

Articoli/Articles

MEDIEVAL MONSTERS, IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

LISA VERNER

University of New Orleans, USA

SUMMARY

MEDIEVAL MONSTERS, IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The past two decades have witnessed a plethora of studies on the medieval monster. These studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of religion, art, literature, and science in the Middle Ages. However, a tendency to treat the medieval monster in purely symbolic and psychological terms ignores the lived experiences of impaired medieval people and their culture's attitudes toward them. With the aid of recent insights provided by disability studies, this article aims to confront "real" medieval monsters – e.g., physically impaired human beings – in both their human and monstrous aspects.

In his often cited first thesis concerning monsters, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen asserts, "*The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically that which reveals, that which warns, a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself*"¹. Cohen here expresses a popular notion in the study of monstrosities. Scholars of monsters, including medievalists John Bloch Friedman, Andy Orchard, Jacques LeGoff and David Williams, for the most part concur with his assertion. Considering the multiple ways monsters manifested themselves in the Middle Ages – in romances, travelogues, manuscript illustrations, heraldry,

Key words: Middle Ages – Teratology – Disability Studies

and sculpture to name only a few venues – one immediately suspects something other than literalism is at work, and as the aforementioned scholars and others have shown, medieval monsters work in a variety of symbolic ways, their multiple meanings to impart.

The symbolic interpretation of the monstrous in literary studies has become so ubiquitous, however, that one is tempted to examine the topic from an entirely different angle. Specifically, one might ask how medieval people regarded real monsters. I am of course not suggesting that the giant of Mont Saint Michel or Beowulf's dragon "really" existed; I refer instead to those creatures that medieval people would have considered to be monsters that nevertheless lived among them: dwarves, conjoined twins, parasitic twins, hermaphrodites, and, as Zakiya Hanafi puts it, "*piteously deformed infant[s] destined to die quickly*"². However, not all infants with significant deformities or impairments did die quickly; that they did not die, and thus must have received assistance from caretakers for much if not all of their lives, suggests that medieval "monsters" had an existence beyond their symbolic function in art, literature and theology. That the "*appearance of a monster was thus tied from the beginning to an interpretive community, to a social order to which it was addressed and to a priestly caste which was needed in order to decipher its precise significance*"³ is indisputable; but after the community had interpreted it and the priests had deciphered its significance, the monster still had to eat, sleep, socialize, worship and live. I would suggest that the monster managed to perform these quotidian tasks while simultaneously functioning in the symbolic realm; I would also suggest that the vocabulary of modern disability studies can be a great aid in helping us understand how this dual medieval existence functioned. The monster's symbolic and psychological functions are so well known as to require only brief mention here. David Williams contributes the most sophisticated analysis I have encountered in his study *Deformed Discourse*, in which he reveals how the medieval period

“made deformity into a symbolic tool with which it probed the secrets of substance, existence, and form incompletely revealed by the more orthodox rational approach through dialectics”⁴. Such an approach, which relies heavily on Neo-Platonism, assumes a scholarly milieu, but monsters could also function symbolically for mass consumption, mostly obviously in art, architecture, and maps. John Block Friedman suggests monsters in art helped medieval people ponder difficult questions about what constituted humanity, where humans might be found, and what Christians should think and do about monstrous humans⁵. Cohen expands upon this notion, arguing that the existence of the monster undermines efforts at classification, compartmentalization, and hierarchy, instead offering “*new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world*”⁶. Finally, on the most rudimentary level the medieval monster simply lives up to its etymology by revealing various messages from the Almighty to His people. For example, the “*point of being a giant, then, is to overreach and fail, and in that failure highlight their corruption to others as a cautionary tale and consolation*”⁷. A slightly different but equally simplistic approach (and one that was not universally accepted in the Middle Ages) suggests that monstrosity is a punishment for sin, an interpretation which would have its own quite obvious moral⁸.

On every level, from the most sophisticated theologian using the monster as a kind of *via negativa* for understanding divinity, to the illiterate layman enjoying a recitation of King Arthur’s defeat of the giant of Mont Saint Michel as a kind of morality tale, the monster serves an agenda outside itself. The church fathers are the primary sources for this method of thinking about monsters, and St. Augustine of Hippo arguably has the greatest influence, both in his own writing and in Isidore of Seville’s application of Augustine’s thought. At this point we may find it useful to observe the predecessors and heirs to Augustine’s way of thinking about monstrosities in order that we can discern where the dual human/monster identity

came from and when and why it mostly ceased. To this end, we will trace the evolution of a single monster, the hermaphrodite, from its classical origins to the Renaissance, with particular emphasis on a fairly extensive medieval anecdote. The hermaphrodite is especially appropriate for this endeavor because, while certainly monstrous in its sexual ambiguity, it was also indisputably human.

In his *Symposium*, Plato puts into the mouth of Aristophanes what is likely the most famous description of the hermaphrodite: “*There were three kinds of human beings, that’s my first point – not two as there are now, male and female. In addition to these, there was a third, a combination of those two; its name survives, though the kind itself has vanished. At that time, you see, the word androgynous really meant something: a form made up of male and female elements*”⁹, Plato’s description, while hilarious and oddly poignant, does not quite correspond to what later came to be thought of as the hermaphrodite, since, in addition to doubled sexual organs, the creature also had four hands, four legs, and two faces. When Zeus finds their power threatening, he slices them in two, thus rendering humans in the single-sexed forms more familiar to us and assuring that the gods will no longer feel threatened, as human beings now focus most of their energy on finding and reuniting, via intercourse, with their other halves. Plato gives us a myth that not only “*accounts for the fact that intermittent sexual union remains tinged with a nostalgia for permanence*”¹⁰, but that also establishes the hermaphrodite not merely as entirely human, but in fact as humankind’s “*natural form*”¹¹.

