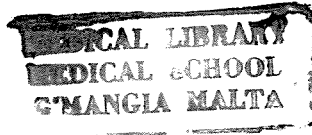


The Birth of Monsters in the Maltese Islands in the 17th and 18th Centuries

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The harmful effects of the ingestion of thalidomide by pregnant women, shown in the birth of malformed babies in 1960-62, alerted the medical profession to the risks of drug administration in expectant women in the early months of gestation. It must, however, be borne in mind that the endemic birth of deformed babies and of so-called monsters was a familiar phenomenon to medical men hundreds of years before thalidomide became available. Indeed it is known that there exists a wide variety of risk-factors responsible for malformed offspring apart from drugs (Hartz, 1975; Medical Tribune, 1975).

Ideas about the generation of monsters have their roots in antiquity and are related to the mythological, moral and religious concepts of the various cultures in which they arose. By the 16th and 17th century a number of medical men such as Ambroise Pare (1510-90) and William Harvey (1578-1657) were already exercising their minds about the nature and aetiology of teratology (Wilson, 1973; Pazzini, 1974). Foremost among these workers was Fortunio Liceto (1577-1657) of Rapallo, teacher of medicine at Padova. In his *De monstrorum causis*, he ascribed foetal deformities to supernatural causes, such as punishment from God for sins committed, and to physical factors arising from defects of the organs of generation. His work is illustrated with many figures showing human beings with a duck's head; with webbed fingers and toes; with a pig's body, etc. (Licetus, 1634). In 1672, Johan Scultetus published an engraving of a baby with reduced limbs and harelip in his *L'Arcenal de chirurgie* (Scultetus, 1672).

Apart from the supposed causes of teratology already mentioned, the visual impressions received by the mother-to-be were also listed among the factors responsible for the birth of monsters. When, for instance, a baby was born with her body covered with hairs in the 17th century, the phenomenon was attributed to the fact that the mother had been looking at a painting of St. John the Baptist who was wearing

his coat of camel's hair. As late as 1726 members of the medical profession in England were debating the possibility of a woman giving birth to a number of rabbits because a rabbit had sprung at her when she was five months pregnant (Mathison, 1958).

The Maltese physician, Dr. Salvatore Bernard, writing in 1749, adhered to the theory that the phantasy "organ" of a pregnant woman communicated by means of the "animal spirits" with the phantasy "organ" of the baby so that any perception aroused in the mother's mind produced a similar impression in the brain of the foetus, which impression in turn reacted upon and moulded the form of its body; indeed he had read about the case of a pregnant woman who having gazed for some time at the picture of a Moor gave birth to a dark-skinned child. He held that monsters, too, in the shape of animals and devils were born to women who during gestation had been exposed to the sight of such creatures (Cassar, 1949).

This paper aims to draw attention to two manuscript descriptions of monsters by a midwife and by a physician in 1630 and in 1788 respectively. They are being published as they are the earliest accounts of the births of teratogenic babies known to have been observed and recorded in the Maltese Islands.

Description of a monster by midwife Oliviera Gambino in 1630.

This account was submitted to the Episcopal Court of Malta on the 18th September 1630. It was written, apparently, to justify the fact that the deformed baby, born dead, was not buried in consecrated ground but was disposed of summarily by the midwife herself without any religious ritual (CEM. AO, 508).

Here is a free translation from the Italian of the original manuscript:

"Report of a monster born at Bormla in 1630 by midwife Oliviera Gambino."

Last Sunday, the 15th of the month, I was called to visit Mattiola; wife of (name is missing) Failla, from Bormla who was seized with severe labour pains. I

had seen her for the same complaint eight days previously. Her labour started at 2 a.m. She expelled two pieces of bad flesh each weighing about a quarter of a rotolo. These were followed by three eggs inside their skins. One of them burst pouring a milk-like liquid. All these eggs were foul smelling and tinged with decomposing blood. At this stage I noted that a portion of intestine, containing two round objects similar to the eggs already mentioned, was dangling out of the uterus. The woman then delivered herself of a dead monster with a flat head to which was attached a piece of black flesh. The eyes were placed at the upper extremity of the forehead. The eyelids were closed because the foetus was dead. There seemed to be no neck, of if there was one, it was so short that it could not be distinguished so much so that the head and chest appeared to form one whole piece without any hint of a neck. The ears were attached to the shoulders. The rest of the body was normal.

