

Monstrous Births: Authority and Biology in Early Modern Spain

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In his seminal *Baroque Horrors*, David R. Castillo points to the “signifying flexibility” (20) of the monster as one of the root causes for its popularity during the early modern period. Dialoguing with the work of scholars such as Elena del Río Parra and other specialists in teratology, Castillo points out that in the early modern period stories involving monsters often served as effective tools for political propaganda or moral teaching. Those stories were also approached as mere entertainment, for monsters could be seen as fascinating oddities, especially within certain learned circles. In many instances, discourses on monsters mixed aspects of politics, didacticism, and amusement, especially among those encompassing notions of politics that included the social management of human and non-human bodies. Michel Foucault, for whom “the body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy” (qtd. in Esposito 27), looked to the nineteenth century to argue for the State’s control of the biological. However—and this was of course clear to Foucault himself—such control comes as the result of a process that can be traced throughout modernity, and which would have tragic developments in the twentieth century, with its notorious apex at Nazi thanatopolitics, or management of death as a “solution” to societal issues. The study of biopolitics as launched by Foucault and more recently developed by Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito can serve as a guide to

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cast light on the nascent manifestations of European biopolitical strategic doctrine.

In this essay, we deal with a particular angle of the relationship between bodies and authority (both intellectual and political) as manifested in the medical discourse of early modern Spain. We focus on the connection between the prevalent medical ideas in that period regarding cases of human gestation and birth and the discursive representation of monstrosity as something that emerges on the margins of humanity and its communitarian organization. In these formulations, women and monsters appear as related objects of inquiry and theorization by men of science. Their texts on monstrous births can be better understood through an exploration of the discursive connections between life and authority in the threshold that is instituted by notions of immunity and the monstrous or pathological. We begin by offering a summary record of the interest in monstrous births in early modern Europe, examining what they were, the reasons indicated to explain their existence, and the categories used to classify them. Concurrently, we discuss their treatment in some relevant Spanish medical treatises, written both in the vernacular and in Latin. Finally, we analyze an authoritative definition of the monster dating from early seventeenth-century Spain (that of Sebastián de Covarrubias) in light of Roberto Esposito's notion of immunity, which can be considered the central contribution of his work on biopolitics.

A Moving Interest: Monstrous Births in Early Modern Europe

Interest in monstrous births was widespread in Europe, and news of the most noteworthy cases traveled fast from one country to another, some of these cases haunting the imagination of readers and writers for a long time. In one of the final chapters of his *Historia de los Reyes Católicos D. Fernando y D^a. Isabel* (History of the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella) (c. 1513), the Spanish priest and historian Andrés Bernáldez refers the case of a monster born in Ravenna in 1512. He describes the monster as

una criatura viva, la cabeza, rostro y orejas y boca y cabellos como de un leon, y en la frente tenía un cuerno como hácia arriba, y en lugar de brazos tenía álas de cuero como los murciélagos . . . Tenía más debajo de los pechos dos bedijas de pelos; tenía más dos naturas, una de másculo y otra de fémica, y la del másculo era como de perro, y la de fémica era como de muger, y la pierna derecha tenía como de hombre, y la izquierda tenía, tan luenga como la otra, toda cubierta como de escamas de pescado, y abajo, por pié, tenía una echura como pié de rana ó de sapo. (2: 372–73)

(a living creature, whose head, face, ears, mouth and hairs were like a lion's, and which had an up-pointing horn in its forehead, and which instead of arms had leather wings like those of bats . . . Below its breasts it had two locks of hair; it also had two natures, one of male and one of female, and that of the male was like that of a dog, and that of female was like that of a woman, and its right leg was like a man's, and the left one, which was as long as the other one, was all covered of something like fish scales, and below, for a foot, it had a growth like a frog's or a toad's leg.)

