

Review

The Monster of Ravenna and Other Imaginations: Animal Symbols, Birth Defects, and Political Agendas in the Conceptualization of Monstrosities from Medieval Witchcraft Lore to Early Modern Europe, with Some Repercussions in the 19th Century and Beyond

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Abstract

Fascination with the unknown has always characterized humanity. This includes creation of mythical creatures that are believed to exist even though fully unproven. Fabricating monsters began to peak in early modern Europe. Sixteenth-century monsters were among the earliest documented, often with printed leaflets that displayed such creatures. This monster tradition began to flourish, both in scientific and popular form including human, animal and hybrid monsters. One of the most famous products of the time was the Monster of Ravenna, inspired by a malformed human birth in 1512, Italy. Due to a lack of understanding of teratology, animal and, indeed, even human birth defects were mischaracterized and used as tools to support the validity of monsters for political agendas. Animals have been an ongoing part of these and other mythical conceptualizations, sometimes of the divine, sometimes of the demonic. This article considers appearance of human- and animal-based fictional monsters in early modern Europe with some later repercussions.

Keywords: monster of Ravenna; monstrous births; medieval monsters; early modern Europe; animal symbols



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1. Introduction

The unknown has always intrigued and influenced human imaginations. An interesting example is the primal fear of old mariners, getting lost and never coming back from the sea. Such anxiety fueled the imaginations of causative sea monsters coming in all shapes and forms (Ellis 1994a, pp. 3–4). Humans have been so attracted to monsters that *Homo sapiens* might be viewed as a species with an ongoing love/hate relationship with monsters. Indeed, it is difficult to find a human culture that has shown indifference to monstrous beings and spirits. Human cultures have then tended to respond to their monster creations with an emotional range from fear to worshipful delight. It seems that humans have become a species that uses the unbridled practice of monstrosity to divert characteristics of the living. The monster thereby occupies a special place in society, appropriating a fundamental mechanism of diversification of the living (Lestel 2012, p. 259). Since late antiquity, Europeans believed that little-known regions of the earth were inhabited

by different species or races of monsters. India and Ethiopia were supposedly inhabited by human–animal hybrids, as well as people with one giant foot, two heads, or no head. Headless monsters appear very frequently in medieval manuscript illustrations and early printed books. Interestingly, what could be monstrous in one culture does not translate to the other: dark skin according to some medieval Christian texts, light skin according to some medieval Muslim texts (Mittman 2016, p. 7). In the late 15th century, chroniclers such as Saint Anthony, a Dominican friar in Florence, and Jacopo Filippo Foresti, an Augustinian friar in Bergamo, began to focus not on distant races of monsters but on fearful monsters supposedly occupying the nearby. This included accounts of monsters endowed with exceptional supernatural qualities and abilities (Jacobson-Schutte 1985, p. 91). Fascination with monsters became pronounced in early modern Europe. Sixteenth-century monster studies are among the earliest documented and were, in many cases, driven by births and autopsies of malformed infants. Printed leaflets displaying such ‘monsters’ first began appearing in the early sixteenth century (Bates 2020, p. 19). Teratogenic monsters as a category then became increasingly popular in natural philosophy writings from the Renaissance to the late eighteenth century, often with closely tied social, religious, and political anxieties, before humans understood that occasional birth anomalies are an expected part of procreation (Wolfe and Manzo 2020, p. 1). Stories of monster births became highly popular in print, medical books, and miracle books. These printed materials drove a burst of public interest in information and images related to disease and medical anomalies. Such publications described different defects as anything from miracles to startling aberrations worthy of supernatural consideration (Licetus 1665, p. 234). The works typically were vividly described, crudely illustrated, slanted toward sensationalism, and often encouraged voyeurism. Near-morbid attention was focused on the deformation details when marketing the monster images, sometimes with scientific and sometimes comic intent. The popularity of monster books and books of secrets revealed the public’s appetite for information and images related to disease and medical abnormalities. This type of popular literature was sold in town squares and villages, often during intermissions of street performances (Cheng 2012, p. 220).

Such works described in detail the corpses of malformed children and animals, to find anatomical proof for theoretical assumptions about their nature. In the early modern period, there is a multiplicity of sources that touched upon the subject. The diversity of voices that invoke monsters makes the study of their visual representations and textual descriptions a very complex and multifaceted phenomenon. From medical inquiries to theological discussions, the interest in monsters grew and found resonance in popular reports, official court portraits, and documents and inventories (Ghadessi 2011, pp. 267, 268). Monstrous births began to be interpreted as omens and predictors of evil times for the future. Not uncommonly, the descriptive pamphlets ended with a paragraph reminding readers that monsters were portents, messengers from God, pertaining to a future but possibly close biblical judgement (Dunthorne 2008, p. 1108). Diverse ‘monster’ births, human and animal, that were recorded in the 16th and 17th centuries differed greatly in appearance to support an equally diverse and growing monster folklore. Sensationalizing prints presented children born with wings instead of arms, with the head of a dog or the claws of an eagle, two heads, ambiguous genitalia, or absent limbs (Bates 2020, p. 19). The cause of monstrousness at times was attributed to the results of opposing demonic and divine forces, with possible input of magic during pregnancy. At the same time, methodical explanations were increasingly being applied to shed light on possible natural origins of physical abnormality. Ultimately, in the nineteenth century, Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1805–1861) established teratology as an acknowledged science for the study of birth defects (Ghadessi 2018, p. 10). A growing number of physicians and philosophers joined

Saint-Hilaire as founders of the medical specialty of teratology, finally seeking natural explanations for anomalous births. The “monsters and prodigies” tradition nonetheless continued to flourish, both in scientific and popular form, dealing with human, animal and hybrid monsters. Authors of broadsheets continued merchandising the divine, demonic or divinatory significance of a monster. However, their overall goal was slowly shifting to astonishing and entertaining readers rather than convincing them of the reality of monsters (Jacobson-Schutte 1985, p. 94).

