

Quilting Monsters With Lacan

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Abstract: This article considers the way in which human beings are displaced into the category of the monster. Specifically, I apply psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's quilt of the human subject to two humans who were connected overtly to monstrosity (one to demons, the other to mythical monsters), in order to "monstrify" them. Lacan's depiction of a subject stitched into a three-layered structure of an ultimately unknowable reality (the Real), images (the Imaginary), and signification (the Symbolic), offers a psychoanalytic structure that explains the role of the monster in the creation of self and Other. Lacan's framework provides a way to compare three aspects that individuals who are displaced into the category of the monster share: the disturbance the body causes to the mind of the observer (the Real), the use of images to produce a sense of self aligned with order and normalcy (the Imaginary), and the use of symbols and binaries to designate the categories of human and monster (the Symbolic). By viewing these bodies through Lacan's registers, the viewer sees a body that 1) disturbs normalcy and violates the boundaries of the self, 2) is placed within the binaries that produce self and Other, human and monster, and 3) is subjected to methods whereby the monstrous element of the figure is excised, through violence of either a punitive or surgical nature, which has the dual feature of restoring the figure to the "proper" position in the human/monster binary as well as the male/female binary.

Keywords: Lacan, intersex, ambiguous genitalia, monster, taxonomy

The category of human designates a constellation of rights, duties, and prerogatives that attach to those who recognize one another as worthy of carrying them.

-Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*

In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's influential essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," he puts forward seven arguments regarding the monster. In Thesis I, he states that "the Monster's Body is a Cultural Body," that monsters are "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, a place."¹ Given this, how do we understand the monster when what is classified as monstrous differs within each culture? What is left to compare if the category itself is entirely contextual? Furthermore, in Thesis III Cohen contends that "the Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis" whose very existence challenges boundaries and definitions of identity.² How then does the category of the monstrous apply to the monster itself? To answer these questions, I turn to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's quilt of the human subject to provide a framework for Cohen's theses. Lacan's depiction of a subject stitched into a three-layered structure of an ultimately unknowable reality (the Real), images (the Imaginary), and signification (the Symbolic), offers a psychoanalytic structure that explains the role of the monster in the creation

¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

of self and Other. Lacan's quilt will be used to examine how two humans, separated by 500 years, are nonetheless connected to what their society deemed monstrous in each of Lacan's registers.

The first, Antide Collas, was a 16th century French woman whose physical abnormality was used as evidence of witchcraft. Consorting with the Devil was thought to produce physical changes in one's body as well as power that could be used to bring death to fields and families. In addition, incest, infanticide, and cannibalism were thought to be practiced as part of the Witches' Sabbath. For these crimes that violated laws of nature and society, suspected witches such as Collas were put to death. The second case concerns a minor child (M.C.) born in Greenwich, South Carolina in 2010 with a rare disorder known as True Hermaphroditism (TH). The names connected to M.C.'s disorders of sexual development (DSD) are derived from Greek mythology (the multi-gendered Hermaphroditus and the multi-bodied Chimera) while M.C.'s treatment was based on the biblical assumption of sexual dimorphism, an approach that deems children born outside of male and female to be a monstrous aberration in need of correction.

Because these two bodies are separated in time and place, they provide the ground for a comparison of how bodies are stitched to each register of Lacan's quilt. The Real helps explain why Collas and M.C. caused distress to the physicians. In each case the observers experienced a breakdown in their preconceived form of bodies. I will use the Real to examine how boundaries of the body were crossed in the mind of the viewer: physical boundaries of the body and its orifices in the case of Collas; the boundary between male and female in the case of M.C. By using the Imaginary register, the two bodies expose the cultural worldview: a 16th century world dominated by God and the Devil and exemplified in the forces of order and disorder; the modern medical worldview that pathologizes diversity through classification of what is normal, and by implication, what is abnormal. Lacan's register of the Symbolic and his mechanism of the quilting point will be used to uncover how the oppositions of male and female, wife and woman, and human and inhuman, stitch these bodies to the category of the monster. Lacan's psychoanalytic framework provides a way to compare three aspects of the category of the monster: the disturbance the body causes to mind of the observer, the use of images and narratives to produce a sense of order and normalcy, and the use of symbols and binaries to designate the categories of human and monster.

ENCOUNTERING THE REAL

She had a hole beneath her navel, quite contrary to nature.

--Henry Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*

The bodies of Collas and M.C. troubled the authorities who investigated their abnormalities in different ways. M.C.'s inner and outer appearance failed to fit neatly into a male or female category while Collas' body was shaped in a way that implied, to the experts of her time, sex with demonic forces. Lacan's register of the Real sheds light on why these bodies disturbed their examiners.

Collas and M.C. had bodies that caused anxiety and a violent response. As such, each is an example of what Lacan would call an "encounter with the real."³ Lacan describes

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI: Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1973] 1981), 53.

experiencing the Real as being “something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*.”⁴ Julia Kristeva equates the Real with what she terms abjection: it is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”⁵ Collas’ and M.C.’s bodies were seen as ambiguous, failing to “respect borders” in different ways in the eyes of their examiners.

