

From Myth to Reason?

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*Monsters in Greek Ethnography and Society in
the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BCE*

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THAT *muthos* and *logos* should not be seen as opposed to one another, as if the one succeeded the other in a progression of Greek thought towards increasing rationality, may be exemplified by Greek views of monstrous beings. Such views may be observed in three areas, namely mythology, ethnography, and society. The present study will not deal with properly 'mythological' representations, but will survey (1) what Greeks wrote on monsters observed in their own society, and (2) ethnographic descriptions which claim to report foreign and distant things, and which give much space to monstrous peoples.

Ethnographic accounts of monsters are in certain respects analogous to myths—indeed, they were called *muthoi* by those who wanted to stress their unreliability.¹ If the ethnography of the ends of the world is not strictly speaking mythology, its imagery looks in many ways like that of myth, and the spatial distance involved in it allows the same type of representation as the chronological remoteness typical of myth.² Accordingly, ethnography, like myth, must be understood in connection with the society which produced it.³

In the present article, the ethnographical counterpoint, which was developed in Classical times, is preferred to the mythical one. (Mythological monsters had appeared already in the Archaic period.) Since ethnography claims to report on the contemporary world, it has to be considered in relation to contemporary Greek societies and their self-representation. My aim will be to try to

¹ e.g. Strab. I. 2. 35, on Herodotus, Ctesias, Hellanicus, and the authors of *Indica*.

² The images of Ctesias' India or Herodotus' Hyperboreans and Long-Lived Ethiopians have obvious affinities with that of the Hesiodic Golden Race. Cf. Lenfant (1991), 117–18.

³ See, for myth, Buxton (1994).

connect what was written by the Greeks about near and real monsters with their view of remote, foreign, and imaginary monsters, in order to understand better the attitudes and feelings of the Greeks towards monsters in their own society, the meaning of some of their ethnographic representations, and the relevance of these issues to the connection between *muthos* and *logos*.

MONSTERS IN GREEK SOCIETY

The word 'monster' is derived from Latin *monstrum*, which originally referred to an unnatural phenomenon through which gods warn ('monent') men. The corresponding Greek term is *teras*, which originally had, just like *monstrum*, the special meaning of a divine sign, a 'portent', with different sorts of referents. It also more specifically designated mythological monsters (like Cerberus or the Sphinx) and actual monstrous births.⁴ It does not precisely tally with the modern and more limited notion, which the present study addresses: 'monster' will be understood here as a 'human being with abnormal formation', which can be denoted or described without this term.⁵ So, our scope will not be confined to a word or a concept, but will also include concrete cases of human beings with abnormal formation.

However, *teras* is also used as a general term in the sense with which we are concerned, and this use helps us to see how a monster was perceived. Monsters in Greek society are defined in a negative way, as beings who do not resemble their parents, in that they deviate from the characteristics of their species.⁶ Such a definition is found in literary texts such as those of Plato and Aristotle,⁷ and also in curses within official oaths. Thus in the oath sworn by the Amphictyons, according to Aeschines, an imprecation against perpetrators of sacrilege on sacred land was

⁴ Cf. Chantraine (1968-80), s.v. τέρας; Stein (1909).

⁵ For instance, the Hippocratic treatises never use *teras* to designate a monstrous being; the only occurrence where it could do so refers to the world of dreams: 'Crossing rivers, hoplites, enemies, monsters with strange forms [*terata allomorpha*] indicate disease or madness' (*Regimen* 4 (= *Dreams*) 93. 5 (Littré, vi. 662)). The fact is sufficiently explained by the excessive looseness of the term in a medical context.

⁶ On the diverse degrees of unlikeness to the parents (as individuals, as male or female, or as human beings), see Arist. *GA* 767^a35-769^b10.

⁷ Pl. *Cra.* 394a; Arist. *GA* 769^b8 and 770^b5.

expressed as follows: 'That the women bear no children who resemble their parents, but monsters.'⁸

Concrete cases of monsters are rarely described, explained, or even mentioned in our sources, except in the writings of the Hippocratic physicians and the biology of Aristotle. The *Corpus Hippocraticum* reports a few cases of deformed stillborn children or invalid viable newborns, but the physician confines himself to a brief description of the anomaly or an explanation of it by an accident or a disease during the pregnancy. The interest of the physician differs according to the type of case. For deformed stillborn children, he only briefly describes their anomaly without explaining its origin,⁹ and his first concern is to remove these foetuses.¹⁰ By contrast, regarding invalid viable newborns, he always strives to explain their case by an accident or a disease during the pregnancy.¹¹ But the vast *Corpus Hippocraticum* mentions only a few instances of congenital malformation, and Hippocratic physicians did not construct a teratology.

⁸ μήτε γυναίκας τέκνα τίκτειν γονεύσιν ἑοικότα, ἀλλὰ τέρατα (Aeschin., *In Ctes.* 111). This oath would be subsequent to the First Sacred War and date from the early 6th cent. BCE. Similar words are found in the apocryphal oath of the Athenians before the battle of Plataea, in a curse against would-be perjurers: καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐμπεδορκοίην τὰ ἐν τῷ ὄρκῳ γεγραμμένα . . . γυναῖκες τίκτοιεν ἑοικότα γονεύσιν, εἰ δὲ μή, τέρατα. The inscription was published by L. Robert (1938: 307-16), who suggested dating the forgery to the last third of the 4th cent. BCE. In his edition, P. Siewert (1972: 98-9) argues that the inscription is genuine and dates from the Second Persian War. But all scholars agree that the curse is copied from the Amphictyonic oath. Similar curses occur in other inscriptions dating from Hellenistic and Roman times (references in Siewert (1972), 98 n. 197), but they do not include the expressions τέρατα and ἑοικότα γονεύσιν.

