

INSCRIPTION ON THE BODY
Monstrous Children
in Middle English Literature



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INSCRIPTION ON THE BODY Monstrous Children in Middle English Literature



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Introduction

Searching for the monster is a productive hunt whose course is impossible to predict: the monster tends to escape constantly, which is one of the attractions of that never ending pursuit; it is better to devote oneself to it with flexibility, pleasure and even imagination, than to blindly persist in an inadequate logic; it is better to treat it as art rather than a duel, which would be won in advance by that protean adversary.

Claude Kappler *Monstres, démons et merveilles à la fin du Moyen Age*¹

Any discussion of monstrosity, elusive as the subject of such scrutiny is, should involve the question of corporeality. The monstrous carnality is of the most extreme nature: monsters are simultaneously not human enough and trans-human, in the sense of transcending the limiting borders associated with the “normal” body. The non-normativity of their bodies, however, does not exhaust the wealth of definitions which could be provided in order to account for the scope of their deformity. Not exclusively a body, but also a spirit may undergo deformation, transforming itself into a warped morality that leads to destructive acts. In this study the ultimate emphasis will be placed on both, but the idea of extra-normal corporeality will always be present.

Even for ancient philosophers humans were potentially bestial creatures. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* involves a delineation of the par-

¹ [Chercher le monstre est une chasse fertile et imprévu: le monstre, constamment, tend à s’échapper et c’est là l’un des charmes de cette poursuite sans fin; mieux vaut s’y adonner avec souplesse, avec plaisir et même avec fantaisie, que s’obstiner aveuglément dans une <logique> inadéquate; mieux vaut en faire un art qu’un duel, lequel serait gagné d’avance par cet adversaire protéiforme]; Claude Kappler, *Monstres, démons et merveilles à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Payot, 1980), p. 14; the translation of the quotation into English is mine.

allelism between human children and animals. The Philosopher, if we use Aristotle's medieval epithet, indicates the children's deficiency manifested in their inability to make choices, which renders them more similar to animals than to adult humans.² The bestiality suggests a degree of monstrosity, subtle as the indication is. Aristotle did not perceive children as human beings, since their nature was allegedly unreasonable, which made their evolution into the state of adult reason indispensable.³ This view on the malleable quality of children's awareness of the surrounding world found its reflection in the medieval notions of childhood: children were then envisaged as not only physically weak, but also devoid of reason.⁴ Nevertheless, such characteristics did not render them innocent in the spiritual sense, as St Augustine insisted in his *Confessions*. If, according to the Church Father, "the weakness... of infant limbs, not its will, is its innocence", then newborn babies are only physically innocent, which indicates their vulnerability.⁵ Still, they have to undergo purification through baptism, as they are not impeccable. In the course of the children's lives their nature has to be improved by nurture, since only in that way can they become good Christians. Therefore it may be postulated that the negative attitude to childhood, as is observable in the medieval culture alongside a more positive view on it, originated in antiquity.

This study of monstrous children in Middle English literature could be perceived as an attempt to account for the ambivalent image of childhood in the Middle Ages. Focusing on those literary representations, the considerations below may constitute a small part of the more all-inclusive project that Mary McLaughlin defined as the "Discovery of Childhood".⁶ Particularly the negative, frequently monstrous, representations of chil-

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 53.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Doris Desclais Berkvam, *Enfance et maternité dans la littérature française des XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1981), p. 138.

⁵ *The Confessions of St Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York, London: Collier Books, Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1961), p. 15.

