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Neo-Gothic Phantasms:

Parodies of "Deranged Imagination" in Contemporary Fiction.

Clare Clark's *The Nature of Monsters* (2007)

ABSTRACT

This paper targets a narrative of monstrous births "rewritten" in the Neo-Gothic vein. Like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Clare Clark's *The Nature of Monsters* (2007) pursues an ever-shifting referent of Gothic phantasms: the perpetually deferred, constantly craved-after origin of monstrosity, whether corporeal or psychological, or both. Clark's narrative thus revisits one of the cultural constants of teratological discourse, namely maternal imagination, which has for centuries been indicted as a cause of deformed births, and dislodges it from its traditional frame of interpretation, shifting the agency of monstrous genesis from the naturally canny birthing processes onto the uncanny Frankensteinian figure of a madly obsessed scientist.

KEYWORDS

Neo-Gothic narratives; Clare Clark; Maternal Imagination; Monstruosity.

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This paper targets a 'rewritten' narrative of monstrous births. Like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Clare Clark's *The Nature of Monsters* (2007) pursues an ever-shifting referent of Gothic phantasms: the perpetually deferred, constantly craved-after origin of monstrosity, whether corporeal or psychological, or both. Clark's narrative – a genuine compendium of diverse historically-attested monster theories – revisits thus one of the cultural constants of teratological discourse, namely maternal imagination, which has for centuries been indicted as a cause of deformed births; furthermore, Clark dislodges this hypothesis from its traditional frame of interpretation, shifting the agency of monstrous genesis from the protagonist-narrator's naturally canny birthing processes onto the Frankensteinian figure of a madly obsessed scientist.

The syntagm "deranged imagination" in the title of this paper limns the issue of maternal imagination as an image-making faculty, which – according to folk lore and pre-Enlightenment quasi-scientific treatises – is actively involved in the prenatal psycho-physiological processes, the degree of deformity it may inflict on the foetus ranging from minor blemishes to massively disfiguring and distorting effects. Thus, amongst the examples avidly gleaned by Clare Clark from sources she briefly – and self-consciously – acknowledges in the postscript



to her book (such as Swammerdam's *Uteri mulieris fabrica*, 1672, Ulise Aldrovandi's *Monstrorum historia*, 1672 or popular reports included in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society), are the ill effects of delusional/ deluding imagination upon a French woman who delivered a simian baby after watching an ape in a freak show, or upon the infant of a "pregnant woman who took great care to wash herself after being greatly frightened by a Negro [...] only to discover her child born black in those place she was unable to reach," or upon "a child born with uncommonly large moles as a result of her mother's affection for currants";¹ and so, the inference goes, the series may go on indefinitely, encompassing also the progeny of Eliza Tally, the protagonist of Clare Clark's fiction, should she allow her own imagination to be moulded in the defective cast prepared for her by the villainous apothecary in whose care she has been confined... Longing for strawberries in mid-October?! Hold that thought! That might imprint a crimson stain upon your baby's face... Such is the jocular stance with which Clare Clark manages to enmesh reader and protagonist alike in the web of dumbfounding deceit and soluble enigmas that the ghostly origins of monstrosity are shrouded in.

Yet the body of wisdom on the ghostly imprint of maternal imagination upon an infant's bodily surface is vast in Clark's fictional re-visitation of eighteenth-century London and its monster lore. Prominent are, for instance, Aristotelian references to the close resemblance between the female and the monster. Insisting on the criterion of parental resemblance in defining monsters, classical teratology, such as epitomised by Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals*, considers that monstrous bodies exhibit accidental deviations from or transgressions of the male generic type, since the former furnishes the ideational shape of the foetus,

whereas the female simply provides the brute, amorphous matter that will nourish the embryo.² Contrary to the Aristotelian tradition, which credits the mother with being the mere receptacle for the paternal seed, the tradition postulating the maternal teratogenic agency, also upheld by ancient authorities like Hippocrates, Galen, or Pliny, yet enjoying far more widespread currency, fundamentally argues that the monstrous infant materialises, as it were, in a sort of public display of corporeality, the mother's illegitimate fancies, her aberrant desires and excessive passions: in procreation and throughout pregnancy, it is alleged, the maternal powers of disruption (affective traumas, desires, wishes, cravings, wild fantasies) can literally shape the infant in defective typecast.

