

# Rationalizing Sex: the Hermaphrodite in Eighteenth Century Medical Writing

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*In eighteenth-century Europe, medical writers rejected the existence of human hermaphrodites as contrary to reason. This paper examines the underlying logic of this “rationalization” through textual analysis of James Parsons’ 1741 Mechanical and Critical Enquiry Into the Nature of Hermaphrodites. For Parsons, the “unreasonableness” of the hermaphrodite body lay not in its sexual ambiguity per se, but in the failure of contemporary theories of reproduction to satisfactorily explain composite male-female offspring.*

## Introduction

In early childhood, both Ann and “Elizabeth”<sup>1</sup> appeared to be physiologically typical girls. But when Ann was five or six, wrestling with a group of playmates, she sprouted a pair of testicles. Some six years later, as she was kneading dough, her penis suddenly protruded. A physician, upon examination, declared Ann a hermaphrodite. “Elizabeth’s” penis emerged under quite different circumstances. When she was seven years old, her parents brought her to the doctor with “some complaint near the groin.”<sup>2</sup> The doctor consulted a surgeon, who declared, to the parents’ astonishment, that “Elizabeth” was in fact a boy. What had appeared to be the child’s labia was in fact a scrotum; what had appeared to be a clitoris was in fact a penis buried in tissue. The surgeon operated, “[freeing] the penis from its confinement” such that the child could urinate standing like a typical boy.<sup>3</sup>

Ann was born in 1647, Elizabeth around 1772.<sup>4</sup> With over a century between them, these two cases—published in London by a physician and and surgeon respectively—mark opposite ends of a general shift in attitudes toward hermaphroditism. In many ways, the two subjects’ bodies were analogous. Both, according to their examiners, had scrota that resembled labia; both had the appearance of a vagina; both seemed also to have penises. (Ann’s was four inches long when erect; Elizabeth’s was originally buried in tissue, its existence established only by surgical intervention.) Yet

their observers interpreted these analogous bodies in fundamentally different ways: in the mid-seventeenth century, physician Thomas Allen declared Ann a hermaphrodite, while in the late eighteenth century, surgeon Thomas Brand declared Elizabeth a boy.

In so doing, Brand rejected the category of “hermaphrodite” not only for his own patient, but for all human subjects<sup>5</sup>—in stark contrast to Allen’s employment of the term as an unproblematic category. For Brand, rejecting the category of “hermaphrodite” was a rational act. The existence of hermaphrodites was a “[doctrine] which had no foundation in truth”; it “only existed in the wild and extravagant imaginations” of its proponents; the application of the term “hermaphrodite” historically lacked “just or demonstrable grounds.”<sup>6</sup> The hermaphrodite, in other words, belonged to the realm of imagination. Brand framed its rejection as an act of reason, a recovery of truth, a reorientation toward the justifiable and the demonstrable.

Modern scholars share Brand’s association between the erasure of the hermaphrodite and the rationalizing impulse. In her study of biological anomaly in the eighteenth century Royal Society of London, Palmira Fontes Da Costa groups hermaphrodites with other “monstrous formations” that “defied” an “‘Enlightenment’ approach to nature based on the search for order and regularity.”<sup>7</sup> In rejecting the category of the hermaphrodite, Da Costa argues, medical writers “[used] the discursive arsenal of enlightened rationality to contain and eradicate the monstrous from English culture and society.”<sup>8</sup>

The aim of this paper is to interrogate the connection between “rationality” and the erasure of the “hermaphrodite.” How did the hermaphrodite become linked to the irrational? What about this anatomical category placed it at odds with reason, and how was that tension resolved? I approach these questions through close textual analysis of one of the most forceful and influential attempts to debunk human<sup>9</sup> hermaphroditism: James Parsons’ 1741 book *A Me-*

1 The actual name of this person is unknown; in his 1787 account of the case, Thomas Brand refers to “the child.” I have chosen the name “Elizabeth” for ease of writing about this child.

2 Brand, Thomas. *The Case of a Boy Who Had Been Mistaken for a Girl* (London, 1787), 5-6.

3 Brand, 7.

4 Allen, Thomas. “An Exact Narrative of an Hermaphrodite Now in London.” *Philosophical Transactions* 2 (1666): 624; Brand reports that the child was seven years old in 1779 (pp. 5).