⁶ Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries" in: *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd de Mause (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), pp. 108—181.

dren deserve a close critical attention due to their equivocal nature. The ambivalence is enhanced by the overtones of holiness that exist in those representations: young Jesus from the Apocrypha is a good example of what could somehow anachronistically be seen as moral monstrosity, if it did not verge on sainthood. Particularly in the Gospel of Thomas Jesus represents the topos of *puer senex*, violent towards all those who oppose him and thus resembling the Old Testament God the Father rather than a mild and docile child.⁷ The monstrosity might be read in the context of medieval culture from two perspectives: Jesus was either a typical representative of children with their incomprehensible vice, as it was thought in the Middle Ages, or he was expected to act like the vengeful Lord. Hugolin Langkammer adds another hypothesis about the source of such mysterious representations when he indicates their pagan and Gnostic origin. Langkammer states that the child's harmful behaviour may originate from his identity of a *theios aner*, the man of God, while his "adult" pride derives from the fact that, in a Gnostic mode, he already knew everything once he was born.⁸ Whatever interpretation we accept, Jesus' behaviour, conventionally seen as immoral, and holiness accompany each other in this representation so closely that similar instances of monstrosity followed by holiness in such texts as *Sir Gowther* should not surprise us greatly.⁹ Another example of such combination, this time of a more literal monstrosity with sainthood, appears in *The Prioress's Tale*, where Chaucer's "litel clergeon" (VII: 503)¹⁰ becomes physically deformed due

⁷ *The Gospel of Thomas*, trans. Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer, at: <<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/noncanon.stm>>

⁸ Hugolin Langkammer, *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu [Apocrypha of the New Testament]* (Katowice: Księgarnia św. Jacka, 1989), p. 33.

⁹ Further commentary on the apocryphal Jesus' behaviour may be found in, for instance, Marek Starowieyski's introduction to the texts treating of Mary's and the Saviour's youth; see Marek Starowieyski, "Wstęp" [Introduction] in: *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu. Ewangelie apokryficzne [The Apocrypha of the New Testament. Apocryphal Gospels]*, vol. 1, *Fragmenty. Narodzenie i dzieciństwo Maryi i Jezusa [Fragments. The Birth and Childhood of Mary and Jesus]*, ed. Marek Starowieyski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2003), pp. 19—59.

¹⁰ All the quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* will come from: *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); the notes will also be taken from that edition.

to his severed throat and is consequently transformed by the Virgin into an automaton, which turns out to be a direct path to his sainthood.¹¹ Nevertheless, Chaucer's character cannot be perceived as a monster in the same understanding as the literary figures we shall focus on here: as offspring born deformed (or accused of deformity by those who use calumny as a weapon directed against the mother). Still, the monstrous children who will be of interest for us share with the characters broached above the potential for holiness and the religious background of their deformity. Those representations of children are multifaceted and hence they bear a number of similarities to the Janus-faced image of a monster that emerges from the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance culture. The malformed or deformed being represents there both the sinfulness of the world and the unfathomable character of the divinity.

What undoubtedly needs more exploration is the function, or rather the functions of monstrous children, to restate the issue investigated by David Williams in his study *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*.¹² The religious, moral, and finally ideological message that those representations entail has to be investigated, particularly due to the context of conversion and the sacrament of baptism that consistently appears in the narratives that will be interpreted in the ensuing sections of this study. Monstrosity thus becomes a text inscribed onto bodies for a reason; the purpose of the inscription has to undergo a serious questioning. Deformity may be subject to metaphorization as an instance of writing that needs deciphering. The metaphor in turn might be conducive to more general reflection on the *nature* of the

¹¹ Andrzej Wicher thus comments on the machine-like quality of the boy's body in his life-in-death state: "The child's life is not, however, truly prolonged, he is turned into a sort of cyborg designed to reproduce incessantly and monotonously the anthem, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, a paradoxical state which the boy himself accurately describes as 'singing in my death' (l. 660). The paradox consists here also in the fact that the boy's only bodily function that is left, apart from his brief statement just before the ultimate death, is singing aloud, i. e. something that he is the least likely to be able to do because of the nature of his wound"; Andrzej Wicher, "Sounding the Limits of Eroticism in Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale*" in: *Representations of the Erotic*, eds. Tadeusz Rachwał and Tadeusz Sławek (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1996), pp. 29—37.

