Martin Weinrich’s De ortu monstrorum commentarius (1595) and Its Reception in England

Rachel E. Hile, Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne
In 1595, Martin Weinrich, a physician and professor in the town of Breslau, published *De ortu monstrorum commentarius* (Notes concerning the origin of monsters), a lengthy treatise that aimed to do for monsters (and by “monsters,” he meant unusual births) what Aristotle and Pliny had done for animals: to provide a rigorous, organized, scientific anatomy of the subject. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park taxonomize the three responses to monstrosity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as (1) the horror of seeing monsters as prodigies or warnings, (2) the pleasure of viewing or hearing of monsters as sports, and (3) the repugnance that stems from thinking of monsters as errors, as creatures who have “failed to achieve their telos, their perfect final form.” This last attitude, heavily indebted to the ideas of Aristotle and Galen, characterizes Weinrich’s work, as Daston and Park note.¹ In addition to furthering this interpretation of monstrous births, he also wanted to argue against those competing views of monstrous or unusual births as either warnings or wonders.

I proposed this paper because I have been curious about why Weinrich’s book had so little impact. It has never been translated from its original Latin, and there are only a handful of references to him in England in the century after he published his work. The work, at approximately 700 pages, is dauntingly long, but Renaissance scholars translated and engaged with many a longer work. That it was written in Latin would have been no impediment;

Ambroise Paré’s more famous *On Monsters and Marvels* was translated into English in 1634 from the Latin edition of 1582, even though there was a more complete French edition of 1585. Even its dullness—and it is rather dull—should not have prevented it from being influential. The answer I have come to is that the book was exactly wrong for its time: it didn’t provide enough marvels for those readers still interested in viewing monsters as prodigies or sports of nature, and it failed to impress its primary audience, serious scholars of science and medicine, because it was scientifically out of step: beholden to the ancient intellectual framework of Aristotle and Galen instead of the newer scientific method based on observation and experiment. So the point I would like to illustrate and analyze in this paper is the mismatch between Weinrich’s product—what he was trying to do—and his reception—the ways that seventeenth-century English readers missed the point in reading his work. Weinrich’s lack of discernible impact or influence on medical thought implies his irrelevance to that audience, and the specific allusions to Weinrich in the succeeding century in England demonstrate that English readers were only interested in examples from Weinrich that supported the interpretation of monstrous births as either warnings or wonders, the opposite of the message Weinrich wished to convey.

I will discuss three of the allusions to Weinrich’s *De ortu monstrorum* in seventeenth-century England, comparing Weinrich’s own discussion of the examples of monstrous births with the reception of those stories as illustrated in the English books. These three examples—of the “stony baby” of Sens, France; of an infant crying before birth; and of a man dressed as a devil begetting a devilish infant—are not the only tales from Weinrich alluded to in seventeenth-century England, but they typify both Weinrich’s approach and his reception: in all these cases, Weinrich is skeptical of supernatural or imaginative origins for unusual births, but the

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seventeenth-century authors who allude to him do not share his opinions, as can be surmised from the titles of the books I will discuss that include allusions to Weinrich: Simon Goulart’s *Admirable and memorable histories containing the wonders of our time*, from 1607; John Johnston’s 1657 work *An history of the wonderful things of nature*, and Nathaniel Wanley’s *The wonders of the little world*, from 1673. Given that all three of these books include the word “wonder” in their titles, we can classify them, following Daston and Park, as seeing monsters as sports of nature that give pleasure.

In 1582, a Frenchwoman named Colombe Chatri, residing in the city of Sens, died at the age of 68. Twenty-eight years previously, her pregnancy had ended not with a birth but with violent labor pains, the expulsion of amniotic fluid, and then . . . nothing. It took three years of bed rest to recover, and the hard mass in her abdomen remained for the rest of her life. After her death, her husband allowed some local surgeons to perform an autopsy. They cut open her abdomen and found a large mass, surrounded by a stony shell, which they were only able to break through with great effort. Inside the shell they found a “lithopaedion,” or stone baby, a rare event in which a fetus dies, is neither reabsorbed nor expelled, and becomes coated in a calcified shell in order to protect the mother’s body from the dead tissue within. The stony baby was treated as a marvel, traded and displayed throughout Europe, finally ending up in Denmark from the mid-seventeenth century. These are the facts of the case, in terms of the historical record and modern medical understanding. Ambroise Paré, in his revised and updated French edition of his book on monsters in 1585, provides an early description of the lithopaedion. In his account, he sticks with the facts, which is noteworthy given his propensity to invent causes for deformities of birth (for example, he asserts that a lack of sufficient sperm is to blame for babies

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born missing limbs). He describes the stony baby as follows, with reference to the illustration: “a portrait of a marvel, a putrefied child which was found in the body of a dead woman in the city of Sens on the sixteenth day of May, 1582, she being sixty-eight years old and having carried it in her womb for the space of twenty-eight years. Said child was almost completely gathered up into a ball, but it is depicted here at its full length, in order to show better the entire conformation of its members, except for one hand, which was defective.”⁴ He cites some authorities for other examples but offers no explanation for why this might happen.