Ovid’s story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis in Book Four of the *Metamorphoses* reverses the course plotted by Plato in the *Symposium*--that is, Ovid reunites two of the split creatures from Aristophanes’s story. Hermaphroditus, teenaged son of Hermes and Aphrodite (Roman Mercury and Venus), captures the unwanted attention of the water nymph Salmacis. Spurning her advances, the confused and blushing boy jumps into Salmacis’s pool; the nymph

dives in after him and attempts a rather frantic submerged seduction. When he continues to resist, she prays to the gods: “*Ita di iubeatis, et istum / nulla dies a me nec me diducat ab isto*” (Command it thus, gods, and no day may separate him from me nor me from him)¹². The gods hear her plea, and at that point Hermaphroditus and Salmacis merge into one person with two genders: “*Nam mixta duorum / corpora iunguntur faciesque inducitur illis / una ... , nec femina dici / nec puer ut possit, neutrumque et utrumque videntur*” (For the bodies of the two mingled, and they put on only one face ... , nor is it possible to say whether male or female, and they appear neither sex and both sexes) (IV. 373-4 and 378-9)¹³. Although there is a tendency to conflate the creatures of Plato with those of Ovid, they are actually different: “*Whereas the Platonic androgyne aspires to a unity that transcends gender (and possibly sex), the Ovidian hermaphrodite promotes and proliferates sexual difference*”¹⁴. While such a distinction is quite valid, the conflation of Plato and Ovid largely prevailed in late antique and medieval thought, and the androgyne/hermaphrodite became a kind of dumping ground category for genital and sexual deviance. We can place the blame for this conflation, should we wish to, on our next example.

Pliny the Elder in his famous and ubiquitous *Natural History* documents what he believes to be a shift in thinking about hermaphrodites in his own era. He observes in book seven that “*Gignuntur et utriusque sexus quos Hermaphroditos vocamus, olim androgynos vocatos et in prodigiis habitos, nunc vero in deliciis*” (Persons are also born of both sexes combined – what we call Hermaphrodites, formerly called androgyni and considered as portents, but now as entertainments)¹⁵. The term rendered “entertainments” by the Loeb’s modest translator, “*deliciis*”, certainly implies something delightful and pleasurable, but it can also be used as a term of endearment (as Catullus uses it, for example, “*Passer, deliciae meae puellae*”, Sparrow, my girl’s darling)¹⁶ and thus may have sexual connotations in this context. Pliny

goes on to declare that hermaphroditic transformation, the turning of females into males, “*non est fabulosum. invenimus in annalibus P. Licinioni Crasso C. Cassio Longino coss. Casini puerum factum ex virgine sub parentibus, iussuque harispicum deportatum in insulam desertam*” (is not an idle story. We find in the Annals that in the consulship of Publius Licinius Crassus and Gaius Cassius Longinus a girl at Casinum was changed into a boy, under the observation of the parents, and at the order of the augurs was conveyed away to a desert island)¹⁷. Interestingly, whereas Pliny at first dismisses the portentous aspects of the hermaphrodite, he almost immediately revisits the possibility of sacred meaning with the interference of the nervous augurs. The dual sacred/human nature of the hermaphrodite is here easily observed, as is the conflation not only of Platonic androgyny and Ovidian hermaphrodite, but also the changing of one gender into another, a further extension of the category.

Augustine inherited the classical history of the hermaphrodite, and indeed of all monsters, and attempted to reconcile the very existence of monstrosities with an omniscient deity. In *City of God*, Augustine decrees that monsters, both individuals and entire races, are divinely sanctioned and have a theological purpose: “*Deus enim creator est omnium, qui ubi et quando creari quid oporteat vel oportuerit, ipse novit, sciens universitatis pulchritudinem quarum partium vel similitudine vel diversitate contextat*” (For God is the creator of all things, and he himself knows at what place and time a given creature should be created, or have been created, selecting in his wisdom the various elements from whose likenesses and diversities he contrives the beautiful fabric of the universe)¹⁸. Isidore echoes Augustine’s sentiments when he notes that nothing is born contrary to nature, “*cum voluntas Creatoris cuiusque conditae rei natura sit*” (since the nature of everything is the will of the creator)¹⁹. Like Augustine, Isidore in his *Etymologies* sees monstrosities as having theological meaning, although he goes a bit further than Augustine’s interpretation

of monsters as illustrating “*beautiful fabric*,” suggesting that monstrous births predict future events, “*vult enim deus interdum ventura significare per aliqua nascentium noxia*” (for sometimes God wants to make known what is to come by way of faults in newborns)²⁰.