Collas’ body possessed an additional opening that was not only confusing to the medical men of her time, but also continues to be somewhat enigmatic.⁶ Two possibilities have been suggested. In Ernest Martin’s *Histoire des monstres* from 1879, he proposes that Collas had hermaphroditic genitals that were understood to be caused by sex with demons. Foucault’s account summarizes Martin’s version:

Toward the end of 1599 . . . a woman of Dôle, named Antide Collas, was accused of having a physical characteristic that, judging from the details contained in the trial documents, must have been similar to that of Marie le Marcis [a suspected homosexual who was later ruled to be a male hermaphrodite and thus allowed to have sex with women]. Doctors were called to undertake an examination. They established that the malformation of her sexual organs was the result of vile commerce with demons. . . . She was put to question and tortured. She resisted for some time but, overcome by her horrible suffering, eventually confessed.”⁷

Foucault, following Martin, assumes that Collas was killed for being a hermaphrodite. This seems unusual given that the leading medical experts of the time believed in natural causes for hermaphroditism. For example, in 1575 Ambroise Paré had published a popular text that put forward the theory that hermaphrodites were caused by the mother and father putting forward the exact same amount of seed during conception.⁸

An earlier account from Henry Boguet’s 16th century book *An Examen of Witches* suggests another possibility. Boguet reports that when examined, a hole was found below Collas’ navel. In the presence of witnesses, medical examiner Master Nicolas Milliere “thrust his probe deeply into it” whereupon Collas confessed that she permitted her demon, a creature named Lizabet, to have “sexual connexion with her through this hole, and her husband through the

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1978] 1991), 164.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

⁶ Part of the confusion is due to the fact that one record refers to “Antide Colas” (Boguet) while the other to “Antide Collas” (Martin). Both accounts refer to a woman from Dôle who had a physical abnormality and was burned at the stake in the year 1599. Besides the spelling of her last name, the accounts differ in terms of the time of year (spring or fall) she was killed. It seems reasonable to me, as it does Sophie Duong-Iseler, to assume that Boguet’s report, written in the early 1600s, is closer to the truth than Ernest Martin’s 19th century version (see Duong-Iseler’s article “Lumières sur le prétendu ‘hermaphrodite’ Antide Collas (ou Colas) de Michel Foucault” in *Dix-septième siècle*, 2012/3 (No. 256), 545-556. doi : 10.3917/dss.123.0545). Given the similarities in the records, it seems reasonable to accept that Antide Colas is Antide Collas. However, since she is primarily known through Foucault’s lectures, I am using that misspelling.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 77.

⁸ Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. Janis L Pallister (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 26.

natural hole.”⁹ One contemporary scholar speculates that Collas had the rare condition of an umbilical fistula,¹⁰ which would no doubt cause great pain if one was to “probe deeply” into it, as Master Milliere was said to do.

The existence and use of Collas’ “second hole” for demonic sex made sense given the medieval understanding of the sexuality of witches. Witches, who were usually women, were lustful women that had turned to the Devil to gain new lovers. To gain this power, the pleasure-seeking witch was thought to engage in orgiastic, non-reproductive sex at the Witches’ Sabbath. The Devil himself was thought to be a shape-shifting being that could transform into a goat, ram, dog, cat, or even fowl, in order to have sex. The Devil’s penis was polymorphous: some said it was covered in barbed scales while others declared it was half flesh and half iron. Some said it was like a horn while others claimed it had two or three prongs, depending on how many orifices the Devil wanted to penetrate. Kristeva relates the abject not only to the mouth and anus, bodily sites of ambiguity, but also to pus and vomit, feces and menses, blood and the “sickly acrid smell of sweat.”¹¹ The abject nature of these fluids is echoed in the witches’ confession that the Devil’s semen was not only “ice-cold and painful,” but also “spoiled and rancid.”¹² The Devil’s multi-pronged phallus ravaged the body by polluting the boundaries of inside and outside with abject emissions.

Sex with the devil not only disobeyed the sanctioned sexual boundaries of the body by its use of non-reproductive orifices but also by violating the incest taboo. Incest was thought to be encouraged by Satan, who was said to have spread the rumor that “there was never a perfect sorcerer or enchanter who was not born from father and daughter, or mother and son.”¹³ These acts of bestiality, incest, anal, and oral sex, violated religious, societal, and sexual taboos. To her examiners, Collas’ body with its unnatural hole was an encounter with a body that had been made monstrous by the Devil in his perversity. Witch hunters not only searched for the mark of the Devil in forms such as a third nipple but also used instruments to prick a suspected witch’s body to find a numb spot, which was thought to provide physical proof of a contract with the Devil.

Collas’ body likewise demonstrated to her inquisitors an alliance with the Devil. In Cohen’s Thesis IV, “The Monster Dwells at the Gate of Difference,” he suggests that sexual difference is marked by making monstrous any woman outside the norm: “woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith.”¹⁴ Witches, a demonic form of the lustful woman, demonized the permeability of women’s bodies and sex outside of sanctioned heterosexuality. By its femaleness and physical form, Collas’ body disrupted these boundaries and signaled the presence of the monstrous.

⁹ Henry Boguet, *An Examen of Witches Drawn from Various Trials* (New York: Barnes & Noble, [1929] 1971), 32-33.

¹⁰ Sophie Duong-Iseler, “Lumières sur le prétendu ‘hermaphrodite’ Antide Collas (ou Colas) de Michel Foucault.”

¹¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 3.

¹² Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 19.

¹³ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, trans. Randy A. Scott (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 206.

¹⁴ Cohen, “Monster,” 9.

Like Collas, M.C.'s body was perplexing to medical examiners.¹⁵ At birth, he displayed external signs of maleness and femaleness,¹⁶ so much so that in his records M.C. was sometimes referred to as male and sometimes as female. Born prematurely weighing less than two pounds, he had a "rather large" phallus, a vaginal opening, and scrotalized labia. Internal exploratory surgery revealed one testis and one ovotestis, a rare type of gonad that contains ovarian and testicular tissues, and while there was a vagina, there was no uterus. One doctor described the case as "confusing." Despite the fact that M.C. was thriving with "no specific concerns or problems," the doctor recommended "surgical correction"¹⁷ to remove ambiguity and create a male or female identity.

