

MONSTERS

An etymological and cultural reading of the "freak" in the Middle Ages

...The ignorant man sees only forms - the mysterious letters on the page of the book of nature - without being able to read them, whereas the wise man passes from the visible to the invisible, and, reading this book, reads the thought of God.¹

Watching the film *Freaks* (USA, 1930s) at the start of the symposium on The Body reminded me how little the attitudes towards the physically Other people had changed in six or even seven hundred years. Both *Freaks'* commentator/ voice-over to the historical introduction to the film's theme and the theological-philosophical literature of the high Middle Ages share the same patronising (= fatherly-moralizing) and apologetic tone. Apologizing for what? For the insult to the natural order of things as created by God which the "freaks" cause in the case of the medieval authors? For the affront to the sensibilities of the viewer in the case of the film's commentator? That the medievals did not interpret "freaks" as an insult to creation is the theme of this paper, showing that medieval thought on the disabled body was not as "backward" as the Dark Ages school of popular historical perception teaches; nevertheless, the differences between the underlying concepts of medieval and contemporary notions of physical disability should not be disregarded.

The exterior mirrors the interior, or: let me gaze at your body and I will gaze at your soul. Such could be a summary of the medieval view regarding the body-soul relationship. The state the soul is in, good or bad, makes an impression on the body and vice versa, an ugly, diseased or deformed body makes the spirit bitter and twisted, while an angelic appearance encloses an angelically pure soul (apart from the frequent occasions when the Devil or any of his host of demons, evil spirits, succubi, incubi.... [and women in general, it seems] fools a person by hiding their evil soul in a beautiful body). Therefore the body can be read as an external sign for what is really important, namely the soul. The beginnings of the Renaissance changed little about this attitude. So Paracelsus (in the early 16th century) held that the external form was a sign (or Zeichen, signum, signatum, signum signatum, signatur) of the inner quality.

Nature's Maker is so skilled that he does not frame the soul to fit the form, but the form to fit the soul: that is, the shape of a man is formed after the kind of his heart.²

It is nature's Art, as he calls it, that shows the artist the means by which the Sign is discerned, namely what type of soul a person possesses.

...there can be nothing in Man that is not marked on his exterior, through which one may discern what is within the person bearing the sign...³

Signs can be manifested by Nature through chiromancy (looks at hands, feet, extremities), physiognomy (looks at face and head), *substantina* (looks at the form of the body as a whole) and

through *mos* and *usus* (looking at manner and bearing of a person). Thus one can *read*, not just see, *the letters on the page of the book of nature*, as St. Bonaventure said. "Freaks" and "monsters" were read like all other "pages" in a book by the medieval philosopher-theologian-jurists.

To read one must understand the sign. The starting-point for this exercise for many medieval scholars was often as not the etymology of the word/sign in question. Our "monster" comes from the Latin *monstra*, from the verb *monstrare*, to show, from which the word *monstrance* is derived, meaning the ecclesiastical object that is shown to the congregation. A monster is linguistically a showing/ something that is shown. The past participle carries with it the meaning of passivity; a monster is always shown (*monstrum est*) by exterior forces, it never shows (*monstrat*) itself by its own power. In Latin culture, the words *portenta/ prodigium/ ostentum* were related in meaning to *monstra*, all of them signifying a sign, a showing, of an other-worldly, spiritual, divine nature. One has only to think of our modern word portent - though few people would name monster and portent in the same breath. All these were related to the Greek *teras*, pl. *terata*, which medical language subsumed as *teratology* to label the science of abnormal/ monstrous human births. The Greek *teras* meant an earthly as distinct from a heavenly/ otherworldly sign, which was a *semeia* or *phasma* (which is why in fairy tales only ghosts are phantas-magorical but never monsters!).

