

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by author, speaker and historian Dr. Surekha Davies, who has an upcoming book entitled *Humans: A Monstrous History*. It's available for pre-order from October and will be published in February 2025. She's also the author of the award-winning *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters*. And so today we're going to chat about the monstrous feminine in human history and how the traits that we demonize in women become literal demons. So one of the topics that you talk about is how the maternal imagination was thought to engender monsters. What does that mean?

SD: The engendering of monsters by women imagining things is perhaps the most extraordinary "women as monsters, women as monster creators" example I come across. So the theory was that women's imagination was something that shaped a child during her pregnancy. As a pregnant person, you had only got to see something alarming for that alarming situation to affect the child. So there are various treatises in the 16th and 17th centuries about monstrous birth. So individual, one-off babies who were born and were atypical in some way, perhaps they had an unusual number of hands and legs or they supposedly looked like some kind of animal. And some of the explanations for why, for example, such and such a woman gave birth to a lobster child in the case of one 18th-century manservant, Samuel Pepys' manservant, James Paris de Plessis wrote about how his own mother-in-law had gone to Leadenhall Market in London while she was pregnant and had been frightened by a lobster. This was an explanation that was used not only to explain the way babies who had say lots of fingers and toes, more than they should have, but also for babies who didn't look like their fathers. So the normal, quote-unquote "normal," way in which a child was understood to look was like their father and what this meant in classical antiquity in the thinking of the naturalist Aristotle was that even a woman was in some way monstrous because she failed to be a perfect replica of her father and while women were clearly very necessary and essential for society, unlike full-on monsters who were simply accidents of nature, they were still some kind of failure. And if women's imagination could change what a baby looked like, you had only got to, say, hang a picture of a monkey or a picture of some other random person in your bedroom and theoretically the child could look like that person. And so the consequences of this were also social. I mean this is a period before genetic testing, so you couldn't know the paternity of a child empirically. So what if a child ended up looking like not at all their father? Well perhaps the mother simply happened to look at some other person or perhaps she was fantasizing about this other person. So this was the can of worms that got opened. And of course on the one hand this made women seem impressionable but there was also the possibility that a woman could choose to imagine her husband when that was not the person she was sleeping with. So that was perhaps the most alarming can of worms. So those were the consequences of the women's imagination being seen in Europe as something that could shape a fetus.

AT: So when we're talking about mothers of "monsters," we're not talking about like Echidna in Greek myth. We're talking about human women who had human babies but because of the way that these societies viewed bodily differences and disability, those children were equated with something monstrous.

SD: Precisely and in English sources, the word "monster" certainly appears and in various European languages that version of that word is there. And it's very matter-of-fact. The audience supposedly knows that this means the individual has broken the category of "normal" and they could have broken that category in a variety of different ways, from anatomical variation being a fairly standard one but it was also a word that became used to describe choices people were making that were seen as unethical or wrong or idolatrous.

AT: It's fascinating that they chose to assign women a type of power that really only served to blame them if something went wrong, which seems like a recurring issue with fertility, like women are blamed if they can't get pregnant even if today we know "well it probably wasn't her fault because he went through several wives and none of them had any success in that area." But this idea that if you're not able to get pregnant or if there is something wrong with the child, this assumption that it must be the woman's fault.

SD: It is indeed the current that runs through this and we see that in the political rhetoric today. There have been US politicians who claim that you can't get pregnant if you're raped. There again, that is one of those most extraordinary and completely unrelated to actual empirical science assumptions of blame put on women.

AT: One of the interesting topics that I believe you delve into is presenting as women as monsters in the context of the witch trials and so here we see women who are independent, women with medical skills, also just sometimes random vulnerable women. And so they're accused of giving their service to the devil instead of God, and that's used as an excuse to kill them.