5 Brand, 4.

6 *Ibid.*, 4.

7 Da Costa, Palmira Fontes, *The Singular and the Making of Knowledge at the Royal Society of London in the Eighteenth Century* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 16.

8 *Ibid.*, 148.

9 Parson’s argument deals explicitly with human hermaphroditism as opposed to animal hermaphroditism. In his *Enquiry*, he freely

*chanical and Critical Enquiry Into the Nature of Hermaphrodites* (hereafter referred to as the *Enquiry*). A physician and Fellow of the Royal Society, Parsons argued that so-called “hermaphrodites” were actually people, particularly women, with deformed genitals. Like Brand, he framed the erasure of the hermaphrodite in terms of rationality according to which belief in hermaphroditism was a “vulgar Error.”<sup>10</sup> For Parsons, the “unreasonableness” of the hermaphrodite lay not in the sexually ambiguous body itself. Rather, the hermaphrodite was “unreasonable” because its formation in the womb could not be reconciled with prevailing notions of human generation (reproduction),<sup>11</sup> as shaped by 18th century European understandings of God and nature. By debunking the hermaphrodite, Parsons disseminated his own favored theory of human reproduction.

### Literature Review: Hermaphrodites as Monsters

“What, but Ignorance or Superstition,” asked James Parsons in his *Enquiry*, “could persuade men to imagine, that poor human Creatures [i.e. reputed hermaphrodites]... were Prodigies or Monsters in Nature?”<sup>12</sup> Nearly three centuries later, we would do well to ask similar questions. What criteria did early modern Europeans use to diagnose “monstrosity”? What connotations did this term hold? And how did hermaphrodites relate to the broader class of “monsters”?

The answers to these questions are hazy. Like the constantly shifting category of “hermaphrodite,” the early modern European category of “monster” was unstable. “Perhaps the most striking aspect of monstrosity during the eighteenth century,” observe Curran and Graille, “is that thinkers had no standard lexical, nominal, or anatomical means of defining the concept.”<sup>13</sup> Throughout the early modern period, the word slipped between the medical, literary and theological realms, acquiring different meanings against different “reli-

gious and/or ideological backdrops.”<sup>14</sup>

The instability of the term “monster” has made it fertile ground for scholarship, as historians seek to grasp at its shifting meanings. Modern scholars have used a range of vocabulary to describe the fate of “monsters” in natural philosophy throughout the early modern period: “normalized”<sup>15</sup>, “pathologized,”<sup>16</sup> “[naturalized]”<sup>17</sup>, “medicalized.”<sup>18</sup> Most generally, the literature describes a shift, culminating in the Enlightenment, by which biological anomalies moved from the realm of the “supernatural” toward incorporation in a natural order. As anomalies moved into the realm of nature, scientific practitioners increasingly used them to reveal properties of nature’s “normal” functioning.<sup>19</sup> Medical writers pointed to headless human fetuses<sup>20</sup> and puppies without mouths<sup>21</sup> as evidence that fetal nutrition did not occur through the mouth. Likewise, infants without brains provided evidence that embryological development did not depend on that organ.<sup>22</sup>

In *Wonders and The Order of Nature*, Daston and Park relate changing ideas of monstrosity to a radical shift in the sensibilities of the European elite and their social networks: “princes, clerical administrators, preachers, teachers, court artists and storytellers, naturalists, theologians.”<sup>23</sup>

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acknowledges that among some smaller classes of animals, such as snails, all individuals are hermaphrodites. This uniformity, Parsons argues, demonstrates that is the “Law of Nature” of these species to be double-sexed, just as it is the “Law of Nature” of humans to have only one sex (pp. 4).

10 Parsons, “A Letter,” 650.

11 This paper uses the modern term “reproduction” and the early modern term “generation” interchangeably. Parsons would later replace the term “generation” with “propagation,” due to his conviction that all life was created in the moment of Creation; mortal animals, therefore, could not be said to generate new life. (See Parsons, James. *Philosophical Observations on the Analogy Between the Propagation of Animals and That of Vegetables* [London, 1752], 2.)

12 Parsons, James. *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry Into the Nature of Hermaphrodites* (London, 1741), xvi-xvii.

