

Monstrous Women in Comics, Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody (eds) 2020

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Monstrous Women in Comics edited by Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody

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Women have been visually depicted as monsters throughout recorded history. While horror and film studies have delved into this representation, comics studies has taken longer to catch up. *Monstrous Women in Comics* fills a much needed gap in comics studies through in depth analysis of women's representations as monsters in the comics medium. The edited collection as a whole succeeds in its analysis of "simultaneously heroic and disruptive" narratives (Ludlow 120). Each chapter also allows women to inhabit multiple spaces, for there to be multiple meanings rather than only one reading of the texts. The images printed in the publication breathe new life in works that have long been analysed, while also introducing new works for further consideration in the field. *Monstrous Women in Comics* beautifully reveals the complexity of the monstrous woman, not allowing simple or binary interpretations. It brings together a variety of methodologies and branches out of a western focus, expanding to Bolivian and Chinese comics as well as Japanese manga. There are fifteen chapters broken into five parts that focus on different aspects of monstrosity. The strength of this book lies in its building on the work of other monster studies scholars, such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Barbara Creed, while also connecting to broader cultural contexts within the comics themselves.

The first part of the book focuses on power and the origins, agency and paradoxes of monstrous women. Elizabeth Rae Coody's contribution is a strong start to the book, as she argues that power in narratives is based on who gets to tell the story. Coody uses comics characters Harley Quinn and Wonder Woman, as well as the biblical character Mary Magdalene to argue that there is a "multivocal" origin story for these women that reveals both deep-rooted anxieties about them within the patriarchal structure as well as ideas of their own empowerment. She argues that these women walk the line between heroism and monstrosity, depending on who tells their story. Similarly, in the second chapter, J. Richard Stevens details the paradoxes of female agency in the hypermasculine sphere of superhero comics. He finds that She-Hulk's monstrous femininity is mapped onto different cultural and feminist movements, ultimately positing that She-Hulk's storytelling is post-feminist. Though this chapter could have considered third wave feminism and recent She-Hulk publications, it brings together important points about She-Hulk's monstrous femininity and its tie to her lack of female friendships. In the third chapter, Ayanni C. H. Cooper focuses on the intersection of beauty and the grotesque. She argues that the comics *Monstress* and *Pretty Deadly* allow the viewers to ponder the abject and embrace their own liminality through the blood, obscenity and boundary transgression in the comics, ultimately suggesting that these are what make us human. This section challenges assumptions of normalcy in comics, inviting readers to consider who is telling stories, the cultural framework of the comics as well as the readers own relationship to the abject.

The second section focuses on the body and its role in women's depictions as monsters. In her chapter, Stefanie Snider examines the unremarkable fatness of the superhero Faith as both covered and

exposed, arguing that “When fatness is normalized to the extent that it is unremarkable, it becomes invisible” (Snider 72). Snider reiterates Mia Mingus’ call for revolution based on lived, bodily experiences and argues that Faith’s fatness should be celebrated, allowing her to be a monstrous woman who can pave the way for greater justice for fat people in pop culture and everywhere else. Similarly, Charlotte Johanne Fabricius argues that something important is lost in Gail Simone’s *Batgirl* which erases the disability of the Oracle. Fabricius finds a disparity in the representations of able-ness of *Batgirl*’s normative body versus the disability of her non-normative body, analyzing the difference in her stances as well as the panel structures when she is abled and disabled. She ultimately finds that *Batgirl*’s miraculous recovery erases the subversive potential of the characters as a disabled body amongst superbodies. In the sixth chapter, Keri Crist-Wagner argues that the violence in *InSEXts* has the queer potential to transform patriarchy and heteronormativity. The author utilises tools from social science, visual rhetoric and queer theory to determine the ways in which violence and queerness relate to gender, power and genre within the text. Crist-Wagner ultimately finds that power and the queer body are linked in the text and highlighted by gendered motivations. This section builds upon the first and explores the different ways the body’s build, abilities and identity shape its monstrosity.