¹² See David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996).

deformed and the role of *nurture* in the process of becoming (or, alternatively, un-becoming) a monster.

While interpreting the figures, or rather illusory images, of monstrous children, navigating one's way through the sphere of the imaginary becomes crucial. In *The Medieval Imagination* Jacques Le Goff insists that the sphere of representations is more interesting as an object of study in giving readers more insight into the past than concrete historic sources.¹³ A study of the purely fictitious monsters from medieval literature might therefore result in a more productive outcome than concentrating on the actual deformed offspring which was born to meet its frequently dreadful end, if one remembers that abandoning such children was a usual practice in Roman antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Fiction, often tinged or even suffused with ideology(ies), could tell us more about the mentality prevalent in the epoch in question than historical records. The monstrous child that will be the object of our attention here repeats the pattern that Reinhard Kuhn observed in child figures in Western literature: the child can be treated as a "cultural invention, a product of the imagination". Moreover, Kuhn describes that construct as a "protean figure": the one that undergoes constant changes.¹⁴ As we shall see, the monstrous child in medieval, and specifically Middle English literature, is no different from the more abstract figure of any child emerging from Kuhn's study. It is also an elusive construct, always in the making and undergoing unpredictable transformations.

The figures of monstrous children that will be referred to here may seem very illusory. A few of them are pivotal characters in the plot, which is naturally not the case with the reported offspring of queens falsely accused by their sinister adversaries (the enemies interestingly often being women exercising power in the real sense of the phrase, since they are mostly the unfortunate heroines' regal mothers-in-law). Thus the word "representations" that should refer to all the figures discussed here becomes to a certain extent inadequate. Nevertheless, the monsters figuring in the falsified letters may still be referred to as "representations", since they are concrete

¹³ Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), particularly pp. 1—17.

¹⁴ Reinhard Kuhn, *Corruption in Paradise: The Child in Western Literature* (London: University Press of New England, 1982), p. 3.

tizations of ideas, even if they belong to the realm of imagination. Some of the literary works mentioned here even involve elements of description that specify the child's deformity; hence including them in a study of representations becomes justifiable due to the realistic quality of the imagery. Even when they are solely products of false accusations, the monstrous children from those reports function similarly to real monsters in other narratives: they symbolize the alleged sinfulness of the mother, but on a different level they also provide evidence for her holiness. Not incidentally are the heroines of the "Constance group" typically presented as emulating the Virgin Mary, particularly in the Piétà-like scenes that appear in those stories at the point when the women float in rudderless boats at sea.

The body of texts that have been chosen for our discussion here by no means exhausts the list of possible sources of the representations in question. The false accusation of an unnatural birth also appears in, for example, Marie de France's *Le Fraisne* and its Middle English version, *Lay le Fresne*. There a "levedi milde" (33) is accused of infidelity due to bearing twin girls instead of one child.¹⁵ A similar accusation occurs in the fourteenth-century romance *Octavian*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the discussion of monstrosity in the texts above does not entail any ideologically laden considerations of religious and ethnic nature, hence they are not close analogues of the texts that will be of interest for us here. As for examples of the real monsters from literary texts and not the quasi-monstrous offspring, Mélusine in the romances by Jean d'Arras and La Coudrette mothers at least two monsters, *Geoffroy à la grand dent* (the large-toothed) and *Horrible*, which directly results from her own supernatural origin.¹⁷ Yet, again the issue of deformity does not appear central there; neither does ethnicity come into play as a factor causing monstrosity. The romances that have been chosen for this analysis seem to be fairly representative in terms of involving specific types of monstrous children, arbitrary as such a se-

¹⁵ "Lay le Fresne" in: *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), pp. 233—248; the numbers of the lines refer to that edition.

¹⁶ See "Octavian" in: *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London and Rutland, Vermont: J.M. Dent & Sons and Charles E. Tuttle, 1992), pp. 75—124.