Kristeva argues that the anxiety produced by "what disturbs identity, system, order," by "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," give rise to fears and phobias, which in turn produce ideas of defilement and pollution, and culminate in religious taboos. Kristeva declares that these developments are based first and foremost on a sense of disgust. It is thus noteworthy to mention that in Suzanne Kessler's interviews with pediatric surgeons and endocrinologist of children with DSD, she sensed disgust. When they spoke about the genitalia of their patients, doctors used words such as "unsightly, offending, challenging, troublesome, offensive, disfiguring, embarrassing, deformed, derangements."¹⁸ These children were viewed as being "so grotesque, so pathetic, any medical procedure aimed at normalizing them would be morally justified."¹⁹ While there is no evidence M.C.'s doctors displayed signs of disgust, it is evident that they did view M.C.'s ambiguity as a problem that must be solved. This opinion is not unique to M.C.'s doctors and indeed in 2015, M.C.'s case was dismissed on the principle of immunity. In order for an official to violate M.C.'s rights, the individual must understand that what he or she is doing is in violation of those rights. Judge Dias explains this in the ruling: "Because we find that the alleged rights at issue in this case were not clearly established at the time of M.C.'s 2006 sex assignment surgery, we need not reach the question of whether alleged sufficient facts to show that the surgery violated his constitutional rights."²⁰

Charles Shepherdson's analysis of Lacan's concept of the Real is helpful in understanding why the affective dimension of the encounter with the Real is upsetting:

The disruptive character of the real, regarded as a dimension of experience that disturbs the order of representation, is not due to the real itself, as a prediscursive domain, but is due to the fact that it is unfamiliar. The real is traumatic because there has been no sufficient symbolic or imaginary network in place for representing it. It is traumatic, not in itself, but only in relation to the established order of representation.²¹

¹⁵ While M.C. was assigned a female identity, he identifies as male and he uses masculine pronouns.

¹⁶ *M.C. v. Aaronson et al.*, No. 2:13-cv-01303, D.S.C. filed May 14, 2013, 1-15. https://archive.org/stream/700989-crawfords-sue-doctors-and-state-social-workers/700989-crawfords-sue-doctors-and-state-social-workers_djvu.txt. Details provided here are from 12-13.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁸ Suzanne Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 36.

¹⁹ Alice D. Dreger, "Intersex and Human Rights: The Long View" in *Ethics and Intersex*, vol. 29 (Springer, 2006), 75.

²⁰ *M.C. v. Aaronson et al.* Appeal No. 13-2178. United States Court of Appeal. 13-2183 (Jan. 2015), 1-16. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca4-13-02183/pdf/USCOURTS-ca4-13-02183-0.pdf>. See page 9 for Dias's ruling.

²¹ Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 34.

M.C.'s body, like other children's bodies with DSD, exceeds the symbolic categories of male and female that disturbs the observer's framework of duality of sexes while Collas' body ruptured the boundaries of inside and outside. Lacan described the Real as "what resists symbolization absolutely."²² In this way, the bodies of Collas and M.C. are a manifestation of Lacan's Real. Each cannot be fully represented within the limited symbolic network that fails to contain them. For Collas, female bodies with any aberration, were found to be disordered. To their examiners, these disordered bodies offered physical proof not only of the witches' societal disorder but also of a universe filled with spiritual agents of disorder. Collas' trial is sadly one of many in the history of witch trials. M.C.'s trial is a landmark case and as such shows the changing worldview of our times. Voices, from activists to academics, have challenged what and who defines what is "normal," and have criticized the medical world for its paternalism. These challenges in turn expand the symbolic framework of our times.

IMAGINARY MONSTERS

Unlike the Real, which can never be fully represented, the Imaginary and the Symbolic provide ways for reality to be experienced. In the following section, I describe the register of the Imaginary and its role in how examiners understood these two bodies as monstrous. I will show how the Imaginary functions in each culture to produce difference. Collas' case takes place within a medieval mindset that understood the world as a place ordered by God and disordered by the Devil. In M.C.'s case, sexual dimorphism is seen to be not only normal but the only acceptable state as a human. Sexual ambiguity has been treated as an unlivable condition in mythology and in medicine.

The Imaginary refers to the entire realm of images that structure a creature's relationship to itself and to its world. It is "that order of the subject's experience which is dominated by identification and duality."²³ Imaginary aspects of the self, and what is not one's self, work to separate self from the Other. Lacan's human subject as one who "come[s] into being only by way of the Other"²⁴ is based on an intersubjective aspect of identity: Lacan's subject understands its own self by way of other beings. This is evident in Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage which posits that the ego is formed because of the Socius, the internalized Other or "an intermediary," that provides "the ego's fundamental and hidden access route to other people."²⁵

Lacan expands the meaning of the Socius to include not just other people, but cultural discourse itself. Tim Dean's *Beyond Sexuality* opens with the role of Lacan's Other in the formation of the self: "it makes fully evident how the private, individual realm of subjectivity ultimately cannot be separated from the public realm of social life. ...Lacan theorizes the subject as coming into being only by way of the Other, a term he uses to designate not other persons or disenfranchised groups, but cultural systems of meaning."²⁶ It is the Imaginary that makes it

²² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, translated by John Forrester, edited by Jacques Alain-Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company [1975] 1991), 66.

²³ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 157.

²⁴ Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.

²⁵ Henri Wallon, "The Role of the Other in the Consciousness of the Ego" in *The World of Henri Wallon*, ed. Gilbert Voyat, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Jason Aronson, 1984), 103.

²⁶ Dean, *Beyond*, 1.

“possible to discover correspondences and homologies”²⁷ thus unlocking the patterns that make up cultural discourse. By distinguishing oneself from others, order from disorder, male from female, one understands patterns of meaning and one’s place within them.

