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THE WOMAN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO A DOG  
MONSTROSITY AND BESTIALITY IN *QUAESTIONES  
MEDICO-LEGALES* BY PAOLO ZACCHIA

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SUMMARY

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*The Italian Paolo Zacchia (1584-1659) is considered one of the fathers of forensic medicine. From a letter sent by the physician and botanist Pietro Castelli, the article seeks to reconstruct the opinions that Zacchia expressed about monsters in his monumental Quaestiones Medico-Legales. Although he did not seem too sure about the possibility that a hybrid could be born from the union of a man and a beast, he believed that God intervened, allowing the birth so that the abomination could be discovered. The opinion of Zacchia is related to the image that people had at the time of the relationship between humans and animals.*

A Letter from Sicily

Last year, 26 December 1635, the feast day of Saint Stephen, here, in the noble city of Messina, the wife of a goldsmith, who the previous year had given birth to a monster in the shape of a donkey, gave birth to one that looked like a dog. I also learned from the people of Messina that two years ago a woman of a nobler family gave

*Key words:* Paolo Zacchia – Monsters – Bestiality – Science and Religion

birth to a Cyclops. In fact, not without reason the ancients collocated the Cyclopes in Sicily. Not only are these [monsters] generated here with a certain frequency, but there are also many caudate fetuses, as well on the isle of Britain, or in Liguria, where I have seen many born with a tail, which is, however, cut off when they are infants<sup>1</sup>.

In 1636 the physician and botanist Pietro Castelli, who had recently moved to Sicily, sent this letter to the famous Paolo Zacchia, whose rise in the elite circles of healthcare in the papal Rome of the day would continue for a long time yet<sup>2</sup>. An important boost to his social rise came from the monumental *Quaestiones Medico-Legales*, which Zacchia was publishing at the time<sup>3</sup>. The Sicilian letter would be included in the book's appendix, among the *consilia* or consultations, which aimed at illustrating the main arguments of the rest of the treatise. The two men had known each other personally for many years. In the 1620s, in Rome, there had been a heated argument about the legality of the use of vitriol-based medicines, during which, in 1623, Castelli had published a series of epistles, the longest of which, dated 1623, was dedicated to his famous colleague, "the highly eminent philosopher and physician, as well as an honest friend"<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, upon being transferred to Messina in 1634, he had asked Zacchia to take his place as the personal physician of Cardinal Lelio Biscia<sup>5</sup>.

A drawing, not reproduced in the printed work, was enclosed in the letter, which nevertheless provided a long description of the monster:

*It was shaped like a dog and its sacrum seemed very wide and full, but without a tail. The skin, or better the cutis, [was] completely hairless, ruddy and highly tenuous, only in this was it similar to a human. Instead, its head, considering [its] shape and the position of the eyes, could be more easily compared to that of a bird than to that of a dog, although the ears were canine, the right one more oblong than the left one, sticking straight up. In place of the nose it had a wide, pendulous membrane, which, once dried, remained erect. It had a small, round mouth with the two lower*

## Monstrosity and Bestiality

*incisors. Its front feet were reminiscent of those of a dog, but without nails; instead, the rear feet were truly monstrous: they were made of four oblong fistulas, of equal size and empty, but osseous, some of which had a sort of round plug at the end. Its abdomen was swollen and livid. I immediately eviscerated it, but, since the entrails were putrid and very fetid, I could not study them carefully. I only observed that the left kidney was very large, but I did not see the right one: I was not surprised since I was investigating amidst decay and nauseating stench. Likewise, I was not able to recognize its sex, but it seemed to me to be a female. The length of the cadaver from its clavicle to the coccyx was a handbreadth, and from head to toe a handbreadth and a half. Then, with proper care, I dried the body, which I keep in my museum, complete and displayable<sup>6</sup>.*

To tell the truth, Castelli did not have many doubts about what had happened and most likely wrote to Rome, rather than for enlightenment, to ensure that his name would appear, linked to some bizarre case, in a prestigious work like *Quaestiones Medico-Legales*<sup>7</sup>. His reference to the “body, which I keep in my museum, complete and displayable” was basically a form of self-promotion: “through the possession of objects, one physically acquired knowledge, and through their display, one symbolically acquired the honor and reputation that all men of learning cultivated”<sup>8</sup>.

Castelli emphasized the psychological characteristics of the woman, while, not dedicating much attention to her physical state (“of good aspect and form” were the only words used), he did not clarify whether he had ever seen her (he stated that he had spoken with her husband, but did not say whether he had had a chance to examine, or at least see, the new mother, which, in such cases, was not the custom for the medicine of the time)<sup>9</sup>. In this way, he provided information that Zacchia, practically spoon-fed, could use to reach the only possible final conclusion: the monster was born because of the woman’s fervid imagination. The matter would, however, prove to be more complicated<sup>10</sup>. After all, everyone knew about the “Jacobi experimentum” recounted in the *Book of Genesis*, to which Castelli himself made reference:

Jacob, after having worked for his father-in-law, Laban, for many years grazing his flocks and managing his properties, had decided to leave his home and asked for a flock of his own as “severance pay”. As he was not successful, he resorted to a trick. He thus proposed a deal to the old man: he would continue to graze his flocks, leaving his father-in-law the white sheep and the goats of a single color, but keeping the dark sheep and all the speckled and dotted animals for himself. Laban accepted. Then, the young man took fresh branches and made incisions on them, so that they appeared striated and of non-uniform color. He put them where the animals went to drink and mate. After looking at those colored marks, they gave birth to streaked, speckled, and spotted lambs and kids ...<sup>11</sup>

Castelli recounted that the first time the woman had been pregnant, while looking out the window she had seen a donkey mating in the street and had been so struck by this, that she had given birth to a being that looked like a donkey. Instead, the second time, while she was having intimate relations with her husband, she had felt observed by the family dog. She had pointed this out to the man, who, calmly, had asked her why she was so concerned. At the end of the nine months, however, she had often heard the fetus barking from inside her uterus, and she had confided in her husband that she feared that she had a dog in her womb. In the end, she had given birth to the monster, but had been unable to expel the placenta, which was particularly hard and leathery, until 10 days after the delivery. The physician elucidated, “the cadaver with its occiput broken was brought to me two days after the birth. The father said that while it was emerging from the uterus the mother herself had pulled its head, and that it had broken. But, for my part, I suspect that it was deliberately crushed because it was a monster”<sup>12</sup>.

