The Hermaphrodite of Charing Cross

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Hermaphrodites were much discussed in the early scientific societies of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Long a topic of speculation and wonder, hermaphrodites became one subset of a large category of “monsters” that early modern natural philosophers yearned to debunk. Unlike other monsters, hermaphrodites, although wondrous, did not portend remarkable events, and by the end of the seventeenth century they had become mundane although no less compelling. From at least the sixteenth century onward, the determination of the sexual status of a hermaphrodite was a medical question, although it impinged on issues of legal status. Ambiguity was not an option, and medical examination determined if the relevant parts were male or female. Multiple accounts of hermaphrodites dotted the medical literature. The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London and, from 1699, the Mémoires of the Paris Academy of Sciences included several accounts of hermaphrodites, sometimes written in Latin to discourage the prurient curiosity of the wider public.

These accounts aimed at a natural history of their subjects and sought a thorough physical description that did not aim to demonstrate causes. William Harvey had pioneered this historical method in his work on the circulation of the blood. The natural history of animals (which included humans) employed a number of observational techniques, among them dissection. Harvey further claimed that his observational method, particularly the dissection of live animals, was also experimental. It was not merely descriptive but intervened in the ordinary course of nature and therefore led to the creation of new knowledge. This knowledge was not knowledge of causes but of the operations of nature which had hitherto been hidden.

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4 On the definition of early modern experiment see Peter Dear, Discipline and Experience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
At the same time, the physicians who penned these descriptions worked within the boundaries of the medical case history. Pioneered by the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, and revived first by Renaissance humanists and more recently by the English physician Thomas Sydenham, the case history aimed to describe a pathological condition, again without assigning causes but giving a possible prognosis. While the detailed examination of hermaphrodites did not resemble any contemporary medical examination of other humans, it partook of both of these genres, natural history and the case history. It described a “preternatural” condition outside the ordinary course of nature that may or may not also have been pathological.

The uneasy relationship between the anatomists who performed these examinations and these particular subjects served as a lens to magnify the uneasy relationship between anatomists and their publics: potential patients, curious spectators, and readers of broadsides and newspapers. To most potential patients, a good bedside manner was more important than anatomical skill. Anatomists were suspected, with reason, of desecrating graves, and there were many stories of corpses that revived while under the anatomist’s knife. The physician James Parsons, who figures in our story, demanded that he not be buried until his corpse began to deteriorate, to avoid both of these circumstances. Indeed, earlier anatomists had declared their disappointment that human vivisection was not legally or morally permissible. In addition, nearly all of the hermaphrodites thus examined were on public display, and in this way came to the attention of learned men. When anatomists sought out the monstrous to examine them, were they any different from the gawking public, or did they seek a deeper knowledge than was possible with normal humans? It was this interplay of learned and popular observation, of different kinds of natural histories joined to case histories with a wealth of circumstantial details, that led to the learned recognition of the truth about monstrous births.

My argument in this essay is that anatomists’ examination of hermaphrodites in this period constituted a form of human experimentation, an extension of Harvey’s historical method of research, which he had defined both as

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7 In the sixteenth century, both Vesalius and Barengario da Carpi had expressed this, and their critics commonly claimed that they practiced it. See, for example, Jacopo Barengario da Carpi, A Short Introduction to Anatomy, trans. L.R. Lind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 10.