After the birth of the monster the woman expelled the intestine containing the eggs and a further chunk of flesh, larger than the monster, to which was attached a neck. This neck was identical in everything to that of a duck or pluncheon. Having detached and examined this neck I found that it contained the vertebrae and articulations typical of the structure of the neck of a bird.

I packed all these fragments of putrefying and stinking flesh in a piece of linen and buried them in a field belonging to a married woman. Dated 18th September 1630."

Report of the birth of a monster with its sketch, 1788, by Dr. Saverio Fenech.

The manuscript was written in Italian by Dr. Saverio Fenech who was appointed to the staff of the Gozo Hospital on the 17th March 1772 (Arch. 1192). He eventually rose to the rank of Principal Physician of that institution, a post which he held for 25 years. He was also for many years First Jurat of the *Universita* (municipal council) of that island under the Order of St. John. He died at Gozo, aged 92 years, on the 21st August 1838. An obituary note published in the official government gazette states that his "sound medical experience and his affable and sociable manners, together with his great charity to the poor and his general benevolent disposition, obtained for him the esteem of the authorities and the affection of the people" (Malta Govt. Gaz. 1838).

The text of the report runs as follows (translation):-

"I was called yesterday to Nadur to assist a parturient woman whom I found to have already given birth to a monster. This creature had the head and ears like those of a cat; the scalp from the forehead to the first three vertebrae was covered with black hair. The face, too, was like that of a cat but without hair and without eyes. (The upper limbs) were human-like from the humerus to the carpus but without articulations; the hands were similar to those of a cat without separation of the fingers. The thumb was detached from the hand and had only one phalanx. The genital parts cannot be distinguished from those of a female cat. There is no anus and no umbilicus. The parish priest considered that these characters

conform more to a human, though malformed, being (than to an animal one) and he had it buried in church. Today the 28th December 1788". Fig. 1

The verso of the document bears the words:-
"Report of the birth of a monster with its sketch. 1788" (Misc. 76).

Comment

Apart from being the earliest known descriptions of monsters from the Maltese Islands, these reports are also of interest because they were motivated not by medical reasons but by the ecclesiastical requirements of the time regulating church burial for the deformed neo-nate. In fact, since the early years of the Christian Church, the burial of the mortal remains of Christians has been regarded as an act of religious import because, among other reasons, it took place in consecrated ground.

In the 17th and 18th century Malta interments of deceased Catholics took place in churches as cemeteries were then very few. This practice did not cease completely until 1974 (Malta Govt. Gaz. 1974). Church burial was governed by Canon Law which prescribed definite rules with regard to the interment of lapsed Catholics, excommunicated persons and suicides. The birth and the death of a grossly malformed infant or monster, however, posed an intriguing quandary to the canonists. Was this deformed creature a human being or an animal? If born alive, was it to receive baptism? If still-born was it to be given church burial? The officiating priest was enjoined to examine the monster to ascertain that its "principal parts" i.e. the head and the chest, had a human configuration. If these parts were present, the infant was baptised but if the head was that of an animal and the limbs of a human being, he was baptised *sub conditione si es homo ego te baptizo* (Schmalzgrueber, 1844; Neyraguet, 1851; Scavini, 1860).

Midwife Gambino's report is of interest not only because it is the earliest document on this topic for the Maltese Islands but also because it implies that the parturient woman gave birth to two monsters - one with human characters and the other with the features of a volatile creature suggestive of a duck or pluncheon.