Teratological exegesis emphasises, however, the potent and pervasive appeal, amongst both elite and popular circles, of the conception whereby the sole factor responsible for the misproduction of offspring is the mother's imagination.³ Albeit scientifically discredited in the wake of mid-eighteenth century debates between preformationists and epigeneticists,⁴ the idea that the prenatal influence of the mother's imagination could be wrought up to marking or even moulding the infant in the womb may still hold its ground in popular conceptions of procreation today.

After briefly indicating the premises of the 'imagination' hypothesis, this paper looks at the 2007 novel *The Nature of Monsters* by Clare Clark, which sifts through the mechanisms allowing the mother figure to be cast in a monstrous mould, not so much as regards the grotesque physicality axiom, but insofar as the corporealising powers of the maternal imagination are concerned.

Exploring the cultural meanings of the imagination as an agent of teratogenesis, analysts like Dennis Todd (1995) or Marie-



Hélène Huet (1993) have also exposed the eruption within the modern episteme of an alternative paradigm to gendering monstrous generation as female: namely, a dissociation between earlier, pre-nineteenth century anxieties related to the maternal imagination (basically mimetic, reproductive) and the reassignment in Romantic aesthetics of the role of creative, productive imagination this time, onto the male scientist or artist.

The imagination could be regarded, Dennis Todd indicates, as teratogenic on two accounts. First, since it was largely understood to be an image-making faculty and since anomalous births were deemed to render iconically images of things previously imprinted in the mothers' minds, the plasmatic, forming power of the imagination could be extrapolated to encompass corporeal formation as well; and secondly, Todd explains, the faculty of the imagination was seen to function as a "nexus where mind and body continuously were *enter-communicating*," that is as a threshold or "narrow Suture" mediating the transactions between them; this psycho-physiological dynamic unity would make it possible for the foetus to be imaginatively fashioned in the womb.⁵

Focusing on the same line of thought, largely though not definitively curbed by its scientific debunking in the Enlightenment, Marie-Hélène Huet's studies address conceptions regarding misbirths as generative transgressions that the female imagination lends itself to: hypothesised as a deceitful, dissimulating, procreational force, it may sprout forth monstrosities through an obliteration, or erasure, Huet maintains, of the father's legitimate paternity.⁶ However, with the advent of the modern episteme, and of Romanticism in particular, a paradigmatic shift occurs, re-assigning the powers of spawning aberrant progeny to the father/

artist figure. In this light, a scientist's teratogenic experiments would amount not so much to a displacement as to a disciplinary submission of the disorderly, irrational forces of the maternal imagination. It is the reappropriation of the imagination as an artefactual faculty by excellence that Clare Clark's parodic and, somewhat anachronistic, revision of the Frankensteinian prototype highlights.

Nowhere is this transition more evident than in Mary Shelley's conflictual staging of both types of imagination as the creative principles behind her 'hideous progeny,' which invites interpretation as both the humanoid creature begotten by Frankenstein and the textual offspring of the author herself. Delving into the same deliberate conflation operated by her Romantic predecessor, A. S. Byatt's *Possession. A Romance* (1991) rewrites ophidian femaleness into a trope of the monstrous imagination underlying artistic *and* biological creation. Clare Clark's *The Nature of Monsters* also addresses the issue of maternal imagination, and recasts its "deranged" agency onto Grayson Black, a deformed and horrendously disturbed male protoscientist.

Set in the year 1718, around the time when the historically attested case of Mary Toft, a rabbit-birthing woman, spawned the infamous Turner-Blondel debate,⁷ Clark's novel enmeshes, on the one hand, Eliza Tally's first-person account of her incontinent erotic desire and troublesome pregnancy and, on the other hand, Grayson Black's diary, medical notes and epistolary exchanges, lodging these monster-making narratives in an indestructible dyad.