Bernáldez's description is but a drop in a sea of reports. In March of 1512, Florentine pharmacist Lucca Landucci first documented the existence of the monster of Ravenna. Due to a combination of reasons, including its consideration as an omen of the sack of the city in April of the same year, the rumor of the monster spread across Europe. Priests, scholars, and laymen discussed its meaning and characteristics, and dozens of descriptions were printed and circulated widely, often accompanied by woodcuts and engravings. At each stop, the monster acquired new and more portentous characteristics (Daston and Park 177–89; Eamon). But references to the monster were not only made in cheap printings; religious and scientific treatises also mentioned it, as did literary works. In the case of Spain, it should be noted that Mateo Alemán included a description of the monster in his *Guzmán de Alfarache* (I, i, 1: 122–23).

The story of the monster of Ravenna is just an example of the immense popularity of monstrous births in early modern Europe. The causes and significance of this trend have caught the attention of scholars, as part of a broader interest in monsters that started with the works of Foucault and the cultural turn in European historiography. The first studies on monstrous births used to be part of more general studies on monstrosity. Such is the case, for instance, of Jean Céard's study on prodigies in sixteenth-century France, one of whose chapters is devoted to monstrous births in the works of Ambroise Paré, surgeon to the French royal family (292–314). Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park also include a chapter on monstrous births in their monumental study on wonder and wonders in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment (173–214). A number of extensive studies specifically devoted to monstrous births have appeared more recently. Among them are the works of Irene Ewinkel, Jennifer S. Spinks, Julie Crawford, and Alan W. Bates. The first two analyze, from different perspectives, representation of monstrous births in the context of sixteenth-century religious turmoil in Germany. Crawford, in turn, focuses her analysis on the political and religious uses of monstrous births in post-Reformation England.

The works mentioned above deal with monstrous births that appeared throughout Europe, but they focus specifically on England, France, Germany, and Italy. Comparatively little attention has been given to monstrous births in Spain, especially in reference to the sixteenth century. One of the reasons for this difference in emphasis may be that interest in monsters seems to be directly related to contexts of generalized political crises, which were prevalent in the rest of Western Europe in the sixteenth century (most especially in Germany and England), while the same would be true in Spain only in the seventeenth century. In the next few pages, we will describe what were understood as monstrous births in early modern Spanish medical texts, specifically in treatises published between 1494 and 1580.

Mentions of monstrosity in treatises on obstetrics and gynecology are common. After all, doctors and other medical practitioners have always been in contact with exceptional physical phenomena. However, not all healthcare professionals have been interested in monsters. References to monstrosity rarely or hardly ever can be found in pharmacological texts, in recipe collections, in handbooks of surgery, or in treatises on pestilence. On the other hand, for obvious reasons, gynecological and obstetrical treatises have shown a deep interest in monsters and monstrous births from the very beginning of the Western medical tradition. The early Spanish treatises we will analyze here were no exception to this trend.

It is also important to consider the differences between Latin and vernacular medical texts in the early modern period. From late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, Latin was the only language of science in Europe. Medical knowledge was no exception to this tendency. It is necessary to keep in mind that “medicine was a highly literary art based on the physician’s systematic and extensive knowledge of information carefully gleaned from books,” and that “by definition these books were those written in Latin and Greek” (Solomon 185–86). However, this situation began to change in the Late Middle Ages, when the Black Death and many other plagues hit Europe, and made it necessary to inform the authorities and the public about the nature of the plague and provide them with some basic measures against its devastating effects. Catalan Jacme d’Agramont’s *Regiment de preservació de pestilència* (Rules for preserving health against the plague) (Lleida, 1348) was one of those works on the plague, and also one of the first vernacular medical treatises written in Europe.