Zacchia had been not so sure that the mixing of human semen with that of animals would not lead to procreation. As we will see, he had already hinted at that possibility in a special section of *Quaestiones*

*Medico-Legales*, but over time he was increasingly convinced. After all, he warned, fueling this false belief only had dramatic consequences: women, in fact, thinking that they could not become pregnant, continued to mate with animals with impunity, but then, after delivery, blamed the monstrosity of those born to a defect in sperm or blood or, as in the case in question, to an overly lively imagination ... His argument was based on exclusion. It was not possible that the monster of Messina was the result of a defect of semen or blood, because both the mother and the father – in the opinion of a cursory Zacchia, whose only source was Castelli who, in his turn, was quite reticent on the subject – seemed to be in good health. Moreover, had there been a defect in the semen, a mole [*moles*] would have come out – that “however, I believe is only spawned from a female seed” – while what was born was an animal that was in some way complete<sup>13</sup>. Finally, the fact that the monstrous birth was repeated led to the exclusion of the influence of the imagination: it was not possible that such a rare event could happen twice to the same person in such a short period of time.

It was necessary to understand how the human body worked. Imagination was an animal faculty: differently from what Thomas Feyens believed, therefore it could not perform a task pertaining to a natural faculty, such as the *facultas formatrix*, nor direct it very much<sup>14</sup>. Otherwise, it would have been necessary to attribute the *facultas formatrix* with a sort of *cognitio*, which, instead, it clearly did not possess. Nor would the problem have been resolved by sustaining, as indeed Feyens did, that the *cognitio* was twofold: “true” *cognitio*, possessed by the *stricto sensu* powers of knowledge, and “natural” *cognitio*, corresponding to the unconscious way that animated parts of the body, plants, etc. “know” how to function (in modern terms you could call this their biological information)<sup>15</sup>. For Zacchia, in fact, Feyens “cites this natural cognition completely spuriously, since all things that function naturally do not act through any co-

gnition, but by necessity of nature”<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, even permitting (but not granting) the said *cognitio naturalis*, it would not explain anything: it would, in fact, have acted in a manner favorable to its nature, not in a way that would alter and destroy it, as in the case of the procreation of monsters. There was an additional difficulty. The *facultas formatrix*, as demonstrated by the continuing growth of bodies, never rested and was very strong. How could it be overcome by imagination, if not even will was able to influence it? Finally, if the *phantasmata* with which it acted were immaterial, how could they have an effect on material? As a result of all of these reflections, only one conclusion could be reached: the effects of the imagination on the fetus were more imaginary than real:

*On the basis of what has been said, excluding imagination and defects of the semen as causes of these monsters, what remains is the suspicion of the commingling of semen of different species. Therefore, I still suspect this woman, who gave birth to the monster you have described, of having nefarious relations and, to bring the truth of the facts to light, it is necessary to proceed with these clues so as to identify others. Unless it is said in her defense that: 1) said procreation of monsters can be ascribed to the nature of the region, since Sicily is fecund with these monsters, as you yourself admit; 2) this birth belongs to the type of mole and that the barking that the woman spoke of was imaginary; that it was her fear that made it seem as if the fetus were barking. In this vein there is also the opinion, which I find convincing, that moles are generated by the female seed alone, together with the flowing of blood to the uterus. It could then have happened that the woman, watching the donkey that mated and the dog, released her own seed during the act of coitus and conceived. From this, she brought to light these monsters. Although this interpretation is not lacking in great difficulties<sup>17</sup>.*

### *Zacchia's Monsters*

In short, Zacchia, who generally did not like statements that were too restrictive, seemed to “absolve” the woman only so as not to contradict his colleague, but, if it were left to him, the evidence would have

led to quite a different conclusion. His was certainly not an improvised opinion. He had, in fact, dedicated an important section to monsters in *Quaestiones Medico-Legales*, in which he had defined them as not quite human<sup>18</sup>, and for many people they should not even be baptized<sup>19</sup> or could even be killed with impunity (not being children legally, they obviously could not be beneficiaries of a will either)<sup>20</sup>. They were “non-vital” beings, because of their ephemeral nature<sup>21</sup>: often aborted, they were able to live with their mothers only as long as they remained in the uterus; in fact, they died immediately after birth<sup>22</sup>. He defined them as follows:

*The monster is an animated being, generated in such a way that it deviates enormously in goodness and simplicity from the figure of the species to which it belongs ... I say “in goodness,” meaning for goodness the symmetry and natural proportion of the figure ... “In simplicity,” to include the monsters that count excessive members or which have additional parts that are not proper for the individuals of the species to which they belong ... Since we cannot call monsters those in possession of every type of error or deviance in goodness and simplicity of figure, like a deformed foot or an extra or missing finger ... those words “that deviates enormously” were added*<sup>23</sup>.

Having set aside the teratological classifications offered by those who had preceded him<sup>24</sup>, Zacchia devised his own, definable as “anatomical-combinatorial:” the monster was the result of an excess or defect of parts. Therefore, it could be a monster: a) on the basis of its “form or external figure;” or b) on the basis of the “substance of its members or their quantity.” In case a) there were three ways in which this could take place: a.1) “according to external constitution,” if the organs did not have the appearance they should have had, as in the case of a twisted nose, shrunken feet or crossed eyes; a.2) “according to their site,” when the members and parts were not in their natural position, like when an eye was located on the chest, the hands came directly out of the hips, or a foot was connected to the tibia; a.3) “according