⁹ As in the case of the child born with an arm adherent to the side (*Epid.* 5. 13 (Littré, v. 212)) or the 'little plump child, whose most important parts were separate, four-fingers long, without bones' (*Epid.* 2. 19 (Littré, v. 92)).

¹⁰ *Mul.* 1. 47, 70 (Littré, viii. 106, 146-8); *Superf.* 7 (Littré, viii. 480).

¹¹ The maimed foetus which is born 'lame, blind, or affected with another disability' has certainly been ill *in utero* during the eighth month of the pregnancy (*Septim.* 5 (Littré, vii. 444)). Those born with a short arm must owe that infirmity to a dislocation suffered in their mother's womb (*Art.* 12 (Littré, iv. 114)). Finally, the treatise *On Generation* assigns two possible mechanical causes to the state of the maimed child: either external violence (blow, fall, . . .) suffered by the mother or the extreme narrowness of the womb which has impeded, at some point, the normal development of the foetus. For a much more slight anomaly, which one should not call monstrous, such as a mark on the head of the child, the physician even puts forward, exceptionally, the influence of the so-called longings of the pregnant woman, and their satisfaction: 'If a pregnant woman longs to eat some mould or coal and does it, the child who is born has on his head a sign which results from those things' (*Superf.* 18 (Littré, viii. 486)). Lastly, the physician sometimes indicates a way of correcting a congenital malformation, as in the case of club foot (*Art.* 62 (Littré, iv. 262-8)).

Aristotle's biology, by contrast, dwells at greater length and more systematically on monsters, and does outline a teratology,¹² of which the essential is to be read in the fourth book of the *Generation of Animals*.¹³ In Aristotle, *teras* clearly designates a monster, without implying any religious interpretation.¹⁴ The philosopher deals with monsters rather methodically, and is the first to do so. He strives to define the monster, to distinguish between degrees of malformation, and to discriminate between several types of monsters; he does not hesitate to describe some examples, and to try to explain their causes.

He defines the monster, in commonplace enough fashion, as a human being who does not resemble his parents,¹⁵ or as a being who does not even resemble a man, but rather an animal.¹⁶ He distinguishes between slight anomalies, which do not threaten life, and others, which affect vital organs.¹⁷ Lastly, he presents different sorts of monsters: those which have a part of their body resembling a different species (for instance, a being with an ox-head),¹⁸ those which have supernumerary limbs or organs (for instance, several heads),¹⁹ and those which lack limbs²⁰ or have an orifice closed (for instance, that of the uterus).²¹

In all these cases, Aristotle refers to nature.²² Furthermore, he is keen to emphasize that speaking of a being with an ox-head is a simple metaphor to underline a resemblance to the bovine species, and that to admit the mixing of two species is out of the question.²³ Finally, for several of the monstrosities he describes, he propounds purely biological explanations.²⁴

Such a survey of monsters is particularly noteworthy, for it

¹² Cf. P. Louis, 'Monstres et monstruosités dans la biologie d'Aristote', in Bingen, Cambier, and Nachtergaele (1975), 277-84.

¹³ GA 769^b3-773^a32.

¹⁴ The term was already so used before Aristotle, as appears from his own words (cf. e.g. ἄδη καὶ λέγεται τέρατα, GA 769^b10). Cf. Stein (1909: 11) for other instances.

¹⁵ Cf. n. 7 above.

¹⁶ 769^b8-10. ¹⁷ 771^a11-14.

¹⁸ 769^b13-14. ¹⁹ 769^b26-7.

²⁰ 770^b30-3. ²¹ 773^a14-20.

²² The monster is *παρὰ φύσιν*, contrary to the ordinary process of nature, but not contrary to nature in an absolute sense, since 'nothing occurs against nature' (770^b9-17).

²³ 769^b13-17.

²⁴ The cause derives generally from the matter (ὕλη), which is supplied by the female: if not sufficiently mastered by the movements, which come from the male, the animal aspect dominates and produces a monster partially resembling another species (769^b11-13); if the matter is superfluous, it causes the hypertrophy of a limb or its splitting in two (772^b14-19).

stands out against the general silence of the sources on the matter. In fact, it is striking how Greeks kept silent about monstrous births in their society—a silence which concerns at the same time the existence of monsters, the nature of their monstrosity, and the fate of such creatures, in relation to Greek attitudes towards them.

It is generally assumed that monsters and deformed newborns were eliminated. But even on this subject the texts remain for the most part silent or allusive.²⁵ It is well known that in Sparta the civic community used to decide to dispose of deformed newborns by throwing them into the chasm of the Apothetae.²⁶ But the exposure of deformed babies seems to have been a more widespread practice. For Athens, the most conclusive allusion is in Plato's *Theaetetus*, which mentions, in a metaphor, the baby who is stolen from his mother and exposed as being 'unworthy of being brought up'; but the text does not specify what makes him unworthy.²⁷ All in all, the evidence is very scanty and inconclusive.

Such a silence cannot be explained only by the scarceness of monstrous births: nowadays, in Europe, 2.5 to 3 per cent of newborns are deformed or monstrous,²⁸ and there is no reason to think that there were fewer in Classical Greece. Furthermore, palaeopathologists have observed ancient skeletons which attest a number of congenital malformations.²⁹ Lastly, the account which Aristotle gives of monsters implies that there were indeed some to be seen.