Neither Augustine nor Isidore in these passages appears to consider the specific humanity of monsters; Isidore even goes on to tell the reader that monsters that function as omens “*non diu vivunt, sed continuo ut nata fuerint occidunt*” (do not live a long time, but immediately upon being born, they die)²¹, which suggests that monsters have no existence or function beyond their theological message. However, in addition to such general pronouncements, both bishops direct readers towards the more mundane possibility of monsters as simply people. Isidore, immediately after asserting that omens do not live long, distinguishes ordinary deformities from extraordinary portents, giving as examples of the former people with extra digits and dwarves²². Isidore discusses hermaphrodites, along with myriad other monsters, in Book Eleven of his *Etymologies*, which famously deals with prodigies and portents: “*Hermaphroditae autem nuncupati eo quod eis uterque sexus appareat. Ἑρμῆς quippe apud Graecos masculus, Ἀφροδίτη femina nuncupatur. Hi dexteram mamillam virilem, sinistram muliebrem habentes vicissim coeundo et gignunt et pariunt*” (Hermaphrodites, however, are so called because each side appears to have its own sex. Hermes, of course, is called in Greek masculine, Aphrodite is called feminine. Their right breast is male, their left female, and in turn they have intercourse, both begetting and bearing children)²³.

Augustine’s entire point in addressing the issue of monsters and monstrous races in *City of God* is to determine if such creatures are in fact human, and he proclaims “*Verum quisquis uspaim nascitur homo, id est animal rationale mortale, quamlibet nostris inusitatam sensibus gerat corporis formam seu colorem sive motum sive sonum sive quamlibet vi, qualibet parte, qualibet qualitate naturam, ex illo uno proto-*

plasto originem ducere nullus fidelium dubitaverit" (Indeed, whoever anywhere is born a man, who is a rational, mortal animal, however much he seems strange to our senses in bodily form or color or motion or sound or in any faculty, in any part, or in any quality of his nature, no faithful person may doubt that he derives from that one original man who was made)²⁴.

After this broad, general statement of principle, Augustine mentions several individual monsters who, by his own argument, would be human beings as well: "*Apud Hipponem Zaritum est homo quasi lunatas habens plantas et in eis binos tantummodo digitos, similes et manus*" (Near Hippo-Zaritus is a man having crescent-shaped feet with only two digits, and his hands are similar); "*Androgyni, quos etiam Hermaphroditos nuncupant, quamvis admodum rari sint, difficile est tamen ut temporibus desint*" (Androgynes, which are also called hermaphrodites, are quite rare, yet it is difficult to find periods when they do not exist); "*Ante annos aliquot, nostra certe memoria, in Oriente duplex homo natus est superioribus membris, inferioribus simplex. Nam duo erant capita, duo pectora, quattuor manus, venter autem unus et pedes duo sicut uni homini; et tam diu vixit ut multos ad eum videndum fama contraheret*" (Some years ago, certainly within my memory, in the East a man was born, double in his upper limbs but single in his lower parts. For he had two heads, two chests, four hands, but one stomach and two feet just like a single man; and he lived for long enough that many people reported seeing him)²⁵. Thus Augustine includes in the categories "human being" and "monster" hermaphrodites, conjoined twins, and those suffering possibly from ectrodactyly. Hermaphrodites are not notably distinguished from forms of human monstrosity, but they are definitely human and monster; we might also note that Augustine continues the tendency found in Pliny to conflate androgynes and hermaphrodites into a single category.

Justinian's *Digest*, completed in 533 A.D., documents the treatment of the hermaphrodite as a legal person, but the Christian emperor's

laws are largely based on the opinions of the early 3rd-century pagan lawyer Ulpian. Ulpian treats the hermaphrodite as legally human, but the degree of hermaphroditism determines the extent of the hermaphrodite's rights. In discussing inheritance laws, Ulpian makes the astounding statement that "*Hermaphroditus plane, si in eo uirilia praeualebunt, postumum heredem instituere poterit*" (A hermaphrodite, though, will be able to institute a postumus as heir, if the male characteristics in him are predominant)²⁶. Whereas it might seem counterintuitive to speak of a hermaphrodite's sex, here the extent of the hermaphrodite's "male characteristics" or virility is crucial for determining legal standing. Elsewhere, when asked "*hermaphroditum cui comparamus?*" (to whom do we compare the hermaphrodite?), Ulpian answers, "*magis puto ejus sexus aestimandum, qui in eo praeualet*" (I think it is judged by whatever the greater sex is which prevails in him/her)²⁷. His "entertaining" or "delightful" androgyny and his potential portentous or prodigious qualities are irrelevant, but he is a bonafide person whose legal standing remains debatable, and who participates in such activities as providing an heir to his fortunes. The *Liber Monstrorum*, whose five extant MSS date from the ninth and tenth centuries, uses Ovid, Isidore and Augustine extensively as sources²⁸, and seems most concerned to establish the basis for reliable authority in the reporting of monstrosities. The book's very first entry speaks of the hermaphrodite, and although Orchard has identified its source as Augustine²⁹, the author asserts firsthand knowledge of such a creature: *Me enim quendam hominem in primordio operis utriusque sexus cognouisse testor, qui tamen ipsa facie plus et pectore uirilis quam muliebris apparuit; et uir a nescientibus putabatur, sed muliebria opera dilexit, et ignaros uirorum more meretricis, decipiebat; sed hoc frequenter apud humanum genus contigisse fertur.*

(Indeed I bear witness at the beginning of the work that I have known a person of both sexes, who although they appeared more

masculine than feminine from their face and chest, and were thought male by those who did not know, yet loved feminine occupations and deceived the ignorant amongst men in the manner of a whore; but this is said to have happened often amongst the human race)³⁰.

