Leah DeVun explores in *The Shape of Sex*, actually provide the opportunity to think through and materialize the existence of intersex individuals. While hermaphrodites as monsters were symbolic entities, intersex individuals did exist and monstrous identities allowed both positive and negative ways to imagine them. When contained, the monster can flip entirely from an object of horror to one of desire, such as the sexualized Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. However, because of the dangers they pose, those who approach monstrousness must be punished. Monsters become sites of control that serve to police what is and isn't desired behavior, like the child whose nocturnal wanderings are curtailed by the fear of a monster under their bed, thus ordering the activities they can participate in when outside their parent's watchful eye. The

monster often functions as a means of enforcing physical restrictions on bodies, controlling their movement, activities, and presentation. Ultimately, however, as Cohen says, as much as the center attempts to push monsters away, monsters insist that we acknowledge that we have created them, and consider why we have done so.

Ironically, the tenets of monster theory have remained relatively stable and even twenty years later when Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle published *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, Mittman introduced monster theory in terms very similar to Cohen's:

> "[Monsters] not only challenge and question; they trouble, they worry, they haunt. They break and tear and rend cultures, all the while constructing them and propping them up. They swallow up our cultural mores and expectations, and then, becoming what they eat, they reflect back to us our own faces. [The] monster is outside of such [human] definitions; it defies the human desire to subjugate through categorization. This is the source, in many ways, of their power" (1,7).

While monster theory has changed little, the emphasis given to different theses has expanded it. Mittman emphasizes that society's center cannot exist without the margins providing it definition and clarity, arguing that ultimately monsters are not at all separate from the center, but a reflection of it. While speaking in terms similar to Cohen, the rest of the anthology expands upon these tenets, exploring especially the ways in which borders are used to define human and monster.

Karl Steel, both in *The Ashgate Research Companion* and prior to it in his 2011 book *How to Make a Human*, asks the question about the medieval, "What makes a human?" Steel uses an exploration of human-animal hybrids to explore how category crisis illuminates how humans define themselves through violence. He explains that humans attempt to define themselves gently, such as by their possession of reason and certain bodily traits like hands and an upright posture, while animals are only reactionary and cannot handle tools or look up to God, instead staring at the ground. Steel, however, disagrees and argues that the category of *human* in the medieval is propped up by the category of *animal* and maintained by violently subjugating animals, thus reassuring humanity of what they are.

He explores monstrous bodies such as the satyr, the herdsman in *Yvain,* and the dog-headed cynocephali, who possess physical characteristics of both humans and animals and sit uneasily between possessing reason and reaction. In response to such uncertainty, humans react with subjugating violence, as is the case of the satyr in *The Life of Saint Paul*, who is banished as a demon before being safely contained by death, at which point his body is paraded as a marvel and otherwise treated like a hunting trophy. Conversely, monsters can return to the human fold by performing the same violence as humans, such as is done by the herdsman, whose humanity is only cemented after his "declaration of mastery over his animals," and the cynocephali, who are most easily understood as humans through their domestication and violence against animals (140, 150). Defined more broadly, the monstrous can become human by disavowing their fellows and assisting humans in violently subjugating them. As a work of monster theory, Steel argues that human is defined not only by what it is not, but by how it builds the borders between the center and the margins through punishment, violence, and power structures. Subjugating

violence enacted by humans will remain a key point in the issue of category crisis, especially in medieval texts.

Eight years later, Steel responded to and countered his own work in *How Not to Make a Human*. In it, he cautions against relying on the trope of "medieval brutality," and instead sets out to find a kinder relationship between humans and animals (14). He focuses on the creation of "communities that do not make sense to dominant communities, that are given over to futures and pleasures that will not be recognized," using Mari Ruti's exploration of the "antisocial thesis" in queer theory (39). Forming such communities requires a break, but a less violent one than presented in *How to Make a Human*. He argues that "shattering the self for one's community does not mean shattering it altogether, but rather making other kinds of selves, other kinds of communities" (40). Such communities, in opposition to the dominant community's desires, operate on ethics of care and refuse to support the dominant culture's reliance on violence in order to define itself. He explores communities created between Chaucer's Prioress and her pets, the suicidal knight and his dog in the Canis legend, and in modern examples such as Sarah Ahmed's relative ease in defining herself in relation to queer communities while struggling to define herself in community with her dogs.

Steel's exploration of minority communities turns the lens of monster theory and category crisis around, arguing from the perspective of the margins, a move that is vital to the study of queer theory. In his exploration, he maintains the boundaries between the dominant and the marginal, but considers how the margins gaze at and define themselves, rather than how the dominant culture does. In this he finds communities of care that are created by shared grief, shared food, shared pleasure, and shared language. Within the realm of queer theory, M.W.