Dr. Fenech's report does not specify whether the infant was born alive or dead; but from the general tone of the document, it appears reasonably certain that it was a still birth and hence the question of baptism did not arise. What had to be determined, therefore, was whether the neo-nate was entitled to church burial in view of his pronounced bestial features. The diagnosis as to whether he was a human being or not, with the consequent decision as to its proper place of interment, was made by the parish priest. In fact, Dr. Fenech simply limited himself to a description of its anatomy and to a factual statement as to what the parish priest decided and did. Why did Dr. Fenech refrain from expressing an opinion as to the human nature or otherwise of the neo-nate? We have no means of knowing but considering the times

in which he lived one suspects that he wished to steer clear of any course that might have involved him into some confrontation with the Bishop's Curia or with the Tribunal of the Inquisition. It is worth noting in this respect that up to the end of the 18th century Maltese physicians who published medical works had to do so *superiorum permissu* and those who merely wanted to read books listed in the Index of prohibited works had, as late as the beginning of the 19th century, to obtain the licence of the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Index to allow him to "read and to keep in his custody, so that they were not accessible to others, prohibited books dealing with medicine, anatomy, surgery and chemistry" (Bernard, 1749; Grima, 1773; Locano 1774; Cassar, 1964).

As late as the mid-19th century canonists were still debating the religious issues raised by the birth of monsters. In their conclusions they were swayed by the conviction that monsters were generated as the result of copulation between a woman and a male beast or between a woman and the devil (Schmalzgrueber, 1844; Neyraguet, 1851; Wheatley, 1971).

That witches consorted with the devil, in an assumed human form, was widely believed in not only by untutored persons but also by the intelligentsia since at least the end of the 15th century (Wilson, 1973). In fact this concept was acted upon by the Tribunal of the Inquisition so much so that in one year alone - 1485 - no less than forty-one witches were burned at the stake at Como, in Italy, after having been found guilty of having practised these "abominations" with devils (Sprenger and Kramer, 1968). In a trial of two women charged with witchcraft in Essex, England, in 1645 the accused gave accounts of their alleged sexual relations with the devil (Macfarlane, 1970).

These beliefs were also current in Malta. In 1676, for instance, the Maltese wife of a physician accused herself before the Tribunal of the Inquisition of Malta of having invoked the devil and invited him to have sexual intercourse with her if he destroyed her husband. (AIM, 79).

The turning point in the Church's attitude came at the beginning of the present century with the rise and progress of the science of embryology and medical genetics. The old ideas were discarded by the Church as "to-day (1927) it has been definitely established that a woman cannot conceive (by intercourse) with a beast much less with the devil". It is of historical interest to know, however, that this shift was not universal and that at the same period some canonists were still advocating the use of the *si tu es homo* formula in the baptism of monsters (Vermeersh, 1927; Prummer, 1923).

The first printed descriptions of monsters delivered in Malta appeared in 1816 when an anonymous writer - presumably a medical man - published, in the form of a hand-bill, *An Account of a Monstrous Fetus Born in*

Malta 1816 in English and in Italian. It consists of a detailed external and internal description of a deformed creature with the features of conjoined twins but having only one head. It was born to a woman at the women's Hospital in Valletta in September of that year. (Anon. 1816). Other descriptions of malformed babies born in Malta were published by Dr. L. Pisani, Dr. F.L. Gravagna and Dr. A. Preziosi in the forties of the last century (Portafoglio 1840 and 1843; Storia Soc. Med. 1845).

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Sono stato chiamato jesi al raddar per scriverlo
 ad una onagera, quale ho trovato aver già
 partorito un mostro che avea fa testa e braccia
 uguali a quelle d'un gatto, l'altezza d'una
 braccia, ma vertebre vestite di pelo nero
 la faccia simile ad un gatto nero, ma senza pelo
 e senza occhi, dall'ombel fin' il torso d'un umano
 senza articolazione, le mani simili pure a
 un gatto senza articolazione delle dita, con
 una sola falange del pollice divisa in
 due, le parti genitali non si distinguono
 che d'una femina, senza ano, e senza
 urina, ha creduto che ha più
 che mai confermato, e ha
 oggi il 24 d'Aprile 1788
 Lucio



Manuscript describing and illustrating a "monster" born in Gozo in 1788.