European scholars who attempted to document a supernatural reality of monsters included Julius Obsequens, Conrad Lycosthenes, Fortunius Licetus, Ulyssis Aldrovandus, and Ambroise Paré. Paré, a famous French surgeon, described and illustrated many of the deformities of his time and was the first to attempt to classify them (Thompson 1968a, p. 37). In the preface to his book *Des monstres et prodiges* (1573), Paré offered an intriguing definition of monster and prodigies: “Monsters are things that are beyond the laws of nature and usually portend future misfortune, such as a baby being born with only one arm, another with two heads, or other abnormalities of the body. Prodigies are things that are totally contrary to the laws of nature, such as a woman giving birth to a snake or a dog, or other things that are totally opposed to nature” (Huet 2004, p. 127). Flyers depicting births of abnormalities moved from continental Europe to England as early as the 1530s and continued to arouse great public interest until around 1637. Initially, they were largely dismissed by readers as literary works intended for the more credulous individuals (Patterson 2014, p. 288). *The Physica Curiosa*, a Catholic book of wonders, described monsters, their history, and causes in thirty chapters. The monsters were divided into several categories based on their appearance: monsters with one head or with two or more heads, and also a two-headed monster with one of its heads in the abdominal wall. Monsters were also divided into animal monsters with human heads and humans with animal heads or animal limbs (Bates 2005, p. 150).

2. The Monster of Ravenna

One of the most famous births of the time was undoubtedly the “Monster of Ravenna.” According to early sources, a strange and terrifying creature was born in Ravenna in the spring of 1512. However, according to some reports, this anomalous birth actually occurred in Bologna on 22 March 1512. The name “Monster of Ravenna” came from its connection to the Battle of Ravenna in 1512 (Bates 2020, p. 124). Pope Julius II had waged war against King Louis XII in a bloody battle fought near Ravenna, a short time after the monster was born (Paré 1982). The deformed baby was believed to be the child of a nun and a monk. This ‘monster’ was the latest and most horrifying in a series of births of deformed babies (Licetus 1665, p. 234), both human and animal, that plagued the city. The birth so shocked the governor of Ravenna, Marco Coccapani, that he immediately sent a description to the Pope, warning that this unnatural birth meant disaster (King 2014, p. 253). The earliest report of this particular birth anomaly appears in the Roman chronicler Sebastiano di Branca Tedalini: “This monster has a large head, a horn on its forehead, a large mouth, three letters ‘YXV’ on its chest, three hairs on its chest, one leg is hairy and has a devil’s hoof, the other leg is a human leg, the other, the man’s leg with an eye on the middle of the leg; never in memory of man has there been anything like this” (Niccoli 1990, p. 35). There is also a description in the book *Works of the Great Surgeon Ambroise Paré*, of this monster: “In 1512 AD, a monster was born in Ravenna, it had a horn on its head, two wings, only one foot like a bird of prey, and an eye on its knee. It looked like a man but had male and female genitalia” (Paré 1649, p. 649) (Figure 1). Pierre Boaistuau also described the Monster of Ravenna in his book *Histoires prodigieuses*, where he interpreted it as a symbol of sin and the realization of hope: “The horns symbolize pride and ambition, the wings symbolize frivolity and capriciousness, the lack of arms symbolizes the lack of good deeds, the bird’s feet symbolize robbery, usury and greed, by the eye on its knee, symbolize

the preference for worldly things, and the two sexes symbolize sodomy; because all these sins are prevalent in Italy at that time, the country was suffering from war. The Y shape and the cross (mentioned in some descriptions of the monster) are symbols of salvation” (W. Williams 2011, pp. 7–8). Boaistuau therefore embraced what had been a common theme, ascribing meaning and omens for the local people in the appearance of the Monster of Ravenna.