Bychowski explores similar ways in which the margins gaze at themselves with the more explicitly monstrous community of the hermaphrodites.

Bychowski's article "The Isle of Hermaphrodites: Disorienting the Place of Intersex in the Middle Ages," published in 2018, explores first how hermaphrodites are pinned down by the center in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* before flipping the conversation to consider how the hermaphrodites don't need the center. Bychowski argues that the isle is "a place on the margins, where the unintelligible may be made to wait until the central powers know what to do with them," establishing "certain bodies and places as central, as 'near,' other bodies and places become marked as marginal, as 'far'" (165, 168). "Mandeville remains the dominantly mobile and orienting body" while the isle and its people are fixed in place (170). But for all the speed with which Mandeville passes the isle, shoving it into the margin, there is an unease in that "he may be forced to slow down and wait, caught in the disabling environment of the isle" (171). This forces a realization that the inhabitants of the isle gaze back, and that "[f]rom the viewpoint of the isle, [Mandeville and the audience] are the strange ones" (173). This leads to a question about what the hermaphrodites think about themselves, and a recognition that the isle can become a place of safety for the inhabitants who are removed from the dominant gaze. The isle "represent[s] the power to emphatically 'be' without needing to wait for society to offer an invitation or explanation for this being" (175).

While Bychowski initially works within the main tenets of monster theory, examining how the center creates margins, viewing them as the not that defines what humans are, like Steel, Bychowski shifts to the perspective of the margins and asks how the margins can find comfort in maintaining boundaries away from the center, without need for permission or approval. While Steel emphasizes the comfort that binds these communities, Bychowski emphasizes the margin's

apathy to the center, positing how we might consider whether the binaries or power structures are necessary or useful for defining minority identities. Steel and Bychowski do the work of dismissing the center's gaze as inherently more noteworthy or worthwhile, or the need to define relationships based on dehumanizing violence.

Monster theory rests first and foremost on the issue of category crisis, that though monsters may stand on the margins, violently policing the boundaries or being policed themselves, monsters open up the possibility of other modes of existence. For all the authors I have discussed unsettle categories, they continue to rely on them, from Steel's human/animal and dominant/minority communities and Bychowski's center/margin and mobile/immobile. Queer theory, however, Myra Hird argues in the *Queering the Non/Human* anthology presents the opportunity to more radically destabilize these categories and binaries. Queer theory can be used to "unpick binaries and reread gaps, silences and in-between spaces" (5).

Butler's work in *Bodies that Matter* centers on dissolving boundaries while maintaining the real power and effect of the body. They argue that sexual difference, like gender, is given the veneer of normativity by discourse, a 'regulatory ideal' as defined by Foucault. The production of sexuality is "a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through forcible reiteration of those norms" (2). This is done to enforce heteronormative practices and ideals, and as Steel also points out, is often done violently. As much as this creates certain identities and forecloses others, setting boundaries and defining what is 'human,' the regulations also open up room for dissent, instabilities, and rematerialization, an idea that heavily influenced Cohen's ideas on monster theory.

However, although Butler works to dissolve the categories of *male* and *female*, *straight* and *queer* as regulatory ideals, rather than anything natural, they emphasize that it is nonetheless

important to recognize the effect the body has on the creation of discourse, saying "[l]anguage and materiality are not opposed, for language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified. But if language is not opposed to materiality, neither can materiality be summarily collapsed into an identity with language" (68). For Butler, matter is not an origin that discourse is stamped onto, but is already enmeshed in discourse. The interplay between the two and the repetition of them creates the body and materialization. The goal of this work is not simply to assimilate the margins into the center, to draw a larger center, but to shift our perspective to an unreachable horizon. Matter and bodies, then, are not defined as appropriate or inappropriate, but as always becoming as they move toward a horizon they won't reach.

This instability of the body is explored further in Hird's essay "Animal Trans" and Eva Hayward's essay "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixiated Flesh and Transspeciated Selves" in the *Queering Non/Human* anthology, both explore new understandings of human bodies through animal bodies, considering the proliferation of animal sexual habits – including transsex behavior, abortion, and interspecies sex – and the starfish's ability to cut away and regenerate limbs, illuminating how the transgender body can become a sight of cutting, healing, and transformation. Both argue for the inevitable fluidity of bodies and use animals to question societal norms that attempt to create rigidity and order. This liminality is present in the bodies of Hippocrate's daughter in *Mandeville* and the werewolf in *Bisclavret*. The bodies of *Queering the Non/Human* are messy and liminal, destabilizing our ability to find monsters without a center to hold them up to.

