



Introduction: How We See and Use Monsters to Justify Human Re/Action: Or Are Monsters Real if We Make Them Real?

Wendy J. Turner

Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on Monsters and the Law for *Culture Unbound* breaks down both how the editors see monsters within human lives and stories, real and fanciful, and how the authors in this collection explore themes within monster studies as applied to law or legal cases and/or within legal studies using monster theory. Three major themes emerge as central to this collection: technology as monster, nature and culture as boundaries highlighted and permeated by monsters, and monsters in our authoritative and cultural heritage.

Keywords: monsters, law, nature, culture, boundary, technology, authority



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This volume is, as the title suggests about monsters and the law, but specifically how monsters are perceived and described within law or legal case studies. The articles in this volume cover many topics, time periods, and regions of the world. They examine the fanciful, which seems fitting when discussing monsters, as well as real humans or entities that act in monstrous fashions. The authors express several themes, uncovering how technology acts as a monster and use the perceived monstrousness as a way legally to undermine technological advances. At the same time, the authors have discovered how the public references unfamiliar technology as monstrous, and, sometimes, when and how those technologies behave much like monsters—eating up large quantities of resources or endangering humans. Other authors recognize natural elements, especially invasive species as unfamiliar and often unwanted specimens in the natural world as monsters. On the reverse, authorities have used laws to protect monsters, or at least the cultural heritage of space and place that is associated with a given monster. A few authors have examined specific instances in which monsters emerge from law or are referenced in legal cases. Collectively the authors have found that monsters can be both the enemy, real or imagined, and the gatekeeper or marker of remote and unwanted places or ideas. This idea underscores what has been explored in monster-studies' research to date. Today, in film, literature, games, and more, monsters appear in a spectrum of guises from ugly and depraved to beautiful and wanton (Li 2012). This special issue on Monsters and the Law will highlight how monsters and the monstrous intersect with laws and legal authorities within these three larger themes: technology and culture, nature and culture, and authority and culture.

The earliest era in this collection is the Middle Ages, but monsters are much older. The word “monster” is derived from both the Latin *monstrare*, meaning “to show,” and *monere*, meaning “to warn” (Asma 2009, 13; Urbanski 2025, 10). Often humanoid in description, monsters were the ultimate “other,” the strangers on the far side of the border, real or imagined (Kearney 2003, 3). They were corrupted, twisted, morally bereft versions of “us” and our animals. Sometimes intelligent, they seem bent on destruction or act indifferent to humans. Descriptions of wicked monsters are laced with elements that lean away from the classical ideas of balance, harmony, and pathos, and toward a lack of any empathy or sympathy, embracing chaos, discord, and antipathy (Holmes 2026a, b). Yet they also act as warnings, sentries at boundaries between worlds, sitting at the edges of what might have been known and unknown on a map. Modern monsters continue to encapsulate many of these same ideas, as chaos-makers and discordant entities, even when appearing beautiful or appealing gatekeepers to the unknown, be that magic, unending life, or power and wealth.

Three articles in this collection delve into how technology has become both monster and monstrous in a variety of ways with focus on robotics, blockchain

computing, and artificial intelligence. In “The Monstrous Posthuman: Ethical and Legal Responses to Cyborgs, Artificial Intelligence and Robotic Entities,” Nicholae Bobaru examines how robots are described as “other” as well as monster. He astutely points out that while “artificial intelligence, robotics, and hybrid embodiment [have] become increasingly embedded in daily life, legal systems are struggling to address the status, rights, and responsibilities of these posthuman entities” (Bobaru 2026, this volume). His interest is in the unresolved question of legal personhood for non-human entities. In his search for answers, he uses legal philosophy, posthuman ethics, and other scientific and technological studies to ascertain how these new creatures in our midst can be treated ethically and responsibly in our future. To do this, he is using monster studies as a way to examine these “others.”