To understand how Collas’ examiners saw her body one must first grasp the cultural discourses surrounding monsters and female bodies. A change in the natural order of things was thought to be a sign from God or the Devil. This was not unusual since as far back as Saint Augustine people had interpreted the Latin root *monstro* in terms of its relation to the word *monstrum*, Latin for sign or omen. A monster foretold impending doom, God’s glory or his wrath, or God allowing demons to do their mischief. Jean Bodin, a French philosopher of the 16th century, expresses the popular view when he writes, “there is nothing done, either by demons or by witches, which is not done by a just judgment of God who permits it.”²⁸ This view accounted for “celestial monsters” such as comets, which scholars believed were signs from God. Similar reasoning is evident in Paré’s understanding of the monster of Ravenna. The child, born with a rare condition where one’s legs are fused together (sirenomelia or mermaid syndrome), was understood to be a sign of God’s displeasure:

From the time when Pope Julius II kindled so many misfortunes in Italy and when he waged war against King Louis XII (1512), which was followed by a bloody battle fought near Ravenna; just a little while afterwards, a monster was seen to be born having a horn in its head, two wings, and a single foot similar to that of a bird of prey.²⁹

In addition to having supernatural causes, Paré thought natural causes, such as a pregnant woman’s sight, touch, taste, or even imagination, could give rise to monsters. Monsters could be produced by the “foul and filthy food” mothers eat, or what they want to eat, or what a pregnant woman has looked at after she has conceived, or because “someone may have tossed something between their teats, such as a cherry, plum, frog, mouse, or other thing that can render infants monstrous.”³⁰ This view is evident in the opening to Paré’s *Monsters and marvels* where he responds to worries his readers have concerning the illustrations of monsters in his book. Paré, presuming his readers, fellow medical men, were worried that his work would be seen by pregnant women, writes to reassure them: “we will note in passing how dangerous it is to disturb a pregnant woman . . . and [...] show them [images of the] deformed and monstrous. For which I’m expecting someone to object to me that I therefore shouldn’t have inserted anything like this into my book on reproduction. But I will answer him in a word, that I do not write for women at all.”³¹

Paré’s audience was right to worry given that women were thought to be impressionable, credulous creatures whose weak bodily boundaries allowed ideas and images to deeply affect them. It made sense to Collas’ examiners that her “second hole” was a natural extension of her femaleness, a state that was naturally prone to physical penetration.³² Heinrich Kramer, author of

²⁷ Silverman, *The Subject*, 157.

²⁸ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, 135.

²⁹ Paré, *Monsters*, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

³¹ *Ibid*, 54.

³² According to Kramer, male witches were thought to engage in sacrilegious behavior but not in sexual congress with the Devil. See Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 31.

the *Malleus Maleficarum*, informs his readers that the Devil attacks women not only because they are more credulous than men but also because they are “naturally prone to leak.” This leaky nature makes it “easier for individual spirits to make an impression upon them by giving them revelations.”³³ Like the embryo, which is described in Paré’s account as being “ready like soft wax to receive any form,” women’s child-like minds and leaky bodies are open to the Devil.³⁴

In the examination of M.C., the physical differences between male and female are also related to sight. The role of seeing plays a key role in DSD because the diagnosis is based on the *viewing* of genitalia. Endocrinologist Gönül Öçal, for example, defines a case of DSD as when the “genital appearance is abnormal and it is not possible to decide at first glance the sex of the infant.”³⁵ This “first glance” indicates the link between genitalia and the observer. Milton Diamond and Keith Sigmundson state that the treatment of children with DSD is based on two assumptions: 1) that individuals are “psychologically neutral at birth” and thus can be raised either male or female and 2) that healthy psychosexual development is dependent on the appearance of the genitals.³⁶ The second factor, the appearance of genitals, once again connects being seen as a monster to the root of the word *monstro*, “to show.”

The concern over one’s appearance to others is a key factor in the surgical policy of the American Academy of Pediatrics. In the “Consensus Statement on Management of Intersex Disorders” by *Pediatrics*, the authors of the statement report that “[i]t is generally felt that surgery is performed for cosmetics reason in the first year of life to relieve parental distress and improve attachment between child and the parents” despite the fact that “systemic evidence of this belief is lacking.”³⁷ Ian Aaronson, M.C.’s surgeon, agrees with this prevalent view: “It is the experience of most pediatric urologists and endocrinologists dealing with intersex problems at birth that most parents are disturbed by the appearance of genitalia and request that something be done as soon as possible so that their baby ‘looks normal.’”³⁸

³³ Maxwell Stuart, ed., *Malleus Maleficarum* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 75.

³⁴ Paré, *Monsters*, 54.

³⁵ Gönül Öçal, “Current Concepts in Disorders of Sexual Development,” *Journal of Clinical Research in Pediatric Endocrinology* 3, (Sept. 2011): 105. doi: 10.4274/jcrpe.v3i3.22

³⁶ Milton Diamond and Keith Sigmundson, “Sex Reassignment at Birth: Long-term Review and Clinical Implications” *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, vol. 151, (March 1997): 298-304.

