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***A Guidebook to Monsters: Philosophy, Religion, and the Paranormal*, by Ryan J. Stark**

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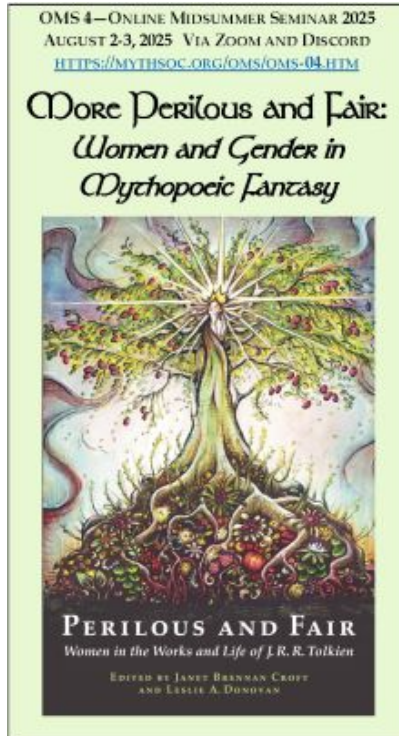
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A Guidebook to Monsters: Philosophy, Religion, and the Paranormal, by Ryan J. Stark

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A GUIDEBOOK TO MONSTERS: PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, AND THE PARANORMAL. Ryan J. Stark. Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2024. 88 + xi p. ISBN 9781666784695. \$18.00.

READERS ARE CAUTIONED, AT THE OUTSET OF *A Guidebook to Monsters*, that “this book comes with a playful warning” (ix). Indeed “play” and “warning” are the two features which give shape to the literary idiom Stark employs throughout the book. It is with playful seriousness that Stark can refer to the way in which “[i]n the old days, before the internet, before the printing press, the hard-bitten villagers understood first principles, one of which goes as follows: the monsters are real” (ix). It is a playfulness without irony or satire which, coupled with a real scholarly interest, which invites the reader to loosen the parameters of discourse in order to “provide a counter-narrative to conventional academic wisdom on the topic, which, as a general rule, presupposes monsters to be metaphors, full of symbolic import but nothing beyond that” (x). Stark’s brief book examines eight kinds of monster (Vampire, Werewolf, Zombie, Ghost, Robot, Leviathan, Devil, and Alien), each with a chapter dedicated to it.

Engaging in a vast and variegated array of source material, from the cult Television Series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-1975) to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Stark follows a line of thinking which begins with the conviction that “[t]he question of monsters is a question of metaphysics” (x). In doing so Stark is clear that the goal of the book is neither “forthcoming proofs in manuscripts” nor is it getting “readers to believe in monsters” (x). Rather, *A Guidebook to Monsters* “constitutes a series of efforts to characterize the entities properly” (x). Even if we want to remain staunchly skeptical, Stark contends that we must at least know the actual contours of a monster before we can ask what that monstrous presence signifies. Mythopoeic scholars will identify the similarity to, or even the heredity of, this line of thinking in J.R.R. Tolkien’s “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” although Stark only refers to this text in once in passing much later in the book (51).

Where it is strongest Stark's analysis offers compelling reflections on the various species of monstrous being. When discussing the Vampire, for instance, he carefully notes the fact that, amidst all its various expressions, the vampire always emerges in ways that are "backwardly liturgical": "The bow of pretended humility, the elongated gesture, the brooding gravity—all produce together a bizarre carriage of the body that conceals a sinister carriage of the mind" (5). Thus, as a kind of false eucharist, the Vampire "prefers romance to compulsion, seduction to force. [...] [P]refers thrall, almost to the end" (1).

Werewolves differ from vampires in just this way, Stark argues winsomely. For the lineaments of werewolf-hood are not traced by the mere transmogrification of human and animal—Spiderman is not a part of the class of were-thing, nor is *la bête* in any of the renditions of 'Beauty and the Beast.' Werewolves, good or bad, are given over to the lupine curse; they exist in the perpetually accusative case ever on the passive side of the verb. As Stark explains, "[i]n the old country, werewolves in the collective were not called 'packs' or 'routes' but rather 'bondages,' a term that makes explicit how the wolf curse imprisons the psyche" (16).

Zombies and Robots, according to Stark's analysis, compose a counterpoint of the monstrous. Whereas zombies "carry [...] a history of personhood, and so in their present form appear as macabre parodies of the human condition writ large" (19), it is precisely a history of personhood which androids/robots lack. Zombies lack a human history they once had, and androids/robots are endowed with the appearance of personal history they have not known. If, therefore, "part of zombie lore's wisdom is to show that bad people often produce more horror than the zombies themselves" (20), part of robot lore's wisdom is to show how the "real danger in robotics is not that humanoid robots will be difficult to recognize as machines, but rather that some people will be difficult to recognize as people because they will too much emulate rote machinery" (40).