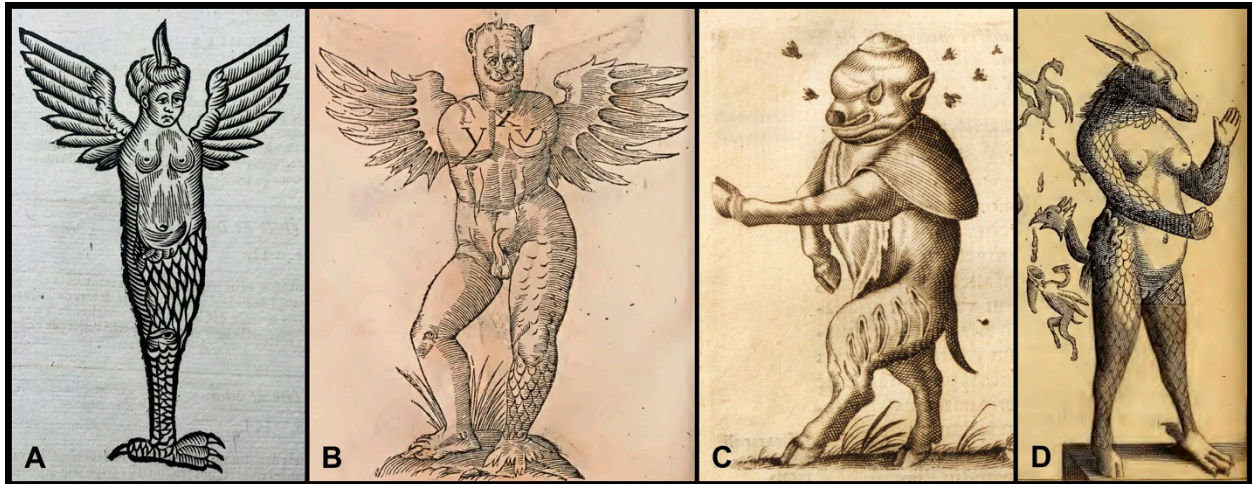


Figure 1. (A): The monster of Ravenna with one leg from *The works of the great surgeon Ambroise Paré* (1649), p. 649 (B): Another version of the monster of Ravenna, with two legs from Ulyssis Aldrouandi *Monstrorum Historia* (1642), p. 370. (C): The monk-calf from Fortunius Licetus *De Monstris* (1665), p. 248. (D): The pope-ass from Fortunius Licetus *De Monstris* (1665), p. 256. All the images are in public domain.

Images of the Ravenna Monster circulated on cheap broadsides used to spread news or religious, political, and moral messages. Some leaflets deviated from previous descriptions by mentioning Florence as the monster’s birthplace. Wherever the origins of the Ravenna Monster, this supposed offspring of a nun and a monk came to serve both a social and a political function. One of its legs (in bipedal descriptions) was depicted as scaly or feathered, similar to the leg of a frog or bird, and came to be called the “*zampa di diavolo*” (the devil’s claw) (Aldrouandi 1642, p. 370), suggesting that corruption of conception led to a demonic abomination (Niccoli 1990). Deformed births were also a major topic in the tabloid press in Italy, Germany, France, and England, where they were advertised as warnings from God (Bates 2005, pp. 151–52). Such conceptions continued, for example, in the December issue of the *Gentleman’s magazine* (1748), which was produced in London, there was an article of a monstrous birth: “*Two months ago, a poor woman belonging to this town, delivered a monstrous child. The whole shape is somewhat conical. A few days after the birth, the (covering) membrane broke, discovered to view an irregular clump of flesh, perfectly human, with a skin of a florid color. In its inside are solid substances, which feel like bones, and on its external surface are visible a hand and foot. Such phenomenon, a remarkable display of almighty power, undoubtedly visible proof of God’s displeasure against sin*” (Cave 1748, p. 535).

In Spain, especially in the 16th century, less attention was paid to birth defect anomalies. One reason for this different emphasis may be that interest in monsters was linked to political crises that prevailed in other parts of Western Europe during the 16th century, while Spain saw greater turmoil in the 17th century (Barragán and Martín-Estudillo 2014, p. 15). In all areas, the unnatural fusion of multiple species made these typically mythical creatures both abominable and wonderful in the eyes of the population. It was seen by those in leadership roles as religiously beneficial for the common people to believe these monster creatures were the product of God’s judgment and a punishment for the wickedness of the parents. However, since such births were uncommon and rare, the connection was

subtle. Adulterers, fornicators, and pagans were reminded that God was always watching, knew their secret sins, and could punish them by birth of a monster. The message was sent to readers of the printed material that the parents of monsters had committed sexual sins by having children out of wedlock or committing incest (Paré 1982, pp. 5–6; Huet 2004, pp. 129–30). Readers were then supposed to apply this information to their own morality. Monstrous creatures were explained by the idea that birth of monsters was not only attributed to the sins of the parents but was also seen as a call for moral self-reflection (Bates 2005, p. 148). A monstrous young child was in this manner considered the product of a divine power that could be placed into a rhetorical context and made a part of the collective moral consciousness of a city or village (Hanafi 2000b, pp. 13–14; Randviir 2004, p. 114). Monsters were also believed to be the product of wrong maternal imaginations or desires, meaning that the creation of these creatures could be related to the mixing of physical and symbolic realities, with their origins and purpose representing a balance between the concrete and the abstract. The mother's imagination at conception and early in pregnancy was thought to be a key factor in causing deformities. If a woman was exposed to frightening or disturbing images during sexual intercourse, either through the senses or memory, this offensive image could be imprinted on her offspring. The monster child was intimately tied to the woman who produced it (Crawford 2005b, pp. 62–63). The imagination could leave such an impression and cause fetal deformities. It was said that Queen Persina of Ethiopia mysteriously conceived a white baby with King Hydusetus because the beautiful Andromeda appeared to her in her imagination, and as they embraced, an image of Andromeda appeared before her eyes, and she became pregnant from this image. There is also a story about a girl who was born with the skin of a bear. Her unfortunate condition was due to her mother's excessive focus on an image of St. John the Baptist, dressed in animal skins, with his own body hair and beard during her pregnancy (Asma 2009, pp. 146–47).

In the mid-17th century, pamphleteers began presenting fictional monster cases as real facts. This started causing public skepticism about the credibility of monster literature and prompted people to question reports that were once believed to be accounts of real events. Pamphleteers often accused each other of misrepresenting the facts. As the spread of news increased dramatically in the 17th century, some pamphleteers used this medium to appeal to the public's credulity on certain topics and advance their agendas (Patterson 2014, pp. 300–1).

3. The Birth of Other Monsters

As previously mentioned, before the biological/medical explanations for anomalous births and the development of medical field of teratology, fictional monstrous births were leveraged as political tools and interpretations of the divine. In 1523, Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon published a pamphlet describing two monsters, a *pope-ass* and a *monk-calf*, (Crawford 2005a, pp. 27–28) whose appearances were said to symbolize the errors of the Catholic Church (Figure 1). The places and times where the monsters appeared were said to be determined by divine providence. These pamphlets were published at a time when the reformers were questioning Catholic beliefs and practices, with the two new monsters being interpreted as divine omens against the Roman Catholic Church. Readers could see from provided illustrations that the calf resembled a monk in a cowl, while the donkey was a reformist caricature of the pope. Images of the monsters show them alive and standing in the landscape. The text was intended as an eyewitness account and to convince readers that the monsters had only recently appeared (Bates 2020, p. 122).