³⁷ Peter A. Lee, Christopher P. Houk, S. Faisal Ahmed, Ieuan A. Hughes, “Consensus Statement on the Management of Intersex Disorders,” *Pediatrics* 118, no. 2 (Aug. 2006): e488-e500. doi: 10.1542/peds.2006-0738

³⁸ Ian A. Aaronson, “The Investigation and Management of the Infant with Ambiguous Genitalia: A Surgeon’s Perspective,” *Current Problems in Pediatrics* (July 2001): 168-194. 189. The view that the American Academy of Pediatrics reports and Aaronson endorses is not universally accepted. Contrary to the American Academy of Pediatrics who continue to endorse genital surgeries in “extreme cases,” meaning Prader IV or V. The Prader Scale, conceived by endocrinologist Andrea Prader, is a way to measure the amount of virilization present in the genitals. A Prader Scale of 1 is a “normal” female while 5 is a “normal” male. Through use of this scale, along with inspection of the genitals, classification of the organ occurs: “clinicians often describe an ambiguous penis/clitoris as an hypertrophied (enlarged clitoris or a micropenis), and use scientific instruments to measure and classify the anatomy in question” (Sharon E. Preves’s *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self*. [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 45.]). However, this view is not universally accepted. The authors of the Swiss Commission on Biomedical Ethics simply state “the parents should accept the child as it is” without exception (see “On the management of differences of sex development: Ethical issues relating to ‘intersexuality’” by Susanne Brauer, ed., Swiss National Advisory Commission on Biomedical Ethics, *Opinion No. 20/2012*, 9). While the authors of the Swiss statement acknowledge that parents do request surgery, they state that this is simply out of “initial feelings of helplessness” which one must help them to overcome (*Opinion*, 9). Neither can one assume that the parents are acting in the child’s best interest given that “it is the mark of this particular exceptional situation that it is not immediately clear, and often a matter of dispute, what will actually promote the child’s welfare” (*Opinion*, 9). The only thing that promotes the child’s welfare is no action at all: “all (non-trivial) sex assignment treatment decisions

Aaronson favors genital surgery, arguing that current surgical techniques “result in genital appearance that in both boys and girls is barely distinguishable from normal.”³⁹ A desire for a normal appearance, despite potential damage to nerves and pleasures of the flesh, is, for Aaronson, an obvious choice given the alternative. In an editorial entitled “When and How to Screen?,” Aaronson states what that alternative is: “We live in an age of increasing respect for minority rights. However, to advocate nonintervention in intersex infants until they are old enough to make up their own minds about what gender they want to be signifies a return to the ‘dark ages’ of intersex management, which has given rise to a host of psychological cripples.”⁴⁰ In her report entitled “Report to the UN Committee Against Torture,” Anne Tamar-Martin lists “depression, poor body image, dissociation, social anxiety, suicidal ideation, shame, self-loathing, difficulty with trust and intimacy, and post-traumatic stress disorder” as possible side effects from these surgeries. Despite this, surgery has been advocated on the basis of the theory that having a small penis or a large clitoris will cripple people psychologically because of visual aspects. Seeing oneself and being seen by others led influential sexologist John Money to assert that without an adequate penis, the child will not only suffer from envy or low morale but also, more fundamentally, a crisis of identity: “Money’s case-management philosophy assumes that while it may be difficult for an adult male to have a much smaller than average penis, it is very detrimental to the moral of the young boy to have a micropenis. In the former case, the male’s manliness might be at stake, but in the latter case, his essential maleness might be.”⁴¹

In the Imaginary, the division between self and others depends on seeing and being seen by others. The examiners of Collas and M.C. saw their bodies through lenses of difference: a difference that separated God-given order from the Devil’s disorder in the 16th century, and one that sees the difference between sexual dimorphism and sexual ambiguity as the line between a life that is livable or unlivable.

ADAM AND EVE, WOMAN AND WITCH, AND OTHER MYTHICAL CREATURES

I turn to the register of the Symbolic, the most important register for understanding human reality. According to Lacan, there is no other human reality, no “real world” that humans experience outside of the Symbolic: “One can only think of language as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we here call the plane of the symbolic.”⁴² There is only the “humanized, symbolized world” captured in the net that we can experience.⁴³ The Symbolic provides linguistic access to image and reality while making the registers of the Real and the Imaginary impossible to know without representational thought: “language isolates the subject from the Real, confining it forever to the realm of signification.”⁴⁴ Like a quilt hanging on a wall, the topmost layer, the Symbolic, is the only layer we experience.

which have irreversible consequences but can be deferred should not be taken until the person to be treated can decide for him/herself” (*Opinion*, 18).

³⁹ Ian A. Aaronson, “Editorial Comment: How and When to Screen?” *Infections in Urology* (July/August 1999): 117.

⁴⁰ Aaronson, “Editorial,” 117.

⁴¹ Dreger, “Intersex,” 75.

⁴² Lacan, *Book I*, 262.

⁴³ Lacan, *Book I*, 87.

⁴⁴ Silverman, *The Subject*, 166.

It is within the Symbolic that the human becomes a subject by understanding the world around it and finding its place therein. Lacan's "symbols" are not icons or figures but signifiers in the sense meant by Ferdinand de Saussure. That is, symbols are like chess pieces in that they are "differential elements, in themselves without meaning, which acquire value only in their mutual relations, and forming a closed order."⁴⁵ Lacan states, "the position of the subject is essentially characterized by its place in the symbolic world, in other words, in the world of speech."⁴⁶ The human subject comes to know itself by realizing patterns and connections in the symbolic world.

In 1485, just over a century before Collas' trial, Kramer conducted his first witch trial. Of the fifty people arrested, 48 were women. Part of the purpose of Kramer's book is to explain why so many witches are women. Kramer explains that the answer is in the nature of women themselves, a character inherited from Eve:

A woman is more given to fleshly lusts than a man, as is clear from her many acts of carnal filthiness. One notices this weakness in the way the first woman was moulded, because she was formed from a curved rib, that is, from a chest-rib, which is bent and [curves] as it were in the opposite direction from [that in] a man; and from this weakness one concludes that, since she is an unfinished animal, she is always being deceptive. All this is shown by the etymology of the word ["woman"] because *femina* is derived from *fe* [faith] and *minus* [less], since she always has less faith and keeps it [less].⁴⁷

The binary code that opposes male to female is evident in the author's description of Eve. Paired qualities such as lust and chastity, weak and strong, filthy and clean, finished and unfinished, and faithful and faithless, work to create an ideal male self that finds identity through the negative connotations of the female Other.