By the early modern period, however, the number of vernacular medical texts had increased considerably, although Latin was still the most important language for scientific communication. As for Spain, two kinds of vernacular texts were produced there at that moment (Gutiérrez Rodilla 303). The first was aimed either at wealthy readers or at civil and religious authorities. It included treatises on plague prevention similar to the ones produced from the Late Middle Ages, as well as diet books and treatises on “courtly” diseases, such as gout or kidney stones. Texts included in the

second kind were aimed at readers ignorant of Latin who needed to gain access to medical knowledge for professional reasons. It is necessary to remember that, prior to the development of modern scientific medicine, there were a variety of medical practitioners apart from physicians. That community included surgeons, bloodletting practitioners, pharmacists, bonesetters, and, more importantly for the purpose of our study, midwives and wet nurses. Consequently, vernacular texts used to be briefer than Latin treatises and were more centered on offering empirical, practical remedies for the diseases than in theoretical discussions about them. That tendency was also the case with when dealing with the specific topic of monstrous births, as with more encompassing Spanish medical texts such as *Compendio de la humana salud*, *Libro de las comadres*, *Libro intitulado del parto humano*, and *De affectionibus mulierum*.

The *Compendio de la humana salud* (Compendium of human health) was published anonymously as a treatise on general medicine in 1494. This text is in fact a translation of Johannes de Ketham's *Fasciculus medicinae* (Bunch of medical knowledge) (1491). The *Compendio* is a collection of several independent and quite different medical treatises devoted to such topics as bloodletting, medical astrology, wounds, and women's diseases. Discussion of monstrous births is included, not surprisingly, as a part of the chapter-treatise devoted to diseases common among women.

The *Libro de las comadres o madrinas, y del regimiento de las preñadas y paridas, y de los niños* (Book of the midwives or wet nurses, and of the rules for pregnant women and new mothers, and of the newborn babies) (Majorca, 1541) was written by a little-known author, Damián Carbón, whose text on obstetrics was the first vernacular treatise ever published on this topic in Spain. Carbón wrote it as a handbook for midwives and wet nurses, and divided it into two sections. The first one explores such topics as the characteristics of good midwives, the process of the generation of the fetus in the womb, and pregnancy-related problems, while the second section focused on problems of sterility. The sixth chapter of the book is devoted to the generation of the fetus (14r: *Capitulo sexto de la generación de la criatura*) (Chapter six, on the generation of the fetus), with its last section devoted to monstrous births (15v–16r: *Hablando empero de los monstruos que naturalmente se engendran . . . acerca de la preñez*) (But when discussing naturally engendered monsters . . . during pregnancy).

A few decades after the publication of the *Libro de las comadres*, Francisco Núñez de Oria published his *Libro intitulado del parto humano* (A book entitled on human birth) (1580). Núñez de Oria studied medicine at the University of Alcalá, where he counted among his teachers two of the most important Spanish physicians of the sixteenth century, Cristóbal de Vega and Fernando de Mena. He wrote two *regimina* (akin to diet books), the *Aviso de sanidad* (Advice on health) (1569), and the *Tratado del uso de las mugeres* (Treatise on the habits of women) (1572), before publishing the *Libro del*

parto humano in 1580. The purpose and the contents of the book are very similar to those of the *Libro de las comadres*. In fact, Núñez's treatise replaced the *Libro de las comadres* as the normative handbook for midwives and wet nurses in the second half of the sixteenth century. The *Libro del parto humano* introduces the topic of monsters and monstrosities in a chapter on difficult labor. It also includes a chapter on evil eye and its treatment.