The author of the *Liber Monstrorum* is notoriously brusque and judgmental, but we can observe two noteworthy things: while vile, the hermaphrodite is clearly human, and the author wearily dismisses the single hermaphrodite he knows as a common occurrence. Secondly, the account of the hermaphrodite is embedded in a treatise whose function is largely religious, in that the entries the author finds credible tend to come from Christian authorities while those he dismisses out of hand derive from classical sources, such as Ovid³¹. In any case, our rather cranky and puritanical author censures not the hermaphrodite, but his/her behavior.

As Augustine observes, hermaphrodites are indeed unusual, and yet they seem to occur in every age³², an observation that would include the Middle Ages. Metzler notes that a variety of impairments were designated as hermaphroditism, but even so she has found only three, possibly four reliable recorded cases of hermaphroditism in medieval records. This paucity, considering the modern frequency with which conditions previously called hermaphroditism occur, leads her to speculate that medieval people were more tolerant in practice than we might think.

“For the peasants, who surely would periodically have encountered all sorts of strange, weird and wonderful abnormalities in the domestic animals around them, similar abnormalities in humans may well have just been considered part and parcel of life and not something to get particularly excited about³³”.

A tantalizing possibility, and a close reading of one of the cases Metzler documents offers potential insight.

“1300. Prope Bernam in villa ... mulier 10 annis viro cohabitavit; quia cognosci a viro non potuit, iudicio spirituali a viro

separatur; Romam proficiscens, Bononiae a chirurgo cunnus eius scinditur, egreditur virga virilis cum testiculis; domum reversa uxorem ducit, opera rustica facit, cum uxore concreditur legitime et sufficienter”.

(1300. In a village near Bern ... a woman lived with a husband for 10 years; because she was not able to be known by a man, she was separated from her husband by the spiritual court; proceeding to Rome, at Bologna her vulva was cut open by a surgeon, a male rod with testicles came out; he returned home, married a wife, did rustic work, and engaged with the wife properly and adequately)³⁴.

This fascinating account, delivered with a remarkable lack of horror, wonder or sensationalism but with recourse to fairly crude biological terms (“cunnus” and “virga”), can tell us much.

First, the somewhat crude terminology for male and female genitalia suggests a lighthearted, anecdotal approach to the material, rather than the serious, portentous attitude one might expect and often finds in monster descriptions. “*Cunnus*” is by all accounts an obscene term for female genitalia, and “*virga*” literally translates as twig or rod. Secondly, this hermaphrodite lives in a rural community, a village, and upon returning to that village from Bologna performs “rustic” work, likely of the most ordinary agricultural sort. Within this community she was allowed to marry and enter into normal family life, or at least to try to do so. Her failure “to be known by a man” implies repeated attempts, over ten years, to function procreatively as would be expected of a medieval woman. The intervention of the “spiritual court” to dissolve her marriage, along with the existence of the marriage itself, speaks to her involvement in both religious and civic life in her village. The journey to Rome via Bologna has intriguing implications. Although the text does not specify the motive for her trip, likely it was a religious pilgrimage, possibly to seek a spiritual cure, again pointing to her involvement in religious life. The detour to Bologna, whose university was widely known for surgical proce-

dures³⁵, implies a dual motive – that is, in addition to seeking a spiritual cure, she quite practically sought medical help for her condition. Metzler notes that this “is perhaps the only medieval case of an allegedly successful operation”³⁶. This success allows her, now him, to return home to his village, apparently without stigma (although no doubt with some notoriety) and take a wife, thus re-engaging in normal family life, “properly and adequately” this time.

Most remarkably, this anecdote about the hermaphrodite from Bern treats its subject exclusively in terms of his humanity; never is he referred to as a monster or a portent, and his existence does not seem to indicate anything portentous or symbolic. However, on the same page is a description from that year (1300) of a “*puer natus habens os plenum dentibus*” (a child born having a mouth full of teeth) as well as “*habens magnum oculum in fronte, faciem leonis, pedes anseris, manus canis*” (having a great eye in his forehead, the face of a lion, the feet of a goose, [and] the hands of a dog). This creature is referred to as “monstrum” (but also as a boy or child, “*puer*”) and it “*futura predicebat*” (foretold the future)³⁷. Like the conjoined twins below, who are treated largely as human beings but who are in close proximity to portentous earthquakes, the hermaphrodite is remarkable largely for his humanity, but can be found in the company of prodigious monsters. Such proximity implies categorical overlap, but the text actually seems to go to great pains to communicate a very human, slightly touching story regarding the hermaphrodite’s search for his true self and an ordinary, rustic family life.

If we leap forward less than three hundred years – the same distance separating Isidore of Seville from the *Liber Monstrorum*, and slightly less than the distance separating the *Liber Monstrorum* from the hermaphrodite of Bern – we find a different depiction of the hermaphrodite in Ambroise Pare’s 1573 treatise *Des Monstres et prodigies*. Chapter six, “*On Hermaphrodites or Androgynes*”, is much longer than any other mention of hermaphrodites previously