The female symbol is further divided in the duality of Eve and Mary: one woman is responsible not only for the fall of Man but also for the origin of death, while the other gives birth to the way to everlasting life. Stephen Greenblatt summarizes how medieval Christians understood this contrast:

Eve was pulled from the flesh of the old Adam: the New Adam was born from the flesh of Mary. Encountering the virgin Eve, the serpent's word crept into her ear; encountering the Virgin Mary, the Word of God had crept into her ear. Through Eve, the serpent's word built the edifice of death; through Mary, the Word of God built the fabric of life. The knot of disobedience that Eve had tied by her unbelief Mary opened by her belief and her obedience. Eve gave birth to sin: Mary gave birth to grace. *Eva* became *Ave*.⁴⁸

The link between Eve, death, and witches, is clear in Pope Innocent VIII's papal bull, the *Summis desiderantes*, where he explains the ways witches cause loss of life: witches "ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foal of animals, the products of the earth, the grapes

⁴⁵ Lacan, *Book XI*, 279.

⁴⁶ Lacan, *Book I*, 80.

⁴⁷ Stuart, *Malleus*, 75.

⁴⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 128.

of vines, and the fruits of trees.”⁴⁹ The papal bull warns of the power witches have to hinder men from begetting by inhibiting ejaculation in men and causing impotence.

It is not only the forces of life and death that stand in contrast. It is also the physical actions of the Devil’s mass that were thought to be the inverse of the Christian mass. The Christian ritual produced *benefecium*, or benefit, while the Witches’s Sabbath produced *maleficium*, or harm. Whereas God’s power produced ever-lasting life, the Devil’s power produced death. In a church, people approached the altar by facing forward while at the Sabbath, witches were thought to walk backwards. Christians prayed with their hands pressed together facing up; witches were thought to hold their hands together while pointing downwards. From inverting crosses to riding on broomsticks backwards, witches’s actions were thought to negatively mirror the actions of good Christians.

The complex dualistic nature of the wife and witch, life and death, Eve and Mary, are most stark in the key event of religious and counter-religious Christian and Satanic rituals: the eating of flesh and drinking of blood. The witches’ imagined rites of infanticide and cannibalism mirror the sacrifice of Jesus and the Eucharistic ritual. In the following confession, a suspected witch explains how and why they obtain the blood of infants:

We entered the houses of our enemies at night, by doors and entranceways that were opened for us [by demons], and, while their fathers and mothers were sleeping, we picked up the tiny children and took them over the fire. There we pierced them under their nails with the needle, and then, putting our lips to the wounds, we sucked out as much blood as our mouths would hold. And I always swallowed part of it – sent it right into my stomach – and part of it I put aside in a little bottle or jar. From it I later made that unguent that we use for anointing our shameful parts when we want to be carried to the Sabbat.⁵⁰

It was thought that witches returned each night to prick the infants and suck blood from their prey. Like vampires who sucked life, witches were thought to perform acts that brought about death rather than mothers who suckled to give life. Once the victim was bled dry, witches would make grisly use of the corpse, as another confessed: “we secretly steal them from their graves and cook them in a cauldron until the whole flesh comes away from the bones and becomes a soup that can easily be drunk ... And with the liquid we fill a flask or skin. Whoever drinks from this, with the addition of a few other rituals, immediately acquires much knowledge.”⁵¹ The sanctity and power of Christ’s blood is demonstrated by its counter form in the blood of unbaptized babies. The power of blood that ran with original sin, shows the power of a body that had been redeemed by Christ’s blood. From their unproductive sexuality, to their destruction of crops and newborns, witches were aligned with death and its creators: Eve and the Devil. Conversely Christianity was associated with supernatural aspects of miraculous life such as the blood and body of the eucharist, the Virgin Mary, and God.

In the case of M.C.’s sex assignment, we see the way the Symbolic creates subject positions of male and female, rendering positions between these two poles impossible. In

⁴⁹ Pope Innocent VIII, Bull *Summis desiderantes* (1484), in Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/witches1.asp>

⁵⁰ Stephens, *Demon*, 278.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 200.

Cohen's Thesis V, "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible," he writes, "the monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – *must* not – be crossed."⁵² This aptly applies to the medical protocol that works to eliminate ambiguous bodies, allowing them to exist only after medical correction and subsequent conformity to the two-gender system. Judith Butler has argued that bodies are only allowed to "live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" while bodies that fall outside of this norm are considered "unthinkable, abject, unlivable."⁵³

The specific disorders that are associated with M.C.'s DSD, TH and chimerism, "place these patients outside the mainstream of society, relegating them to the realm of mythology," as Aaronson himself notes.⁵⁴ In the following paragraphs I examine the mythical and medical history of the names associated with M.C.'s condition, hermaphroditism and chimerism. The myths of the Hermaphroditus and the Chimera reflect the medical protocol that insists upon clear bodily boundaries that exist within either a male or female subject position.

The world that M.C. was born into in the early 2000s had very clear classifications for his body based on Theodore Albrecht Edwin Klebs' classification system. In 1876 Klebs published *Handbuch der Pathologischen Anatomie* which laid out a system that continues to be used today. Klebs divided hermaphrodites into "true" and "pseudo" hermaphrodites. True hermaphrodites had bodies that contained both ovaries and testes whereas bodies with only one kind of sexual gland, combined with ambiguous genitalia, were labeled female or male pseudo-hermaphroditism, depending on the gonad.