Our understanding of early modern medical discourse on monstrous births would be incomplete if we limited our analysis to vernacular treatises. Consequently, we are also considering the most important treatise on gynecology published in sixteenth-century Spain, Luis de Mercado's *De affectionibus mulierum* (On the conditions of women) (1579). Luis de Mercado was probably the most important physician in early modern Spain. Mercado taught medicine at the University of Valladolid, and was the personal doctor of the kings Philip II and Philip III, as well as "protomédico general de las Españas," a position equivalent to that of a modern cabinet's secretary of health or surgeon general. Generally considered an orthodox Galenist, his *Opera Omnia* (Complete Works) covered all the medical knowledge of his time. The *De affectionibus mulierum*¹ was one of the most important gynecological treatises ever published in early modern Europe (Rojo Vega 89). It was divided into four volumes. The first two are devoted to diseases that were common among women in general, and in particular among widows or virgins. The third chapter of the book discusses sterility and pregnancy-related problems. Finally, the fourth chapter explains the diseases that affect newborn children, and gives advice on correct breastfeeding. The seventh chapter of the third volume of the book is devoted to monstrous births ("De monstroso conceptu. Cap. 7") (Chapter seven, On Monstrous Births). Mercado offers a detailed catalog of monstrous births and identifies five main classes: fabulous races (like the Sciapodes, whose feet were so large that they could use them as sun umbrellas); giants and dwarfs; newborn babies lacking parts of their bodies or having a surplus of parts; and two different kinds of animal-human hybrid births. However, he also mentions other kinds of monstrous births that he does not include in his catalog. The above-mentioned chapter also includes a long philosophical and medical discussion on the causes of monstrous births, as well advice on how to recognize and avoid them.

The first kind of monstrous birth mentioned in these treatises is the *muela[s] de la matriz*. The *Libro de las comadres* first mentions it when introducing the topic of monstrosity: "Hablando empero de los monstruos que naturalmente se engendran . . . digamos agora primero de la muela de la matriz (que falsa empreñación se llama)" (Carbón 15v–16r) (But when discussing naturally engendered monsters . . . let us start by dealing with the womb's mole [called false pregnancy]). The phrase *muela de la matriz* refers to certain kinds of tumorous masses formed when non-viable fertilized eggs

implant in the womb and cause abnormal pregnancies. Molar pregnancies have been well known to physicians and scholars since classical Antiquity; Pliny the Elder described some recipes against moles in his *Naturalis Historia* (Natural History) (70).² Caelius Aurelianus and Muscio included chapters on moles in their gynecological works. Rhazes (Muhammad ibn Zakariyā Rāzī) and Avicenna, the two most prominent Muslim doctors of the Middle Ages, did the same in their treatises on general medicine. References to moles also appeared in Latin treatises contemporary of the *Libro de las comadres*, like the *De morbis mulierum curandum liber* (On healing women's diseases) (1542), by the Frenchman Nicholas de La Roche, or the *De conservacione pregnantium* (On the conservation of pregnant women), an *opusculum* included in the *Libro del regimiento de la salud* (Book of rules for health conservation) (1551) by the Spanish physician Luis Lobera de Ávila. As for their morphology, moles can appear in a wide range of forms. Carbón mentions the case of a mole completely filled with air: “lo vi yo en una generosa señora, la qual por largos tiempos fue en reputacion de verdadera preñada, guardandose todos los nueve meses y procurando todo el aparejo para el parto, y todo fue ayre y viento. Y esta ventosidad despues que hizo su curso fue evacuada, quedando esta señora y su vientre como antes” (Carbón 16r) (I saw it in a large lady, who was regarded as truly pregnant for a long time, and who was well cared for the whole nine months, and when everything was ready for labor, all was air and wind. And after this gas went its proper way it was expelled, and the lady and her womb went back to their previous state).

Closely related to the *muela* is what we can call “fleshy births.” In these cases, abnormal pregnancies resulted in women giving birth to one or several (in)animate pieces of flesh. The *Libro de las comadres* describes them as follows: “Otra monstruosidad ay que se sigue de abundancia de carnes. Assi que se ha visto en el tiempo del parir salir un pedaço de carne figurado de muchas figuras, a las vezes inanimado, a las vezes animado de anima sentitiva” (Carbón 16r) (There is another monstrosity that comes from an abundance of flesh. So that at the moment of labor a piece of flesh has been seen coming out in many different shapes, sometimes dead, sometimes alive and animated with a “vegetative soul”³). These “fleshy births” can appear in a variety of forms. Sometimes they are simply inanimate pieces of flesh. On other occasions, they have the shape of animals. Carbón cites the case of a Majorcan woman who gave birth to “mas de veynte y cinco pedaços de carne de semejança de peces” (17r) (more than twenty-five pieces of flesh resembling fish), a monstrous birth that he attributes to astrological causes: “y quiça en la hora de la concepcion era el signo en los peces” (17r) (and perhaps at the moment of conception the sign was in the fish [that is, Pisces]).