¹⁷ See *Romans of Partenay or of Lusignen*, ed. W.W. Skeat (London: The Early English Text Society, 2002).

lection may appear. Characteristically, popular literature supplies us with a wealth of texts on the subject.¹⁸ The sensational dimension of juvenile monstrosity, however, did not hinder inclusion of more serious topics into the plots. Monsters are viewed in the light of early scientific theories of generation, paganism and conversion, devilish interventions in human procreation, and, last but not least, miscegenation.

Externalization of a monster is entangled in the intricate web of dependencies, with the gesture of “othering” not only of children, but also of their mothers as potential sources of deformity or at least difference. Any female body means potential peril, not to mention the threat of spoiling what we would nowadays call the “white race” through unions with religious and ethnic others. A monstrous child may be a punishment for the transgression of its parents, but also a sign demonstrating God’s inscrutability. A degree of ecumenist attitude might even be involved, since in the narratives in question the others also have their function in the plan of salvation.

Chapter One tries to reveal the complexity of terminology referring to the monstrous and etymological intricacies associated with the term. Divagations on the function of the monstrous in the medieval and Renaissance cultures subsequently follow. The scientific theories of monsters’ origin, often continuing misogynist discursive practices of antiquity, will be summarized at that point as well. It will be hypothesized that representations of monstrous children may be read in the context of medieval ambivalence over childhood as related to the Christian ideal of ascetic life and the hardships associated with parenthood. Philip Ariès’ concept of the non-existing awareness of childhood as a separate stage of human life will be repudiated. Nonetheless, the affirmative stance on monstrosity, paradoxically based on Pseudo-Dionysius’ apophatic, that is negative, theology, is confirmed as dominating in the Middle Ages. Despite its generally apocalyptic attitude to deformity, the Renaissance in turn clearly developed the idea of a carnivalesque dimension of monstrosity.

¹⁸ On the qualities of medieval popular romances, their sensationalism, and the possibilities of a more serious theoretical analysis of those “ugly ducklings of medieval English studies” see Nicola McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction” in: *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 1–21.

In Chapter Two *The Man of Law's Tale*, one of the few tales of Chaucer where children appear, is analyzed as not exclusively the record of a monstrous birth resulting from an inter-faith marriage, but also as a narrative on religion, race, and missionary practices. Constance is accused of “unnaturalness” by her two subsequent mothers-in-law, themselves “unnatural” in their craving for authority and in their non-female characterization. Furthermore, the question of ethnicity is foregrounded in the descriptions of Constance’s pallor and the religious difference manifested by her adversaries. The heroine’s two subsequent marriages with pagans result in conversion and, later, the prominent position in Christendom of her quasi-monstrous son, Maurice. Like Constance, the title character of *Emaré* also undergoes the process of “othering”, here visible in a different perception of her due to the oriental dress she wears, which makes otherness not only similar to a text written on the body, but also to a clothing item that alters one’s physicality. What is more, the latter romance exemplifies the affirmative, therefore truly Christian, treatment of a monster by the parents. The two analogous romances deal with inscriptions on the body in the form of alleged monstrosity or ethnic difference.

Chapter Three openly focuses on the question of miscegenation, since the deformity of an infant is no longer fictitious here. An inter-faith and interracial union leads to malformation of the couple’s child, perhaps due to the infidel father’s inability to endow the matter with life, if Aristotle’s theory of the male giving the form to the female matter is considered. Biracial origin metaphorizes otherness, visualized either in the formlessness of the body or, alternatively, in its particoloured quality. In *The King of Tars* the sultan, bestial in accordance with the metaphor of Muslims’ canine nature, witnesses the child’s magic beautification through baptism and consequently decides to subject himself to the sacrament as well. His multi-coloured body has to be read as a text parallel to the representation of Saracen Feirefiz in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*. The two ideologically laden images function as evidence for the necessity of conversion.