to the substance of the member,” if the human body hosted a part that did not belong to its species, like a dog’s head, the legs of an ox or a horse, but also when a woman gave birth to a dog or a hare, or a child was born to a horse<sup>25</sup>. In case b) the articulation was dual: b.1) for defect, if a part was mutilated or the subject was extremely small, as in the case of pygmies; b.2) for excess, when a part was overly abundant or multiple, or the subject was very large, as in the case of giants<sup>26</sup>. Monsters had traditionally been considered “signs,” that is, as bearers of a specific message: generally, the announcement of a situation of moral abjection or a warning of fearful future events<sup>27</sup>. Some believed that Cicero has sustained that the name “monster” derived from the fact that it “futura praemonstret,” i.e. it shows the future in advance<sup>28</sup>. However, for Zacchia this was an error. In fact, freeing himself from tradition, he did not believe in the “communicative” power of these beings<sup>29</sup>. Hence, he sustained that the monster should rather be interrelated to the fact that it “ab unoquoque unicuique commonstretur,” that is to say that it “is indicated by each to each”. Proof of this was Father Niccolò Riccardi, master of the Sacred Palace, whom everyone called the “Father Monster,” because he was admired and judged by all to be a prodigy of wisdom<sup>30</sup>. The most fascinating aspect of these pages of *Quaestiones Medico-Legales* is, above all, the *vis destruens* towards knowledge that was widely shared (not always accompanied by an equally energetic *vis adstruens*). Given the purely natural origin of the monsters, Zacchia dismissed the “metaphysical causes” (God and demons), mostly referring to the copious existing literature, in particular to Fortunio Liceti and Martin Weinrich. However, stating that he did not have patience with superstitions, he focused on refuting some particular clichés. First of all, he rejected any influence of the stars. He then continued on to demonstrate the incorrectness of the belief that monsters could be born from relations with incubuses and succubuses, of whose existence he was nevertheless firmly convinced<sup>31</sup>. According



to a certain theological-philosophical-medical-juridical *koiné* – whose proponents included Martin Delrio, Gerolamo Cardano, and Caspar Bauhin, among others – demons, taking on the appearance of succubuses, would lay with men to snatch their seed, then turn into incubuses, and pass the seed to women, in this way inseminating them<sup>32</sup>. If this were true, Zacchia noted, the procreation that was possibly derived would, nonetheless, have been due to merely natural causes, since “a demon cannot reach beyond the forces created by nature”<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, the demon would only have been an intermediary, and, as a spiritual and incorporeal substance, it could not, in any way, have blemished the semen<sup>34</sup>.

That someone or something could actually be born seemed frankly improbable to him, “unless the Holy Mother Church does not teach otherwise”<sup>35</sup>. The spiritual substance of semen was considered to be so delicate that it cooled and dispersed if it was not placed “in a suitable container” in a timely manner, while the period of time for conception with – or, better, by means of – a demon would have been rather long: the succubus would have had to gather the semen, then transform itself into an incubus or pass the semen to one, which would have had to lie with a woman, waiting for her to produce her own seed, which would have to merge with the semen taken from the man. This is why witches confessed that the semen received from demons was so cold that it did not give them any pleasure!<sup>36</sup> In short, it was best to not lend too much credence to women who claimed to have conceived with demons. They had, in fact, been fooled: either by the demons, who had made their wombs swell and, at the time of delivery, put children taken from somewhere else under the women; or by others (most likely the men who had impregnated them).

In any case, supposing that women could conceive in this way, why would a monster be born from semen that, as had been demonstrated, could only be human? If you really wanted to find the cause of monstrosity in demons, it would have been wise to admit they could act

to alter the semen or a fetus that had already formed in the uterus, “but perhaps this cannot happen so easily”<sup>37</sup>. The “preternatural” – category, as Lorraine Daston observed, invented in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas – was undergoing a gradual “naturalization” between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, due to the efforts of physicians, natural philosophers and theologians, who aimed to drastically reduce the possibility of both divine and, above all, diabolical intervention in nature<sup>38</sup>. In this climate, Zacchia positioned himself – as Elena Brambilla notes – as a “rational or skeptical magician”: someone who, far from denying the theological or simply magical tradition, attempted to destroy it from within, giving it a rational basis<sup>39</sup>. Hence, for example, the attacks on the visionary Sprenger<sup>40</sup>.

### *The Power of the Imagination*

Pietro Castelli attributed, as has been seen, great importance to the imagination. This was a very ancient belief. Augustine, for example, remembered how Hippocrates, using just this type of explanation, had been able to exonerate from the accusation of adultery a white woman who had given birth to a child with dark skin: “He urged those men to see if by chance in their bedroom there was a painting of a child who resembled him; the painting was found and the woman was freed from suspicion”<sup>41</sup>. Nothing new, therefore. Nevertheless, between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century this type of belief was much discussed by the medical class<sup>42</sup>. For many, the “species” which resulted from the object that was seen, had passed through the eyes to the “common sense” or sixth sense, which Aristotle located in the heart and in the precordial region, and was then, in the case of species, transported by the blood to the fetus<sup>43</sup>. The concept was of an imagination “agent” or “transitive,” which had its roots in a more Arab than Greek-Roman tradition: the *phantasia* was intended as an operational force capable of influencing not only the soft body of the unborn child, but also, at a distance, third objects<sup>44</sup>.

Zacchia was clear: if imagination had really had all the strength that was commonly attributed to it, monsters would have been much more frequent. Women, in particular pregnant ones, always wanted so many things; hence, they should have only given birth to children covered with skin with more spots than a leopard! As in other medical treatises of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, in *Quaestiones Medico-Legales*, due to reflections on maternal cravings, the pregnant woman began to be presented, although within the limits of writings that were still completely male, no longer as a “reproductive machine,” but as a psychologically complex being<sup>45</sup>.

The physician continued his indictment: why did the phenomenon not occur in animals, which, not being endowed with reason, were, by force of circumstances, more than women, slaves of their own imaginations? Why did dogs – mirroring what happened to the woman in Messina – who coupled and carried their pregnancies in full view of their owners, not produce puppies that looked like people? Or that looked like the other animals they lived with, for example in a courtyard or stall?