13 Curran, Andrew and Patrick Graille. “The Faces of Eighteenth-Century Monstrosity.” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21, no. 2 (May 1997): 12.

14 Ibid.

15 Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 205; Moscoso, Javier. “Monsters as Evidence: The Uses of the Abnormal Body During the Early Eighteenth Century.” *Journal of the History of Biology* 31, no. 3 (September 1998): 378.

16 Moscoso, 378; Da Costa, Palmira Fontes. *The Singular and the Making of Knowledge at the Royal Society of London in the Eighteenth Century* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 142.

17 Da Costa, *The Singular and the Making of Knowledge*, 130; Curran and Graille, 2; Vázquez García, Francisco and Richard Cleminson, “Subjectivities in Transition: Gender and Sexual Identities in Cases of ‘Sex Change’ and ‘Hermaphroditism’ in Spain, c. 1500–1800.” *History of Science* 48, no. 159 (March 2010): 10.

18 Da Costa, *The Singular and the Making of Knowledge*, 144.

19 Moscoso points to a shift in this direction in the early eighteenth century; Bates challenges this chronology by arguing that monsters constituted part of an ordered world as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (See Bates, Alan. “Good, Common, Regular, and Orderly: Early Modern Classifications of Monstrous Births.” *Social History of Medicine* 18, no. 2 [August 2005].)

20 Moscoso, 377.

21 Da Costa. “The Medical Understanding of Monstrous Births at the Royal Society of London During the First Half of the Eighteenth Century.” *History and Philosophy of Life Sciences* 26, no. 2 (2004): 164.

22 Ibid., 165.

23 Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 18.

Their broad synthesis tracks the European elite's relationship to "wonder" and "wonders" from the twelfth through eighteenth centuries. By "wonders," the authors refer to a shifting canon of objects, phenomena and organisms understood to be "rare, mysterious and real," from monstrous births to comets to African pygmies.<sup>24</sup> They argue that in the late seventeenth century, elite Europeans came to associated "wonder" and "wonders" with the "disruptive forces of enthusiasm and superstition and religion in politics" that had ravaged Western Europe during the previous 200 years of civil strife.<sup>25</sup> Rupturing a centuries-long tradition of engagement with wonders, elite Europeans disassociated themselves from "wonder" (the emotion) and "wonders" (its objects). This rejection of wondrous anomalies coincided with a developing view of nature as fundamentally ordered, uniform, and regular. Monsters, once celebrated for their singularity, became repugnant manifestations of disorder and irregularity.

Daston and Park make the crucial point that the Enlightenment impulse for order was a historically produced sensibility that shaped the elite's relationship to the physical world. Palmira Fontes Da Costa builds on this narrative of an elite search for order through her more localized study of the Royal Society of London during the eighteenth century. In the *Singular and the Making of Knowledge*, she argues that the Royal Society engaged in an "Enlightenment' approach to nature based on the search for order and regularity," which "monstrous formations continued to defy."<sup>26</sup> Da Costa points to Parsons' erasure of the hermaphrodite as "the most radical attempt [of a Royal Society member] to integrate the monstrous within the natural and social order."<sup>27</sup> By attempting to erase the category of "monster"—by pathologizing or medicalizing physiological anomalies—scientific practitioners such as Parsons attempted to impose order on a fundamentally disordered world.

According to Da Costa, hermaphrodites in particular stand, as representative of an un-orderable nature. Da Costa suggests that "sex" is an artificial category imposed on diverse bodies. Yet by attacking the category of "hermaphrodite," and reinterpreting reputed hermaphrodites as deformed men and women, writers like Parsons helped "[consolidate]...a binary understanding of sexual order," consisting of the mutually exclusive categories of "male" and "female."<sup>28</sup> Da Costa's work here intersects with a number of other scholars who consider the decline of "hermaphrodite" within the consolidation of a modern sexual binary.<sup>29</sup>

24 Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 17.