If the scarceness of monstrous births cannot sufficiently explain

²⁵ The allusions in Plutarch, Plato, and Aristotle are (differently) analysed by Delcourt (1938), 36–44, and by Dasen (1993), 206–10.

²⁶ Plu. *Lyc.* 16.

²⁷ 160e, cf. 151c and 160e–161a. Delcourt (1938: 42–4) quotes also Plato and Aristotle, who prescribe the exposure of malformed newborns. Cf. Pl. *Rep.* 460c ('As for the children of worthless men and those who may be born crippled, they will be hidden in a secret and invisible place, as is fitting.—Indeed so, if the race of the guardians is to be pure'), and Arist. *Pol.* 1335^b ('As to exposing and rearing the newborns, let there be a law forbidding the rearing of any maimed child'). As is well known, both philosophers set forth a fictive, ideal legislation. Delcourt assumes that this reflects Athenian practice, but for the questions under consideration the model seems rather to have been Sparta (e.g. the community of wives and children both in Sparta and Plato's *Republic*). Moreover, if the elimination of deformed newborns was a general custom, Aristotle's wish to impose it by law would be surprising. It is most probable that the practice was imposed by law in Sparta, whereas it devolved upon the family in Athens (cf. Dasen (1993), 205–6).

²⁸ Fischer (1991), 14, 114.

²⁹ Cf. Grmek (1983: 109–18), who describes several of them.

the silence of the Greeks about monsters, two other explanations may be considered: either monstrosity gave rise to a religious interpretation, which made it a matter of outstanding importance, or, on the contrary, a monstrous birth had no particular significance.

The first view was particularly developed by Marie Delcourt: according to her, the birth of a monster was considered by Greeks as a manifestation of divine anger and as a bad omen that inspired religious fear in the whole community: this would explain its removal, in so far as Greeks hoped to suppress in this way the calamity which it revealed or foretold.³⁰ Furthermore, the silence of the sources would itself be explained by a religious dread.³¹ But this view includes many assumptions which have no support in the ancient evidence or rely on questionable interpretations of the sources.³² It leads to a coherent picture, but it is no more than a hypothetical construction.³³

In what respect, then, did Greeks connect monsters with the divine?

First, the two meanings of *teras* suggest a link between the malformed being and the divine sign which indicates the (generally dark) future.³⁴ But such a link can hardly be perceived in Classical Greece, and the monstrous births which are seen as portents either affect animals,³⁵ or seem to be impossible,³⁶ or are

³⁰ Delcourt (1938), 9-21, 29-49, 67-9. This view has become widespread. See e.g. den Boer (1979): 'To have given birth to deformed children was generally looked upon as a punishment, and it is understandable that the community took measures against these unfortunates whenever possible' (p. 133). 'All that was considered was the interest of the community, which might be threatened by the "abnormal" child' (136). Den Boer here makes no reference to sources.

³¹ Delcourt (1938), 47, 93.

³² e.g. Hes. *WD* 244 οὐδὲ γυναῖκες τίκτουσιν is understood by Delcourt (1938: 11) as 'les femmes n'enfantent plus *normalement*', whereas the Greek wording only suggests sterility. The abandoned newborns which manifest, in Sophocles' *OT* (180-1), the curse which strikes the Thebans, are interpreted as being monstrous newborns (Delcourt (1938), 31-5)—which can be no more than a hypothesis. Delcourt argues that in the 4th cent. BCE the exposure of malformed newborns received a rationalistic explanation which replaced the ancient religious motivation; but such motivation is not attested . . .

³³ Delcourt's religious interpretation was rejected especially by Roussel (1943) (concerning exposure) and, more recently, by Dasen (1993), 209 (concerning monsters as evil omens which inspired religious dread).

³⁴ Cf. Stein (1909), 7-31, for the first meaning (something unusual, especially a malformed being), and 32-62 for the second (portent).

³⁵ e.g. *Plu. Per.* 6. 2 (often quoted, although a quite isolated instance).

³⁶ e.g. *Hdt.* 7. 57 (a mare gives birth to a hare).

supposed to occur in the East, where teratomancy was far more developed than in Greece.³⁷

If we compare the Greek situation with that in Babylonia, where treatises on divination obligingly enumerate various monstrosities either possible or impossible,³⁸ or with that in Rome under the Kings and the Republic, where monsters were ominous and abundantly described,³⁹ the scarcity of Greek mentions or descriptions would rather tell against their religious significance, and certainly not in favour of the dread put forward by Delcourt.⁴⁰ Nothing provides support for the idea that, faced with a bad omen, the Greek reaction would have been silence: on the contrary.

Secondly, the interpretation of a monstrous human birth as a divine punishment is suggested by two facts. First, we have seen that the monster was defined as a creature which does not look like its parents, and Hesiod presents the birth of such beings as a punishment which gods inflict upon unjust societies.⁴¹ Secondly, when monsters occur in curses, as in the Amphictyonic oath, they appear as a divine punishment threatening those who would violate this oath.⁴² However, these sources should not lead us to overestimate the importance of the Greek interpretation of monstrous births as divine punishments. In Hesiod as in the

³⁷ e.g. Hdt. 7. 57, Ctesias, *FGHist* 688 F 13 § 14, and Ps.-Callisth. *Alex.* 3. 30 (on the link between the last two and their Babylonian context, cf. Lenfant (1996), 372–3). It is striking how Herodotus, who is perhaps the most fond of divine signs among Classical writers, so rarely mentions monstrous births; the only one which concerns humans is both impossible and located in the East (I. 84: a woman who bears a lion—which is not in itself a monster . . .).