SD: Yes, so in my book *Humans: A Monstrous History*, I am quite generous and capacious with what I include as examples of individuals and groups who were seen as monstrous. I'm very inclusive in how I think about the sorts of practices that fall under what I call monster-making. And monster-making is ultimately about control. This is storytelling that defines who gets to count as normal, who gets to count as fully human. And so witches in medieval early modern Europe, this was a category of person who was deemed to direct their obedience, their work, their labor, their loyalty not to God but to Satan, to the devil. So they have transgressed not some anatomical boundary per se but a behavioral one, and they are disrupting the spiritual body if you will. And so there has, I don't know, since forever been this idea in Europe of magic, of particular skills that people can develop in order to reliably have certain kinds of power over nature. This is different from giving prayer to God, who may or may not choose to pay attention but rather having a hat that means you can always make something happen. So that was kind of one kind of magic that you could learn. and another type was that because the kind of being you were, you could affect the world around you simply through your will. So there was already this concept of magic but what you start seeing in the 13th and 14th century is increasing anxiety over what proper spiritual behavior looks like. There are various heresies as over the time of Christianity there have been various groups who have had different beliefs from the orthodoxy and at times they've been branded as heretics. So in the late 13th, 14th, 15th centuries, you have this anxiety and what you start getting is theologians trying to codify what their thinking is about witchcraft and whether it even exists because not every scholar, not every lawyer thought it was real. Not everyone thought you could, for example, get special powers by giving your loyalty to the devil. And then there start to appear various treatises that finger women as being especially vulnerable to the attractions of the devil. For example there was this inquisitor who in 1486 wrote this treatise about witch-hunting.

AT: Was this the *Malleus Maleficarum*? (SD: Yes, yes.) Oh that guy needed therapy so bad!

SD: He needed therapy so bad. So the *Malleus Maleficarum* or *The Hammer of Witches* included sections about why women were more likely to be tempted by the devil because they were credulous. They were supposedly of weaker intellect and they had these voracious sexual appetites, so sleeping with the devil was attractive to them. So what unfolds over the 15th, 16th centuries and into the 17th and 18th centuries at different points in different places in Europe is accusations that people were making against their friends, neighbors, relatives, even children that they were witches, that they were practicing witchcraft and what made this a real witch hunt over time is that suddenly religious and secular authorities got involved and started to take this seriously and you start seeing actual trials in which people were interrogated about their alleged practices. A very large proportion of these people were women and so why were people's friends and neighbors accusing them of witchcraft? There were certain situational and employment spheres that were fingered as places where you could spot witches doing their action. For example, midwives were very vulnerable. So this is an era of huge infant mortality and women were also dying in childbirth rather more often than is the case in many places today and so in those periods of grief and loss when perhaps your baby has died, people looking around for an explanation sometimes found themselves finding a scapegoat in the midwife. What did she do? Did she cause this child to die? But childbirth wasn't the only situation that was rife with tragedy in the early modern period. Your crops, you might lose in a freak hailstorm and suddenly this is a

serious famine issue for you. Why did it happen? So if you already imagine that the devil is looking for willing helpers on earth to create misfortune and you've just had one, you might well look around to see, well whose fault it was. Who did you just have an argument with? And for women who were say either curiously quite wealthy and independent because let's say they're a widow and they have their husband's money, or were very poor and perhaps elderly and needed the community's assistance, there were economic reasons to resent them. So if you were poor you were potentially a burden on society when times were tough and if you had financial independence, that was a rather unusual thing for a woman. So they again could be the victims of envy. And what you see during the witch craze is a group of very standard stereotypes for what a witch looks like, and what a witch does, developing and many of them were gendered. These stereotypes were attached to women. For example, the artist Albrecht Durer devised a print of a witch riding a goat backwards so everything is opposite. She's naked, she's visibly old, which is relatively unusual in the 15th century. The idea of a powerful old woman who's no longer normal in so many ways, is beyond the age of childbirth. The fear that these women might be gathering, flying for example on their broomsticks or on their goats backwards to witches gatherings was the kind of image that created what we would today cause might call a moral panic and indeed there are lots of situations where women were monstrified. They were said to be behaving in some inappropriate way that also leads to stereotypes about their appearance, the trope of the hag, everything exaggerated and also leads to fear about what they will do to society as a whole. So everybody is supposedly threatened by the presence of these beings.