25 Ibid., 331.

26 Da Costa, *The Singular the Making of Knowledge*, 16.

27 Ibid., 16.

28 Ibid., 133.

29 See Vázquez García and Cleminson (2010); see also Braunschneider, Theresa. "The Macroclitoride, the Tribade, and the Woman: Configuring Gender and Sexuality in English

Although Da Costa diagnoses the Royal Society's concern with integrating phenomena into an ordered understanding of nature, she leaves open the question of *why* and *how* the hermaphrodite, specifically, became a target of this rationalizing impulse. One explanation is that the hermaphrodite body inherited the negative associations of monstrosity; to erase the hermaphrodite was to "contain" the disorder that it represented. Indeed, Kathleen Long traces an earlier tradition that associated the hermaphrodite with "subversion" and "strife,"<sup>30</sup> while Daston and Park trace the association between hermaphroditism and "the sexually, theologically, and morally charged issues of sodomy, tranvestism, and sexual transformation" since the sixteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Yet even if these moral and social anxieties influenced medical writers, their presence does not explain how the hermaphrodite became unreasonable as an *anatomical category*. Before the eighteenth century, the existence of hermaphrodites was seldom questioned<sup>32</sup>, and natural philosophers and medical experts drew on multiple models of the body to explain their existence.<sup>33</sup> On what grounds did eighteenth-century writers now reject their existence?

Parsons' *Enquiry* provides a valuable case study of the logic of "rationalization." For Parsons, the "irrationality" of the hermaphrodite body lay not in its sexual ambiguity (*per se*) nor in its monstrosity (*per se*) but in its incompatibility with modern understandings of generation. His *Enquiry* calls for the reconsideration of longstanding anatomical categories, in light of new understandings of reproduction and embryology. Yet, as this paper explores, Parsons' natural philosophical arguments intersected with theological, moral, social and professional concerns.

### Contextualizing the *Enquiry*

Parsons' involvement in the the debate over hermaphroditism began with the spectacle of a "monstrous" body. In 1740, London newspapers began advertising the commercial exhibition of an "African hermaphrodite." "*Mas, Mulier, Maurus, Mundi mirabile Monstrum!*"<sup>34</sup> declared the ad-

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Anatomical Discourse." *Textual Practice* 13. no. 3 (1999).

30 Long, Kathleen P. *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 1-2.

31 Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. "The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature." *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1995): 423.

32 Da Costa, Palmira Fontes. "'Mediating Sexual Difference': the Medical Understanding of Human Hermaphrodites in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Cultural Approaches to the History of Medicine*, ed. Willem de Blécourt and Cornielie Osborne (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). 127.

33 Daston and Park, "The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature."

34 *London Daily Post and General Advertiser* (London, England), Wednesday, August 27, 1740; Issue 1823.

vertisements: “Man, woman, Moor, marvelous monster of the world!”<sup>35</sup> As Da Costa remarks, such advertisements appealed to both “sexual voyeurism” and the exotism of the subject’s “African origins.”<sup>36</sup> The advertisements included rich “top-down” descriptions of the subject’s body, moving from face to voice to shoulders and chest to arms to thighs and legs.<sup>37</sup> Lastly, the advertisements provided Latin-language descriptions of the genitals<sup>38</sup>—perhaps especially titillating to those who could not read them.<sup>39</sup>

Both educated and popular audiences engaged with this “monstrous” spectacle. Medical experts publicly debated the classification of the so-called “famous African”<sup>40</sup> as “male,” “female,” or “hermaphrodite.” In October of 1740, the *London Daily Post* reported a “Dispute lately arisen between several Physicians and Surgeons concerning the African Hermaphrodite.”<sup>41</sup> Later advertisements capitalized on this elite debate over the body’s sex, drumming up interest in the body’s ambiguity. One advertisement publicized the contradicting opinions of three medical experts (James Douglas, John Freak, and William Cheselden) who classified the subject as “female,” “male” and “A wonderful Mixture of both Sexes,” respectively.<sup>42</sup> Disagreement among medical experts magnified the sense of mystery around the body on display. Advertisements invited readers to become participants in the viewing this enigma: to see for themselves the body that was “the just Admiration of the most Learned and Curious of both Sexes.”<sup>43</sup>

Such advertisements built popular interest in the exhibit through reference to the educated elite; Parsons, in turn,