If animal-shaped “fleshy births” were considered monstrous, obviously the same was the case with hybrid and animal births. News of women who

gave birth to animals or hybrid creatures already appeared in ancient and medieval scholarly and medical texts. Isidore of Seville cited, among others, the case of a woman who gave birth to a child whose body was half human and half animal (135). As for the treatises analyzed here, the *Compendio de la humana salud* mentions a cow that gave birth to a half-human calf, in what local peasants considered the result of a clear case of zoophilia (Ketham 24r). In his *Libro del parto humano*, Núñez includes animal births into the category of monstrous births potentially dangerous for pregnant women, and finds an authoritative account to give credibility to such wonders: “Otra muger en Seuilla, la qual era de mi patria despues de largo y dificultoso parto pario vn monstruo como lagarto, el qual repentinamente se vio huir, y segun Plinio dize, vna muger llamada Alcippe pario vn Elephante, y vna esclaua vna serpiente” (14v-15r) (In Seville another woman, who happened to be from my hometown, gave birth to a monster like a lizard, after long and difficult labor; the monster ran away suddenly. According to Pliny, a woman called Alcippe gave birth to an elephant, and a slave to a snake).

In the absence of support from a classical authority such as Pliny, references to the author’s own experience are also effective rhetorical maneuvers to gain intellectual credibility. The *Libro de las comadres* cites the case of a woman who gave birth to a child lacking an arm. What is extraordinary about this case is that, immediately after the child was born, a hedgehog-like animal ran out of the womb of the woman. Carbón, who claims to have witnessed the event, also points to the fact that the arm seemed to have been partially eaten: “Y vi en Mallorca la muger de vn official de aquella tierra parir vn niño que le faltaua vn braço comido, y despues de poco salir cierto animal semejante a erizo biuo y con dientes, tal que era marauilla ver tan espantable figura” (17r) (And I saw in Majorca the wife of an officer of that land giving birth to a child who lacked an arm, which had been eaten, and shortly afterwards came out a certain animal resembling a living hedgehog with teeth; it was a marvel to see such a horrific creature).

Another kind of monstrous birth mentioned in these treatises is that of hyper-multiple labors, although references to them are scarce. Johannes de Ketham is one of the few authors that seem to consider hyper-multiple births as monstrous. On a passage describing the reasons for multiple births, he affirmed that when a woman gives birth to more than seven children, the birth should be considered as monstrous: “si pariesse la mujer mas de siete / seria cosa milagrosa monstruosa” (23v) (if the woman were to deliver more than seven / it would be a miraculous, monstrous thing).

Siamese twins are also part of the subcategory of monstrous births. The longest quote about them that can be found in these treatises is included in the *Compendio de la humana salud*. The text described two cases of Siamese

twins apparently mentioned by Albertus Magnus, and included a medical explanation of the phenomenon:

dize el mismo alberto / que vio vna persona con dos cuerpos / los quales no se ayuntauan sino en el espinazo [*corr.* esquinazo]: & tenian dos cabeças / quatro braços / & quatro pies & yuan a qualquiere parte que los boluian. E otrosi tenemos por relacion & palabras de alberto: que lo oyo de personas dignas de fe / que vieron vn hombre enel qual estauan dos hombres juntados por las spaldas / & el vno dellos era muy ayrado / el otro muy manso / & despues de hauer los visto viuieron por spacio de dos años/ el vno murio primero / & el otro viuio hasta que la corrupcion del hermano muerto le mato / & acahesce esto en el cuerpo de la madre por esta manera / que despues que la simiente viril esta infundida en dos cellas viriles para la generacion de dos machos rompese ocasionadamente el intersticio / o la pellicula que esta medianera entre las dos cellas / & ayuntanse las simientes de las dichas dos cellas por las spaldas / & peganse de tal forma como suele acahescer enlos arboles / que quedan dos cuerpos con cabeças / & miembros distintos / concadenados / & pegados en vno. (Ketham 24r–24v)