Catholics and Protestants alike interpreted anomalous birth and horrific monster story phenomena to their advantage. For example, the Monster of Freiberg in Saxony,

born on 8 December 1522, was described as an omen of monastic corruption. Protestant interpretations referred to this golden calf as being in a preaching position; it was blind, but it stuck out its tongue to preach; its huge ears symbolized the tyranny of the sacrament of confession, and its stiff neck symbolized the rigidity of monasticism (Hsia 2004, p. 80). Catholic polemics also used monsters to refute Protestant doctrine, but for the most part did not interpret monsters as divine omens. Protestant literature, including pamphlets, ballads, and broadsides, used monsters as ideal subjects for depicting social, economic, and political instability, while yet again describing them as products of divine providence (Patterson 2014, p. 288). Curiously, animals without deformities were also used as political tools. In 1554, a case of animal cruelty occurred, in which a cat was hanged in London. Henry Machyn, merchant from London, wrote about the episode. The cat was hanged on the gallows beside Cheapside Cross, with the crown of the head shaved. The cat was wearing a garment like that of a priest, with the word “mass” written on it. A round piece of paper represented a wafer that was held by the forelimbs. The disfigured cat was clearly intended to mock Catholic beliefs in the power of specific garments and ceremonies (Crawford 2005a, p. 34).

The Monster of Ravenna was followed by another deformed child, born in Bologna on 9 January 1514. Remains of this child were used to motivate various political and religious agendas and interpretations. The monster had two faces and three eyes, and a woman’s open vulva on his forehead. Two eyes of the child were permanently closed, and the third eye was felt to likely be blind. The desired interpretation of the monster was, without a doubt, that it came as a sign from God to the people of Italy. Due to its division, Italy had become a monster with closed eyes and two faces facing in two different directions, one looking westward to follow its own inclination and convenience, the other looking northward according to its own passion. Thus, the monster showed that Italy was divided and blind. The open vulva on his head was interpreted as the corruption of the long-preserved and defended beauty, chastity and modesty of the country. Even more, it was interpreted as a rejection of outsiders who were supposed to luxuriate and behave wildly in the region. Others interpreted the female symbol simply as a prostitute symbol in times of depravity (Bowd 1999, pp. 40–42). The message urged all true Christians to pray for God’s mercy on the Italian peninsula. Another extraordinary monster child born in 1543 was known as the monster of Krakow (Figure 2). According to widespread accounts of the time, it was of unknown sex, had eyes like fire, a head that resembled an elephant, webbed feet, a curved tail, and animal heads scattered around its body (Thompson 1968a, pp. 38–39). In 1559 this monster, painted by an unknown artist, appeared in a richly illustrated and lavishly bound manuscript showing the wonders of the natural world. The French Protestant humanist Pierre Boaistuau later prepared the manuscript as a present for Elizabeth I of England. Over the next few decades, French printers revised the monster of Krakow manuscript several times, often in expanded illustrated versions that included a woodcut depicting the Krakow Monster (Figure 2). Boaistuau was fascinated by the creation of “deformed births,” a term commonly used to describe children and animals with physical defects. The Krakow Monster recalled medieval descriptions of the devil and sparked new discussions about the manifestations and causes of monstrosity (Licetus 1665, p. 256; Spinks 2018, p. 672). Triple monsters (monsters with three faces, three arms, and three legs) next appeared and were considered extremely rare phenomenon that represented the Holy Trinity. In engravings, they were depicted with saint-like halos. Such monsters were said to be able to perform miracles and inexplicably always disappeared before being buried (Bates 2020, p. 128). Italy also produced the infamous monster of Verona in the year 1254 (Figure 2). In this case, a mare was said to have given birth to a horse with human face monster. Again, war agendas were linked to the birth of this

horse-human hybrid. This was the war between Florentines and Pisans that took place shortly after the appearance of the monster at Verona (Paré 1982, pp. 5–6).

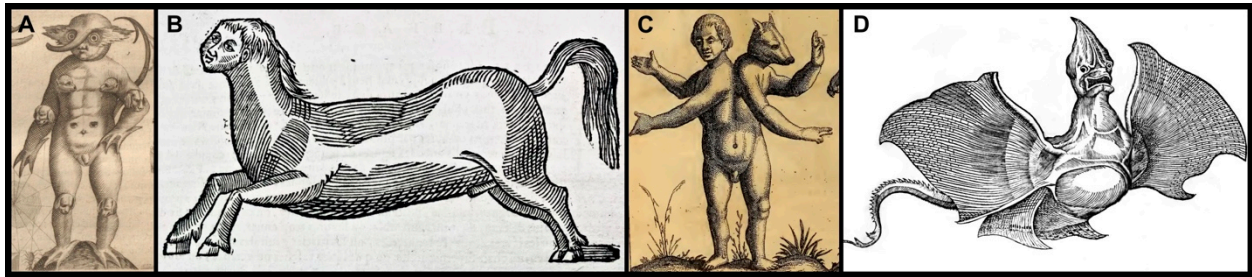


Figure 2. (A): The monster of Krakow from Fortunius Licetus *De Monstris* (1665), p. 256. (B): The monster of Verona from *the works of the great surgeon Ambroise Paré* (1649), p. 648 (C): A human–animal hybrid monster from Fortunius Licetus *De Monstris* (1665), p. 182. (D): Dry ray altered into the form of a dragon, from *De Piscibus* book 3 by Ulyssis Aldrouandi (1613), p. 443. All the images are in public domain.