AT: Now what if we go all the way back to the first or second century BCE. The first known person that I'm aware of to be executed for witchcraft was actually a folk healer named Theoris of Lemnos. So even going back to the very first one that we know about, a woman who had medical knowledge was executed for being a witch and this is something that we see over and over again. There was a midwife named Margaret Jones who was charged in 1648 and the evidence against her was, "she would use to tell such as would not make use of her physic, that they would never be healed, and accordingly their diseases and hurts continued with relapse against the ordinary course and beyond the apprehension of all physicians and surgeons." So we've got a medical professional telling patients that "if you don't do what I tell you to do you won't get better" and they use this as evidence that she was a witch. And another piece was "some things which she foretold came to pass accordingly." So she predicted that some stuff would happen that did happen. I mean, this does not seem like it should be enough but she was the first person executed for witchcraft in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. So like when we're looking at this trend where women with medical knowledge, who are actively treating people are then accused of witchcraft, that does also seem to be part of a larger pattern of male doctors wanting to make their profession exclusively male. And you see this with, when medical schools first started popping up and the medical doctors tried to make traditional healers outlawed essentially, basically saying "well you have to have a permit and to have a permit you have to have gone to school "but women weren't allowed to go to the school. So it does seem like there's this throughline of trying to remove these women from desirable professions. And we also see this with beer-brewing which I will caveat this by saying this is debated. There are historians who will tell you, yes it's true and there are ones who will say "eh not really." But I like it so I'm going to tell it. The correlation between women brewers which in the Middle Ages was one of these paths that women could take to actually financially support themselves independent of a man and so the correlations here are cats who are not familiars but they're rat catchers who keep the pests away from their grain. They're wearing the tall, pointed hat over a cauldron. The cauldron is full of beer and they're wearing the hat so that you could find them in a crowded marketplace. So if it's not true, there does seem to be a lot of coincidence there but in both of these cases you are seeing women who are able to support themselves financially in a profession then being driven out of these professions which, I don't know if this was consciously calculated, but you have to assume that that was part of the motivation.

SD: Yeah that's fascinating about the beer brewers. Certainly there would have been people who would benefit if their competition was removed. I mean certainly in politics people don't mind how their opponents are taken

out so long as they're taken out. But the thing is with the witch craze, these witch hunts would get out of control. So they would start with these midwives or family disputes leading to people being accused of being witches. If some of these cases ended up at court, people would deny that they were witches and so then what would happen? Application of torture, which of course we now know is not really a good way to get the truth because people will tend to say whatever they need to say to get the torture to stop. And so what you then have is these victims of torture, these defendants describing all the attributes of the witches that they claim to know and fingering other people in their population. So what started off perhaps as a combination of accusations coming from grief and perhaps other people being complicit in letting these things continue because it wasn't affecting them, suddenly more and more of the population is getting caught up in this because people accused of witchcraft start fingering other people. Women, men, leaders of societies, mayors, their own children. So suddenly all kinds of behavior that might be children playing or just, "well there was a hailstorm and nobody caused it" becomes something that can be used against your rivals or opponents.

AT: Well, apart from the the mercenary possibilities that we've discussed, how much of that do you think was just paranoia and an innate human fear that we cannot control the world around us and so by finding someone to blame, someone that we can attack, that makes us feel empowered?

SD: There were a lot of unexplained tragedies around and a lot of them were tied up to things that nobody could apprehend through their senses. So once we're well into the 16th century, suddenly the Reformation is happening, so Christianity is in its big schism. There are Protestant sects arising everywhere like mushrooms and for the faithful, making sure you got to heaven mattered. So if you thought you were doing it right then the other people were going to hell. They might be part of your own family and the wars of religion in France for example were a moment of a huge amount of fighting and bloodshed. Pamphlets were written about how the other side were monstrous among other things. They were heretics. And so the amount of kind of fear over what you can't see was great. And for secular authorities this is also a threat to their power and the witch craze, one of the arguments that scholars have made is that the witch hunting and and the complete hysteria around it could only happen because authorities started taking these accusations seriously and hearing these accounts at court and at a point when the institutions of state and institutions of local government were becoming increasing formalized, but also dealing with political threats and the challenges of the Reformation. It was important for them to to wield their power. So you have economic strife, political problems, religious Reformation and a great deal of existential fear. And nobody wanted to be converted away from the true faith. So there is fear in your communities and there certainly seem to have been higher amounts of witch-hunting and accusations in those areas that were less homogenous in terms of of Christian belief.