Hugh Hampson Young work on Klebs's taxonomy indicates the importance, and impossibility, of a true hermaphrodite's gonads: "In the classical sense a hermaphrodite is an individual who has the gonads and external genitalia of both sexes, and is capable of living as either a man or a woman. Such a person should be able to impregnate a female or be impregnated by a male, and indeed to impregnate itself. Modern writers are in accord that no such perfect hermaphrodite has been scientifically proven to have existed."⁵⁵ It is not surprising then that M.C., whose diagnosis is True Hermaphroditism, fails to meet Klebs's criteria of the hermaphrodite, given that no uterus is present in his body and thus he could not become pregnant.

Klebs's classification system of rare "true" hermaphrodites, and the more common "pseudo-hermaphrodite," has had profound effects, as Sharon Preves points out: "Klebs' classification system served to drastically decrease the number of people who were defined as hermaphrodites, and thus reinforced the newly popular thought that there were only two and only two sexes: female and male, with a very rare and unusual exception in the case of true hermaphroditism."⁵⁶ Later terminology used the umbrella term intersex, despite its negative connotation of being between states. Changing the term from intersex to someone who has a particular DSD reframes the difference of these bodies from a term that indicates an identity to a term that refers to a particular medical condition that a man or woman has. This works to subdivide people into smaller specific disorders and enforce a dualistic sex model.

⁵² Cohen, "Monster," 13.

⁵³ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi.

⁵⁴ I. A. Aaronson and A. J. Aaronson, "How Should we classify Intersex Disorders?," *Journal of Pediatric Urology* 5 (Oct. 2010): 443-6. 443. doi: 10.1016/j.jpuro.2010.04.008.

⁵⁵ Hugh Hampson Young, "Genital Abnormalities, Hermaphroditism and Related Adrenal Diseases" *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 38, no. 5 (1938): 524.

⁵⁶ Preves, "Intersex," 35.

Ovid's story of Hermaphroditus depicts living being the sexes as an abject state. Its characters are a masculine nymph, a feminine boy, and a hybrid body made of the two. The boy, Hermaphroditus, is the beautiful child of Hermes and Aphrodite. He possessed features of his mother and father, his name further signifying this even combination. The feminine aspects of the male youth are brought out by its contrast to an unconventional nymph, Salmacis. She is "not skilled for the chase, or used to flexing the bow, or effort of running."⁵⁷ Indeed, she is "the only Naiad not known by swift-footed Diana." Lazy and lustful, she is decidedly un-nymph-like.

Ovid begins his tale with Salmacis seeing Hermaphroditus, a beautiful, virginal 15-year-old. Salmacis presents herself, boldly suggesting marriage, or, if that is not possible, an afternoon of "stolen pleasure." Hermaphroditus, young and embarrassed, refuses her. She retreats, pretending to leave him alone while secretly watching him bathe. While observing the youth strip and swim, Salmacis is overcome with desire. Tearing off her clothes, she enters the water and captures him, snake-like, coiling around his struggling body. Unable to overcome him because they are evenly matched, Salmacis turns to the gods:

Grant this, you gods, that no day comes to part me from him, or him from me." Her prayer reached the gods. Now the entwined bodies of the two were joined together, and one form covered both. Just as when someone grafts a twig into the bark, they see both grow joined together, and develop as one, so when they were mated together in a close embrace, they were not two, but a two-fold form, so that they could not be called male or female.

Horrified at what he has become, Hermaphroditus cries out his own plea to the gods: "Father and mother, grant this gift to your son, who bears both your names: whoever comes to these fountains as a man, let him leave them half a man, and weaken suddenly at the touch of these waters!" His parents, moved by this, contaminate the pool with a damaging drug.

In the myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, the blending of masculine and feminine, both in the bodies of the characters and in the hybrid creature that is produced, produces a narrative where only male and female positions are viable. The nymph is aggressive and lustful while the male god is feminine and chaste. Their battle is even-handed, too balanced. Even both of their cries, one offering a curse while the other offers a prayer, are answered. The dangers of the pool, where the two literally intertwine, becomes a place where the "enervating waters weaken, and soften the limbs they touch." The pool of Salmacis warns of what happens when there is an even mix of male and female. The myth presents a catastrophic situation that enforces a fear of gender ambiguity.

The second kind of DSD associated with TH is chimerism, a rare kind of DSD where a person has both XY and XX present. People with TH have a variety of possible chromosomal make-ups. TH individuals have the karyotype 46 XY ovotesticular DSD, 46 XX ovotesticular DSD or chromosomal ovotesticular DSD that is either 46XX/46XY (chimerism) or 45X/46XY (mosaic type).

The Chimera was a fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology. She was a child of monsters, whose parents exemplify Kristeva's understanding of the Real as a place where boundaries fail. The Chimera's father was a hybrid creature named Typhoeus, a giant with 100 serpent heads, while her mother, Echidna was half-woman and half-serpent. The couple had

⁵⁷ All quotes are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV, 317-345. Trans. A. S. Kline (Ann Arbor, MI: Border's Classes, 2004).

other children with monstrous bodies and too many heads: the flesh-eating, fifty-headed hound of hell, Cerberus, the two-headed hound Orthus, and the multi-headed hydra. Like her siblings, the monstrosity of Chimera's body is the result of too many heads, and too many bodies, in one.

Like the cursed Hermaphroditus, the Chimera was outside the realm of usual forms. Hesiod describes the Chimera as a three-part creature: "in her forepart she was a lion; in her hinderpart, a dragon; and in her middle, a goat, breathing forth a fearful blast of blazing fire."⁵⁸ She violated the boundaries of the land by terrorizing the countryside by ravaging herds and setting fire to fields, before the hero Bellerophon, mounted on the winged horse Pegasus, ended her life with his rain of arrows."⁵⁹ The Chimera was a creature whose body and actions did not respect the boundaries of species or form. Like Hermaphroditus, her body serves as a warning, a threat that "polices the borders of the possible."⁶⁰

Lacan's register of the Symbolic helps uncover the binary oppositions operating in the worlds that Collas and M.C. were born. In Collas' time, women were divided mythically into Mary and Eve, and thereby spiritually connected to the models of wife and witch and the powers of life and death. In M.C.'s time, sexual dimorphism is mythically and medically treated as fundamental to human life, while sexual ambiguity is aligned with the monstrous and the cursed.