considered. Pare defines his subject, “*children who are born with double genitalia, one masculine and the other feminine*”,³⁸ and after reviewing the scientific cause of the deformity, further subdivides his subject into four different kinds: the truly male which can impregnate and whose vulva is superficial; the truly female, whose vulva is perfect but who also has a non-functioning male member; those having both male and female sex organs that cannot be used reproductively; and those having both male and female sex organs that can be used reproductively (this latter category is obliged to pick a side, so to speak)³⁹. Pare then composes a marvelous discourse on how the medical profession can, by observing various sex and gender signs, determine “*whether hermaphrodites are more apt at performing with and using one set of organs than another, or both, or none at all*”⁴⁰. Such signs include objective criteria, such as whether a vulva is sufficiently capacious and whether menstrual blood issues from it, as well as more subjective indications, such as whether the person under examination is “*bold or fearful, and other actions like those of males or of females*”⁴¹. Pare assures the reader that “*by this examination one will truly be able to discern and know the male or female hermaphrodite*”⁴². Pare closes his discussion with an account of hermaphrodites he has seen or heard reported from reliable witnesses. However, as a sort of addendum, Pare adds a brief section titled “*Memorable Stories About Women Who Have Degenerated Into Men*”. The hermaphrodite of Bern is not among Pare’s examples, but the ones he offers seem quite spontaneous, and Pare places the cause at the foot of male “heat” and the fact that these hermaphrodites’s penises did not emerge until the hidden male had worked up enough heat “*to push out what was hidden within*”⁴³.

What has happened to the medieval hermaphrodite? On the surface, we may not discern that much change; after all, matter-of-factness largely characterized the medieval attitude towards hermaphrodites. What Pare has altered, however, can tell us much. He includes caus-

es beyond God's message or beautiful fabric of creation: hermaphrodites are caused by the fact "*that the woman furnished as much seed as the man proportionately*"⁴⁴, and female-to-male transformations are caused by the build up of the aforementioned heat. He emphasizes the role that medical opinion, rather than the hermaphrodite's own inclinations, plays in the determination of the hermaphrodite's "true" nature. He also takes something away, as we see when Pare considers Pliny's account of the girl who changed into a boy:

*"Pliny (Book 7, Chapter 4) says similarly that a girl became a boy and was for this reason confined on a deserted and uninhabited island, by the decision and order of the Aruspices (or soothsayers). It seems to me that these prophets had not any cause to do this, for the reasons given above; still they estimated that such a monstrous thing was a bad augury and presage for them, which was the reason for driving monsters away and exiling them"*⁴⁵.

Gone is the prodigious company the hermaphrodite keeps; augury is replaced by medicine. This is a mixed blessing at best. Hanafi suggests that the "sacred monster" disappears into the science of categorization, "[m]echanistic paradigms, ... mathematization of natural laws"⁴⁶. She identifies the period during which this shift takes place as the seventeenth century, but as Pare's discourse testifies, the process was well on its way at least a century earlier. What I find fascinating about this process is not only the way science replaces the sacred, thus eliminating the portentous aspect of the monster, but also how the human being is also in large part eliminated, or at least marginalized. One of Pare's gender switching examples, the young woman who, chasing swine, works up enough heat for the hidden penis to burst forth, is spoken of in scientific terms:

He was in the fields and rather robustly chasing his swine, which were going into a wheat field, [and] finding a ditch, he wanted to cross over it, and having leaped, at that very moment the genitalia and the male rod came to be developed in him, having ruptured the ligaments

*by which previously they had been held enclosed and locked in... having brought together Physicians and Surgeons in order to get an opinion on this, they found that she was a man, and no longer a girl; and presently, after having reported to the Bishop – who was now defunct Cardinal of Lenoncort – and by his authority, an assembly having been called, the shepherd received a man’s name*⁴⁷.

Despite superficial resemblance to the hermaphrodite of Bern, we can observe that the Physicians and Surgeons are the real authorities here, the Bishop only coming into the picture after the medical determination and in fact limiting himself to authorizing the name change. Also interesting is the fact that the observation about Pliny and the silliness of augury occurs immediately after this account of the swineherd, thus precluding any kind of portentous or spiritual meaning to be derived from the story, unlike the prodigious company kept by the hermaphrodite of Bern. Pare’s example also lacks the agency we observe in the Bern hermaphrodite who sought help, likely of both the religious and medical varieties. Science has replaced the sacred and, in the process, has also somehow reduced the monster’s humanity. For the medieval mind, the monster manages to be both human and prodigious, but with the ascendancy of science, not only is the prodigious replaced by scientific causes, but the human is to some extent replaced by medical jargon and scientific categories; one thinks of Pare’s four subdivisions of hermaphrodites and the proliferation of terms needed to deal with them. Hanafi documents “*how transparent modern medicine’s efforts have been to grant normalcy to something that obviously resists classification*”⁴⁸ through elaborate Latinate terminology for things like conjoined twins having two heads, four arms, but only two legs; I would only suggest that she omit the word “modern”.

In his historical survey of attitudes towards monstrosity, Dudley Wilson makes “*the distinction between the fantasy monster, which has links with humanity only in so far as it has been created by hu-*

manity, and the monster within humanity, which is a human being with a difference, usually referred to nowadays as a handicap"⁴⁹. The medieval monster is both these things. We can certainly distinguish between the fantasy, or portentous, aspect and the human aspect, but we should be aware in doing so that we will be reproducing a distinction made by disability studies and skillfully brought to light and applied by Irina Metzler to the Middle Ages. Specifically, Metzler points out how "*one may be born impaired but one is made disabled*"⁵⁰. Disability is a social construction with all sorts of cultural trappings and assumptions about the person with the disability. Impairment, on the other hand, is a "physiological reality"⁵¹. For the Middle Ages, I believe, we can substitute "monstrosity" for "disability". As so many scholars have pointed out, monstrosity, like disability, exists as "pure culture"; it is useful to make the distinction, then, between the disability/monstrosity and the impaired individual. Just as one can be, simultaneously in the modern world, disabled and impaired, one could be, simultaneously in the Middle Ages, monstrous and impaired. But to concentrate exclusively on the social or cultural meaning of the medieval monster involves marginalizing or stereotyping the impaired medieval person, whose existence deserves greater scrutiny. The vocabulary of disability studies is useful in that it allows us to approach the impaired medieval person as something more than "pure culture," and also more than an object of pity or revulsion. In addition to bringing the vocabulary of disability studies to the medieval period, Metzler also performs the valuable service of questioning generally accepted notions of the physical and emotional lives available to impaired medieval people: "*Simplistic attempts to explain reactions to impairment are those which follow the principle of a genetic reductionism, whereby human repugnance of impairment is positioned as inborn or instinctive*"⁵². Examination of analyses of medieval monstrosities does reveal a tendency on the part of critics to such reductionism, as Metzler details. She documents and challenges critical