In “Monsters Can be Created but Never Tamed: Blockchains and Walking Dead,” Ekaterina Makovich and Polina Ignatova research current legal strategies and decisions concerning blockchain technologies through the lens of monster studies to better understand the culture “monster” blockchain has become both as something to be controlled and to be feared. While there are prophesied benefits and some headway in convincing scientists and society of the advantages in this technology, at the moment, many remain hesitant to embrace this monster who eats more resources than it remunerates.

Another, more recent technological monster to emerge is artificial intelligence, which has become an aid to some and frightening to others. Tetiana Sovhyra, Serhii Vytkaiov, Viktoriia Volynets, Liudmyla Dykhnych, and Ihor Brailko address this timely topic in their article, “Golem & AI: Technologically Advanced Monsters.” They draw a picture of the Golem, a Jewish magical mud-man, who was the protector gone-wrong, killing the human it served, and use this image as a metaphor for the human-created intelligence, AI, which might in the end kill the creativity of humans who created it.

Rather than technology or human-made monsters, nature is also portrayed both as monster and as victim of human “monsters” or consumers. The next three articles all examine nature and culture as regulated within law as monster or as victim. Monsters entered local boardrooms and national discussions as descriptors for invasive alien species. These natural floral and fauna from other global locations were at times brought over by the locals and at others came of their own accord on ships or aircraft or the feet of unsuspecting tourists. And yet, once in their new location, they become pests, dominating and crowding out local plants, insects, and animals. In “Regulating an Unruly Nature. Invasive Alien Species, Monstrosity and the Law,” Maja Lagerquist, Lars Kaijser, Mattias Frihammar discuss how and when these species become monstrous in the press, social media, and the law. While sensitive to the plight of many species and communities, they also are aware of the legal implications. They write, “To put it bluntly: it [the EU & Swedish directed

list of species] operatives both as a *monster list*, naming certain species as threats, and as a *list monster*, a bureaucratic entity that grows and produces unintended consequences” (Lagerquist 2026, this volume).

Continuing the theme of nature as monster, Anindra Candrika in the article, “The Green Border between Monster and Human illustrated in *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019),” examines nature and natural elements in these two Disney animated films. She is specifically examining the border between nature and humans, a liminal space where the character Maleficent exists as a dark fairy. The interplay here is not only between humans and nature along the green border, but also a question of who is the monster? Is it the humans who are destroying nature or the natural beings who fight to maintain distance from the untrustworthy humans? Using ecocriticism and border studies methodologies, Candrika analyses these two films in terms of nature’s role next to and within human society and culture.

In Hanna Jansson and Sanna Händén-Svensson’s article, “The Board’s Dilemma - Bending the Rules to Protect a Local Cryptid,” one county administration board extended legal protection to three species, one of which was a cryptozoological entity. This monster was the Great Lake Monster (in Swedish, Storsjöodjuret) of the county Jämtland. While unverified as a real being, the local community found this cryptid to have local importance. As the authors explain, “These creatures are utilized for tourism, marketing, and regional branding purposes, in cultural heritage processes, local identity formation and in shaping individual identity narratives” (Jansson & Händén-Svensson 2026, this volume; Händén-Svensson 2024a; Magin 2016; Welinder 1998, 2004). The authors suggest a new term, “playful legal space,” as way both to describe the actions of this board and other legal entities who might take similar actions and to find a liminal space for real law to shape itself around cultural and national heritage and folklore that deserves to be preserved in a creative way for local social and cultural groups to enjoy.