In antiquity, Aristotle already referred to aberrant human bodies as monsters/ *terata*. Something outside the existing order of nature was such a *teras*, and could be classified by its types and its causes in true scientific, dissecting fashion.⁴ With a view to human *terata*, Aristotle advised that "as to exposing or rearing the children born, let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared..."⁵ Most antique writers had a similar view⁶. Judeo-Christian culture refined the meaning of abnormal appearance. Monsters were no longer simply, as Cicero saw them, portents of the will of the gods, but they were that *and* a consequence of original sin/ personal sin. Cain, one of the first sinners, was described verbally and pictorially as deformed and ugly for his sin; modern English usage still has the phrase "ugly as sin". Rabbinic Judaism in particular regarded a minority - deformed people - as per se inferior to the majority - physically normal people -, since the majority was closer to God's image⁷. *Nature* and *natural* were (and are) extremely value-loaded terms, violations/ aberrations of the natural were always also violations of the divine. At the latest with St. Augustine, Christian thought on these matters came up with the idea that violations of nature are done deliberately by God to show his power/ divine superiority over the merely natural, and therefore *monstra* are there to show God's will. Unlike antique *monstra-to-be-drowned*, which also show the will of the gods, Christian *monstra* are fully human *monstra-to-be-baptized*, because while classical gods can be good or bad in their intentions or just simply capricious, the Christian God is always good in his intentions, and if he goes to the effort of creating an aberration from nature, then nature had better respect it. So physically deformed/ disabled babies had the benefit of moving from an antique long submersion in water (drowning) to a Christian short submersion in the same element (baptizing).⁸

By the high Middle ages the jurists were becoming interested in the exact legal status of *monstra*, for the purpose of the transmission of property down the family - patriarchal - line. The sixth century Digest of Justinian, with many interpolations and add-itions, by the high Middle Ages read "not

children" to be births that are 'contrary to the likeness of the human race', but that if a child has extra limbs but is otherwise normal looking, then it was to be included as "among children"⁹. Defining and categorizing what appearance and how many limbs or heads made a child fully or partially human became a major occupation of the civil and canon lawyers when they discoursed on the topic of abnormal bodily form. So one Bartolus of Saxoferrato (1314-57) of the Bologna school of law stated that 'a monstrous birth, that is, against nature or human form is said to be legitimate'¹⁰. His pupil Baldo Ubaldi (1319-1400) refined the reasoning, categorizing and labelling in true medieval scholastic fashion:

That which does not have the body of a man is presumed not to have the soul of a man, because it is presumed...that nature does not bestow a soul where there is not a body...since form gives essence to a thing, that which does not have the form of a man is not a man.... That which lacks the form of a man lacks civil liberty in name, but he who has something of human form, despite defect of form, holds in effect civil liberty.¹¹

Woman and the form of woman is not mentioned, presumably since a deformed woman was most unlikely to marry and produce a (male) heir, the question of the spiritual/ legal status of the deformed woman was deemed irrelevant - female infanticide was already higher with regards to normal births than male infanticide¹².

The canon lawyers accepted the basic premise of the humanity of deformed children - according to the criteria of the civil lawyers -, their main intellectual problem was what practical implications a deformed child had on ecclesiastical law and customs. So the question for them was whether or not a parish priest was to regard a "monster" as human and whether or not and if so, how to baptize it. Eventually the canonists' conclusions were incorporated in and disseminated by parochial manuals. Guido da Baysio (+1313), archbishop of Bologna in a comment on the *Decretum* uses the example of a two-headed birth to ask whether the child is to be baptized as one creature or as two. He refers to Thomas Aquinas and asserts that if it appears there are two heads, necks, chests and hearts, then the child is to be baptized as two separate beings; if there are two heads but the rest of the torso is not clearly made up of two bodies, then one head is to be baptized after the other¹³. The head was the index of the humanity or non-humanity of a monstrous birth. This conferred with standard medieval thinking about the human body, where the head is the noblest aspect of a human being and is superior to the rest of the body. Peter of Abano, commenting on the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata* (1310) observed that if a *monstra* has a fully formed head, even if the rest of the body is monstrous, then it 'can be said to be one of us'¹⁴.