The story traces thus the birthing tribulations of Eliza Tally, daughter of a village midwife, who, on account of an illicit love affair that tarnishes her local reputation, finds herself shipped to London, where she takes lodgings in the claustrophobically Gothicised workshop of Grayson Black. The



sinister apothecary, severely disfigured by a birthmark himself, and marred by an ailing constitution and opium addiction, is determined to make it into the ranks of the day's scientific elite by publishing a tract *Upon the Mother's Imagination*; at his publisher's recommendation, he aims to satisfy the public's epistemophilic craving for monsters, substantiate his foregone conclusions with an illustrated compendium of strange birthings, and conduct experiments on several child-bearing women. This is how Grayson self-aggrandisingly describes his theory of maternal impression:

I must confess to believing the analysis of the physiological effects of imagination masterly. Of course the raised temperature of a woman's blood when in a violent passion must heat the fluid parts of the body. And, of course, when those passions duly weaken, the salts contained within those fluids must be deposited within the body, precisely as salt marks the interior of a cooling cooking pot. Where else could they then collect but in the unshed blood of the menses? It is inevitable, then, that when the menstrual blood is ingested by the child for nourishment, the salts impress themselves upon the as yet unhardened muscle & bone of the foetus. And so the child bears the imprint of the mother's passions as sealing wax receives the imprint of a stamp.⁸

"There are monsters on the prowl," Michel Foucault reminds us, "whose form changes with the history of knowledge."⁹ From prodigy to pathology: such is the strange career of monsters across centuries, a progression from astounding portents to reified pathological specimens. However, what Clare Clark's genealogical survey of monstrosity shows is that contrary to a teleological view of monstrosity's progressive

rationalisation and "scientification," the discursive frames within which the monstrous has been docilised have registered significant overlappings, disruptions, mutations, or reversals.

For instance, novel experiments in the equally "reputable" science of physiognomy, which establishes correspondences between deformed anatomy and intrinsic corruption, are threatening to conclusively disprove Black's theory. Thus, the maternal agency is altogether dismissed, such occurrences as concorporate twins evincing "depraved and deplorable sexual desires" harboured by the twins themselves, while a "hare lip reveal[s] the loose mouth of one who might not be trusted."¹⁰ Black himself grafts his discursive account of monstrosity in the prodigy complex, whereby monsters are deemed to be ciphers in a secretly coded language of divine wrath. The female imagination, he remarks at one point, is a temptation sent by God, which only affects sinful women, leaving them unmarred but making her offspring bear the stain of her defilement.¹¹ And later in his career, Black further amends the scope of his theory, claiming that the imagination does mechanically imprint its deviations upon the infant's body, if not in rational subjects, than in "*true savages and idiots*", for, he says, "*in the idiot may be found the most formidable imagination of all.*"¹² Since several strands of teratological thought are vying for supremacy, Grayson Black feels impelled to speed up Eliza's misbegetting and deploys an entire arsenal of imaginary terrors meant to "stimulate a heightened state of imagination", and to fuel "the low faculty of imagination that so dominates women"¹³ into producing a deformed child.

From its positioning centre stage in sites of display, monstrosity undergoes, Foucault tells us, an interiorisation process. The eighteenth century has been identified



as a transitional age, “marking... the beginnings of a science of anomalies, malformations, and monstrosities.”¹⁴ Monsters embark on a progressive route of disenchantment, being increasingly subsumed to a constitutive outside of what Kristeva calls the “self’s clean and proper body.”¹⁵