³⁸ Cf. Bottéro (1985), 1–28; (1987), 166. The majority of the preserved omens derived from unusual births (more than two thousand) are published by Leichty (1970) (transcription and English translation).

³⁹ Cf. Delcourt (1938), 49–59. See, above all, Pliny, Livy, and Julius Obsequens (this last compiled, in the 4th cent. CE, a list of unusual births).

⁴⁰ (1938), 93.

⁴¹ Hes. *WD* 182 οὐδὲ πατὴρ παίδεσσιν ὁμοίος οὐδέ τι παῖδες, a condition Zeus will inflict upon the Fifth Race, by contrast with the one he will offer to just societies: τίκτους δὲ γυναῖκες εὐκότα τέκνα γονεῦσι (l. 235).

⁴² As a matter of fact, monstrous human births rarely occur in curses (in addition to the Amphictyonic oath and the oath of Plataea which copies it on that point, Siewert (1972: 98 n. 197) refers to six later inscriptions which present similar formulas, such as μὴ γυναῖκες εὐτεκνοῖεν (*SIG*³ 360) or μὴ γυναῖκας τίκτειν κατὰ φύσιν (*SIG*³ 527; *Inscr. Cret.* iii. 5, p. 50; Pouilloux (1960), no. 52)). But what is exceptional is the detailed formula in which they appear: in Classical times, a short, abstract formula is generally used: εὐορκούντι μὲν πόλλ' ἀγαθὰ εἶναι, ἐπιορκούντι δὲ κακὰ (cf. Siewert (1972), 26–7).

curses—which reveal more about Archaic than Classical beliefs—monstrous births are mentioned as a threat, as a potentiality, but they do not account for real, historical monsters. Furthermore, the connection between monstrous births and divine anger should not be understood as a symmetrical one. In other words, divine punishment may consist, according to curses, in monstrous births, barrenness of land, disease,⁴³ ‘defeat in war and in legal cases and in the market-place’,⁴⁴ and so on. But this is not to say that all these evils were always felt as a divine punishment. What R. Parker says about disease probably applies to monstrous births also. Divine interference in human life is not considered in the same way by different persons, or even by the same person in different circumstances: gods may be sometimes credited with punishing the bad, sometimes with giving way to chance or to fate, and these religious explanations of disease coexist at all periods. But, on the whole, disease was only exceptionally interpreted as a punishment, being more usually regarded as a random event.⁴⁵ In the same way, it seems likely that monsters in general lacked religious significance.

This view is not invalidated by the scientific writings of the Hippocratics and Aristotle. Although it is usually assumed that their rational approach to monsters contrasted with general superstition on the matter,⁴⁶ nothing allows us to be so categorical. True, they do not consider monsters as portents or as divine punishments, and they both refer to nature.⁴⁷ But nor do they attack a religious interpretation of monstrosities. Hippocratic medicine refuses, as a general rule, to consider any disease as having a divine origin, or at least as expressing a divine intention towards the affected person or his community. It considers every disease as having a natural cause.⁴⁸ Its specific attacks concern

⁴³ Cf. the oath of Plataea (n. 8 above).

⁴⁴ Cf. the Amphictyonic oath quoted by Aeschines, *In Ctes.* III.

⁴⁵ Parker (1983), 255–6.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Neumann (1995), at 47–8 (on Hippocrates), and Louis in Bingen, Cambier, and Nachtergaele (1975), 282 (on Aristotle).

⁴⁷ For Aristotle, cf. n. 22 above.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Aer.* 22: ‘no one [disease] is more divine or more human than any other; all are alike, and all divine. Each of them has a nature of its own, and none arises without its natural cause’ (trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb edn.). See above all *Morb. sacr.* 1–2 (Littré, vi. 352–64). On these questions, cf. Jouanna (1992), 259–97.

epilepsy (or 'the sacred disease'), usually interpreted as having a divine origin,⁴⁹ or the disease of Scythians who become impotent, a condition understood *by themselves* as a divine punishment.⁵⁰ The Hippocratics never criticize a religious interpretation of monstrous births. This fact is not surprising, given that Hippocratic concern with monsters was limited; in any case, it does not support the idea that medical views on monsters stood in opposition to a generally held religious interpretation.

There is thus no reason why the elimination of monsters should be seen as a religious act.⁵¹ The ancient sources justify it, rather, on eugenic grounds: the aim was to preserve a healthy and strong community.⁵² That could be no more than philosophical idealism (Plato, Aristotle) or late rationalization (Plutarch).⁵³ But it is awkward to replace ancient explanations with modern ones which are not attested and might simply be anachronistic.⁵⁴ All in all, Greek silence on the fate of the deformed is no more noteworthy than the scanty evidence on exposure in general.⁵⁵

So we come back to the silence of the sources. If this was on the whole not due to religious dread, it may rather be connected with a fear which is probably unavoidable at all times, but which was increased by the sensibilities of Greeks, who valued so highly physical harmony and integrity and were particularly horrified by

⁴⁹ *Morb. sacr.* I (Littré, vi. 352). ⁵⁰ *Aer.* 22.