and historical assumptions, including that the impaired were reviled or even killed, left uncared for, functioned largely as signs of sin, and were vehicles of the diabolical. Wilson states as a given that “*In earlier ages, the monster--whether or not seen as sign or portent--was definitely regarded as a being outside human society, where human society is equated with normality*”⁵³, and I have already suggested that Hanafi overstates the case. Metzler argues that the tendency beginning in the nineteenth century to institutionalize impaired people led to the twentieth century practice of anachronistically regarding the reaction of pity and revulsion to impairment as universal. Alternately, she suggests that “*the non-segregated presence of impaired people in their home communities, often in small, face-to-face societies, did not lead to the forming of a ‘disabled identity’ for the individual*”⁵⁴. Thus, an impaired medieval person may very well have been a monster in theory, but, within his/her own family and community, s/he would have been a person in practice.

We have a few intriguing accounts of possibly genuine, human monsters in the Middle Ages, including the not atypical Bern hermaphrodite, and these accounts for the most part replicate Augustine’s simultaneously dual treatment of monsters as both theological signs (monsters) and genuine human beings (impaired persons). Two examples are of particular interest as, unlike the Bern hermaphrodite, their monstrosity was clearly evident at birth or shortly after, and thus they would have always been identified as both monster and human, as we will see.

John Block Friedman has addressed the legal and spiritual condition of monsters in the Middle Ages with his analysis of the human status of monsters as revealed in the writings of the canonists. Concerned as they were with the souls of newborns, canonists directly addressed priests’ questions about the propriety of baptizing monstrous infants. The terms used to confront this issue reveal that monsters can indeed be human:

“But what if there is a single monster which has two bodies joined together: ought it to be baptized as one person or as two? I say that since baptism is made according to the soul and not according to the body, howsoever there be two bodies, if there is only one soul, then it ought to be baptized as one person. But if there be two souls, it ought to be baptized as two persons. But how is it to be known if there be one soul or two? I say that if there be two bodies, there are two souls. But if there is one body, there is one soul. And for this reason it may be supposed that if there be two chests and two heads there are two souls. If however, there be one chest and one head, however much the other members be doubled, there is only the one soul⁵⁵”.

Friedman then declares that “we can conclude that *monstrum* came to be defined indirectly as something that could have both a soul and a legal status, and therefore partake of humanity from the social and theological points of view⁵⁶. That being said, what priests and canon lawyers have to say about monstrous humans in scholarly discourse may not have translated directly into the experiences of impaired medieval people. Fear and revulsion on the part of laypeople would likely have impacted impaired individuals much more frequently than the magnanimous attitude of the clergy--if laypeople did actually respond with fear and revulsion, which, as Metzler points out, was not necessarily the case. Sally Crawford has collected documentation from several studies of Anglo-Saxon era cemeteries that testifies to deformed and disabled people being helped by their communities to live for years, often into adulthood⁵⁷. In his book-length study of medieval childhood, Nicholas Orme argues, contrary to much of the conventional wisdom at the time, that medieval people were generally affectionate, caring parents who acknowledged that children were not merely small adults and treated them accordingly⁵⁸. Part of his evidence includes documentation of children with impairments who had obviously been cared for by attentive adults, such as the case of 14th century conjoined twins.

Et paulo quidem ante haec tempora, erat quoddam monstrum humanum in Anglia, ab umbilico et sursum divisum, masculus scilicet et femina, et in inferiori parte connexum. Porro, uno comedente, bibente, dormiente vel loquente, alter dissimiliter fecit quod voluit. Nam unum ante alium mortuum superstes per triduum circumferbat in ulnis. Solebant namque dulcissime simul cantare. Obierunt tandem in villa de Kyngestona super Hullo, in aetate circiter 18 annorum, paulo ante dictam pestilentiam subsecutam.

(And indeed shortly before this time, there was a certain human monster in England, divided from the navel upward, evidently into male and female, and joined in its lower parts. Further, one would eat drink, sleep or speak while the other did differently whatever it wanted. When one died before the other, the survivor carried it around in its arms for three days. They were accustomed to sing together most sweetly. They died finally at home in Kingston-upon-Hull, aged about 18 years, a little while before word of the pestilence arrived)⁵⁹.

