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"Inscriptions on the Body: Monstrous Children in Middle English Literature", Anna Czarnowus, Katowice 2009 : [recenzja]

Romanica Silesiana 5, 302-304

2010

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*Anna Czarnowus: "Inscriptions on the Body:
Monstrous Children in Middle English Literature"*
Katowice, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2009, 148 p.
ISBN 978-83-226-1844-8

A small book on little monsters. In fewer than two hundred pages, Anna Czarnowus' monograph offers a good survey of what she identifies as the types of monstrous children that appear in Middle English literature. Examining such romances as *The Man of Law's Tale*, *Emaré*, *The King of Tars*, and *Sir Gowther*, Czarnowus takes an interdisciplinary approach to these little creatures, "in the light of early scientific theories of generation, paganism and conversion, devilish interventions in human procreation, and, last but not least, miscegenation" (15). Within this framework, she probes a critical gap in terms of identifying the function(s) of these monstrous children, and then offers a very postmodern solution: to read deformity and monstrosity as texts inscribed onto bodies that need deciphering.

In this respect, Czarnowus encourages activity on the part of readers to decipher the monstrous body as one that can function on diverse levels, potentially embracing both positive and negative signs. As the introduction of the book suggests the value of considering the purposes of these ambiguous meanings, the paradox of monstrosity itself is further explored in her first chapter, "Monstrous Images, Monstrous Selves: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas." Echoing Girardian theory, she describes the potential for monstrous beings to signify as both objects of horror and reverence. She offers a nuanced account of the intricate etymology of the term "monster" through different languages and periods, revealing how the word itself reflects the hybrid nature of the bodies it signifies. As the female sex was itself doubly a site of impurity and holiness, namely through its ability to generate new life, both Aristotelian and Hippocratic theory in the Middle Ages associate the female body as the locus of monstrous progeny. Here, Czar-

nowus briefly describes the cultural ideologies of such concepts as corruptive menstrual blood, immoral maternal behaviour, and the influence of the mother's improper desires on the child's physical form, any of which could account for the occurrence of monstrous births. Ending her chapter with a consideration of visual arts, i.e. *mappae mundi* and bestiaries, she connects these forms to her general thesis in an interesting way — showing how textual bodies are literally placed within textual frameworks.

In "The Fictions of Monstrosity in *The Man of Law's Tale* and *Emaré*," Czarnowus examines two romances in the genre of the calumniated queen, which demonstrate the first type of child monstrosity — one that is completely fictitious but, nonetheless, has dire consequences for the mother figure. Czarnowus shows how fabricated monstrosity reveals the complexity of inter-religious and interracial relations at stake in each text. In *The Man of Law's Tale*, racial anxiety is aroused by Constance's Byzantine origin and interracial marriage, as Emaré's body is marked with race, figured as whiteness, and oriental otherness through the fairy-like robe she wears. Though both female bodies assume the possibility for monstrous births through their ethnic differences, monstrosity is falsely assigned to each woman's son. The true identity of each child is restored, even with an aura of holiness, but the more interesting transformations occur in the mothers' bodies. In summarizing the first tale, Czarnowus writes: "the mother's body was merely a text inscribed with the calumny of a monstrous birth, and then it became a blank page sanctified through her son's position in secular and ecclesiastical circles" (63). For both women, we know less about how their bodies look than we do about the accessories they wear, the children they produce, or the discourse that marks them. This notion of the "blank page" at the conclusion of the texts, or the invisibility of the female bodies that assume form and meaning only through external objects and beings, would benefit from a fuller treatment, perhaps through the exploration of more theoretical approaches, i.e. a psychoanalytic paradigm like Lacan's on the paradoxes of courtly love, or possibly Kristeva's abject.

In Chapter Three, "'Stille as ston': Oriental Deformity in *The King of Tars*," Czarnowus determines how an interfaith, interracial union literally leads to deformed progeny, only to be remedied through Christian conversion. Here, the lump-child emerges as a result of the marriage of a Christian princess and a Muslim ruler and, as exemplum, signals the inadequacy of such unions and its consequences. Drawing on Aristotelian theory to reveal deficiency on the part of the Sultan in being unable to shape the child, Czarnowus points out the impotence of racial and religious others. As word becomes flesh, Christianity literally brings form to this lump-child. Through suggesting that the erasure of religious difference leads to the erasure of ethnic difference, she points to a common trend in many medieval conversion narratives.

In the final chapter, “From a Demonic to a Canine Self: Moral Depravity and Holiness in *Sir Gowther*,” Gowther’s monstrous birth signals individual vice, which originates from his demonic *pater*, a figure where ethnic otherness is also located. Czarnowus traces the motif of demonic offspring from St. Augustine and St. Aquinas through medieval penitentiaries to account for its literary representations in romance. She links Gowther to the Wild Folk type, who has a singular relation to holiness, and offers a lengthy summary of some of its major analogues, including *Robert le Diable* and the romances of Alexander the Great. To explain Gowther’s bestiality, she convincingly argues that “like monstrosity, canine identity becomes imprinted onto Gowther’s humanity and erases the moral deformity, replacing it with sainthood” (124). Here, it is fascinating to consider Gowther’s externalization of inward sinfulness through voluntary canine behaviour as a means to abject his inner moral depravity. This chapter is certainly a valuable addition to the limited critical commentary on the poem.

Attempting “to account for the ambivalent image of childhood in the Middle Ages” (10), Anna Czarnowus offers a thoughtful contribution to the study of monstrous children in Middle English literature. For anyone interested in getting a taste of these tiny creatures, her book offers a wonderful short survey. As Czarnowus focuses on reading monstrous bodies, and considers which ones are both inscribed on and erased in the processes of transformation, it is interesting to consider whether these bodies can also function as palimpsests or offer cases of hybridity. Do all changed Christian bodies get a clean slate, or are some merely written over? If these monstrous figures function as *textus* in the Latin sense, this notion of bodies being woven as opposed to erased, presents an exciting point of comparison. Overall, however, *Inscriptions on the Body* successfully engages the interdisciplinary framework it sets out, and inspires further investigation of medieval literary representations of childhood monstrosity.

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