AT: And when we're talking about the more institutional and political level, I think we still see that today where if politicians can blame a specific "other," if they can find a target to say - like immigrants are a pretty popular one in a lot of places - where if they can say, "well you don't have a job for example because of immigrants" or "your crops failed because witches." I mean, they both seem to be about the same level of believability from my perspective, but there is very much that, "we are going to unite our people by finding an 'other' to pit them against and we will unite against that other." And if you have a woman who is seen as, like you said a a drain on community resources, she's past her fertility and therefore useless. If you have a woman who is daring to be financially independent separate from a man, these are all traits that they could point to and say "she is other. She is not following the rules of our society, therefore she is to blame."

SD: Yes exactly this is a scapegoating technique. This is monsterification at play and what we see happening to women in the period of European witch hunt is just one example of many, many moments in space and time where a vulnerable population has become the target of attack, not just by individuals but also by a state. So you can sublimate all the fears and blame all your problems on this one relatively powerless group or a few relatively powerless groups.

AT: Something that you have observed is that when you have a member of the community with skills, so say that's medicine, you are looking at do people seek them out and applaud them and raise them up or do they demonize them? Because people do have that choice and you have found that this is often a gendered choice.

SD: Yes it is I mean the place where this is quite striking that I can think of at the moment is actually in the present around something like sporting talent.

AT: Well and when you mention sports it also makes me think of the racial component like when you hear the simultaneously racist and sexist things that people say about the Williams sisters for example is describing them as things other than human.

SD: The curious thing about great talent is that that too can be seen as a sign that someone isn't fully human and there are striking examples in the world of contemporary sport. And up to a point, being excellent is applauded and then people can sometimes cross a line and suddenly their excellence is pathologized. There are a couple of examples I can think of in tennis and Martina Navratilova used to be critiqued for having too many muscles, being too strong. That was not what women's tennis was supposed to look like. So she was really too good and this for a woman is somehow a problem. She has implicitly, supposedly crossed a barrier of excellence that women aren't supposed to cross. Then more recently we might look at the examples of the Williams sisters or Simone Biles in gymnastics. And this is where extraordinary excellence at the sport in women who are also Black create these extra points of tension for societies that have been programmed to think about white men as being the people who have excellence. The most potent example for me of actual monster-making going on around the excellence of an extraordinary Black woman athlete is a story in the Houston Chronicle in 2021 about Simone Biles's extraordinary gymnastics ability. And the headline of the story was and I quote, "Biles finds beauty in beastly athleticism." I think, "what?" And then there's a photo underneath of Biles on a piece of apparatus. And according to this correspondent, he's reporting on how the world of gymnastics has become a rather stressful place for Simone Biles and as he put it, "you only had to ask her about how the world of gymnastics rates her artistry to," and I quote, "darken her day." so he's referring here to the fact that the world of gymnastics wasn't giving her high enough score for the amazing vault she was doing that nobody else could do. So here is this headline writer placing the words "beastly athleticism" over a photo of Biles and using the word "dark," which has multiple meanings, using this figurative use of the word to call, talk about darkness as a negative. And so his words as he reports on his interview of Biles undercut Biles's own argument, which is that strength and beauty are not mutually exclusive. And yet when an athlete doesn't conform to some old-fashioned idea of what a woman looks like - she's small and weak and with long Rapunzel-like black hair and white skin. Suddenly she's not fully human, her skills are suspect, whether they are Simone Biles or Serena or Venus Williams to an extent or Martina Navratilova. There was a sports commentator a couple of years ago who said the Williams sisters were human Rorschach tests - you could tell what, how people thought about women and how people thought about gender by the way they reacted to the excellence of one of the Williams sisters. Yes, this was Wesley Morris on the daily podcast of The New York Times in 2022. And we might think about how the excellence of a woman is framed as opposed to the excellence of a man, for whom there's somehow no limit but if a woman is too good she somehow can't be a woman anymore and this is an attitude that goes back certainly in western thought to at least Aristotle.