In Chapter Four monstrosity signals individual vice. Demonic intervention in procreation demonstrates the adequacy of reading fiends in visual representations as yet another group of ethnic others. The demonic origin determines the life of Robert le Diable and his Middle English equivalent,

Sir Gowther. Like the child in *The King of Tars*, they represent the Wild Folk type with its propinquity for holiness: a quality more easily attainable for them due to their secluded, meditational life in the woods. Adopting the life of a dog becomes an adequate form of penance for moral deformity. Instead of *cynocephali's* monstrosity, Gowther lives up to the canine aspect of the Christian ideal, present also in St Christopher's legend.

Thus finally deformation is received with affirmation, confirming the possibility of a positive Christian response to the monstrous. Towards the end of this study monstrosity emerges as a religious ideal, a condition allowing for a faster development of sanctity and a path to salvation, not only of the individual, but also of the world. It is a text written on the body alongside other inscriptions, indelible but potentially ennobling. Even though it might initially seem that a monster is merely a being "not conforming to the divinely ordered scheme", as Jane Gilbert defined it, the final conclusion of our analysis might testify to a different truth: perhaps God also speaks through monsters, or they are even closer to holiness than ordinary humans.¹⁹ Monstrosity thus becomes a system of signs inscribed onto bodies, the system which has to undergo deciphering and be read as a text demonstrating the complexity of creation. The inscription on the body transmogrifies into a text affecting what is dormant within. The body thus frequently materializes the world of the spirit and the relationships between the two, body and soul, may be perceived as complementary.

¹⁹ Jane Gilbert, "Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*" in: *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain. Essays for Felicity Riddy*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Rosalynn Voaden, Arlyn Diamond, Ann Hutchinson, Carol M. Meale, and Lesley Johnson (Turhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 329—344.

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NAPIS NA CIELE

Monstrualne dzieci w literaturze średnioangielskiej

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca stanowi omówienie idei deformacji fizycznej i psychicznej skonkretyzowanej w postaciach dzieci-potworów występujących w literaturze napisanej w języku średnioangielskim, jak również w analogicznych utworach napisanych po średniofrancusku i średnioniemiecku (*Mittelhochdeutsch*). W rozprawie umieszczono tego typu przedstawienia w kontekście średniowiecznej fascynacji tym, co odmienne, jako znakiem unaoczniającym złożoność Bożego planu dotyczącego stworzenia, jak również podkreślono niejednoznaczny obraz samego dzieciństwa w kulturze średniowiecznej. Uwzględniono w niej też teorie reprodukcyjne i teratologiczne wywodzące się ze starożytności, a także kontynuację średniowiecznego zainteresowania monstrualnością w postaci renesansowej wizji potwora jako boskiej kary skierowanej przeciwko grzesznym rodzicom.

Rozważania zawarte w studium zapoczątkowane są omówieniem motywu „oskarżonych królowych”, pierwotnie umieszczanego przez Margaret Schlauch w kontekście baśni ludowej, a występującym w *Opowieści Prawnika* w Chaucerowskich *Opowieściach kanterberyjskich* oraz anonimowym średnioangielskim romansie *Emaré*. Odmienność religijna i etniczna pozwala w nich oskarżyć matkę o rzekomy negatywny wpływ na cielesność potomstwa, ale fabuły te kończą się potwierdzeniem świętości dziecka.