As Eliza’s undesired pregnancy advances, the foetal presence starts being charted in terms of a “body horror” type of anxiety, where the horrific growth inside her threatens to invalidate all distinctions between inside and outside, self and other. The “worm” occupying her increasingly distended belly becomes the ghostly or monstrous signifier of her concupiscence or damnability. The unborn baby is described as “the contemptible maggot in my belly,” “the vile worm,” or the tenacious “creature,” pictured as infesting her or devouring her from within, stretching and squirming, clawing and gripping.¹⁶ Its movements are so brutally vicious that she feels herself invalidated as an autonomous self, and rendered vulnerable to uncanny experiences of bodily distress. As Mary Douglas might say, Eliza’s unformed baby is matter literally “out of place,” polluting the maternal body from within. The morphological aberration implicit in the fluctuating contours of a pregnant body clearly falls outside normative prerequisites of bodily perfection (closure, containment, symmetry, fixity), and ranks amongst the cases mentioned by Douglas as an affront to structural clarity.¹⁷ Eliza’s psychological account of her body becoming a passive, defenceless container for a violently aggressive and apparently abhuman baby repeatedly highlights the threat that it brings to her identity in terms of an unassimilable, polluting, abject “abomination.” This is an example of the many instances in which Eliza Tally apprehends her baby as a monstrous denizen of her intimate self, as the inimical presence of a beastly other at the very core of her identity:

Inside me the child twisted like a worm, its marble eyes peering into my private darkness, its hooked claws clutching and squeezing my stomach as, piece by tiny piece, it devoured me. I would have torn into my own abdomen and ripped it out with my fingernails, there and then [...]. But it was too late. The worm had no intention of relinquishing its grip. It would see me dead first. Already it had sucked the animal spirits from me like the juice from a plum so that I shrivelled to nothing, nothing but a stone wrapped in dried-up skin.¹⁸

Eliza’s repeated reference to the infant as an abjectionable, hostile alien invading the privacy of her womb like a parasitic “worm” strikes an uncanny note of resemblance with Julia Kristeva’s meditation on pregnancy in “Stabat Mater,” where, as Hansen points out, “the mother’s identity as a speaking subject is threatened by the splitting of her body and by ... processes over which she has no control.”¹⁹

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it, but it goes on.”²⁰

Kristeva posits here the subjective experience of pregnancy as lodged in a corporeal experience where anatomical boundaries, physiological processes and physical sensations undergo substantial alteration, shattering the notion of a properly contained “bodily ego.” Clare Clark’s description of Eliza’s child monstrously colonising and



appropriating the interior of her womb appears to invoke Kristeva's account of the manner in which the amorphous foetal other gradually assumes consistent bodily contours within the body of the mother: "misshapen, a piece of my body jutting out unnaturally, asymmetrically, but slit [...] monstrous graft of life on myself, a living dead."²¹ The baby renders Eliza's own body unrecognisable to herself, which makes imperious the necessity to expunge it:

There was nothing of me about it, nothing of conventional human shape. It protruded from me like a wen, a sickness my body was determined to expel.²²

It is only with the experience of childbirth, with the severing of that liminal connectivity implicit in umbilical cord, that Eliza resumes the separate individuality of her body and also processes the transformation of what used to be "an internal graft and fold" into another self that, to use Kristeva's words, "is irremediably an other."²³ With this ecstatic recognition of the other that is a self, Eliza may embark on motherhood, though not for long, since in her baby's properly morphed body lies its own undoing: it is snatched away from its mother's bosom by a much disappointed teratogenist, murdered and replaced with a freakish, limbless suckling, which also flaunts the apothecary's plans by dying an untimely death.

Eliza's gradually shifting the frame within which she reads deformities, such as that of Mary, the idiotic housemaid, evinces the cultural constructedness of freakery. Mary, whose rabbit-like, less-than-human, unfinished facial features – cleft palate, split upper lip, lopsided grin, bulging eyes, and shifty gaze – display, apparently, her intellectual deformity as a halfwit, is initially culturally enfreaked by Eliza, who confirms

thus, to herself, her own regularity by contrast with the irregularity of her defective dialectical counterpart.

For Eliza, the definitive reversal of this dichotomous specular scheme, in which her gaze seeks to "sanitise the contaminatory potential of the anomalous other"²⁴ while reinforcing the normality of her own embodied self, occurs whilst examining the teratological archive. In the anthology of Greek myths that Eliza leafs through in the bookseller's shop, the illustrations of fabulous monsters are not those of the snake-haired Medusa or the maze-maddened Minotaur, but woodcuts of beak-faced, monkey-tailed, siren-footed, horse-torsoed infants, signalling a profound destabilisation of the corporeal frontiers that might ensure the consistency and boundedness of the properly embodied self.