⁵¹ *Contra Delcourt* (1938), 41–9. Parker (1983: 221) argues that an abnormal birth was sometimes seen by Greeks as a source of pollution which required purification by being burnt, although this is 'a kind of concern that, in contrast to the conspicuous Roman obsession, scarcely penetrates our sources'. We may add that the sources quoted by Parker (his n. 75) are either unclear or late.

⁵² Cf. *Pl. Rep.* 460c (n. 27 above) and *Plu. Lyc.* 16. 2: 'it was better for himself and for the city that the newborn who from the outset was not disposed for health and strength did not live.'

⁵³ Delcourt (1938: 41–6) argues that these authors assign a rational justification to practices that originally had a superstitious motive. Dasen (1993: 209) stresses that 'these views must be taken cautiously because they come from philosophers' and 'they cannot be regarded as revealing for the popular opinion'.

⁵⁴ Generally speaking, understanding of Greek practices and beliefs in relation to monsters seems to have been distorted by knowledge of Roman ones. It is striking how often modern statements on prodigies 'in antiquity' rest in fact on Latin sources and Roman instances.

⁵⁵ The evidence on exposure is especially scanty for Classical Greece. Cf. Germain (1995), who stresses that we do not know of a single instance of exposure in Classical Greece (pp. 235–41). The extent of the practice is also controversial. Some references are given in e.g. Eyben (1980/1), 14 n. 31, and Dasen (1993), 206 n. 3.

a deformed or mutilated body (see below). However, such silence about monstrosity close to home is in striking contrast to the Greeks' extensive descriptions of monsters which belong to another world, either to the mythical past or to the contemporary, distant space of ethnography. I will now deal with that second sort of representation, the ethnographical one.

MONSTERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Greek ethnography describes all sorts of monsters, sometimes in a very detailed manner, especially in depicting the confines of the world, those regions which are only known from hearsay and to whose distance corresponds a deterioration of human attributes.

Herodotus and Ctesias mention a number of monstrous peoples. The former locates some of them at the edge of Scythia, that is to say in the northern confines of the inhabited world: here dwell the Argippeans, who 'are said to be all bald from their birth, male and female alike',⁵⁶ the one-eyed men,⁵⁷ the 'men with goats' feet' or those 'who sleep for six months of the twelve';⁵⁸ others he locates in the western part of Libya, that is to say in its most distant part: for example 'the Dog-heads and the Headless that have their eyes in their breasts'—one cannot say whether Herodotus considers them as human beings or not—and also 'the wild men and women'.⁵⁹

Ctesias, for his part, mentions in his description of India, at the eastern confines of the world, peoples whom he describes in greater detail than does Herodotus, such as Pygmies, flat-nosed, ugly, very small men, whose bodies are covered by long hair and who have a thick penis which stretches down to their ankles;⁶⁰ or the men with a dog-head, 'black like other Indians', but like dogs for the rest of their body, borrowing from them head, teeth, claws, tail, cry, and way of copulating;⁶¹ also the men without anuses who can only consume milk and evacuate through

⁵⁶ 4. 23. ⁵⁷ 3. 116, 4. 13, 27.

⁵⁸ 4. 25. ⁵⁹ 4. 191.

⁶⁰ *FGrHist* 688 F 45 §§ 21-3 and F 45f α.

⁶¹ F 45 §§ 36-43, F 45p α, β, γ; Psellos (in Maas (1924)).

vomiting;⁶² the people whose women can give birth once only in their life,⁶³ whose babies already have teeth, but also white hair which darkens when they get older and becomes black when they are old;⁶⁴ those who have eight digits on each hand and foot,⁶⁵ whose ears are so big that they cover their back and arms;⁶⁶ those who have only one leg,⁶⁷ who have no neck, and whose eyes are in their shoulders;⁶⁸ or the Sciapodes, whose feet are so big that they overshadow them when they lie down with their legs up.⁶⁹

Such monsters can be divided into two types: one group seem to be hybrids (men with goat-feet or with a dog-head), the others have an anatomical anomaly, which is generally an absence (of hair, of an eye, of the head, the neck, the anus, or a leg) or an excess (limbs with eight digits, ears or feet out of proportion). These two types of anomalies might have been inspired by actual monstrosities: as we have seen, Aristotle distinguished among the monsters the ones who looked like hybrids, such as beings with an ox-head, even if he indicated that the expression aimed only at suggesting a likeness. As for the type of monster characterized by a lack or an excess, this can be connected with anomalies or monstrosities actually known, such as those exhibited by dwarfs, monopods, or polydactyls.⁷⁰

But naturally, even if ethnographers could have been inspired by actual monstrosities and were also sometimes influenced by oriental iconography and legends,⁷¹ these were no more than a starting point for the construction of an imaginary world.

Ethnographical 'alchemy' presents the following features. First, it chooses to locate monsters in those countries which are the most distant from the Greek world. Then it changes an individual anomaly into an ethnic feature. That anomaly is thus hereditary, contrary to the usual definition of *teras*, according to which

⁶² F 45 § 44.

⁶⁴ F 45 § 50, F 45t, F 52.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁸ F 51.

⁶³ F 45 § 50 and F 45t.

⁶⁵ F 45 § 50.

⁶⁷ F 51a.

⁶⁹ F 51a, F 51b, F 60.

⁷⁰ Polydactyly is common, but generally affects one single hand or foot. Imperforate anus is also attested. See Saint-Hilaire (1837), i. 230-7 (polydactyly), 177 (imperforate anus), and *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*, 26th edn. (Baltimore, 1995), s.vv. 'polydactyly', 'atresia'.