Like Hird and Hayward, Jack Halberstam argues in 2018 for the fluidity of the body, using architecture as a metaphor. In Jack Halberstam's 2018 book *Trans**, he cautions against

the easy use of proper names and labels, as the queer community cannot pretend itself exempt from creating categories that are as limiting and violent as heteronormative communities. He argues instead for "embodiment as a series of 'stopovers' in which the body is lived as an archive rather than a dwelling," defining the body as fluid and ever-changing, unable to be fully defined by a single category (24). This recognizes, however, that the body remains important for defining and understanding the self, unstable though it may be. Halberstam points out that many transgender people don't want to see their gender as a performance, but who they are, often stemming from the way they choose to create their bodies. This creation of the body is present in *Le Roman de Silence* where Silene's body must literally be constructed as first masculine and later feminine. On the issue of category crisis, therefore, dissolving categories does not mean ignoring the impact of the flesh, but recognizing how matter can shape discourse, categories, and category crisis.

While Hird and Halberstam find an instability in bodies, DeVun finds an instability in categories across time. DeVun focuses on the creation of traditional binaries, but by telling a history of intersex people, points to how those binaries become unstable across time. While monsters are imagined as on the margins, because queer people may arise in non-queer families, DeVun also points to how an exploration of queerness can bring the margins into the center with a certain immediacy, arguing that the monster is at the center of any attempt to create a center. In *The Shape of Sex*, published in 2021, DeVun traces the history of intersex people, as defined by a variety of terms, including hermaphrodite, androgyne, and sodomite, from the 12th to 14th century. In tracing this history, DeVun insists that a single reading of queerness across time is insufficient. She finds a general ambivalence prior to the 13th century, with some disapproval as exemplified by the presence of the more classically monstrous hermaphrodites in bestiaries and

travel logs, with a shift toward greater restrictions, policing, and binaries in the 13th century with the increase of medicalization of and surgery on intersex individuals. She then traces increasingly positive outlooks on ambiguous gender, especially in religious settings, in the 14th century as androgyny and alchemical hermaphrodites became associated with holiness, leading to an increase in monks and nuns embracing androgynous lifestyles and depictions of Jesus.

Despite this work, DeVun has little to no access to works written by queer individuals, something she herself acknowledges. Doing so will require looking to modern scholarship, such as Chase Joynt's documentary *Framing Agnes* about transgender lives in the 1950s. *Framing Agnes* is told by transgender individuals, bringing a necessary humanity and voice to transgender people that is unlikely to exist so extensively in the medieval period. As such, it serves as an important work for scholars who engage with individuals who are only recorded by others.

Joynt's documentary presents the largest shift away from monster theory and category crisis, but also brings together ideas put forward by Butler, Halberstam, and DeVun. Despite focusing on the 1950s instead of the medieval period, there is a "queer touch" between the documentary and DeVun's work of tracing how the medicalization of queer people – intersex for DeVun and transgender for Joynt – were used to define what it means to be a man and a woman. Joynt, however, goes beyond categories and instead works in the tradition of Butler's dissolution of categories and Halberstam's fluidity of identity, questioning our ability to define any sense of a given 'truth,' and insisting not on any understanding of what *transgender* means, but instead considering the variability and unknowability of every given individual, the importance of which should not be contained to a sliver of time.

Framing Agnes follows Agnes, a transgender woman who received gender confirmation surgery after persuading doctors that she was intersex, as well as a series of other transgender

individuals who were interviewed at the time. Joined by Jules Gill-Peterson, whose explores the over reliance on medicalization in the transgender community in *Histories of Transgender Children*, the documentary questions what identities are seen as valid and questions how we reflect ourselves onto historical figures. Transgender people in *Framing Agnes* are not monsters, they are not on the margins, and they do not need the center. Instead, they are unattainable. Peterson points out that we do not know the people who appear in the documentary's interviews, and though we may identify with them, they remain beyond our understanding. After a brief moment of fame, Agnes vanishes. As she walks off the page, she dissolves boundaries and our attempts to understand her, leaving us with this final statement about the people who exist outside categories: we cannot understand them at all.

In my own work, I use these theories to explore how medieval individuals who lead explicitly cross-gender, or genderqueer, lives escape and are caught up in boundaries. Butler's work has been key in providing a framework for exploring how gender exists within the matter of the body and Halberstam's fluidity of the body provides a useful framework for escaping the argument that women who dress as men do so to attain the 'better' gender. Many genderqueer individuals in the medieval period are monsters and Cohen and Bychowski have been most useful in helping me consider how to define monsters in relation to genderqueerness from the perspective of the monster. Similarly, Joynt helps me keep in mind that genderqueer individuals should be read first and foremost as individuals who cannot be fully understood, even if they are often literary characters. Perhaps most important, when I read DeVun's book, I knew I had a model for my own research. Her exploration of a cultural history resonated very strongly with the work I want to do in tracing the changing cultural perception and performance of genderqueer individuals.