(Says Albertus himself that he saw one person with two bodies, which were joined at the back; and they had two heads, four arms, and four feet, and they went wherever they would move turn them. And we also get through Albertus that he had heard from trustworthy people that they had seen a man in which two men were joined at the backs, and one of them was raucous, while the other was very peaceful, and after having been seen they lived for two more years. One died first, and the other one lived until his dead brother's corruption killed him. This happens in the body of the mother in the following way: after the man's seed is infused in two male cells for the generation of two males, the interstice or film that is between the two cells breaks. The seeds of those two cells join at the back, becoming attached as it often happens with trees, and therefore two bodies with different heads and limbs get bonded and joined in one.)

Conflicting medical and popular interpretations of monstrosities in early modern Spain permeated authoritative discourses beyond that of medicine. Within this clashing imaginary, births played an essential role, as the small catalog of monstrous deliveries included here shows. The intellectual and social treatment of births along these lines brings forth issues on the limits of humanity and the role of sovereign power vis-à-vis life, questions that garnered special attention during the baroque period.

Covarrubias's *Monstro* and Baroque Biopolitics

The lettered rendering of another probable case of Siamese twins is the focus of the last part of our essay. That the learned connection between monstrosity and human genesis was firmly established by the seventeenth century in Spain becomes clear from the first lines of Sebastián de Covarrubias's definition of monster in his influential *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (Thesaurus of the Castilian or Spanish Language) (1611). In the entry it is clear that Covarrubias does not completely separate his writing as lexicographer from what he did as the moralistic author of didactic emblems (Bouzy 144).

MONSTRO, es qualquier parto contra la regla y orden natural, como nacer el hombre con dos cabeças, quatro braços, y quatro piernas; como acontecio en el Condado de Vrgel, en vn lugar dicho Cerbera, en el año 1343. que nacio un niño con dos cabeças, y quatro pies: los padres y los demas que estauan presentes a su nacimiento, pensando supersticiosamente pronosticar algun gran mal, y que con su muerte se euitaria le enterraron viuo. Sus padres fueron castigados como parricidas, y los demas con ellos. He querido traer solo este exenplo por ser autentico y escriuirle nuestros coronistas. (Covarrubias 554v)

(MONSTER: any birth that is against the natural rules and order, as when a man is born with two heads, four arms, and four legs; as it happened in the County of Urgel, in a place called Cerbera, in 1343. A child was born with two heads, and four feet. The parents and those who were present at the delivery, superstitiously thinking that it was a really bad omen, which would be prevented with the child's death, buried him alive. His parents were punished for parricide, and so were the others. I wanted to bring forth this example for being true and registered in writing by our chroniclers.)

It goes without saying that his account tells us more about the discursive practices of the Baroque society within which we need to situate the work of Covarrubias than about the Medieval context from which he receives his anecdote. Covarrubias's perspective is typical of the lettered men of the time, whose contempt for superstition can be qualified as proto-Enlightened. However, his account can be read as the story of a self-fulfilling prophecy: the omen is rendered true as the child's birth provokes the ensuing tragedy. Superstition—a set of beliefs—and the actions it brings forth are societally condemned, and its upholders penalized. The deformed physicality of the child, that otherness that is unbearable to his own parents' eyes, is for the

sovereign a mere accident of nature. In Covarrubias's rendering, the State confers a status of humanity to the child. (So did the Church, too, at least in the case of human-headed monsters born to women; *Lobera de Ávila* 49v.) While the emphasis on the monstrosity of the case is on the unusual birth, equal attention is given to the punishment of the killers.