⁷¹ See, for Ctesias' Indian monsters, Lenfant (1995), 319-20 (on the influence of the hybrids of Mesopotamian and Achaemenid iconography) and 323 (on their likeness to the strange creatures of Indian epics).

monstrous children do not resemble their parents.⁷² Furthermore, the anomaly is, of course, not inconsistent with life. More paradoxical is the fact that it involves no disadvantage, for physiology and habits adapt themselves (thus, men without anuses evacuate in another way); it can even constitute an advantage (thus, Pygmies use their hair as clothes and Sciapodes guard against sun thanks to their feet). Lastly, another paradox contributes to situate ethnographical monsters far from those evoked as a threat in the Greek world by Hesiod and the curses. Ethnographical monsters do not come into the world to punish the unjust; on the contrary, they live, at least in Ctesias' India, in the most just society.⁷³ How can we explain these diverse paradoxes, and what is the meaning of an imagining process which follows such well-defined rules? To understand it, we must first consider the Greek mental universe, since ethnography does not form—any more than mythology does⁷⁴—a world apart.

Monstrosity deviates not only from the species, but also from an aesthetic canon. One of the most striking features of Greek Classical culture is a concern with physical harmony and the perfection of the human body. This is to be seen in the practice of athleticism, which strives to model the human body, as in art. Not only do painters and sculptors choose man as their chief subject: they also strive to give him a perfect body. Even if caricature and the grotesque are not unknown, 'iconography reflects the sensitivity of the Greeks to the human body, its proportions, its integrity':⁷⁵ V. Dasen points out that 'Greek artists had little interest in showing human physical anomalies', and most mythological monsters are usually composed of normal human and animal elements, whereas the rare physical anomalies are never emphasized.⁷⁶ For the same reason, they were reluctant to depict mutilated bodies.⁷⁷

In contrast to such a cultural background, the foreign countries

⁷² But biologists admit that malformations may sometimes be transmitted (Hippoc. *Genit.* 11 (Littré, vii. 485); Arist. *GA* 721^b17–20 and 724^a3–4, *HA* 585^b29–33). Hippocrates applies that principle on an ethnic scale in the case of the Macrocephals (*Aer.* 14).

⁷³ The great justice of Indians is a leitmotiv of the *Indica*. Cf. F 45 § 16, etc.

⁷⁴ Cf. Buxton (1994), 4 and *passim*.

⁷⁵ Dasen (1993), 165.

⁷⁶ Because dwarfs are an exception to that rule since they were often depicted, Dasen infers that their anomaly was seen as acceptable. ⁷⁷ Dasen (1993), 166.

evoked by ethnography are the place *par excellence* of the deterioration, indeed the dislocation, of the human body—in other words, the reverse of the exhibited ideal. This is obvious for monstrous peoples placed at the edges of the world: Ctesias' Pygmies, with their smallness, flat nose, and disproportionate hair and genitals, may be considered as a Greek pattern of ugliness.⁷⁸ But it is also true, to a lesser degree, among peoples living nearer the Greeks, like those of the Persian empire. There, the human body is also affected, although not on an ethnic scale, but individually, through mutilations and tortures. Herodotus' account of Persia includes many examples of mutilation, castration, impaling, beheading, or flaying;⁷⁹ and Ctesias' *Persica* accumulates severed heads, pulled-out eyes, stonings, impalings, flayings, as well as more original tortures like cutting out the tongue, pulverizing the head between two stones, or pouring molten lead into the ears.⁸⁰ We may add that Ctesias, especially attentive to the body as a physician, gives clinical and very detailed descriptions of several tortures or pains caused by the taking of a poison.⁸¹

Such practices could only horrify the Greeks,⁸² even if torture was not unknown in their own society.⁸³ Why, then, did they play down tortures⁸⁴ and monstrous births, changing them into oriental attributes? They undoubtedly strove to suppress what

⁷⁸ Ibid. 176.

⁷⁹ See the examples quoted by Lévy (1992), 214–15.

⁸⁰ Severed heads: F 9 § 5, F 13 § 19, F 14 § 39; pulled-out eyes: F 9 § 6, F 26 § 14, 10; stonings: F 15 §§ 49 and 52; impalings: F 9 § 6, F 14 §§ 39 and 45, F 16 § 66, F 26 § 17, 7; flayings: F 9 § 6, F 15 § 56, F 16 § 66, F 26 § 17, 7; cutting out the tongue: F 16 § 58; pulverizing the head between two stones: F 29b § 19, 9; pouring molten lead into the ears: F 26 § 14, 10.

⁸¹ For instance, the trough torture (F 26 § 16): the condemned person is laid down in a trough on which one puts, as a cover, a second trough, letting only the head and the limbs protrude; the face of the condemned is painted with honey and soon after becomes covered in flies; he is compelled to eat, and his excrement feeds a profusion of worms which devour his entrails; or the results of the taking of a poison derived from the Indian purple snake (F 451): 'he will be seized with convulsions of the utmost violence; next, his eyes squint and his brain, being compressed, drips through his nostrils, and he dies a most pitiable, but fast death.'

⁸² Cf. Lévy (1992), 214.

⁸³ But it is true that, in Classical Athens, the law prohibited the torturing of a citizen, and that only slaves, and sometimes free foreigners, could be subjected to it (MacDowell (1978), 245–7). As for the death penalty, the three methods we hear of (precipitation, *tumpanon* (the victim being clamped to a pole and left to die), and poisoning) do not imply any mutilation, and it is noteworthy that beheading is never mentioned (ibid. 254–5).