Devils, ghosts and leviathans are each also given thoughtful and inventive reflection—though these three chapters together (even though they are not sequential) orchestrate an argument larger than a focused analysis of any of the named species of monster. Instead, much of those chapters is dedicated to interrogating the disciplinary tactics of secular modernity to enforce a kind of skeptical nihilism—an established discursive loop which Stark, and his array of monsters, seeks to unsettle. The chapter on Ghosts, therefore, spends less time talking about ghosts, than it does discussing the mind/body problem and the gnostic traits of skepticism. The chapter on devils, likewise devotes less of its content to the kind of reflection which animated Stark's discussion of werewolves, and more to time the meta-logic of the diabolic, which operates ever in a twofold pattern: producing and compelling violence even while it

convinces those within its power of the total probity of their actions. The greatest lie of the devils, suggests Stark, is to convince us that there are no devils. That is an intriguing thesis, but I find myself wishing we had talked more about, well, you know, actual devilry. And the chapter on leviathans—monsters of the deep—likewise is dedicated more to questioning the doubts of skeptics and illuminating the kind of totalitarian rhetoric of post-enlightenment politics (e.g. the only Leviathan modern people believe in is the body politic, a maneuver that simultaneously legitimizes neoliberal power while casting dispersions on the supernatural beliefs of those subjugated by it), reflecting imaginatively on stories of Nessy.

Aliens are the subject of the last chapter. That chapter, therefore, has to do the work of both reflecting on the monstrous image of beings from the heavens, as well as summing-up the overall work of the book. That's a lot to do in just a few pages and Stark again shows his skill at curating a varied collection of source material and offering intriguing insights and illuminating overarching patterns. Chief among these is his inclusion of the angelic into the conversation of the extraterrestrial. This makes things weirder and more profound: "Herein we discover that twilight region between alien worlds and spiritual realities, little green men, on the one hand, and—on the other—angels, fallen or otherwise. And in this twilight region we confront ambiguities" (69).

If there is one fault in Stark's book it is that what I have above described as "serious playfulness" can sometimes come across more like "playing at seriousness"—though I do not mean that to sound as grave as it may come across in writing. They are the moments when that playfulness results in unclarity. Often, they occur as abrupt new paragraphs that (we assume) are somehow connected to the line of reasoning in the previous paragraph but which feel disjointed from the preceding discussion. When in the chapter on leviathan, for instance, Stark follows a section discussing the "interdimensional-magic-space-dragon hypothesis" (48) with a paragraph-length joke (at least, I understand it to be a joke) about Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* being a kind of leviathan both because of its sheer size and because of the questionable nature of its historical claims (49), one is not sure what to think. Is this a joke? Is this a literal claim Stark wants us to consider? Does Stark take seriously the idea that *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is an interdimensional magic space dragon hiding in and under the accidence of a multi-volume text? Or, when Stark begins a new paragraph (in the same chapter on leviathans) with a sentence that runs thus: "Not that MIT knows how to build gods or devils" (47), we are unsure of how much is a joke and how much is a continuation (however attenuated) of the preceding argument.

Now, these are not the result of real academic sloppiness. They are the result of being overly playful, much in the same way that academics can (and often are) overly turgid in our prose. It is incautious of the sort that can lead to a bit of confusion on the part of the reader or a longing for greater care. It'd be nice, for instance, to know where Stark gets his support for the claim (made in a couple places, p.10 and 15) that Genesis 6:11 contains a reference to werewolves, but none is given. It'd be nice to know which of the church fathers Stark is citing as having taught that "we might blush with embarrassment [...] if we could only half-glimpse the physical joys in store for us in the next world" (34). Which fathers said this? Where can I go find more where that came from?

Even if there are times where it doesn't quite work as well as Stark intended, being left with questions is precisely Stark's goal in writing: "in conclusion, let the inquisitive inquire. Let the curious ask their questions, the sane ones and the not-so-sane ones, too, all of whom rightly discerned that more goes on than meets the eye" (71). The goal of *A Guidebook to Monsters*, then, is less about giving answers as it is about raising questions and exposing the easy answers of contemporary ontological skepticism as altogether too easy. Sure, Stark admits, "[s]uch questions might harm one's reputation in certain dignified circles" and may lead to some weird observations and, perhaps, to keeping some weird company, but the risk is worth the wisdom gained in the journey: "we shall know the truth, and the truth shall make us odd" (71).

—Mark A. Brians III

Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, HarperCollins, 2006, pp. 5-34.

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