Part 3 focuses on a particular monstrosity that female bodies have the potential to do, childbearing. In chapter 7, Jeannie Ludlow, an abortion counselor, offers particular insight into the analysis of several texts about abortion, motherhood and birthing. She praises texts that overcome the politicized prochoice/prolife binary of pregnancy under the patriarchy, and emphasises the potential for grotesqueness in comics “to intervene in the politics of pregnancy, reclaiming life, birth, and abortion from easy binarizations” (Ludlow 115). Marvela Murillo demonstrates in the next chapter how the normative representations of Bolivian cholas, or working-class women, is linked to grotesque maternity and, ultimately, otherness. Murillo argues that “Chola femininity is framed as monstrous under the mestizaje gaze” but that a shift in politics and policies has the potential to create a shift in the representation of monstrous women (Murillo 149). In the final chapter of the section, Tomoko Kuribayashi explores the effects of posthumanism and the genetically engineered maternal figure on sex and gender dynamics in Moto Hagio’s *Marginal* manga. Kuribayashi shifts the western perspective of posthumanism and argues that the manga upends the ideas of uteruses or other sexual organs defining humans, usually women, as others, and ultimately envisions a world in which women are free from the task of reproduction. While this section focuses on childbirth as a unique monstrous trait of women under the patriarchy, it expands binary as well as western considerations of childbirth and offers new readings about its significance in different social and political frameworks.

In the fourth part of the book, which focuses on the horrors of childhood itself, Daniel F. Yezbick examines the ways in which *Magica De Spell* troubles Scrooge McDuck as well as the patriarchal structure of Carl Barks’s storyworld through her ability to shapeshift. Yezbick argues that *Magica* is “a monstrous woman of comics who reveals the monstrous masculinities that mock and marginalize her. (Yezbick 171). In chapter 11, Novia Shih-Shan Chen and Sho Ogawa recognize Kyoko Okazaki, a prominent female Japanese manga writer who has not featured much in English scholarship. Okazaki’s work focuses on the sexualities and anxieties of women in 1990s Japan. The authors analyse her work through the western lens of the monstrous-feminine as well as the lens of Japanese female ghosts called *yurei* and the socio-political context of Japan at the time of Okazaki’s comics. They argue that her comics

ultimately reinforce the nexus between women's sexuality and monstrosity while simultaneously interrogating the capitalist constructions of femininity and reproduction in 1990s Japan. In the final chapter of Part 4, Jing Zhang provides an art historical study of transgressive snake women in Chinese stories, ultimately revealing them to be monstrous women whose symbolism has often been misunderstood and that their repugnant and appealing natures are embedded in children's narratives. This section focuses on the ways in which children and children's narratives attempt to maintain the status quo but ultimately reveal the monstrous masculinities, capitalist constructions, and symbolism that work to make women monstrous.

The final section analyses the complex relationship women have with normative, patriarchal social roles and identity categories especially with respect to women who embrace their role as monster. Justin Wingard analyses the monstrous representation of Grendel's mother in Stephen L. Stern and Christopher Steinger's *Beowulf: The Graphic Novel*. Wingard combines Cohen's monster theory, Scott McCloud's visual rhetoric and Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation to demonstrate the ways in which Stern and Steinger's comics reveals a problematic contemporary bias toward normative ideals of gender that are not found in the original text. The following chapter by Pauline J. Reynold and Sara Durazo-DeMoss argues that *The Jaguar* comics treat monstrosity as not only a physically descriptive label, but one that exaggerates the marginalization of the titular character. According to the authors, "The narrative sexualizes, victimizes, and sexually harasses college women, and as an international student the hero is isolated, bullied and physically attacked" (Reynold and Durazo-DeMoss 242). The chapter reveals the dualities of monstrosity and their complex contradictions in the text and confronts monstrosity as a performance. Finally, in chapter 15 Christina M. Knopf investigates the representation of Arcadia Alvarado in *Saucer Country*. Knopf finds that the comics have a blend of feminist possibilities and monstrous othering through the lens of politics and science fiction that centres on boundary transgression. Arcadia Alvarado is on the margin of society because of her race, gender, and divorced status and still performs as a powerful political leader without becoming a monster. Instead, her monstrosity is perceived through her otherness in the socio-political landscape of the comic. This section wraps the book up well with compelling analyses of the performance of monstrosity and its links to modern political and patriarchal views.

This collection of essays thoroughly considers the cultural contexts surrounding the representations of women as monsters in comics. The book focuses on who has the power or agency to be made monstrous, how the body adds to this monstrosity (specifically through the act of child birth), how notions of the monstrous are imprinted throughout childhood, and the way that monsters are performed not only by women but this performance can be imposed on women. There are a wide variety of theoretical frameworks, and the analyses are deep and refuse a single reading or perspective. The book sets out to demonstrate that while women have been positioned culturally as monstrous, that the monster is within us all and she is powerful. And, *Monstrous Women in Comics*, ultimately succeeds. It is an ambitious and expansive volume that fills a largely overlooked gap in comics studies.