THE QUILTING POINT

According to Lacan, there is no natural meaning to any aspect of the world. Instead, language gives meaning to the world by linking words (signifiers) to objects (signified). Lacan terms the mechanism for tying a given signifier to a signified a quilting point (*point de capiton*). He uses the term in order to conjure up the image of a button on a piece of furniture. In *The Psychoses*, he elaborates on why he uses this image: "The quilting point is the word *fear*, with all these trans-significant connotations. Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material."⁶¹ The quilting point is an exercise of power that keeps given signifiers stitched to corresponding signifieds through the power of fear.

The points connect the signifier to the signified in the subject's mind, quilting together this arbitrary reality. To be considered "normal," and indeed in order to be understood, a person must be able to join together the right signifier and signified out of a range of possible meanings. The connections between the stitches, the signifying chains that create patterns and meaning in one's world, form one's identity. Juliet Mitchell explains this intersubjective aspect of identity in the following way: "When the human baby learns to say 'me' and 'I' it is only acquiring these designations from someone and somewhere else, from the world which perceives and names it."⁶² In the cases of Collas and M.C., their bodies are stitched to points that designate monstrosity. This means that each is sutured to signifiers that denote disorder in bodies and

⁵⁸ Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), line 304.

⁵⁹ Apollodorus, *Apollodorus, The Library, with an English Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 71.

⁶⁰ Cohen, "Monster," 12.

⁶¹ Lacan, *Book III*, 268.

⁶² Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction – I" in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, Trans. Jacqueline Rose. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 5.

society. Collas and M.C.'s bodies encounter the power, exerted by medical and/or religious authorities, that enforce these perceived laws of nature and society.

M.C.'s ambiguous body breaks the dualistic sexual system that pervades the Symbolic. Following protocol and popular practice that allow for only male or female bodies and subject position, M.C.'s doctors "cured" M.C. by eliminating the unacceptable aspect of his body. Male and female. Sally Gross, a theologian and self-described intersexed person, relates how the biblical verse "male and female He created them" has been used to argue for her inhumanity: "Gen. 1.27 states that from the beginning of creation, God made each given member of the human species either male or female, and not both or neither. Thus, determinate maleness or determinate femaleness is the mark, above all else, of what it is to be created human. [These verses] have been used to argue that an intersexed person such as me does not satisfy the biblical criterion of humanity."⁶³

The assertion that someone who is not male or female is somehow not human is underlined by the names associated with M.C. and the reasoning behind M.C.'s surgical team. The duality of sexes, a reality created not only by biblical understanding, but also by medical taxonomies and protocol, works to create a quilting point of human and inhuman that is based on sexual dimorphism.

In 1599 the cure for human monsters, at least for the society that contained them, was banishment. Paré tells the story of a 25-year-old conjoined twin who was driven out of town "because they said she could spoil the fruit of the pregnant women."⁶⁴ Because of this, Paré concludes, "It is not good that monsters should live among us."⁶⁵ Unlike monsters who must be banished, there is no cure for witches. There is only a cure for society. Kramer explains that witches "should not be committed to perpetual imprisonment as other heretics are, but must suffer the ultimate penalty, because of the temporal damages they inflict in various ways on human beings and beasts of burden."⁶⁶ Citing the biblical decree, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," Paré argued that witches must be killed for the safety of the community: "God has threatened by His law to exterminate peoples who permitted sorcerers and enchanterers to live."⁶⁷ Some thought that torture and death by burning would cause them to repent and thus be cured before their execution while others thought that if that didn't work, then it at least have the benefit of reducing their numbers.⁶⁸

Cohen suggests, like Lacan, that abjection is constitutional for the self. That is, we create a border between inside and outside by separating self from Other, thus forming an identity: "the monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities."⁶⁹ In being designated as monsters, Collas and M.C. were stitched to the quilting points that separate the Devil from God, order from disorder, witch from wife, male from female. Medieval taxonomy connected deformity to the Devil while today it is connected to abnormality. In both cases, the taxonomy of the monster works to dehumanize the subject who is stitched to this category. These divisions create not only meaning and power but enforce social order and deprive people of their

⁶³ Sally Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture" *Theology & Sexuality* 11. (1999):, 70.
doi: 10.1177/135583589900601105

⁶⁴ Paré, *Monsters*, 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁶⁶ Kramer, *Malleus*, 102-3.

⁶⁷ Paré, *Monsters*, 89.

⁶⁸ Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of witches*, 174.

⁶⁹ Cohen, "Monster," 20.

humanity. These borders make subjectivity possible. Cohen asks, “Do monsters really exist?” and answers, “they must, for if they did not, how could we?”⁷⁰ Similarly in Cohen’s Thesis VII “The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming,” he states that monsters “ask us why we have created them.”⁷¹ M.C.’s body is made monstrous by the surgeries that not only that life outside of male and female is unthinkable, but also by the stitches that sutured him into an unwanted female position. Collas’ execution demonstrates not only the power of the quilting point, but also the pain of the stitches that bound her to the stake. Lacan’s quilt shows that we create monsters to establish difference, to construct boundaries between self and Other, inside and outside. We create monsters to create ourselves.

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⁷⁰ Cohen, “Monster,” 20.

⁷¹ Cohen, “Monster,” 20.

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