Of course, some might argue that the infrequency of the monsters derived from the unlikely combination of circumstances necessary for their creation. On the one hand, a violent passion of the soul was necessary, on the other hand, that this took place at the appropriate time, coincident with the act of fertilization or with the very first stage of gestation, when the fetus was very tender. Zacchia proceeded analytically. There were two possibilities that those who believed in the power of imagination were forced to admit: either that the influence could be exercised at any time or only in a certain period of the pregnancy. In the first case,

*if the transfer from one figure to another can occur at any [time] and if at this very moment the mother who imagines a bull can transmit to her son a head with a bovine form or, having imagined a frog, a frog-shaped head, and then later she imagines a donkey, the bull will change into an ass or, if she imagines a bird, the frog will change into a bird; which is ridiculous<sup>46</sup>.*

Secondly, it was necessary, however, to exclude the possibility that the influence could occur at conception, because at such an early stage the image would not have been able to attach itself to something that was still shapeless. Consequently it was necessary to opt for a period corresponding to three to seven days after the event<sup>47</sup>. Nevertheless, concluded Zacchia with a very nonfactual argument, this could not happen since “nature was stronger, which is cause in itself and immutable”, than imagination, cause “*per accidens* and momentary”. His conclusion was predictable: “Therefore, on the basis of all this, we must conclude that imagination should be completely eliminated from the list of causes”<sup>48</sup>.

In short, since there were many types of monsters, it was necessary to open up to a kind of etiological pluralism and identify many different causes: incorrect positions assumed by women especially during intercourse, passions of the soul, defects of the semen or of the blood. In particular, the degeneration of the semen was often invoked by physicians of the day. Aristotle himself (or at least his tradition) had sustained that a weak man and woman could produce a child that was similar to an animal<sup>49</sup>. However, Zacchia was determined: he admitted degeneration, but he warned against similarity to animals. This was, in fact, evidence of something else: “The figure which degenerates into other figures denotes a very great defect in the semen and blood that feed [the monster]. Instead, degeneration into other species demonstrates the mixture of the semen of different species”<sup>50</sup>.

### *The Dilemmas of Hybridization*

Thus, the problem of hybridization, or interspecific generation, arose indirectly. Even if Zacchia, at least in the beginning, gave the impression of wanting to address the issue from a general point of view, he, as a physician, showed himself to be interested above all in probing the possibility that a union between a human being and an animal could be fruitful. For Galen, for example, this was not possi-

ble because there was too much *dissidentia* or discordance between the types of semen<sup>51</sup>. Not only: if, by some strange chance, a creature was born to a man and a horse, what would he eat, food that is good for humans or fodder? How would he walk? Which senses would he have? How could he carry out his actions? Zacchia proceeded to dispel all doubts. *Dissidentia*, first of all, did not prohibit the breeding of animals, one of which was the wild variant, and the other domesticated: the boar and the pig; the wolf and the dog; the onager and the ass. For the author of *Quaestiones Medico-Legales* – who in this instance gave credit to many “dicitur” – even beasts that were more distantly related were able to have offspring, as long as they had some affinity, like the dog and the fox, the dog and the tiger, the tiger and the panther, the leopard and the hyena, the dog and the monkey ... After all, even the horse and the donkey, despite being very different – the author exaggerated the differences – could, as is known, have offspring. In confirmation of the possibility of the generation of hybrids from dissimilar parents, Zacchia invoked the example of the legendary *hippotaurus*, born of the union between a bull and a mare, which he claimed to have seen personally<sup>52</sup>. In brief, the *dissidentia* argument was indeed correct, but only applicable to animals that were quite different from each other: this was the reason why the stories about unions between eagles with wolves, or men with birds or fish, should be considered in the same way as fairy tales<sup>53</sup>. As for the second objection, it could be said that the newborn, as well as all the hybrids, would have a particular physique which would determine its nutrition, way of walking, etc. It was already difficult, when crossing plants, to know what would come of it, let alone what would result from a union between animals!<sup>54</sup>

Having disposed of Galen, it was time to address Aristotle. He believed that the female did not have her own seed, but only blood, which nourished the male seed, which – it could be deduced – would perhaps have found nourishment in the blood of any other species.

Therefore, were all types of cross-breeding possible? In Aristotle's opinion, three conditions had to be met: 1) that the two species were not too distant in nature; 2) that their body size was not too different; 3) that they had the same gestation period<sup>55</sup>. Zacchia had little to say about the first of these three conditions: man was considered to be the most perfect being in creation and, certainly, there were no creatures similar to him (although the argument against the *dissidentia* invoked by Galen was still valid). Instead, he had stronger opinions on the other two points. As for the size of the bodies, he pointed out, it was common for large men to impregnate very small women, as well as for very large women to be impregnated by very small men. Moreover, a small female dog could be impregnated by a large male, although the contrary did not hold true. However, this happened "per accidens;" therefore, it was not possible to generalize. Lastly, he responded to the third objection: when would the hybrid of species with different gestational periods be born? Zacchia believed that these periods were not set *a priori* by nature, but that they corresponded to the period necessary for the fetus to become perfect and, once born, be able to feed itself and survive. In fact, even within the same species great variability was found: warmer individuals were born before colder ones, males before females, the strong before the weak, if it was hot outside before if it was cold, etc. Therefore, nothing forbade that a hybrid could be born simply when nature – which Zacchia imagined as a sort of self-regulating entity, able to intervene constantly on itself each time it created an imbalance – considered it capable of surviving<sup>56</sup>.

Then there were other causes of impediment that Zacchia could not challenge. First of all, the difference in genitals, size, shape, etc. The author of *Quaestiones Medico-Legales* confirmed it: he had even conducted experiments that showed that dogs whose genitals did not adhere to each other could not generate! Then, it was necessary that the emission times of the seed were the same in the male and in the

female. However, everyone knew that warmer animals emitted their seed first, and colder ones later<sup>57</sup>.

*Man and the Beast or Man as a Beast*

In comparison with the fathers of Italian forensic medicine who had preceded him – for example, Giovanni Battista Codronchi<sup>58</sup>, Fortunato Fedele<sup>59</sup> and Giovanni Filippo Ingrassia<sup>60</sup> – Zacchia addressed issues related to human sexuality (impotence, rape, hermaphrodites, eunuchs, incubuses, succubuses, etc.) more carefully and, therefore, also the monsters which resulted from forbidden relations<sup>61</sup>. In truth, he did not seem to make clear distinctions between “wonderful or exotic species,” which many thought lived permanently on the edge of the world, and actual monsters, born in the heart of Christianity and a usually ephemeral life<sup>62</sup>.