Like Candrika’s article, which looks at monsters as highlighting borders and boundaries, Mamdooh Afdile and Bo Eriksson also examine much the same. In their article, “When Implicit Fear Breeds Monsters: Legal Encounters and Implicit Fears in Religious Muslim Life in Sweden,” they take up a new theme, one of authority and culture as monster. Their research explores how unfamiliar laws and cultural norms can become overwhelming and appear monstrous to immigrants experiencing cultural displacement because of war. While many people in Western countries often portray Muslim immigrants as outliers or, worse, as threats to Western culture, Afdile and Eriksson turn the conversation around to focus on how Muslim immigrants perceive Western culture as something to fear, as monstrous. Using the Swedish folkloric tales of *Skogsrå* (the Forest Lady, often depicted with a tail or tree-back) and *Näcken* (seductive water creature playing a harp), the authors

examine legal cases in which humans claim to have been either attacked or seduced by these creatures as a way to explore “the other” within Swedish law and culture. The Muslim immigrants express a distrust of Swedish social workers (and other legal and political authorities) as attempting to lure their children away from them and their culture, like the monsters in the folktales lured children into the forest. This assessment goes both ways. Swedish people continue to be distrustful and wary of Muslims, and the Muslims feel much the same about the Swedish people and their laws and regulations.

To continue this exploration of authority and culture as monster, Guro Flinterud investigates “Crimes, Criminals and the Monstrous on Social Media: The Norwegian Online Patrols Narratively Navigating Borders of Humanity.” Even as this title suggests, this research once more takes up the idea of monsters as warnings at a border, this one between the public and authorities policing social media. As Flinterud explains, while peace-keeping authorities traditionally disseminated information in which they controlled the narrative, now, with social media, that information is often reinterpreted and their posts become volatile and monstrous – a narrative they cannot control.

This theme of authority and culture is explored as it impacted individual lives in Wendy J. Turner’s article, “A Medieval Chancery Case of Mental Health and a Monster.” This is a case study of a man who killed someone dressed in a monster costume who refused to acknowledge his pleas to reveal himself. This sad but true example from medieval English law provides an opportunity to explore what premodern people considered monsters, how “othering” played into medieval English law as monster, and how and why the mental health of the frightened killer played into his decision to take a life. His mental health and his understanding of monsters also played a role in the court’s decision to pardon him for the killing.

Overall, this collection of articles on monsters and the law, examines regulations and actual legal decisions on monsters and the monstrous from “others” to immigrants, from nature to technology, from human authority to fictitious cryptids. At some point, we might all be the monster or the victim. We might protect or signal a boundary or unseen dangers. We might also be beautiful in one breath and ugly in the next. We might be human, but we can also be the monsters.

Laws and regulations keep humans who act like monsters from harming or influencing their fellow humans, but there are also laws that protect cultural icons of monsters from being coopted by other places or mocked by the public. For example, in 1938, the Chief Constable of the Inverness-Shire Constabulary wrote to the Under Secretary in Whitehall to ask for advice about “a Mr. Peter Kent and Miss Marion Stirling, both of London, [who] are determined to catch the Monster dead or alive.” (NRS 1938, HH1/588, 31). He goes on to say that not only does he and the local community find it “desirable” to protect the creature

but also, “That there is some strange [the word “fish” is corrected to “creature”] in Loch Ness seems now beyond doubt ...” (NRS 1938, HH1/588, 31). There are posts online suggesting that the Loch Ness monster, known as Nessie, might be safe under Scotland’s Protection of Animals Act of 1912 and other laws since, but that would be only if were captured. If killed, Nessie does not seem to have any protection; although, Clare Feikert-Ahalt, in a blog post about Nessie, suggests that in the 1960s there was discussion around Nessie falling under the Royal Prerogative as a “Royal Fish” and would then come under section 1 of the more recent Wild Creatures and Forest Laws Act of 1971 (Feikert-Ahalt 2012). This example is only one of more recent intersections between monsters and the law. Laws might protect people from monsters, but a few also protect monsters from humans.

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Author

Wendy J. Turner is Professor of History at Augusta University. The focus of her research is the intersection between law and medicine in medieval England, with special attention given to mental health, learning disabilities and intelligence. Turner has received several honors, including a Leverhulme Trust visiting Professorship to Swansea University in Wales and a Research Award from the Southeastern Medieval Association.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7593-4711>