AT: Well and I think we're also getting into the topic of using monstrous language to deride and undermine women. So there was the *Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which was a written piece attacking female monarchs. Shakespeare used "harp" in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "wicked hag" in *The Tempest*. But he did also call men monsters, so we can't be too hard on Shakespeare. But even in the US political realm, I hate to mention Trump but I have to. He referred to Kamala Harris as "this monster" in an interview shortly before the 2020 election. And then previously in 2016 he had said "she's a monster" of Hilary Clinton among the many other awful things that he said about women but it is very telling that even today this very sexist man is deriding

his opponents, his female opponents specifically, as monsters explicitly.

SD: Yes, it's extraordinary how this is still in the world and this is not just about misogyny, but that word "monster." being used to activate in people almost a lack of empathy. It's like, they're gonna say "monster," it's as if they've reached over and turned off your empathy button. And that is the work that that word does. And in the case of this 16th century pamphlet, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, curiously it is the very act of being a woman that is, and labeling someone a woman was for a certain Scottish reformer John Knox, the woman word was almost like the monster word. This is how you pressed a button in your audience's mind to say, "not a legitimate ruler." So let me back up a minute. So we're in the 1550s and Queen Mary's on the throne in the middle of the 1550s in England, Mary I, who married Philip II of Spain. And this Scottish reformer who was very anti-Catholic, John Knox was exiled in France in Dieppe because there is now a Catholic on the throne. This is Mary I, one of King Henry VIII's daughters. So he was exiled because his preaching was inflammatory. And so while he was away, 1554, Mary I had an act of Parliament passed that affirmed that she was fully monarch in the same way as a king even though she was a queen. So not only had Henry said that Mary and Elizabeth were his legitimate heirs but Mary made sure there was an act of Parliament saying that she had all of the power that she would have if she was a king not a queen. And so this meant even though she was now getting married or that even with her marriage to Philip, she was holding on to her full authority. And so what Knox does, he put together this pamphlet of all the reasons why having a leader who was a woman was monstrous. It was a wrong form of rule. It was a perversion and he went back to the Bible. He went to the Hebrew Bible he went to Genesis he pulled out all the reasons that he could find in authorities that ordinary people and ordinary educated people would, had some faith in like classical and antique authors like the Bible. And he found for himself a bunch of legal precedents why women were always supposed to answer to men. They were supposed to be silent. They were not supposed to lead nations. And he uses the language of monsters. He says that to be ruled by a wicked woman was abominable. A woman promoted to sit in the seat of God, sit above men is a monster in nature, a thing most repugnant to his will. And so Knox is now speaking for God and saying he judges it a monster in nature that a woman shall exercise weapons. And he moves then from the this monstrous monarch and he wrote this thinking of a very specific monarch, Mary I, and he says, well if the head of the body politic is monstrous, what hope is there for the body? So he's creating here a moral panic that the whole nation is in trouble because of Mary I being on the throne. There's an idol on the throne. And he even kind of suggests that it would be legitimate to challenge this monarch. He says it was the duty of the people to remove from honor and authority that monster in nature. So a woman on a throne as a queen regnant is monstrous. And officially the reasons he's giving for Mary being not an appropriate leader is that she's a woman. But actually, he's gone over to the Reformed faith and he's mad about the fact there's a Catholic on the throne but what he activates is all the prejudice around women. Women should be silent, they should not be in charge. And that's what he's using to try and undo the traditional emotional bond between the monarch and their subject. So he's trying to turn off the empathy and loyalty button in English readers by talking about the fact that Mary I was a woman. Now unfortunately for Knox, by the time his treatise was actually published, Mary I had been dead for a few months and Queen Elizabeth, suddenly the great sympathizer of reformed faiths was on the throne. So whoops a daisy, Knox is in trouble. So his exile didn't end and he had now annoyed Elizabeth I. But certainly it was Mary's gender that was seen, to him, as the most the weakest thing about her to attack, when he really was appalled that she was a Catholic on the throne of England.