In a more medical attempt, the most important gynecological treatise published in Spain in 1579 was Luis de Mercado's *De affectionibus mulierum* (On the Condition of Women). Mercado provided a detailed catalog of monster births in his treatise, which he divided into five categories: mythical creatures (such as stone-footed monsters, whose feet were so large that they could be used as parasols); giants and dwarfs; newborns with missing or extra body parts; and the birth of different types of human–animal hybrids. Also included were detailed philosophical and medical discussions of the causes of monster births, as well as advice on how to identify and avoid them (Barragán and Martín-Estudillo 2014, p. 17). Reports of women giving birth to animals or hybrids can also be found in ancient and medieval scientific and medical texts. Such monsters were considered a clear result of immoral behavior (Hsia 2004, p. 70; Thompson 1968b, p. 99). An example was a giant monster that appeared in the mountains of Zardaña, Spain. On 20 October 1654, a description of this creature was sent to Madrid: “It is of strong build, like a strong man, with seven heads, the largest of which faces forward, with one eye in front; the others have two eyes each, where they should be—donkey ears. With its main head it eats and drinks and makes a strange and terrible cry. It has seven human-like arms and hands, all very strong. From the middle down, it is like a satyr, with goat’s hooves, and has no sex” (Cortijo-Ocaña 2015, p. 377). Of note, preceding pagan gods also shared features sometimes described in the European monsters. The Greek god Pan, for instance, was considered a hybrid of man and animal, with goat’s ears, horns, a beard, and hooves. Pan was associated with the satyr, a rough, hairy, goat-like creature with a demonic nature. Pan and the satyrs were also closely associated with the Greek god Dionysus, whose virtues included fertility, jubilation, madness, ritual madness and religious ecstasy, and the Dionysian festival (Mack and Mack 1998, pp. 95–96).

4. Demonology and Witchcraft

In the European tradition, some of the most influential scholars of the early medieval period encountered great difficulties over the definition and etymology of *monstra* (monster), and their presence within God’s perfect creation. (Mittman 2016, p. 3). The Middle Ages defined monster as *a creature* with such qualities, leaving out the qualifiers that it be mythical or imaginary (Mittman 2016, p. 5). The status of monsters is uncertain in terms of how they may relate to stories of biblical fallen angels or demons, or other spirits. They have been viewed as divine messengers, natural phenomena, or products of the actions of demons. Animals and monsters have long been considered fixed symbols in demonology and the occult (Dunthorne 2008, pp. 1108–9). Human animal hybridity was a common

theme of discussion, also giantism, dwarfism, and other forms of excess or lack, such as too many limbs or the lack of them, with multiple categorizations as explained above. However, Mittman states that the monster defies human desire for categorization, and this is the source of its power in culture (Mittman 2016, p. 7). Ugly, aggressive, tyrannical, murderous, and speaking an incomprehensible, squawking language, these are the traits of medieval monsters. Medieval tales spoke of hybridization and monstrous races that would be part animal and part human; the crane man is an example of such a concept. In late medieval and early modern pictorial context, the crane man, a human–animal hybrid, was described as a human with avian head. They were represented as having well-formed hands and feet and were in every respect handsome, except that their heads and necks were those of cranes. Full armies of crane men were supposed to exist (Higgs-Strickland 2010, pp. 4 and 15).

Because of these associations, it is common to analyze various aspects of monsters and animal symbolism when studying witchcraft. In general, demonologists agreed that human women can become pregnant through sexual intercourse with incubi demons (Masters 1969a, pp. 35–36). These incubi are described as lascivious demons or goblins who seek to have sex with women. The counterparts to incubi demons that also appear to humans are the succubi, which are female demons who have sex with human males. The incubi and succubi are also considered part of the group of demons known as “familiar” in demonology. They can appear as men, women, or animals (Robbins 1981, p. 254). Angela de Labarethe, a 56-year-old noblewoman from Toulouse, is a prominent example of the belief that a woman could carry the offspring of an incubus. She was the first woman to be executed by the Inquisition for becoming pregnant with a demon in 1275. The child she gave birth to was said to be a monster with a wolf’s head and a snake’s tail. She was also said to have compounded her crime by feeding her monster child the flesh of babies she had kidnapped and brutally murdered (Masters 1969a, pp. 71–72). Centuries later, the case of Agnes Bowker was equally remarkable. This woman was said to have given birth to a cat in England in 1569. She was unmarried and pregnant and apparently conspired with a midwife to switch her newborn with a skinned cat, leading to rumors that she was haunted by a “nightmare demon.” News of the monster cat’s birth spread throughout England. Advertising broadsides were printed depicting a hairless cat with bared teeth and extended claws (Goodare 2003, p. 272). The fate of Agnes’s actual child is unknown, but historians note that child abandonment was tragically common in Europe, a practice that continued into the 18th century. It has been suggested that Agnes drew on superstitions of the time to avoid the shame of having an illegitimate child (Shedd 2007, p. 32). Since the incubi were viewed as a different species, sexual intercourse with these beings was condemned as bestiality, a sin that exceeded adultery or fornication. Reports of half-human, half-beast monsters resulting from such unions were freely circulated (Robbins 1981, p. 258). These beliefs included the assumption that the monsters were the outward manifestation of private immoral behavior (sexual sins such as adultery, sodomy, and bestiality). It should be noted that the birth of a deformed animal was generally not seen as a punishment for its owner or the animal itself. Instead, such births provided the basis for assertions of societal, rather than individual, responsibility for the deformity (Cumings 2023, pp. 41–42).