Martin Weinrich, on the other hand, shows himself a consummate Aristotelian in the ways that he thinks about how a lithopaedion might occur. He describes Madame Chatri’s autopsy in distinctly medical language, though he ends on a poetic note: “After all those years, when her life was over, she was opened, and the dead infant was found lying transverse inside an orbem, within a hardened covering. All of the limbs were distinct, but petrified so firmly, as though it were represented sculpted out of marble.”⁵ But soon Weinrich arrives at the questions that truly interest him: “But we must inquire from what cause this was petrified in a living body? In things rare and abstruse, we must investigate the cause with reference to similar things,”⁶ and these questions lead him to a thoroughly Aristotelian line of inquiry: Weinrich considers other things that become hard (for example, water becomes ice when it’s cold) and wonders whether there is any connection. He approaches the issue from many angles, musing about animals versus elements, whether liquids become hard, whether earth does, and so on and so forth. He considers the material that formed the stony covering, whether it came from inside or outside the woman and also the efficient cause. After five dense pages of thinking about the reasons, he

⁵ Martin Weinrich, De ortu monstrorum commentarius (Breslau: Heinrici Osthusii [Heinrich Osthhausen], 1595), 185v. Translation mine.
⁶ Ibid.
arrives at hypotheses related to Galenic humors theory, imagining that an imbalance of heat and moisture had led the baby to turn to stone inside the mother.

Only then, and briefly and without advocating it, does he turn to the possibility of maleficent causes for such things. He seems to feel that he has to address this possibility, because that’s the most common explanation for monstrous births, but he lends no credence to it, saying that he doesn’t know (“non habeo quod affirmem vel negem,” 189r) and that he will concede that all things are possible that Nature permits, as long as they take nothing away from God. Nevertheless, he sees astrologers as “most vain” in attributing things to the heavens that actually derive from their imaginations. He closes the chapter by saying, somewhat sarcastically, “Therefore it is permissible to fly to this saving asylum of the ignorant, to the hidden, secret causes of evil.”

Weinrich’s ideas are clear, but his ideas and interpretations are not of interest to the one person in seventeenth-century England who referred to his discussion of the lithopaedion, John Johnston, in his 1657 work *An history of the wonderful things of nature*. In a chapter titled “Of Monstrous Births,” Johnston provides a laundry list of unusual births, some more and some less fantastic. Near the end of the chapter he provides by far the longest example in the chapter, a description of the famous “monster of Krakow,” which I will quote in full, because its length and degree of detail are important in shaping the reader’s attitude toward the allusion to Weinrich that immediately follows. Johnston describes the monster as an infant that

was terrible to behold, with flaming shining eyes; the mouth and nostrils were like to an Oxes, it had long horns, and a back hairy like a dogs, and faces of Apes in the breast, where the teats should stand; it had Cats eyes under the navell fastned to the hypogastrium, and they looked hideously, and frightfully, and the heads of dogs of

7 Ibid., 189v.
both elbowes; and at the whirlbones of each knee, looking forwards; It was splay-footed, and splay-handed; the feet were like Swans feet, and it had a tail turn'd upwards that was crooked backwards, about half an ell long: It was born and lived four hours, and then spake thus; Watch, the Lord your God comes; and then it dyed.\(^8\)

Daston and Park discuss the widespread fame of this report of a monster born in Krakow, noting that “sixteenth-century writers universally pronounced [it] to be supernatural in origin.”\(^9\)

Johnston follows his description of this famous monster with a description of what would seem to a modern audience a different type of unusual birth, the story of Madame Chatri’s lithopaedion. He writes: “To this may be added, the stony birth at Agendicum of the Senones, that was carried 28 years, and was cut out of the mothers womb, when she was dead. It is seen to this day at Agendicum, for a miracle, and is not corrupted, Thuan. l. 76. Histor. He that would hear more, let him read Bauhinus de hermaphrodite, Weinrichius de monstros, and others.”\(^10\)

Weinrich, who diligently presents himself as a man of science, working to dispel superstition and false science, would surely be disturbed by this juxtaposition of his name with the clearly embellished story of the monster of Krakow. Referring to the “stony baby” immediately after the description of the fabulous creature renders the reality of the lithopaedion suspect, and of course Weinrich’s careful, though wrong, Aristotelian analysis of the causes of this phenomenon is nowhere to be found in Johnston’s account. This example of a believable, medically possible event turned fantastic through proximity to the monster of Krakow serves as the most fully developed instance of a seventeenth-century English writer reading Weinrich against Weinrich’s own wishes for his reception. Other examples, though, will serve to suggest

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\(^9\) Daston and Park, 193.

\(^10\) Jonstonus, 334.
that Johnston’s view of Weinrich’s work as just another compendium of marvels is typical of seventeenth-century English references to Weinrich.