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AT: So again we've got a situation where he's using religion, he's using sexism but what he's really mad about is that a Catholic woman is in power, not that a woman is in power.

SD: Well, scholars debate that a little. They say, "oh well he didn't always write horrible things about women."

But there's enough in the literature and he didn't exactly write any feminist treatises as far as I know. But the ticket on which he was going to go after her was the fact that here was a woman. And he wasn't the only person writing angry pamphlets about her, about queens in general. We have to assume that he would still have felt that women were illegitimate but it would of course have been very convenient for him for the monarch, male or female, to not have been a Catholic and then he wouldn't have been exiled for that.

AT: All right so first off, we need to bring back "monstrous regiment of women" - not the work, but I just really want to like reclaim that like they did with "nasty woman" and just form a squad that is my own monstrous regiment of women because that does sound badass, right?

SD: It does, it does and I too think there's something to kind of reclaim in the word monster, which traditionally suggested something that transgressed category. So you have a bunch of categories, not everything fits, not everyone fits and so the ones that straddle categories or don't fit any of them are, monster is a word for that. They don't have to be negative, they don't have to be scary, although many things that transgressed categories are framed as a threat, partly by individuals and groups who don't want to think about their own bodies or identities or societies as being on any kind of a continuum with other beings. But in fact the idea of the human has never been constant. It has never been universal. And it has always been multi-dimensional - what does human actually mean today? And people might say "oh we mean homo sapiens." Of course I know everybody's homo sapiens, as if that constitutes recognizing the full humanity. That might be like the biological category of the human, but what does social personhood look like? What does intellectual property look like what we in terms of, do you own your labor, who gets to benefit from it? What range of gender presentations does someone get to have before their rights, their safety, their legitimacy as a being in the world get questioned?

AT: So, actually Lady Gaga has beaten us both to that one because her fans are often referred to as "Little Monsters. (SD: Oh, in a good way.) Yeah, she's even got a song called Manifesto of Little Monsters, and so she herself uses this term and they use us term as well, so.

SD: Great, that is fascinating. But there is a different way to look at the fact that bodies are volatile, they're malleable. No one said that variety has to be a threat. And for me, one of my earliest kind of memories is of watching *The Muppet Show*, and as far as I was concerned, this is basically what the world was supposed to be like. Everybody's doing exactly what they want there are being their best selves. Kermit is very patient. There's only one adult - so this is the big when you're four or five - there's only one adult in the room. The adult is completely not running the show or telling you what to do or not to do. And so I mean I had this word I coined, monsterofuturism and I'm informed here by the African-American literary and artistic movement called Afrofuturism. So let's imagine a future when there is no trauma associated with being different, when people whose communities have historically faced a great deal of discrimination and monsterification are now celebrated. And each person can be their best selves so long as they're not causing harm to others. And today's moral panics around say trans people, moral panics around whether it's immigrants or people having abortions. And I thought like the ordinary person on the street who finds this argument of moral panic compelling, I wonder to what extent they fear their own ideas changing, their own bodies changing, whether that's rational or not, to what extent they feel that something somebody else does actually has a chance of threatening them. And I think back to the European witch craze and the amount of imagination expended on trying to figure out what invisible forces were doing around you. We don't really have that excuse anymore, of that level of lack of understanding of ordinary misfortunes like hailstorms or plagues. But perhaps we need to figure out what is really behind the very real challenges people face today, of the erosion of their paychecks the erosion of the climate, precarious lifestyles created by the gig economy, what it's like to live in the US, where your healthcare is tied to an employer and also varies with the whims of whoever is in Congress or whoever's in government able to turn things on, and in an age when corporations increasingly see people as obstacles

to profits, we need to reclaim the right to be different in our own private lives, our own cultural and creative lives that don't harm anyone else in order to chart a better path to the future.

AT: Well and when we're getting into the right to exist as you are, one of the things that you write about is John Bulwer ranting about fashion and makeup in the *Anthropometamorphosis*, which was first published in 1650. So how does that connect with what we've been talking about?