Many of these stories, to tell the truth, did not seem credible even to the author of *Quaestiones Medico-Legales*. Particularly unlikely were, for example, those which told of beings which had the characteristics of their parents rigidly separate and almost juxtaposed, like the monster with the body of a lamb and the head of a pig born in Frosinone, not so far from Rome, and mentioned by Julius Obsequens<sup>63</sup>. In order for there to be conception, it was essential for the seeds to completely interpenetrate each other, mixing, so to speak (anachronistically), their “gene pools”. For example, in the case of centaurs it would be necessary to admit that the seeds, after having joined together as one, could then separate again to form the two parts, which frankly seemed absurd.

Excluding these cases, what really prevented the hybridization between man and beast? Zacchia listed: man’s abomination for such practices, the waywardness of animals; human and divine law; the differences in genitals. All in all, perhaps except for the latter, these were contingent limitations, rather than real, natural impeding causes. In every living creature, he added, heavenly and divine heat was

admitted. What vivified human seed, however, differed from that of a beast only because it was more perfect: it could therefore heat and vivify animal seed, creating a mixture from the intermediary characteristics. These were, in fact, only materials: nor you could say, as many did, that the soul was already present in human semen (nonetheless it was believed to be true that the soul was in the animal semen and this was why it had difficulty in accepting a new form)<sup>64</sup>.

*What then must be concluded? It must be certain that the seeds of any animal, except man, contain the soul. Such seeds are combined with seeds equal to them: in other terms, the seed of the male, upon reaching the correct place in the female, leads to the creation of fish, birds and other animals, as the soul itself that this contains has to give the form to the material of the seed and the maternal blood. Instead, in human beings, the seed, once separated from its parents, does not contain the soul, but only the spirit. This has the seeds to receive the rational soul, which is infused by God at the very moment in which the two seeds unite. Now, since the seed of each of the parents is only the partial cause of generation, by itself [ex se] it cannot generate anything, but must unite with a companion seed to generate a human being. If therefore, in the place of the human seed, we find the seed of an animal as the second parent, it cannot unite since the seed of the animal is animated and contains the form of its species, that is, of the animal that the seed came from; for this it is incapable of receiving a form other than its own. Nevertheless, the human seed has a disposition to receive the rational soul and not another and cannot in any way admit another form. Therefore, it does not seem possible that the union of human seed and that of an animal could generate anything. But I would not dare deny that the birth of a monster (which, once born, is often thrown away) that has limbs that are somehow halfway between those of a human and those of a beat, constitutes a clear indication for putting the uncertain perpetrator of the heinous act to meticulous torture. Probably God Optimus Maximus, to atone for this ineffable crime will allow for something to be born from that infamous commingling, so that he who is guilty of such deeds receives due punishment ...<sup>65</sup>*



Of course, medical examination at the time only had the status of testimony and did not bind the judge's decision. The matter, however, was very delicate, because Zacchia invited the inquisitors, in clear terms, to proceed to torture to extract a confession<sup>66</sup>.

In brief, while considering it very unlikely that the generation of a hybrid of man and beast could occur in natural terms, he recovered it metaphysically, anchoring it to the will of God to make the guilty man – actually, the guilty woman – expiate her ignominious sin.

So, while in the remaining part of his teratological treatment he maintained overall a “naturalistic” attitude, which also enabled him to take courageous positions, as in the case of children born from intercourse with succubuses and incubuses (after all, the perceptions of demons were not so different from those of beasts), on monsters with feral characteristics he maintained the traditional status of *signum*, a specific message which, wedged into natural law, was communicated by God to men. Perhaps a (minor) *miraculum*. Or, at least, a sort of divine *prodigium*. The monsters born from the union of man and beast were, therefore, the result of the transgression of a rule. They showed how divine, natural and human laws were closely intertwined. Confirming that, Alan Bates notes, “behaviour such as bestiality and sodomy was at the same time a sin, a crime, and against nature”<sup>67</sup>. Over the years Zacchia would become more and more convinced and finally he would declare: “I was previously of that opinion, and now, I persevere much more in the [opinion] that nothing can prevent it that from the mixture of human seed with beastly seed some generation can follow”<sup>68</sup>.

So, a return to the Middle Ages? Not exactly, far from it. An anecdote recounts that one day Albert the Great had saved a cowherd who had been accused of bestiality when one of his cows gave birth to a calf with human characteristics. In this case, the saint-philosopher had blamed the influence of the stars. In fact, Johannes M.M.H. Thijssen explains that in the Middle Ages hybrids between man and animal

were not contemplated, which is why this type of monster was not used as evidence of acts of bestiality<sup>69</sup>. It was only starting in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries that authors of authoritative tracts (besides Zacchia, Paré, Liceti, etc.) began to give credence to stories that admitted the possibility of such a hybridization. After the Middle Ages, perhaps humans rediscovered an embarrassing kinship with beasts, which, so to speak, shortened the distance between the two steps of the “chain of being” once separated by an unbridgeable metaphysical chasm<sup>70</sup>. It was a sort of attack on the status of humanity, against which it was necessary to take measures. Hence, increased attention was paid to the rules that forbade men to join together with animals<sup>71</sup>. And court cases multiplied<sup>72</sup>. Even at the expense of the animals themselves<sup>73</sup>. The cities reacted to a crime that was committed in the provinces, seen to be still feral and pagan<sup>74</sup>. While in the Middle Ages bestiality was treated in the penitential manuals in the same way as masturbation (after, a great deal of confusion with pederasty was recorded until very recently)<sup>75</sup>, in the following centuries it became a capital crime<sup>76</sup>. Not only was sex with animals punished, but also sex performed in the manner of animals: *coitus more ferarum*, but also that consumed with excessive and uncontrolled desire<sup>77</sup>. Man was not a beast and it was necessary to remember it. As Paré stated,

*It is certain that most often these monstrous and marvellous creatures proceed from the judgement of God, who permits fathers and mothers to produce such abominations from the disorder that they make in copulation, like brutish beasts, in which their appetite guides them, without respecting time, or other laws ordained by God and Nature*<sup>78</sup>.