Since the Middle Ages, demons and monsters have primarily been linked in two different ways. One connection was based on the obvious and relatively unproblematic link between moral corruption and physical deformity, which was widespread and deeply rooted: demons take on monstrous animal or part-animal appearances, e.g., goat familiars; or, demons are actually monsters (Hanafi 2000a, p. 49). It was said that “familiar” such as astral demons (those connected to the realm of non-material existence) are assigned to witches as servants. Such familiars are considered to be lower demons that can become

invisible or disguised in animal form (Summers 1974, pp. 43–44). Their services are particularly useful for fortune-telling or performing supernatural acts under the guidance of a wizard or sorcerer. It was believed that newly initiated witches were assigned a low-level demon or familiar who served as both the witch's servant and guardian (Haining 1972, pp. 52–53). For example, a familiar could take the form of a winged animal and carry the witch to Sabbaths/witches' meetings. Thus, in demonology, a familiar was considered a metaphysical being that was connected to or controlled by the witch. It was also believed that a familiar was a fortune-telling demon that possessed a magician (Unger 1994, p. 144). The proliferation of printed discussions about magic and witchcraft reinforced a growing view that certain animals are "demonic" (Parish 2019, p. 3). Traditionally, the devil, or sometimes higher demons, were believed to manifest in various forms, and in shamanism, they often appear in animal form. These animal-demon monsters have traditionally been viewed as impure and abominable (Bailey 2021, p. 13). Some familiar demons are described as misshapen, multi-legged, rough, hairy creatures similar in size to cats. These domestic demons were believed to always obey their mistresses and bring omens, precognition, and other forms of magic. According to tradition, animals were also negatively affected by witchcraft. During the witchcraft trials of the 16th and 17th centuries, one of the most common charges against English witches was bewitching farm animals, or a cow or other animal that the family depended on for survival. In Yorkshire, several women were tried for casting spells on horses, cows, or other livestock (Smith 1978, pp. 102–3).

Demons were believed to assist or hinder natural processes, by negatively affecting female reproductive processes, by diluting semen so that it cannot normally impregnate, or by hindering nutritive processes in certain parts of the fetus to causing disease or malformation. All of these processes were believed to correspond to deformed births, and the demons simply amplified them in a way that creates abnormalities (Hanafi 2000a, p. 51). Late medieval witchcraft was a combination of several distinct traditional themes, the most important of which included monsters and ghosts, animal metamorphoses, demonic heresies, malevolent magic, and superstition (Ewen 1970, pp. 70–71). Sabbath and Black Mass rituals overlapped, with fusion of animal creatures symbolically forming a unity that can be summarized as an engagement with Satan and a rejection of Christianity (Weddeck 1994, pp. 119–20).

Fortunius Licetus (1577–1657) was a well-respected physician, intellectual, and Aristotelian philosopher who firmly believed that God had the power to transform humans into monsters to punish them (Hanafi 2000a, p. 34). Licetus divided monsters into two main categories: uniform monsters (single species and sex) and non-uniform monsters (parts of different species and/or sexes). Uniform monsters were divided into different groups, such as defectives (missing limbs or parts of limbs), hypermorphs (two heads or limbs), doubles (conjoined twins), and deformities (children with crushed, broken, dislocated, or fused limbs). There was also a category of "extraordinary monsters," which included monsters with hair and pigment. Non-uniform monsters were divided into uniform and hybrid types, including hermaphrodites and animal hybrids (Figure 2) (Bates 2005, p. 149). Evil demons were again felt to contribute to production of the monsters by transporting sperm, exchanging embryos with animals, and interfering with reproductive processes in humans. St. Augustine believed that demons went beyond this and took actual pleasure in sexual intercourse with humans. St. Thomas Aquinas claimed a different view, that demons are incapable of lust and are motivated by leading humans to commit abominable sins (Robbins 1981, p. 254; Masters 1969b, pp. 9–10). Both views resulted in narratives of beautiful young women being impregnated by demons. In one such story a young woman confessed to her parents that she had a handsome young man as her lover who mysteriously appeared in her room, slept with her, and then disappeared. The parents

decided to carefully observe their daughter and one day, hearing suspicious noises in her room, broke in to find her in the arms of a horrible monster. When the Gospel of John was read to the demon by one of the family members, he is said to have departed, crashing through the ceiling and setting fire to all the furniture as he went. Later, the girl in the story gives birth to a human–animal hybrid, which was taken and immediately burned to death (Masters 1969a, pp. 54–55).

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828), the genius Spanish painter, played an extraordinary role in the birth and development of modern painting. Goya brilliantly captured the medieval lore of the monstrous in witchcraft in his *Capricho* series and some of his paintings. Goya's *caprichos* are a set of 80 engravings in their entirety as a manifestation of enlightened satire. The images represented superstition and medieval lore and the Spanish society of 1799 (Holloway 2012, p. 21). This series makes heavy use of witches, horrible monsters, human–animal hybrids, Sabbath, and grotesque naturalism. In Goya's time, the word "capricho" meant "something achieved through creativity rather than through artistic rules" (Casariego 1965, p. 13). His monsters of what many viewed as morbid imaginations came to life as if part of a medieval nightmare. They were described as rising from satire to an almost real Satanic cult (G. A. Williams 1976, p. 38). The humor of the *Caprichos* is constantly overshadowed by an element of nightmare. Technically revealing the influence of Rembrandt, they feature savagely satirical attacks on social customs, with elements of the macabre in scenes of witchcraft and diabolism (Peitcheva 2015, pp. 1–2). Goya's *Caprichos* were extremely popular in Spain, but members of the Inquisition, which had been particularly stressed by these works, became threatening and sought revenge. However, the conflict failed due to intervention by the so-called Prince of Peace, Manuel Godoy, who was hostile to the monks and took Goya under his protection (Crastré 2019, p. 34).