⁸⁴ See, especially, the unclear allusions to the *apotumpanismos* (Gernet (1924)).

could sully the image of the Greek world, and it is not surprising that ethnography, like myth,⁸⁵ exhibited aspects of social life that were otherwise concealed. Imaginary rejection of the malformed to the edges of the world could symbolically express the rejection such persons actually suffered in Greek societies⁸⁶ and, in this respect, the study of ethnographic representations simply confirms some impressions given by the scanty evidence on Greek monsters. As the picture of the Greek world was affected, so was that of the barbarian world, as being inhabited by a physically and morally degraded humanity. In that field as in others, Greeks strove to deepen artificially the difference between themselves and others.

Yet, that difference could take on divergent meanings, as appears from a comparison between Herodotus' view of monsters and that of his successor Ctesias. Two divergences are especially noteworthy.

First, Herodotean ethnography makes physical and moral perfection converge: Long-Lived Ethiopians not only surpass other men in height, strength, beauty, and longevity, but they are at the same time just, refusing to attack other peoples and rejecting Cambyses' presents.⁸⁷ By contrast, Ctesias makes a paradoxical association, for, in the Indian world as he describes it, one can be at the same time just *and* ugly, monstrous or hybrid, like the Pygmies or the Dog-heads. Moral qualities are thus independent of physical beauty.

But the gap between Herodotus and Ctesias is still wider, and we should not be misled by the examples of monsters quoted above. First, there are many more monsters in the *Indica* than in the *Histories*. That disproportion is all the more pronounced as the people described by Ctesias live in the heart of India, the subject of his book, whereas Herodotus mentions monsters only in connection with marginal regions, the confines of Libya and Scythia, which he describes briefly. And if the peoples depicted by Herodotus are in many respects aberrant and can be understood as expressing an increasing negation of the Greek norm, their anomalies are above all moral, and not anatomical.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the two authors have diametrically opposed attitudes towards the

⁸⁵ Cf. Buxton (1994), 210.

⁸⁶ Cf. Dašen (1993: 188) on pygmies and dwarfs.

⁸⁷ 3. 20-3. ⁸⁸ Cf. Rossellini and Saïd (1978).

monsters they describe. Whereas nothing attests any reservation from Ctesias about monsters,⁸⁹ Herodotus insistently rejects what he considers as incredible legends. He is sometimes content with ascribing what he reports to intermediaries: for instance, he says that he heard about one-eyed men through Scythians who were informed by Issedones . . .⁹⁰ But he generally expresses his scepticism more clearly: he indicates twice that he does not believe in the existence of men with goats' feet or of those who sleep for six months of the twelve,⁹¹ and declares also: 'I regard it as incredible that there can be men in all else like other men, yet having but one eye.'⁹²

These two attitudes correspond to two degrees of critical sense and two distinct manners of understanding the ethnographer's duty.⁹³ But they also express, more basically, two views of human identity. Herodotus is intent on clearly distinguishing man from animal. He does not describe animals by a partial assimilation with man, whereas Ctesias depicts the *bittacos*, a bird which can speak like a man, or the *martichoras*, which has features of the lion and the scorpion, but whose face has human attributes.⁹⁴ The legend of the Dodonean doves speaking with a human voice is rationalized by Herodotus, who interprets the term 'dove' as a

⁸⁹ On the contrary, Ctesias stated (*FGrHist* 688 F 45 § 51) that his account was most truthful, that he relied on what he had either seen or heard from eyewitnesses, and that he preferred not to mention many other things still more marvellous for fear of being suspected of telling 'incredible things' (ἀπίστα).

⁹⁰ 4. 27.

⁹¹ He reduces their existence to an assertion of the Argippeans, the bald men, and twice expresses his scepticism (4. 25).

⁹² 3. 116. We may add that his enumeration of the strange creatures inhabiting the edges of Libya is undercut by a few words expressing his reservations (ὡς δὴ λέγονται γε ὑπὸ Λιβύων, 'at least according to the Libyans') and ends with καὶ ἄλλα πλήθει πολλὰ θηρία κατὰ ψευστα, 'and a lot of other incredible beasts'. The MSS read ἀκατὰ ψευστα, 'not incredible'; but the meaning 'incredible' is not in doubt, considering the scepticism expressed before. Thus modern editors generally choose either to amend the manuscript (with Reiz's correction, adopted by Legrand in his Budé edn.) or to keep the manuscript reading, either by contrasting the last-mentioned beasts with the former, or by giving the term an ironical sense (so Medaglia and Corcella (1993), 204, 381).

⁹³ One should certainly not underrate the context in which Herodotus' statements appear and their effect on the reader. In 4. 25, Herodotus' expression of scepticism about what lies beyond the bald men implies that the existence of a population of bald men is above suspicion (cf. Buxton (1994), 157). Nevertheless, the contrast between Herodotus and Ctesias remains intact: bald men are very different from men with goats' feet or from people whose eyes are in their shoulders, for baldness has nothing monstrous about it and is perfectly human.