Naturally, the severity of the judgments was exaggerated when the person in discussion was unknown and far away, and could have easily indulged in all kinds of vices. Zacchia did not seem very concerned about, if nothing else, casting a shadow of suspicion on the woman in distant Messina. Nonetheless, in *Quaestiones Medico-*

*Legales* he opened up the range of etiological possibilities in telling of another monster with animal characteristics: the cause was attributed to “vicious and corrupt matter” (the same, if he had wanted, could have been said for the “fetid” Sicilian child), perhaps because, in this case, the unfortunate mother was not an unknown woman from Messina, but a noble Roman woman<sup>79</sup>.

But which monsters were human, or possessed a rational soul? Zacchia adopted criteria which could be called “aesthetic”: those which had a human figure were to be baptized – and so, could not be killed with impunity – unless they were completely without their senses. To define what is human he resorted to a category of mental and physical perfection, since “it seems that for the perfection of man [also] a sufficient perfection of the body is required, because the soul alone does not make the man”<sup>80</sup>. The external figure, above all in controversial cases, provided a clue to the presence of a rational soul: this was the starting point for passing judgment. Appearance gave the measure of the predominance of one of the two seeds – human vs. animal – over the other. A beast that mated with a human being could, in fact, create humans or animals: Fortunato Fedele, for example, argued that a horse or a cow, fertilized by a man, could generate a real man<sup>81</sup>. After all, Attila himself was born, according to Torquato Tasso, from the union of a woman and a dog ...<sup>82</sup>

Doubts remained about those individuals who seemed somehow placed halfway between the one and the other species, like centaurs, onocentaurs and satyrs (which Zacchia had just stated to have little faith in their existence). For some, a human head, the seat of the rational soul, ensured the subject’s humanity. It was, however, a simplistic position: could you not see every day – asked Zacchia who made reference to sayings which were probably best understood in their metaphorical meaning, rather than literally – that lying beneath the appearance of every man was an animal? In this state of uncertainty it was necessary to proceed with a *sub condicione* baptism.

*Quaestiones Medico-Legales* mixed medical, legal, historical and demonological sources with numerous poetic citations or, as in this case, with statements of popular wisdom. The result was a text that, while inspired by precise scientific convictions, included, in its basic dimension as a compilation, evidence of dissimilar value and contradictory judgments in which it was not difficult to get lost even in the face of issues of importance<sup>83</sup>.

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2. Zacchia became a chief physician for the first time in 1638, then likely archiater to Pope Innocent X. On his biography, about which there is much more uncertainty than is commonly believed, see DE RENZI S., *Per una biografia di Paolo Zacchia: Nuovi documenti e ipotesi di ricerca*. In: PASTORE A., ROSSI G. (eds.), *Paolo Zacchia: Alle origini della medicina legale. 1584-1659*, Milano, F. Angeli, 2008, pp. 50-73. For a historical framework, FISCHER-HOMBERGER E., *Medizin von Gericht: Zur Sozialgeschichte der Gerichtsmedizin*. Bern-Stuttgart-Wien: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1988, passim; GENTILCORE D., *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 23-24, 186-187, 194; POMATA G., *Contracting a Cure: Patients, Healers, and the Law in Early Modern Bologna*. Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, ad indicem; DITCHFIELD S., *Liturgy, Sanctity, and History in Tridentine Italy: Pietro Maria Campi and the Preservation of the Particular*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 235-36; GENTILCORE

- D., *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy*. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 99; BRAMBILLA E., *Corpi invasi e viaggi dell'anima: Santità, possessione, esorcismo dalla teologia barocca alla medicina illuminista*. Rome, Viella, 2010, ad indicem, but primarily pp. 27-121. For a biography of Pietro Castelli, see DE FERRARI A., *Castelli, Pietro*. In: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*. Rome, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1978 (21).
3. *Quaestiones* was “serialized”, in Rome, starting in 1621. Many other editions followed the first, and were printed in numerous other European cities. The following editions contain additions and appendices, including the *Consilia*, the *Responsa* and the *Decisiones* of the Roman Rota (the latter collected by Zacchia’s nephew Lanfranco Zacchia). On the timing of the issue and re-issue of the texts see DUFFIN J., *Questioning Medicine in Seventeenth-Century Rome: The Consultations of Paolo Zacchia*. *Can. Bull. Med. Hist.* 2011; 28 (1): 149-170.
  4. CASTELLI P., *Epistolae medicinales*. Rome, G. Mascardi, 1626, pp. 34-119.
  5. The information is confirmed in the same letter. On these relationships, see CERBU T., *Naudé as Editor of Cardano*. In: BALDI M.L., CANZIANI G. (eds.), *Girolamo Cardano: Le opere, le fonti, la vita*. Milano, F. Angeli, 1999, pp. 363-378. Silvia De Renzi hypothesizes that Zacchia may have come into contact with Marco Aurelio Severino through Castelli. DE RENZI S., see ref. 2. On the relationship between Castelli and Severino, see ref. TRABUCCO O., *La corrispondenza tra Pietro Castelli e Marco Aurelio Severino (con un'appendice di lettere inedite)*. In: DOLLO C. (ed.), *Filosofia e scienze nella Sicilia dei secoli XVI e XVII*. Catania, Centro di Studi per la Storia della Filosofia in Sicilia, 1996, pp. 109-136.
  6. *Quaestiones*, Vol. III, Cons. XXII, p. 27.
  7. That which is reported is part of a packet of six *Consilia* (XVII-XXII) which Castelli asked Zacchia for and which were published in *Quaestiones medico-legales* (Vol. III, pp. 21-29). In the other cases it is difficult to know whether Zacchia confirmed the diagnosis of the colleague, because only the *argumenta* are reported, i.e. brief descriptions of the case, and not Castelli’s full-length letters.
  8. FINDLEN P., *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, p. 3.
  9. On this highly controversial issue, see PARK K., *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation and the Origins of Human Dissection*. New York, Zone Books, 2006, p. 116; DE RENZI S., *The Risk of Childbirth: Physicians, Finance and*

*Women's Death in the Law Courts of Seventeenth-Century Rome*. Bull. Hist. Med. 2010; 84 (4): 549-77.