35 My translation.

36 Da Costa, “Mediating Sexual Difference,” 130.

37 “The Subject with which we hope to entertain the Curious, is a Black Native of Angola in Africa, about Twenty-five Years old ; of Masculine Features, which however seem perfectly Feminine in the Circumstance of Smiling or Joy. The Voice, when deliver’d in a low Tone, is quite a Woman’s; if aloud a Man’s, and remarkably so in Expressions of Energy or Passion. There is no Appearance of a Beard. The Chest and Shoulders are very robust and spread; the Paps hard and flat: the Muscles above the Elbow vastly strong and brawny: The Arms and Hands neat and slender: The Thighs and Legs a perfect Model of Female Proportion.” (*London Daily Post and General Advertiser* (London, England), Wednesday, August 27, 1740; Issue 1823.)

38 *London Daily Post and General Advertiser*, Wednesday, August 27, 1740; Issue 1823.

39 “To a popular audience,” explains Da Costa in “Mediating Sexual Difference,” “Latin kept concealed what was normally hidden. At the same time, it drew attention to what might be revealed through the live exhibition” (129).

40 *London Daily Post and General Advertiser*, Tuesday, December 9, 1740; Issue 1912.

41 *Ibid.*, Thursday, October 9, 1740; Issue 1860.

42 *Ibid.*, Thursday, April 2, 1741; Issue 2010.

43 *Ibid.*, Tuesday, December 9, 1740; Issue 1912.

capitalized on the public’s interest in expert opinions. In July of 1741, he published (and advertised in newspapers) his *Enquiry*, arguing that the “famous African” was in fact female. Parsons thus took advantage of a moment of heightened interest in hermaphroditism to publicly demonstrate his own medical expertise, asserting his role as an informed judge of ambiguous bodies.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, through his broader theoretical rejection of hermaphroditism, Parsons asserted his role as an advocate for “Truth”<sup>45</sup> and “publick Good.”<sup>46</sup> Hermaphroditism, he explained in the *Enquiry*, was an outdated belief in need of “[reform].”<sup>47</sup> He linked the propagation of this misguided belief to social evils, including the violent persecution of reputed hermaphrodites<sup>48</sup> and their exclusion from appropriate sexual roles as women.<sup>49</sup>

Parsons also expressed theological concerns with the prevailing belief in hermaphroditism. As he explained in his speech introducing his *Enquiry* to the Royal Society, “Physical Knowledge”—such as that provided by his *Enquiry*— “[is] most conducive... to furnish the Minds of Men with the justest Notions of the great AUTHOR of Nature.”<sup>50</sup> An incorrect understanding of the sexually ambiguous body, Parsons implied, corresponded with incorrect notions of nature and its “author” (God).

In addition to building his reputation with the reading public, Parsons “capitalized” on this opportunity to ingratiate himself to his peers and superiors in the Royal Society. He formally dedicated his *Enquiry* to the Royal Society, on the grounds that “Such a Society... are the best Judges, and the fittest Protectors, of every Essay opposed to vulgar Error.”<sup>51</sup> By dedicating his book as such, Parsons gained the Society’s patronage. He simultaneously established himself as an integral member of the Society, whose work furthered the Society’s collective goals.

Parsons’ *Enquiry*, then, emerged at the intersection between popular hype and educated debate. Parsons advertised his book in the same newspapers that had listed the exhibition of the “famous African,” making it available to the same audience; furthermore, buying the book cost about as much as seeing the spectacle.<sup>52</sup> The low cost, combined

44 Da Costa argues that monstrosities provided medical professionals with opportunities to publicly assert their expertise. See “The Medical Understanding of Monstrous Births,” 160.

45 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, iv.

46 *Ibid.*, xii.

47 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, iii.

48 *Ibid.*, xvi-xviii.

49 *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

50 Parsons, James. “A Letter From James Parsons, M. D. F. R. S. to the Royal Society.” *Philosophical Transactions* 41: 650-652. London, 1741: 650.

51 Parsons, “A Letter,” 650.

52 Da Costa points out that the *Enquiry* cost “three shillings and sixpence, almost the same price of the exhibition of the African,” which cost one or two shillings. See “Mediating Sexual

with Parsons' care in translating all quotations into English, made the *Enquiry* accessible to a broad range of readers. Yet the *Enquiry* targets not only the "Vulgar"<sup>53</sup> but also certain "Men of Science"<sup>54</sup> for their belief in hermaphroditism. And indeed, Parsons' peers in the medical community, including the prominent anatomist and surgeon William Cheselden, continued to espouse hermaphroditism as an anatomical category.<sup>55</sup> The exhibition of the so-called "African hermaphrodite" provided Parsons with the opportunity to intervene in the debates of the "vulgar" and learned alike.