⁹⁴ *Bittacos*: F 45 § 8; *martichoras*: F 45 § 15, F 45d α, β, δ.

metaphor designating barbarian women whose language sounded like the song of birds until they seemed to acquire a human voice when they spoke in Greek:⁹⁵ 'For', he says, 'how could a dove speak with a human voice?'⁹⁶ That is precisely what Ctesias admits with the *bittacos*, which 'has a human language and a human voice'.⁹⁷ Conversely, the peoples depicted by Herodotus are not described through comparisons with animals, at least regarding physical features: the only assimilations with animals concern behaviour, that of peoples who, unlike Greeks and Egyptians, are not reluctant to copulate in sanctuaries 'and hold a man to be like any other animal',⁹⁸ or the behaviour of those who, like peoples of Caucasus and southern Indians, do it 'openly, like beasts'.⁹⁹

Thus, for Herodotus, man answers to a well-defined model. The historian does not admit monstrosity on an ethnic scale. He distinguishes sharply between the anatomy of man and animal, and considers that the dignity of man implies giving up the behaviour of the beast. Ctesias, by contrast, through his representation of monstrous peoples, questions the human model known to the Greeks. The men and beasts of the *Indica* easily exchange their physical attributes and also some of their behaviour: the *martichoras* shoots like a Saca bowman,¹⁰⁰ and the Dog-heads, although having a number of canine features and copulating on all fours like dogs, are the most just of men.¹⁰¹

Such an ethnography perfectly plays the role that R. Buxton assigns to myths: 'myths often fulfil the role of pathfinders, testing out boundaries, imagining the consequences of interferences between categories.'¹⁰² The point here is to define the limits of the human and its attributes, but also to question certain moral norms (for instance, does the manner of copulating imply anything about the practice of justice?) or certain common opinions (for

⁹⁵ 2. 55-7.

⁹⁶ ἐπεὶ τῷ τρόπῳ ἂν πελειᾶς γε ἀνθρωπινήη φωνῆ φθέγγεται;

⁹⁷ γλώσσαν ἀνθρωπίνην ἔχει καὶ φωνήν.

⁹⁸ 2. 64.

⁹⁹ 1. 203, 3. 101. This fact might seem to be refuted by the case of the Garamantes, whose language resembles the shrill cries of a bat (4. 183). But such a comparison obviously reflects the feeling of a foreign hearer and recalls the case, quoted above, of the Dodonean doves.

¹⁰⁰ F 45d β.

¹⁰¹ F 45 § 43.

¹⁰² (1994), 204.

instance, is it necessary to be beautiful to be just?). Ethnography, like myth, reflects the society that produced it and expresses a questioning of its norms.¹⁰³

CONCLUSION

In Greece, there was no general evolution either from a religious to a rational rejection of monsters, or from a belief in mythical monsters to a rational disbelief on the matter: quite the contrary. Greeks generally agreed in removing, physically and symbolically, from daily life and from their writings, the monsters which were born in their society. But monsters reappeared all the more vividly elsewhere, in myth and ethnography, which thus expressed what Greeks wanted to exclude from their society. They appeared as a figure of the stranger¹⁰⁴ and even Aristotle, the only one who outlined a teratology dealing with monsters from a biological viewpoint, believed that foreigners more readily bore monsters.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, the monstrous picture of foreigners was not confined to giving a negative idea of them: it also allowed the Greeks to embody paradoxical situations and to question implicitly the norms of *doxa*, 'common opinion', such as the anatomical or moral definition of man, the boundaries between species, the advantages and disadvantages of civilization, the relations between beauty and justice or nature and morals . . . More

¹⁰³ I do not wish to suggest that Ctesias' main *object* was to challenge norms and to re-educate his readers: he obviously practised paradox in order to surprise. But I think that his representations had such an *effect*. Not only did they entertain, but they also produced unusual associations which might prompt reflection.

¹⁰⁴ In the same way, the mythological monsters of Archaic literature have been interpreted as a metaphor of the resistance of indigenous tribes to Greek colonizers (cf. Hall (1989), 49–50). An extreme example of such a tendency to identify monsters with foreigners is given in the Middle Ages (12th cent.) by Gui de Bazoches, who wrote in his *Apologia contra maledicos*: 'France alone has no monsters, but abounds in able, strong, and most eloquent men'; quoted by Friedman (1981), 53 and n. 56.

¹⁰⁵ Thus, since he considers that being multiparous promotes confusion between embryos and explains in this way the fact that monsters are more frequent among beasts, he compares to the latter the Egyptians, whose women are multiparous and give birth to more monsters (*GA* 770^a34–6); besides, in that same country, 'children survive even if they are born monstrous' (*HA* 584^b9). In a word, more human monsters live in Egypt than anywhere else, and this feature makes its inhabitants resemble beasts.

than the dishonesty or the ingenuousness of Classical and medieval authors,¹⁰⁶ more than the simplicity of their readers, the implications of such pictures¹⁰⁷ seem to explain the great success of an entire tradition.

¹⁰⁶ Ctesias' picture of the Far East and its monsters was handed down from antiquity to the Middle Ages and beyond, especially through Pliny, whose enormous influence is attested by fantastic humanity pictured in cartography, literature, and art. Apart from Pliny and Solinus, the basic texts on monstrous races are Augustine, *City of God* 16. 8, and Isidore of Seville, *Libri etymologiarum* 11. 3. On monstrous peoples in medieval thought and Christian attitudes towards them, see Friedman (1981). On fabulous creatures in medieval art, see Wittkower (1942).

¹⁰⁷ After Augustine, medieval texts often raise the question of the humanity of monstrous races, which render uncertain the notion of man and lead to reflection on his definition (reason, morality, social organization...). Cf. Céard (1977), 46-50, and Friedman (1981), 178-96. They make explicit a question which often remained implicit in Classical times.