10. It should be noted that the seventh book of *Quaestiones medico-legales*, in which Zacchia had criticized those who supported the thesis of the effect of the imagination, was released in 1635. Castelli, who claimed to have written the letter to “enrich the volume,” was, therefore, likely aware of how different his colleague’s point of view was.
11. *Genesis*, 30, 31-42. For the history of the effects of this passage, see ANGE-LINI M., *Le meraviglie della generazione: Voglie materne, nascite straordinarie e imposture nella storia della cultura e del pensiero medico (secoli XV-XIX)*. Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2012, pp. 19-36.
12. *Quaestiones*, Vol. III, Cons. XXII, p. 27. Levin Lemnius had advised against keeping dogs and Barbary apes in the house because women, as a result of their fervid imaginations, could generate children with characteristics reminiscent of these animals. LEMNIUS L., *De gli occulti miracoli*. Venice, L. Avanzi, 1560, Part I, Chap. IV, pp. 8r-14r. Castelli’s words would seem to imply more than they say explicitly. Perhaps they tell of a caring husband who agrees with his wife, doubly unfortunate, on a credible version of the facts and, leaving her at home, went alone to the physician to explain the event. The story of first the “immodest” donkey, then the “nosy” dog (but also the broken skull, perhaps evidence of infanticide, which in these cases, however, was more easily carried out by suffocation) appear to have a timing a bit too perfect to not cast a shadow of suspicion. This is, of course, only conjecture, but on the complex question of the sources on infanticide in the modern age, see DA MOLIN G., STELLA P., *Famiglia e infanticidio nell’Europa preindustriale*. Quaderni (Ist. Scien. storico-politiche, Fac. Magistero, Un. Bari) 1983-84; 3: 69-97.
13. *Quaestiones*, Vol. III, Cons. XXII, p. 28. “The mole is unformed flesh generated in the uterus by the female seed and by weak [deficient] male blood, which could have guaranteed the form, not unlike that which is usually generated in a true conception.” *Quaestiones*, Vol. I, Book. I, Chap. III, Quaest. V, p. 49. In truth, Zacchia dedicated a good part of the *De praegnantia, superfetatione et mole* (Vol. I, Book. I, Chap. III) section to the subject and at least one *consilium* (XXXIX), using sometimes conflicting arguments, which left no doubt about the possibility that the mole could actually be born without the assistance of the male seed. On the mole see CONFORTI M., “*Affirmare quid intus sit divinare est*”: *Mole, mostri e vermi in un caso di falsa gravidanza di fine Seicento*. Quaderni storici 2009; (1): 125-152.

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14. FEYENS T., *De viribus imaginationis*. London, R. Daniel, 1657, Quaest. 14, Concl. 45 and Quaest. 15, Concl. 46-47, pp. 240-260. This text, published in its first edition in 1635, was used widely for over a century.
15. The articulation is similar to that between *ratio* and *ratiocinatio* which would be introduced by Georg Ernst Stahl less than a century later. Albeit with a number of variations, it would be admitted by many in the world of the medicine and natural philosophy (of Aristotelian ancestry) of the 17th century. DE CEGLIA F.P., *I fari di Halle: Georg Ernst Stahl, Friedrich Hoffmann e la medicina europea del primo settecento*. Bologna, il Mulino, 2007, pp. 187-207.
16. *Quaestiones*, Vol. III, Cons. XXII, p. 28.
17. *Quaestiones*, Vol. III, Cons. XXII, p. 29.
18. Although Zacchia assessed the writings of his predecessors critically, he often did not take clear positions. Like Weinrich, he also felt that “among the monsters, some species change, others do not” and in particular the first deserved the name monsters. Cfr. WEINRICH M., *De ortu monstruorum*. Breslau, Osthus, 1595, Chap. I, pp. 1-12. In addition, in some circumstances it is not clear if the references he made to unlikely cases or wonderful species, such as centaurs, satyrs and sphinxes, “if ever such monsters existed,” derived from a desire to offer a work that was as wide-ranging as possible (that would collect and take a census of all the knowledge of the time) or from the faith that he placed in his sources (including some that were poetic).
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20. *Ibid.*, see ref. n. 27, p. 856; WEINRICH M., see ref. 18, Chap. 41, pp. 51-56; CARRANZA A., *Disputatio de vera humani partus naturalis et legitimi designatione*. Madrid, F. Martinez, 1628, Cap. 17, n. 22, pp. 585-586.
21. ARIST., *De gen. anim.*, IV, 4.
22. WEINRICH M., see ref. 18, Chap. 35, pp. 32-35.
23. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. I, pp. 59-60.
24. On the teratological classifications of the period, see BATES A.W., *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe*. Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2005, pp. 73-84.
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40. Therefore, Zacchia believed that Sprenger's opinion was doubly wrong: both because he affirmed the possibility of conception and because he believed that it could result in monstrous or otherwise "infected" offspring. SPRENGER (INSTITOR) H., *Malleus maleficarum*. Frankfurt am Main, N. Bassaus, 1580, Par. 2, Quaest. 1, Chap. 4, p. 244-258.
41. AUGUST., *Questions on the Heptateuch*. I, XCIII.
42. HUET M.H., *Monstrous Imagination*. Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 56-78; PANCINO C., *Voglie materne: Storia di una credenza*. Bologna, Clueb, 1996, pp. 79-115.
43. BRAMBILLA E., see ref. 2, pp. 27-121.
44. GODET A., *Nun was ist die Imagination anderst als ein Sonn im Menschen: Studien zu einem Zentralbegriff des magischen Denkens*. Zurich, Diss. Basel, 1982; GRIFFERO T. *Immagini attive: Breve storia dell'immaginazione transitiva*. Florence, Le Monnier, 2003; DE CEGLIA F.P., *It's not true, but I believe it. Discussions on jettatura in Naples between the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century*. Jour. Hist. Ideas 2011; 1: 75-97.
45. PANCINO C., see ref. 42, pp. 92-94.
46. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. II, p. 64.
47. For example, some believed that the "form" of the fetus could be changed within three, seven, forty days, three months, etc. from conception. FEYENS T., see ref. 14, Quaest. 22, pp. 304-324.
48. *Quaestiones*, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. II, p. 64. Zacchia cited numerous sources that supported his position.
49. ARIST., *De gen. an.*, IV, 767a 30-37. On this highly complex subject, see BALME D.M., "Anthropos anthropon genna": *Human is Generated by Human*. In: DUNSTAN G.R. (ed.), *The Human Embryo: Aristotle and the Arabic and European Traditions*. Exter, University of Exter Press, 1990, pp. 20-31.
50. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. II, p. 64.
51. GALEN, *De usu part.*, 3, 1.
52. The *hippotauros* – which corresponds to the mythological animal otherwise called *gimerou* or *jumarre* – lived, according to legend, primarily in France. According to Zacchia, a specimen had been given to Cardinal Scipione Borghese. *Quaestiones*, Book VII, Chap I, Quaest. IX, p. 83. The physician also said that in Rome he had seen a hybrid of a deer and a cow, sent as a gift to Cardinal Francesco Barberini.
53. Liceti, for example, accepted more distant crosses between species, and even between man and virtually every species. LICETI F., ref. 28, Lib. 2, Cap. 68, pp. 213-221.