Putting aside the writer's obvious mistake regarding the twins' genders, we can discern quite a bit from this brief anecdote. First, the twins are considered monsters, but interestingly they are "*monstrum humanum*", and thus both monster and human; membership in one category does not preclude membership in the other. Secondly, even if the writer's estimate of the twins' age at death is off significantly, they clearly lived for many years, which argues for intensive adult care of the children, and likely affection as well, especially in infancy. Further evidence of adult attention can be found in their tendency "*dulcissime simul cantare*", which would have required instruction and practice. Their singing, along with the writer's observation about their ability to function independently at different activities, also suggests that the twins were in a sense employed, that they were exhibited for money. Whereas we might find such exhibition a repugnant sort of profiteering from one's children's misfortune, we

should bear in mind that in the Middle Ages most children did some sort of work, on farms, shops, smithies, looms and various other occupations, assisting adults, learning trades and contributing to the family's income. An impaired child would likely have been expected to contribute as best s/he could to the family's wellbeing. The rearing of helpless infants and later the need for employment are very human activities and quite mundane ones at that, as are eating, drinking, sleeping and speaking in which we are also told the twins engaged. The final sentence, however, like the opening one, gestures away from the human and back toward the monster by mentioning that the twins died shortly before the outbreak of the plague. As Isidore and his predecessors had established, monsters often presaged disasters and other momentous occasions, as did certain natural phenomena, such as earthquakes. Incidentally, the passage immediately preceding the account of the conjoined twins documents an earthquake of 1349 so strong that it ejected the monks from their cells. Thus we find in this brief account of medieval conjoined twins evidence of their supernatural significance and their everyday human existence; both discourses are present and functioning and, like the twins, not interfering with one another.

Orme also cites the case recorded by Matthew Paris of the discovery of "*quidam humuncio non nanus, quia membra habens proportionalia*" (a kind of small man, not a dwarf, since he had all his limbs in proportion)⁶⁰ in the year 1249 on the Isle of Wight. The rest of the description is intriguing for what it says about the overlap of monstrosity and humanity. First of all, the "small man" has a name, "Johannes" (John), a very common name but also a very Christian one, arguing for his membership in the religious community of medieval Europe. Secondly, John has employment, albeit of a peculiar kind, related explicitly to his identity as a monster: "*Quia monstrum fuit naturae, pro admiratione intuentium regina secum circumduci praecepit*" (Because he was a monster of nature, the queen com-

manded that he be led around with her for the wonder of observers)⁶¹. The passage seems to imply that John was a court fool “*quia monstrum fuit naturae*”, but such employment does not necessarily belittle, humiliate, or dehumanize him in ways we might assume it would. As Orme observes, “*Making them [unusual or impaired people] fools is distasteful by modern standards, but contemporaries may have thought that they were giving them roles in which they could earn a living*”⁶². Indeed, considering his diminutive stature and the necessity of brute strength for many jobs, John likely considered his position as court fool with equanimity. As his function, to induce “wonder” in observers, illustrates, John is indeed a “monster of nature,” but he is also a human being with a name, a job, and a place in society.

All three medieval examples of monstrosity presented here – the Bern hermaphrodite, the dwarf from the Isle of Wight, and the conjoined twins of Kingston-upon-Hull – also partake of human activities alongside their monstrosity and its wonder-producing function. All have jobs, with the dwarf’s and the conjoined twins’ occupations deriving directly from their impairments. All clearly partake of civic life and belong to a community that appears to accept them. John the dwarf and the Bern hermaphrodite are Christian, the latter apparently fairly devout, and likely the conjoined twins are as well (having no doubt received a double baptism!). Certainly the twins were observed performing human activities that revealed they were active, competent participants in daily life. One could argue that Pare’s swineherd fulfills these criteria as well; however, Pare adds a scientific explanation for the swineherd’s transformation that none of the medieval examples bother to provide:

“[W]omen have as much hidden within the body as men have exposed outside; leaving aside, only, that women don’t have so much heat, nor the ability to push out what by the coldness of their temperament is held as if bound to the interior. Wherefore if with time,

*the humidity of childhood which prevented the warmth from doing its full duty being exhaled for the most part, the warmth is rendered more robust, vehement, and active, then it is not an unbelievable thing if the latter, chiefly aided by some violent movement, should be able to push out what was hidden within*⁶³.

Certainly the theory regarding the relative hotness of men and coldness of women prevailed during the Middle Ages⁶⁴, but the chronicler of the Bern hermaphrodite did not offer it, or any other explanation, for the hermaphrodite's condition. Nor do we find any scientific or medical explanation for the dwarf or the conjoined twins. The only explanation the texts allude to is wonder, a spiritual explanation entirely commensurate with Augustine and Isidore, but clearly insufficient or inconsequential for Pare.

Based on this survey of medieval monstrosity, we can come to two apparently – but only apparently – contradictory conclusions: medieval people were both terribly practical and immensely spiritual. Lacking the ability to intervene medically in most cases of monstrosity, “*in general, medieval medical discourse was content with describing the symptoms, theorizing about aetiology and philosophizing about possible meanings*”⁶⁵. Metzler here is referring specifically to hermaphrodites, but the same practice applies to dwarves and conjoined twins and any number of other physical impairments, from the merely inconvenient to the inevitably fatal. Confronted by “untreatable and incurable”⁶⁶ conditions in their offspring, medieval parents had only two options: abandon or kill it, or accept the child as it is, in a sense, make the best of it, as the parents of the dwarf and the conjoined twins clearly did. Whereas earlier, pagan parents had the option, or sometimes the compulsion, to do away with monstrous progeny, medieval Christians (with notable exceptions) were bound by Augustine's dictate that their little bundle of monstrosity was descended from Adam, had at least one soul, and was entitled to parental nurture, both physical and spiritual. This dictate, spiritual