Goya's *pinturas negras/black paintings* are a group of 14 frescoes that were discovered in his farmhouse, also known as *casa quinta del sordo* (farmhouse of the deaf man). An important turning point in Goya's career was the mysterious and traumatic illness he experienced in 1792, which left him completely deaf (Peitcheva 2015, p. 52). The black paintings represent a very personal and unique work that perhaps was not intended for the public to see. These paintings are believed to have been created between 1819 and 1824. The first description of the paintings occurred in 1828, the year Goya passed away. One of Goya's *black paintings*, known as *Aquelarre/El gran cabron, or Witches' Sabbath/The Great He-Goat*, depicts a ghostly and terrifying witches' sabbath. The protagonist is a goat demon in the form of a black silhouette over a ghostly environment. The painting depicted the custom of witches' sabbath in the Middle Ages (Mena-Marques 2011, p. 17). Pita-Andrade described the painting as a gathering of evil witches, with the goat demon standing to one side and a group of corpses with horrifically deformed heads turning in horror towards the demon in monk's clothing, who is the embodiment of the devil (Pita-Andrade 1975, p. 51). In medieval times, it was widely believed that demons could take on the form of animals by occupying their bodies or using illusions (Masters 1969a, pp. 36–37). Demons, animal monsters, animal–human hybrid monsters, and bestiality were therefore again linked by the works of Goya.

5. Taxidermy and the Monstrous

Although real children and animals with birth defects attracted much attention at the time, taxidermy and taxonomy worked together to play an important role in producing monsters. This included the creation of mythical creatures whose existence had been the subject of many popular stories, but again, never confirmed. A modern analogy would be *cryptid* creature, terminology that can refer to non-existent or rare actual animals that

remain mysterious in scientific zoology (Forth 2021, p. 61). Cryptid animals today have been suggested to be real but also mysterious or confusing because their form or behavior is unexpected and disturbing (Turner 2017, pp. 12–13). Mysterious animal monsters played a very similar and integral part in various folklores, promoting widespread recognition of fantastic animals that were passed down through oral traditions and legends of peoples. Although legendary monsters often appear in ancient prints and books, their origins are often hidden in time and are now only speculative. Many of these terrifying creatures have simply become monster legends passed down from generation to generation with uncertain starting points. These legends, no matter how mysterious, continue to evoke passion and transform communities that carry them (Puglia 2024, p. 3). As mentioned earlier, it is known that humans are attracted to the unknown and the monstrous. Such monster legends influenced the public's willingness to believe that monsters could be a real phenomenon.

Long-existing sea monster stories are good examples of creatures with uncertain starting points. Descriptions of many mysterious sea monsters over the centuries show that they come in all shapes and sizes and are almost invariably frightening and even demonic. Sea serpent monsters are a popular type and have been recorded in many different parts of the world. For example, there were reports of numerous encounters with huge and dangerous krakens (very large, tentacled octopus- or squid-like sea monsters) in Gloucester Harbor, Massachusetts, in the early 17th century (Redfern 2020, pp. 16–17). It was also common at the time to use taxidermy to create sea or part-sea animal monsters for display and sale. Those producing the "artificial monsters" would include some who desired to promote experiments and seek exchange of information and results. Regardless of intent, these visible monsters impressed the public simply by physical presence and their appearance (Hanafi 2000a, p. 47).

Since the 16th century or even earlier, craftsmen, sailors or simply profiteers had been altering the bodies of marine animals to sell them as monsters, devils, demons and mythical creatures (Gudger 1934, p. 512) such as mermaids, sea monks, dragons and basilisks (Cano and Palomo-Muñoz 2017, p. 53). Most commonly, rays, skate or guitarfish were handcrafted into these mythical monsters and then dried and sold to British travelers and tourists. For example, the Jenny Haniver monster was described in the contemporary fictional book of cryptids of the sea, *Sea Besties*, as follows: "They look like the underside of a skate, or a ray and they do tend to congregate with those animals from time to time." These authors also indicate: "Like rays, such beasts have tails that can puncture a man" (LoPresti and LoPresti 2023, p. 67). It is thought that the name these monsters gained, Jenny Haniver, is a mistranslation of the French phrase "Jeune d'Anvers," meaning "young person from Antwerp." Antwerp is a port city on the Belgian Scheldt River, which flows into the English Channel and is the possible location of origin of the mythical Jenny Haniver creature (Gudger 1934, p. 512).

The first known illustration of a Jenny Haniver appears in Conrad Gesner's *Nomenclature aquatiliū animantium* (1560), where the Jenny Haniver is depicted as a small dragon-like creature (Gesner 1560, p. 139). In *De Piscibus* (Book 3) by Ulyssis Aldrouandi (1613), there are also drawings that appear to be of a Jenny Haniver. One of Aldrouandi's drawings bears the title: "Raia exiccaia & concinnata ad formam draconis," which translates "Dry ray dressed in the shape of a dragon" (Figure 2) (Aldrouandi 1613, p. 443). These words indicate the author knew that the depicted Jenny Haniver was not a real animal (Ellis 1994b, p. 85). To create these creatures for selling and profit, artisans and sailors would carve the carcasses of skates, rays, guitarfish or similar, and cut off their pectoral fins to give an anthropomorphized look to the specimen. They would then flatten and dry the specimens to give them the appearance of a mummified, once-living creature (Cano and Palomo-Muñoz 2017, p. 53).

