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Monsters, Modernity and Medical Humanities

The early scientific explorations that accompanied European colonial expansion developed an anthropological classification, which included amongst homo sapiens the category of ‘monsters’. These are the people described by Shakespeare’s Othello (1.3.144-5) as ‘the Anthropophagi and men whose heads/ Do grow beneath their shoulders’, but the ‘monster’ category also included ‘androgyni or hermaphrodites . . . and also people who have changed their sex’ (Bendyshe, 1865: 397). Concurrently with the European colonial project, medicine was establishing itself as a science. So, in late Victorian Britain, a year after the Greenwich Meridian Line was established to separate the Orient from the Occident, in 1885, the Labouchère Amendment to criminal law divided gay men from heterosexuals. Twelve months later, the new monstrosity of ‘psychical hermaphroditism’, was anatomised by Krafft-Ebing in his Psychopathia Sexualis. Published first in 1886, admired by Freud and Havelock Ellis (Robinson, 1947: ix), Psychopathia Sexualis was still current, translated into English and in its twelfth edition in 1947.

I should like to relate the European colonial project to some of the ways in which sex, sexuality, and gender gave rise to social exclusion and legal disenfranchisement, and the impossible demands this placed on medicine to exorcise, contain, delegitimise, and hygienise these monstrous bodies, desires, and behaviours. These issues from the past are related to present-day medical practice by governmental debates, legal actions, and cultural theories, which provide polycentric perspectives. Trying to trace a genealogy and pathology of the monstrous, I borrow the term ‘modernity’, using it in Marx’s sense of ‘real conditions of life’, to consider the social relations available between differently embodied people, and to explore how they impact on practice-based medical humanities (Marx and Engels 1840: 6).