For Covarrubias, the meaning of "monster" is in essence not identified exclusively with the exceptional creature itself—in this case, most probably Siamese twins—but rather with the process of its delivery (*parto*) and its birth (*nacer*.) Its conception is also disregarded. However, the birth of the child both announces and generates a social problem, which the parents seek to prevent by reversing the process of nature through death. But, in very Baroque fashion, Covarrubias reassures his readers by briefly referring to the materialization of power to re-instaurate moral order (Spadaccini and Martín-Estudillo xix–xxii). While the parents and the rest of those who were present at the child's delivery understood him to be a threatening non-human, they were disciplined as assassins, killers of an innocent human being.

Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has amassed an impressive body of work on the notion of immunity, for him the key to advance Foucault's work on biopolitics. Esposito explores the term's etymology and the overlap in its dual usage as a medical concept (whereby it refers to "a condition of natural of induced refractoriness on the part of a living organism when faced with a given disease"; *Bios* 45) and a political-juridical one ("a temporary or definitive exemption on the part of subject with regard to concrete obligations or responsibilities that under normal circumstances would bind one to others"; *Bios* 45). Esposito regards immunity as something that goes beyond "the relation that joins life to power," since in his conceptualization immunity is "the power to preserve life. Contrary to what is presupposed in the concept of biopolitics—understood as the result of an encounter that arises at a certain moment between the two components—in this perspective no power exists external to life, just as life is never given outside of relations of power. From this angle, politics is nothing other than the possibility or the instrument for keeping life alive" (46). Esposito underscores the connection between the biological and the political through an exploration of the common origin of the terms "immunity" and "community." Both share the Latin root *munus*, "a form of gift immanent to the formation of community" (Benito Oliva 70) and which is "outside of the logic of exchange" (78).

In Covarrubias's rendering of the story, the parents and those who partook in the crime (metonymically, the community into which the child was born) took a drastic measure to try to immunize themselves from the evil that, in their belief, was to be brought upon them by the monster's birth. They attempt to protect themselves by reversing the birth: giving the body back to nature, and thus shielding themselves from it with an earthy membrane. But immunity, when taken to an extreme, can have a most

pernicious effect, taking life instead of defending it. As Esposito argues, “what safeguards the individual and the political body is also what impedes its development, and beyond a certain point risks destroying it” (“Interview” 51).

In Covarrubias’s text, the parents and their associates become a problem for the community, as they violently rejected the fruit of labor: the “monstro,” which had arrived to them as a *munus*, a gift that entails an obligation to the common. The authorities exert their own immunitary powers to reinstitute order and protect the *nomos* by disciplining those who acted against life. Thus, the fact that the life they took was monstrous did not provide them with (legal) immunity from punishment. Rather, they became the social monsters whose demise Covarrubias’s *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* needs to register. In this case, his pre-Enlightened intellectual authority is in harmony not only with the prevalent scientific thought in Spain, but also with, and at the service of, the moral and disciplinary conventions that the nascent State sanctioned. The conjunction of these lettered, medical, and juridical discourses determined to a great extent the delimitation and social management of the perceived limits of humanity, something which would become exemplarily problematized in the extraordinary—but nevertheless existing—cases of monstrosity that haunted the imagination of Europeans during the early modern period.

Notes

1. Sara Segovia Esteban is currently working on a critical edition of the *De affectionibus mulierum* under the guidance of Professor Enrique Montero Cartelle (University of Valladolid, Spain).
2. The current medical term for a molar pregnancy is “hydatidiform mole.” ICD–10 (Tenth revision of the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*) codes for this disease are O01 and D39.2.
3. According to Aristotle, living organisms can have up to three kinds of souls: a vegetative one, responsible for reproduction and growth; a sensitive soul, responsible for mobility and sensation; and a rational soul, capable of thought and reflection. Plants possess only a vegetative soul, animals a vegetative and a sensitive soul, and humans a vegetative, a sensitive, and a rational soul (81–83). Therefore, a human birth that only possessed a vegetative soul was to be considered monstrous.

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