XIII-wieczny romans *The King of Tars* przedstawia już nie fikcyjną, ale prawdziwą deformację, unaoczniającą czytelnikom, że islam to religia tak martwa, jak nieruchome jest ciało dziecka sułtana Syrii i chrześcijańskiej księżniczki. Dopiero nawrócenie ojca na chrześcijaństwo nadaje dziecku kształt, a samego sułtana upiększa, zmieniając kolor jego skóry. Podobny jest wydźwięk *Parzivala* Wolframa von Eschenbacha. Dydaktyzm obu narracji jest jasny: jedynie chrześcijaństwo chroni przed brzydotą zewnętrzną i wewnętrzną. Taką brzydotę wewnętrzną przedstawia sobą brutalny i bezwzględny dla przedstawicieli Kościoła tytułowy bohater romansu *Sir Gowther*, podobnie jak bohater analogicznego romansu *Robert le Diable* dziecko poczęte przez diabła. Dopiero świadomość źródła swojej chorej psychiki pozwala Gowtherowi odbyć pokutę i zostać świętym.

Analizowane teksty ukazują spektrum zagadnień związanych z monstrialnością: deformacją fikcyjną, będącą bronią przeciwko matce oskarżanej o „inność”, monstrialnością realną, wynikającą z tożsamości religijnej i etnicznej ojca, oraz skazą psychiczną, będącą skutkiem wpływu diabła na sam akt poczęcia. We wszystkich tych utworach efektem końcowym jest potwierdzenie nie tylko normatywności cielesnej dziecka, ale nawet jego świętości.

INSCRIPTION SUR LE CORPS

Enfants-monstres dans la littérature du moyen anglais

Résumé

Le but de la présente étude est d'analyser l'idée de la déformation physique et psychique concrétisée dans des personnages d'enfants-monstres de la littérature écrite en moyen anglais, ainsi que dans des oeuvres analogues en moyen français et en moyen allemand (*Mittelhochdeutsch*). L'auteur de la dissertation place les représentations de ce type dans le contexte de la fascination médiévale pour l'étrangeté considérée comme signe de la complexité du plan divin de la création ; elle souligne également une image équivoque de l'enfance dans la culture médiévale. Le travail tient compte des théories reproductives et tératologiques issues de l'antiquité, ainsi que de la continuation de l'intérêt médiéval pour la monstruosité qui se manifeste, à l'époque de la Renaissance, dans la vision du monstre en tant qu'une punition divine infligée aux parents pécheurs.

Le travail commence avec la description du motif des «reines accusées», placé originellement par Margaret Schlauch dans le contexte du conte folklorique, et présent dans *Le Conte du Juriste* des *Contes de Canterbury* de Chaucer, et aussi dans *Émaré*, une romance anonyme composée en moyen anglais. Dans ces oeuvres la seule différence religieuse et ethnique permet d'accuser la mère d'une prétendue influence néfaste sur la corporalité de la descendance, mais les textes finissent par une confirmation de la sainteté de l'enfant.

La romance du XIII^e siècle *The King of Tars* présente déjà une déformation réelle et non fictive, prouvant aux lecteurs que l'islam est une religion aussi morte que le corps de l'enfant du sultan de Syrie et d'une princesse chrétienne est sans vie. C'est la conversion du père au christianisme qui permet de former l'enfant et d'embellir le père en changeant la couleur de sa peau. *Parzival* de Wolfram von Eschenbach transmet un message pareil. La morale des deux histoires est claire: seul le christianisme protège l'homme contre la laideur externe et interne.

Cette dernière est personnifiée entre autres par les héros éponymes des deux oeuvres analogues: Robert, un enfant conçu par le diable (*Robert le Diable*) et Gowther, un homme brutal et intransigeant envers les représentants de l'Eglise (*Sir Gowther*). Ce n'est que la conscience de la source de sa psyché malade qui permet à Gowther de faire pénitence et de devenir saint.

Les textes analysés étalent tout un éventail de questions concernant la monstruosité, à partir d'une déformation fictive, étant une arme contre une mère accusée d'étrangeté, par une monstruosité réelle, résultant de l'identité religieuse et ethnique du père, jusqu'à une tare psychique causée par l'influence du diable sur l'acte de conception. Dans toutes ces oeuvres l'effet final consiste à confirmer non seulement la normativité corporelle de l'enfant, mais aussi sa pure sainteté.

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