Chroniclers mention the incidence of monstrous births with two heads as part of their discussion of portents, but also mention that the babies were baptized as two persons - most of them died shortly after birth, though.¹⁵ Of the popular manuals for priests, some of the most meticulous instructions covering virtually all eventualities were provided by the *Manipulus Curatorum* of Guido of Mont Rocher (*1333), which he dedicated to the bishop of Valencia: if there is a single monster with two bodies, then baptize it as one person because it has only the one soul; if there are two souls, then baptize it as two persons. How is the priest to know if the monster has two souls? By counting the

number of bodies, if there are two bodies, then it follows there are two souls; if there is one body, then there is only one soul. Therefore two chests and two heads mean there are two souls present; one chest and one head, 'however much the other members be doubled' mean there is only one soul to be baptized¹⁶. The *Codex Iuris Canonici* of the present-day Catholic Church, canon 748, still retains instructions and formulae for the baptism of "freaks" and "monsters".

'Being one of us' according to minutely worked out criteria was the general medieval scholastic, ie. philosopher-theologian-jurist, opinion of physically abnormal human beings. As Friedman says, *monstra* came to be defined 'as something that could have both a soul and a legal status, and therefore partake of humanity from the social and theological points of view'¹⁷. But the "freak" was still regarded as a freak, even if the "freak" existed to show God's superior power over the natural order of things. Christian-medieval views of the physically Other do assert the essential humanity of children born that way - after a patriarchally patronizing fashion, though. Not to be confused with a post-Enlightenment, post-Rationalism notion of rights, the only medieval notion of the rights of such individuals was the right to be human, to have a baptism and then to have their souls depart swiftly heavenwards. Speculating on the type of accounts of severely physically disfigured people in medieval texts, I note that all instances mentioned in this paper refer to infants, or the newly-born in particular. Had monstrous births survived beyond the immediate post-natal stage, the perceived burden of the care and "special needs" they will have exacted from their contemporaries may well have led these to regard such births less as divine *monstra* and *portenta* but more as "monsters" and "freaks".

¹St. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 2.11, *Opera Omnia*, Florence, 1882, 5:229.

²Paracelsus, *Sämtliche Werke*, I. Abteilung, XII, ed. K. Sudhoff, Munich-Berlin, 1922-33; cited by M. Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, Yale, 1980.

³ibid.

⁴Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 4.3.767b

⁵quoted by Lloyd deMause, *The Evolution of Childhood*, in: L. deMause, *The History of Childhood*, New York, 1974

⁶For example, Seneca: "we drown even children who at birth are weakly and abnormal", ibid.; the gynaecologist Soranus stating that children who were not perfect in shape and size were not to be reared but to be killed, ibid.

⁷J.B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Harvard, 1981, p.90.

⁸It is interesting to note that St. Augustine still felt the need to tentatively suggest that those born deformed in this world would be resurrected with an "amended and perfect" body in the next world (Augustine, *City of God* 22.12 and *Enchiridion* 3.87). Maybe the classical ideal of a sound mind in a sound body was still regarded as more important than the egalitarian view towards physical disability of a relatively new and not yet fully established religion? In *City of God*, Augustine refers to monstrous births directly in answer to a question by unconverted pagans who wish to know what happens to such births after the resurrection.

⁹*Corpus Iuris Civilis: Institutiones et Digesta*, ed. T. Mommsen and P. Krüger, reprint Dublin-Zürich, 1970, 1.5.14.

¹⁰*Lectura Domini Bartoli a Saxoferrato in Primam Digesti Veteris Partem*, Turin, 1577, 1.14.

¹¹*Baldi Vbaldi Pervsini Commentaria in Primam digesti Veteris Partem*, Venice, 1.14, fol.31v, 1616.

¹²For infanticide of the disabled cf. Mary M. McLaughlin, *Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth centuries*, in: L. deMause(ed.), *The History of Childhood*, New York, 1974.

¹³*Rosarium seu in Decretorum Volumin Commentaria*, Venice, 1577, 3.4, fol.402v.

¹⁴Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, p.181

¹⁵Examples include the story of the Franciscan traveller John de Marignolli (1290-1359) on a two-headed child born near Florence; the *Chronicle of Baldwin*, from Flanders, where in 1299 a pauper girl in the town of Ninove gave birth to a two-headed child which was 'baptized by the midwife and straightaway died'.

¹⁶Guido of Mont Rocher, *Manipulus Curatorum Officia Sacerdotus*, Strasbourg, 1490, 2.1.5, sig.a, fol.8v.

¹⁷Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, p.183.