54. *Quaestiones*, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. III, pp. 65-66.
55. ARIST., *De gen. anim.*, 2, 4-5.
56. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. III, pp. 65-66
57. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. III, p. 67.
58. CODRONCHI G.B., *De vitiis vocis ... ac methodus testificandi*. Frankfurt am Main, A. Wechel, 1597.
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62. DASTON L., PARK K., see ref. 27.
63. OBSEQUENS J., *De prodigiis*. Amsterdam, H. and T. Boom, 1779, Cap. 46, p. 26.
64. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book IX, Chap. I, pp. 171-186. On this subject, see ZACCHIA P., *Die Beseelung der menschlichen Fötus*. Ed. B. Spitzer, Köln-Weimer-Wien, Böhlau, 2002. On the debate, which would continue at length, see BETTA E., *Animare la vita: disciplina della nascita tra medicina e morale nell’Ottocento*. Bologna, il Mulino, 2006.
65. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. III, pp. 68-69. About Zacchia, Francesco Puccinotti said that “he really causes compassion, the great man Zacchia ... when he comes to monsters which originate from the coupling of a woman with a brute”. PUCCINOTTI F., *Lezioni di medicina legale*. Macerata, G. Mancini-Cortesi, 1835, 1, Lect. 5, p. 82. On the probative mechanism that, in the absence of full proof, tried to carefully consider the evidence, see ROSONI I., “*Quae singula non prosunt collecta iuvant:*” *La teoria della prova indiziaria nell’età medievale e moderna*. Milano, Giuffrè, 1995, pp. 73-79, 164-84.
66. PASTORE A., *Il medico in tribunale: La perizia medica nella procedura penale d’antico regime (secoli XVI-XVIII)*. Bellinzona, Casagrande, 1998; DE RENZI S., *Witnesses the Body: Medico-Legal Cases in Seventeenth-Century*

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- Rome. Stud. Hist. Phil. Scien. 2002; 33A: pp. 219-242. Of the dozens of trials for bestiality reported by Dubois-Desaulle, thankfully none were based on a teratological birth. See DUBOIS-DESAULLE G., *Étude sur la bestialité au point de vue historique, médical et juridique*. Paris, C. Carrington, 1905, pp. 49-215.
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  68. *Quaestiones*, Vol. III, Cons. XXII, p. 28.
  69. THIJSSSEN J.M., *Twins as Monsters: Albertus Magnus's Theory of the Generation of Twins and its Philosophical Context*. Bull. Hist. Med. 1987; 61: 237-46; but also OAKS R.F., *Things Fearful to Name: Sodomy and Buggery in Seventeenth-Century New England*. Journ. Soc. Hist. 1978; 12: 268-81.
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  73. EVAN E.P., *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*. London, Heinemann, 1906.
  74. COURTENY T., "Not Having God Before his Eyes": *Bestiality in Early Modern England*. Seventeenth Century 2011; 26 (11): 149-173.
  75. Jens Rydström has shown that bestiality, masturbation and homosexuality remained indistinct until the expansion of the medical discourse on these issues, which occurred only in the 20th century. RYDSTRÖM J., "Sodomitical Sins are Threefold": *Typologies of Bestiality, Masturbation and Homosexuality in Sweden, 1880-1950*. Journ. Hist. Sex. 2000; 9: 240-276.
  76. FUDGE E., *Monstrous Act: Bestiality in Early Modern England*. Hist. Tod. 2000; 50: 20-25; McCANN C., *Transgressing the Boundaries of Holiness: Sexual Deviance in the Early Medieval Penitentials Handbooks of Ireland, England and France 500-1000*. PhD. Thesis, Seton Hall University, 2010, pp. 48-53.
  77. BATES A.W., see ref. 24, pp. 120-122.
  78. PARE A., *On Monsters and Marvels*. Ed. and Transl. J.L. Pallister, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1982, Chap. 3, p. 5.

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79. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. VI, p. 72. On Zacchia's inconsistency, see LAVENIA V., ref. 31.
80. *Quaestiones*, Vol. II, Book VII, Chap. I, Quaest. IV, p. 69.
81. FEDELE F. see ref. 59, Book III, Chap. VII, pp. 509-513.
82. TASSO T., *La Gerusalemme Liberata*. 17, 70.
83. Zacchia could not find a rule that had any universal value, although he resolutely denied the possibility of baptism when there was the suspicion of a union with a beast. The monsters born to men, but which degenerated into another species had nothing human about them. They were ascribable to moles and "can be killed and thrown into the dunghill." *Quaestiones*, Vo. II, Book VII, Book I, Quaest. IV, p. 70. On infanticide in teratological births, see NICCOLI O., *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 33.

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