SD: Oh gosh, yes. This really bizarre treatise *Anthropometamorphosis* was written by this English physician and scientist John Bulwer in about 1648, '49 the first printings. And so this is an enormous treatise, about 650 pages long, in which Bulwer goes through and describes all the different ways in which people around the world have deformed their bodies by choice. And that's the word he uses, he uses the word "deformed" frequently, he uses the word "monster" frequently. He talks about artifice, and what he does with this book is he goes through the body from head to foot, filling most of his time on the head and the face, and talks about how cultures around the world have chosen to change their bodies, their hair, their noses, their eyes, their eyebrows - all the different elements of fashion with which they "pervert" the natural body of humanity. So he comes after women and men for their use of cosmetics, for their vanity.

And a curious thing that that links us back to what we were talking about the start of this conversation, is how he thinks about the maternal imagination. So he proposes that the imagination of mothers was a reason for the blackness of a person's skin. So he he claimed that some people actually wanted to be dark, and first of all they they went to cosmetic alteration to change their skin and then the maternal imagination turned that into an inherited trait, a trait that was supported by the climate in hot places. So suddenly you go from people choosing to paint their skin black to "well, this is why there are Black people" and the woman's imagination - remember that monstrous maternal imagination - is one of the reasons he gave.

AT: I just have to mention because you were talking about how long this is the full title is also just ridiculously long, so it's truth in advertising. Judge a book by the cover because the full title is *Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transform'd, or the Artificial Changeling. Historically presented, in the mad and cruel Gallantry, foolish Bravery, ridiculous Beauty, filthy Fineness, and loathsome Loveliness of most Nations, fashioning & altering their Bodies from the Mould intended by Nature. With a Vindication of the Regular Beauty and Honesty of Nature, and an Appendix of the Pedigree of the English Gallant*. So he's very much framing this as the "regular beauty and honesty of nature" is what he thinks people should look like and everything else is cruel, foolish, ridiculous, filthy, and loathsome, "altering it from the mold intended by nature," so it's unnatural as well.

SD: It's unnatural and there is potentially a political backstory to this track as well in that Charles I of England has just been executed for treason. So we're now in the zone of the English Civil War and so all of this yearning to "be normal" as he seems to be saying may also be a veiled political statement. So much of the book is about the head, "we must not deform the head from what god intended," so there's the metaphor there for sure. And this is where the moral panic of of the monster is often about how you can go up and down the ladder of the social order and monstification is supposedly contagious, so if there's something wrong with the head it's going to spread all the way down. And equally people were concerned about these poor elderly women who supposedly might be witches. People are worried about religious minorities in their community. To me, all this feels like a psychic fear of change, people can't deal with the fact that they themselves do change and they fear those other versions of themselves, those doppelgangers

AT: There's also an interesting aspect of, when we look at fairs in Europe and we see the precursor of what would later become circuses. You had this segregation of people with overtly atypical bodies, so the bearded ladies. the giantesses or just random people from overseas, from different cultures. And so they would put these folks on display, and it was very much "come and gawk at them. It's okay because we have segregated them, we've removed them from the community and put them in this separate space" where it is overtly a