Whilst Eliza's initial temptation is to relapse into the popular discursive practice of explaining monstrous progeny as the result of inter-species miscegenation, or of illicit intercourse between the human and the demonic, she is eventually forced to contain her domineering gaze and acknowledge the humanity of the monsters whose eyes "seemed to follow me, as though they silently begged me to rescue them from their paper imprisonment."²⁵ The paper monsters exemplify a mechanism of "domestic foreignness" or *extimité*, an uncanny mix of "external intimacy" and "intimate alterity."²⁶ Triggering deep disquietude about the limits of the human, these exceptional or extraordinary bodies become, for Eliza, areas for interrogating otherwise comforting distinctions between self and other. In other words, the "entanglement of self and other in monstrosity"²⁷ opens up possibilities for a reconceptualisation of the self in terms that are non-hierarchical, and inclusive of difference, reminding her that the self's secure cloistering in itself is a foundational fallacy.



It is with this realisation that Eliza proceeds about thwarting the apothecary's further teratogenic experiments, salvaging Mary's perfectly shaped baby from his evil guardianship and embarking on foster motherhood. With such hindsight, one may see the irony behind Clare Clark's casting the *Prologue* of her narrative at the time of the Great Fire of London, which not only cleansed the city, provisionally, of its dirt, but also drove Grayson Black's pregnant mother into a fit of terror, leaving its indelible birthmark upon the botched teratogenist. Not only does this make Grayson Black the sole living proof of his improbable theory of deranged imagination, but it also serves as a reminder that, like in the Shelleyan master narrative, the ghostly origin of monstrosity pertains not so much to the misbegotten creature, but to its monstrous begetter.

Notes

¹ Clark, Clare. *The Nature of Monsters*. London: Penguin, 2007, p. 35.

² Aristotle. *On the Generation of Animals* (*De generatione animalium*, II). Trans. D. M. Balme. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 767b.

³ See Glenister, T. W. 'Fantasies, Facts and Foetuses: The Interplay of Fancy and Reason in Teratology.' In *Medical History* 8, 1964, p. 27; Huet, Marie-Hélène. *Monstrous Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993; Todd, Dennis. *Imagining Monsters. Miscreations of the Self in Eighteenth-Century England*. Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995; Braidotti, Rosi. 'Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Difference.' In *Feminist Theory and the Body. A Reader*. Eds. Janet Price & Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 297.

⁴ See Todd, *op. cit.*, pp 47-48 and Tort, Patrick. *L'ordre et les monsters. Le débat sur l'origine des deviations anatomiques au XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 1998.

⁵ Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁶ Huet, *op. cit.*, p. 1 & Huet, Marie-Hélène. 'Living Images: Monstrosity and Representation.' In *Representations*. No. 4 (Autumn, 1983), p. 76.

⁷ See Todd, *op. cit.*

⁸ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁹ Foucault, Michel. 'The Order of Discourse' (1971). Trans. Ian McLeod. In *Modern Literary Theory. A Reader*. Eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. London: Arnold, 2001, p. 218.

¹⁰ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 111.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 177.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jean-Louis Fischer, 'Monstre,' in *Dictionnaire européen des lumières*, ed. Michel Deleon (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), qtd. in Knoppers, Laura Lunger & Joan B. Landes (eds.). *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 7.

¹⁵ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 72.

¹⁶ Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 56, 58.

¹⁷ Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, London, 1966, p. 39.

¹⁸ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁹ Hansen, Clare. *A Cultural History of Pregnancy. Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture 1750-2000*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2004, p. 12.

²⁰ Kristeva, Julia. *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 301.



²¹ *Idem*, p. 314.

²² Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

²³ Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva*, pp. 322-323.

²⁴ Shildrick, Margrit, *Embodying the Monster. Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. London & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002, p. 24.

²⁵ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

²⁶ See Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Of Giants : Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. xii.

²⁷ Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 20.