In recounting reports of infants laughing or crying from within the womb, Weinrich discounts the importance of such possible events, noting that “both of these can have their causes in nature,” and especially that when there is no disturbance in the development of the fetus, then the birth is not a true “monstrum Aristoteli,” that is, no monster in the Aristotelian sense of a creature that fails to achieve its telos or purpose. Weinrich’s point is that such tales, whether true or not, are beside the point, since a perfectly formed infant is not a true monster, regardless of what noises it may be said to emit. This larger point disappears in a seventeenth-century reference to it, in Nathaniel Wanley’s The wonders of the little world (1673). Wanley includes the tale in the first chapter, as part of a list of many reports of infants crying before birth, in order to make the point that life is full of sorrow, and some infants start early. He writes, in a fairly close translation of the passage in Weinrich: “Martinus Weinrichius writes thus: even in our times saith he, and in this our City of Bressa, an Infant was heard to cry, three days before it came into the light: and he observes that the Man so born, was miserable in respect of his fortune and Diseases he was seiz'd with; even to the day of his death.”11 As with Johnston, the example from Weinrich is part of a list of tales from various sources, and what in Weinrich served as an opportunity for discussing the nature of a true Aristotelian monster becomes here support for the contention that life is full of sorrow.

A final example of this tendency to take from Weinrich the occasional marvelous monster tale, while leaving behind his own skepticism, comes from Simon Goulart in 1607. In

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Admirable and memorable histories containing the wonders of our time, Goulart provides an almost entirely faithful translation of a short tale included in Weinrich’s work:

There is a towne in Flanders, called BOSLEDVC, where euery yeare, as in other places of those Countries, on the day of the dedication of the great Church of their towne, they set forth diuers plaies and pageants, disguysing themselues some like Angells, and other some like Diuells. One of them inflamed with the regard of a certaine young gentlewoman, went leaping and dauncing home, where meeting his wife, all disfigured and masked as he was, he threwe her downe on a pallet, saying hee would make a little Diuell in her. By this approch the woman conceiued: but assone as shee was deliuered beganne to skip and daunce like one of these same painted Diuells. MARGARET of AVSTRICH the Daughter of MAXIMILIAN, & Aunt to CHARLES after-ward Emperor, the fifth of that name recounted this History to IOHN LAMVS Embassador for FERDINAND King of Romanes.\textsuperscript{12}

He cites Weinrich, chapter and page number, but the one thing he leaves out of his translation is the fact that Weinrich describes John Lamus, the hearer of this tale, as “incredulous.” Weinrich himself clearly disbelieves in the veracity of the tale and of the other examples in the chapter of how the imagination of a pregnant woman can cause her fetus to become imprinted in the image of the phantastes, because in this chapter, he repeatedly positions himself in the role of a reporter of the opinions of others, such as Pliny, Hesiod, Plutarch, and Hippocrates. In typical fashion, Weinrich spends pages upon pages citing the opinions of others and providing lengthy discussions of the nature of the imagination, and so forth, and very little time on examples such

\textsuperscript{12} Simon Goulart, Admirable and memorable histories containing the wonders of our time (London: 1607), 301. Accessed through Early English Books Online.
as the devil-baby, but for Goulart, the devil-baby obviously held a great deal more interest than Weinrich’s musings on the nature of imagination and the opinions of the Ancients.

As for Weinrich’s impact on scientific and medical thought in seventeenth-century Europe, he appears to have had none. His intellectual debts, suggested by his publication record, demonstrate his commitment to the past. In addition to his books on scientific and medical topics, Weinrich published a treatise on Aristotle’s ideas on justice and co-authored a three-volume work on Arabic grammar. Though I have not been able to examine the Arabic grammar, Weinrich’s involvement in the work presumably derived from an interest in going to the source of Renaissance Europe’s new knowledge of Greek thought. Two of Weinrich’s other works, editions of medical treatises by Giovanni Battista da Monte, deepen our sense of his interest in Greek medical knowledge. Da Monte, a Paduan doctor and professor of medicine who died in the mid-sixteenth century, combined intellectual commitments to Aristotle and Galen with an emphasis on clinical medical education. Martin Weinrich devoted his professional life to a particular, Aristotelian perspective on science, medicine, and intellectual inquiry more broadly, but ultimately, this approach was falling out of favor by the end of Weinrich’s life, as Nancy Siraisi and Ian Maclean have demonstrated, and so his illustrious reputation as a professor and scholar did not long survive him.

In a late-eighteenth-century work, Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester, published in 1790, the author refers to “Dr. Martin Weinrich, a collector of incredible histories” (84). Martin Weinrich, distinguished professor for decades at the Elisabeth-Gymnasium of Breslau; grantee of a patent of nobility from Johannes Crato von Krafftheim,

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imperial count palatine; and author, editor, or translator of at least eight books, had devolved in reputation into nothing more than a collector of incredible histories. His Aristotelianism made him useless to the scientists of the seventeenth century, and all that was left were the fabulous and amazing stories from *De ortu monstrorum* and from his introduction to Pico della Mirandola’s *Strix*. It would be nice to be remembered at all some two hundred years after one’s death, but this surely wasn’t what Weinrich would have had in mind.