question of, you come and gawk at them, you don't have to interact with them as though they're human beings. SD: Yes, this is one of the more disturbing types of monsterfication. It is where individuals who have atypical bodies or were from places very far from Europe were storyfied as being so extraordinary that you should go and see them and pay this money to go and see them. And there were fairs, there's one fair in London called the Bartholomew Fair, which happened in east London in an era called West Smithfield and it started in about 1133 and was going on well into the 18th or I think 19th century, maybe 1855. And all kinds of people seem to have either chosen to make money by performing there or they were coerced or they were simply kidnapped. So there were certainly enslaved persons who were brought over there. And there are examples of people who are supposedly giants and the words like "giant," "dwarf" are used. "Hermaphrodite" appears in the sources, so people who are intersex. There are examples of conjoined twins. Sometimes babies were objects of fascination. And there's this late 17th century monster miscellany that I mentioned earlier produced by James Paris, the manservant of Samuel Pepys. He describes various people that he saw sometimes at fairs and the language is very striking. Here's one example, of someone he labels "the hog-faced woman," and I'll quote, "this monster was a gentle woman of good family and fortune. Very tall and well proportioned" - so these are all normal things about her - "with a very fine pale white skin" so on and so forth and then, "but her face perfectly shaped like that of a hog or sow except that it was not fair, not hairy." Sometimes in his text, he uses phrases like "the creature" or "it" when he's talking about an individual that he has seen. There was someone called the Yorkshire Hermaphrodite who was publicly seen in London in 1702. He talked about how he looked at this person's private parts and asked them many questions. And what you see at some of these fairs in the pamphlets, this real sensationalizing of difference as being something that you must come and see. And this is particularly the case with people from overseas. And there's one example of this little girl called Krao who was taken away from her home in Southeast Asia in the 1880s and ended up being displayed in the London Aquarium. And she was described as "the missing link," "living proof of Darwin's theory of the descent of man" goes the pamphlet. And really for one of these huckster impresarios who was putting people on show, Darwin was the best thing that ever happened to them, because they could now talk about how this was science and you needed to come and see these missing links and be supposedly better informed about the category of the human. And so Krao "performed" - was peered at - for some years. But when she was past puberty, audiences began to resent having to see her, because as they put it, they were having to look at somebody who was a cross between some kind of ape and a human being. So this adult child from Southeast Asia who was supposedly very hairy, she may have had some condition of hairiness, we don't know. Suddenly they didn't want to see her because she made them see that continuum from human to ape. The missing link was too much for them.

AT: Well I wonder if it's also that a child is small and non-threatening but an adult, particularly an adult woman who we're meant to see as an inherently sexual creature even if they don't necessarily frame it that way, someone who is meant to serve as a "fertile vessel" to reproduce - which of course if you're looking at her as something less than human, you don't want to think about the idea of that continuing. (SD: Yes.) I wonder how much of the discomfort there was the difference between a girl child and an adult woman, and how we see that dehumanization differently.

SD: Yeah certainly, suddenly the empathy button has been turned off. She's now suddenly a threat. So what might a child of adult Krao and a white man look like? They're now having to think about what it means for there to be this so-called missing link, so-called alleged species. They're also having to maybe think about the possibility that people did evolve from apes. But certainly the adult woman is a threat here to the identity of the viewers in a way that the child was not

AT: Especially if they are framing this as Darwinian, (SD: Yeah.) because as we've sort of hinted at evolution is all about reproduction. That's how we get evolution, unless we're in the X-Men universe, which sometimes I wish we were but we're not. So it's really just reproduction and so if you've got people looking at her (SD: Yes.)

through that lens in particular you have to assume that that was going on in their minds.

SD: Yeah, what happens next? What's the next link in the chain?

AT: Now bringing us forward a few centuries. Your book has a much shorter title than John Bulwer's (SD: Thank heavens!) (laughter) I'm not sure it would have fit on the cover. And so your book is called *Humans: A Monstrous History* - could you tell us a bit about it?

SD: Sure, the central question I guess is, why do humans make monsters and what do monsters tell us about humanity? And what I found doing this work is that monsters are central to how people think about the human condition. People define the human in relation to everything from apes to zombies. And in the process of defining the human they invented ideas like race, gender and nations. And by telling stories about these moments when individuals or groups were seen as monsters in some way, we go from ancient gods to generative AI, we'll pass through Frankenstein's monster and ET and really show how monster-making is this kind of storytelling that creates control. It defines who gets to count as human. And we are now in a new age of monsterification where as I see it, corporeal embodied humans are in danger of being thrown out of the airlock. We are no longer the default worker necessarily for corporations. Perhaps we are even the obstacles to profits, but maybe by looking at this long and volatile history of monster-making, we're going to notice those patterns of monsterification and chart a better path for the future. And another challenge today is the rising inequality and polarization as more and more groups are seen as inconvenient, non-default humans whether they're homeless or immigrants or artists. So this book is not a history of monsters, but a history through monsters.

AT: *Humans: A Monstrous History* is available through University of California Press and I'll put a link in the description and you can also go to [surekhadavies.org](http://surekhadavies.org) for more information. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and, remember well-behaved women rarely make history.