in nature, had the very practical consequences of adaptation we observed above. That medieval people saw no contradiction in this superficially paradoxical response – their practicality did not lead them to search for cures or causes in most cases, nor did their religious devotion preclude the practical necessity of employment – should not surprise us. Rather, we are surprised only when we anachronistically apply our own mutually exclusive categories of reason and spirituality to the Middle Ages, a time when, as Karen Jolly points out, “*nature and supernature were not differentiated. They were perceived as one, both experienced simultaneously through one another, using the senses as well as the imagination*”⁶⁷. When monstrous progeny are considered in light of such non-differentiation, the dual nature of medieval monsters, as people and as signs, makes perfect sense, and the superficial contradiction evaporates. We are left with the refreshing observation that the Middle Ages, not especially notable for its forward thinking, adopted a stunningly progressive stance as regards human impairment and disability, realizing that in fact, monsters are people, too.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES

1. COHEN J., *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. In: COHEN J. (Ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 4.
2. HANAFI Z., *The Monster in the Machine*. Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2000, p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*
4. WILLIAMS D., *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*. Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 1996, p. 3.
5. FRIEDMAN J.B., *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981.

6. COHEN J., ref. note 1, p. 7.
7. ASMA S., *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 76.
8. NEWMAN-STILLE D., *Morality and Monstrous Disability in Topographia Hibernica*. In: *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe*. New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 2010, pp. 231-57.
9. PLATO, *Symposium*, Trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1989, p. 25.
10. BRISSON L., *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2002, p. 80.
11. PLATO, ref. note 9, p. 27.
12. OVID, *Metamorphoses I-IV*. Ed. D. E. Hill. Oxford, Oxbow Books, 1985, p. 142.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 142 and 144.
14. NEDERMAN C., TRUE J., *The Third Sex: The Idea of the Hermaphrodite in Twelfth-Century Europe*. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1996; 6, 4: p. 499.
15. PLINY THE ELDER, *Natural History*, 7.3.34. Trans. H. Rackham, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1942.
16. CATULLUS, *The Complete Poems*. Ed. and trans. G. Lee, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 2.
17. PLINY THE ELDER, ref. note 15.
18. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *The City of God Against the Pagans*. 16.8. Trans. E.M. Sanford and W.M. Green, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1965.
19. ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi: Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, 11.3.1. Ed. W.M. Lindsay, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1911.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 11.3.5.
22. *Ibid.*, 11.3.6-7.
23. *Ibid.*, 11.3.11.
24. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, ref. note 18.
25. *Ibid.*
26. MOMMSEN T. AND KRUEGER P. (Eds.), *The Digest of Justinian*, 28.2.6. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.
27. *Ibid.*, 1.5.10.

Medieval Monsters

28. ORCHARD A., *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1995, p. 86.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 258-9.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 318-20.
32. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, ref. 18.
33. METZLER I., *Hermaphroditism in the Western Middle Ages: Physicians, Lawyers and the Intersexed Person*. In: *Bodies of Knowledge: Cultural Interpretations of Illness and Medicine in Medieval Europe*. Oxford, Archaeopress, 2010, p. 36.
34. ANNALES COLOMARIENSES MAIORES. In: PERTZ G.H. (Ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. S.S., 17, Hannover, 1861, p. 225.
35. DESHAIES E.M., DIRISIO D., POPP J., *Medieval Management of Spinal Injuries: Parallels Between Theodoric of Bologna and Contemporary Spine Surgeons*. *Neurosurgical Focus* 2004; 16.1: 1.
36. METZLER I., ref. note 33, p. 36.
37. ANNALES COLOMARIENSES MAIORES, ref. note 34, p. 225.
38. PARE A., *On Monsters and Marvels*. Trans. Janis L. Pallister. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 26.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
46. HANAFI Z., ref. note 2, p. 4.
47. PARE A., ref. note 38, p. 32.
48. HANAFI Z., ref. note 2, p. 4.
49. WILSON D., *Signs and Portents*. New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 14.
50. METZLER I., *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages*. Oxford and New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 21.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
53. WILSON D., ref. note 49, p. 4.
54. METZLER I., ref. note 50, p. 7.

Lisa Verner

55. GUIDO OF MONT ROCHER, *Manipulus Curatorum Officia Sacerdotus*. In: *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. Transl. J.B. Friedman, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 182.
56. FRIEDMAN J.B., *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 183.
57. CRAWFORD S., *The Nadir of Western Medicine? Texts, Contexts and Practice in Anglo-Saxon England*. In: CRAWFORD S., LEE C. (eds.), ref. note 33, p. 42.
58. ORME N., *Medieval Children*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 96-8.
59. BURTON T., *Chronica Monasterii De Melsa, a Fundatione Usque Ad Annum 1396*. Ed. E.A. Bond, London, Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1868, vol. 3, pp. 69-70.
60. PARIS M., *Chronica Majora*. Ed. H.R. Luard, London, Longman, 1872, vol. 5, p. 82.
61. *Ibid.*
62. ORME N., ref. note 58, p. 97.
63. PARE A., ref. note 38, pp. 32-3.
64. JACQUART D., THOMASSET C., *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*. Trans. Matthew Adamson. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 81.
65. METZLER I., ref. note 33, p. 36.
66. *Ibid.*
67. JOLLY K., *Father God and Mother Earth: Nature-Mysticism in the Anglo-Saxon World*. In: SALISBURY J. (ed.), *The Medieval World of Nature*. New York, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, p. 225.

Correspondence should be addressed to:

lverner@uno.edu