Between 1545 and 1550, Danish King Christian III sent a drawing to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (then in Spain) depicting a strange sea creature supposedly captured in the Øresund, a strait between Denmark and Sweden. This “new creature” became known as the Sea Monk and aroused considerable interest throughout Europe. The creature had a human-like face and shaved head, and a scale-covered lower body. On the king’s order, the “abominable creature” was immediately buried in the ground (Paxton and Holland 2005, p. 39). An unknown individual creating a Jenny Haniver monster is believed to be the source of the Øresund Sea Monk or Sea Bishop. However, some authors have argued that Jenny Haniver monsters were primarily designed to look like a devil, demon, or dragon, rather than a distinctly human figure (Vainonen 1997, pp. 113–14).

The Jenny Haniver monsters are also known in parts of the Hispanic American community as “Diablitos” or “Garadiavolos” (little devils and devils) and “Chupacabras” (goat sucker) (Cano and Palomo-Muñoz 2017, p. 53). The origins of the Chupacabras, a vampire monster, appear to trace back to a Puerto Rican eyewitness who allegedly witnessed this strange, alien-looking creature. Although suggested connections between vampires and unexplained animal deaths date back many centuries, no references to a blood-sucking “Chupacabra” appear to have been found before the 1990s (Radford 2016, p. 50). The Chupacabra myth subsequently spread from Puerto Rico to Chile, Mexico, Argentina, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Guatemala, and even parts of the United States (Sáez 2010, p. 129).

A Jenny Haniver specimen named “Diablito/Chupacabras” is on display in the vertebrate collection of the Faculty of Biology of the University of the Valley of Guatemala (Cano and Palomo-Muñoz 2017, p. 53). Some artisans would tie a string around the region where the neck would be in these creations, forming the semblance of a human head. The nostrils of skates and rays are located on the undersurface and present somewhat like eyes, while the jaw protrudes during drying as the skin shrinks. In all elasmobranchs (sharks, skates, rays, guitarfish), the males have paired claspers (copulatory intromittent organs), which, when dried, are used by Jenny Haniver creators to represent legs (Ellis 1994b, p. 85; O’Shaughnessy et al. 2015, p. 2). Specimens of Jenny Haniver and Sea Monk monsters are still sold as a rarity and souvenir in some tourist shops and by many web online sites worldwide.

Another animal monster example from the 1800s was the hoax Feejee mermaid, which generated great interest by leveraging mythology. This monster was displayed in P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in New York in 1842, but shortly thereafter disappeared. It has been assumed to have been destroyed in one of several fires that gutted Barnum’s collections. This visually menacing mermaid-like creation was promoted as the missing link between humans and fish. Its origin remains obscure, with suggestions that it was likely created in the early nineteenth century by a Japanese fisherman (Levi 1977, p. 149). After occupying several locations of public visibility, the mermaid ended up in the possession of an American sea captain, Samuel Berret Edes, who bought it in 1822 from Japanese sailors for a then-very-high \$6000 USD (approximately \$164,000 today). The captain is believed to have been entirely convinced that his mermaid was a genuine specimen (Bondeson 1999, p. 38). His son sold it to the Boston Museum in 1842, after which P.T. Barnum acquired the mermaid cryptid. A naturalist determined the specimen was a clever fake, but it was nonetheless displayed for considerable profit. According to Barnum’s 1855 autobiography, the mermaid was made of a monkey’s body with a shark’s tail. Fish scales with animal hair superimposed covered the monkey’s body, and pendulous breasts hung from the chest. The mouth was wide open, and the teeth bared as if the creature had been snarling at its death (Levi 1977, pp. 150–51).

The Feejee mermaid and other sea monster creations are carefully described in the book “Sea Fables Explained” by Henry Lee (1883). The mermaid cryptid creations generally had a lower body made of the skin and scales of a fish, sometimes of the carp family, and fastened onto this, so neatly that it was hard to detect where the joint was made, were prominent ribs giving the mermaid a half-starved appearance. The upper part of the body generally leans upon its elbows and forearms, with arms that are thin, and the fingers attenuated and skeleton-like. The nails tended to be created from small pieces of ivory or bone. The head belonged to a small monkey with a little wool covering the crown. The teeth were often those of some fish species, including the scaleless catfish (Lee 1883, pp. 27–28). These artificial mermaid cryptids looked quite realistic if not closely inspected by a biologist, and, as was the case with Samuel Berret Edes, often sold for high prices. They again were lucrative business possessions for P.T. Barnum and other showmen (Cohen 1977, p. 75).

Is it possible that imaginations/legends of monsters like the infamous monster of Ravenna (a political tool) were fueled by the observance of taxidermy-created monsters such as the Jenny Haniver. This statement remains unknown, but it seems a possibility. Without the sound medical field of teratology, the observance of taxidermy-created monsters and/or real infants or animals with birth defects would distort reality and amplify such legends.

In summary, humans have been fascinated by the unknown throughout recorded history. This in early modern Europe included causes of birth defects and the possible reality and involvement of monsters. Increasing ability of humans at the time to travel and to print and disseminate documents, combined with limited understanding of natural mechanisms leading to birth defects, made medieval and early modern Europe a time well-positioned for sudden expansion of belief in supernatural monsters. These monsters were subject to leveraging as political and religious tools to achieve proprietary or controlling agendas in both realms.

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