At the heart of these debates, stood the body of the "famous" African – yet little remains of the person to whom this much documented body belonged. We have the advertisements' voyeuristic textual descriptions of the body; we have equally thorough accounts of the body by Parsons and the anatomist William Cheselden;<sup>56</sup> we have the close-up illustrations of the genitals accompanying Parsons' and Cheselden's texts. Perhaps most promisingly, we have a brief comment by Parsons, stating that the person "was carried from *Angola* in Africa, amongst other Slaves, to *America*, from whence she was brought to *Bristol*."<sup>57</sup> We are left with fragments of history: of a person enslaved, repeatedly uprooted, and incessantly gazed upon. But this person's subjecthood remains out of reach. We cannot know the "famous African's"<sup>58</sup> relationship to their own body—neither the sensations they experienced through that body, nor the meanings they attached to it. Nor can we know the "famous African's" relationship to categories like "male," "female" and "hermaphrodite." This person is documented only as an object of many gazes.

### Sexing the Sexually Ambiguous Body

Those who gazed upon the body of the "famous African" disagreed about the meanings of the fleshy shapes they saw: large clitoris, or penis? Closed-up labia or scrota? A girl's small breasts, or a man's chest? The parsing of these individual body parts intersected with, but did not wholly determine, the sexing of the body as a whole. Put differently, medical experts disagreed about the combination of body parts (and in some accounts, behavior) that designated a subject as "female," "male," or "hermaphrodite."

In eighteenth-century medical writing, some of the most explicit instructions for sexing the body concerned the term

"hermaphrodite." For many of Parsons' contemporaries, the term was synonymous with the sexually ambiguous. That is, any person of indeterminate sex was to be classified as a hermaphrodite. The entry on "Hermaphroditus" in the 1726 *Physical Dictionary* reads:

such are called *Hermaphrodites*, the coformation of whose Genitals are amiss, so that the *Pudends* or privy Parts of either sex seem to be wanting, or else both appear in the same Person. Those which have the Man's parts most apparent are called *Androgyni*. But, the most learned Authors are of the Opinion, That no *Hermaphrodite* whatever hath the perfect Genitals of both Sexes.<sup>59</sup>

This definition posits the impossibility of a subject with "perfect" (fully developed) male and female organs. But for this writer, perfect organs of both sexes are not a criterion for hermaphroditism; indeed, any individual with either no sex organs or some mix of sex organs qualifies as a "hermaphrodite."

Parsons', however, narrowed this definition of "hermaphrodite" to exclude such sexually indeterminate individuals. Before refuting the possibility of hermaphroditism, his *Enquiry* defines the "hermaphrodite" as "an animal,<sup>60</sup> in which the two sexes, Male and Female, ought to appear to be each distinct and perfect, as well as with regard to the Structure proper to either, as to the Power of exercising the necessary Offices and Functions of those Parts."<sup>61</sup> His justification of his criteria is cursory: "This definition naturally arises from the very Term."<sup>62</sup> By Parson's definition, it is not enough for a body to be sexually *ambiguous*; to the contrary, he demands the *unambiguous* presence of both male and female sex organs, each set complete and fully developed. Not only that, but the "hermaphrodite" body must be capable of generation in both the male role (impregnating a woman) and the female role (being impregnated by a man).

By the narrowing of the category of "hermaphrodite," Parsons' definition ironically expands the categories of "man" and "woman" to contain a greater degree of fluidity. For Parsons, a hermaphrodite was (hypothetically) a person with clear and distinct organs of both a male and a female; however, anyone with *ambiguous* organs must be classified as either "male" or "female." The binary sex categories must

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Difference," 130-132.

53 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, liv.

54 *Ibid.*, lii.

55 Cheselden, William. *The Anatomy of the Human Body*, 5th ed. (London, 1740), 314.

56 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, 133-137; Cheselden, 314.

57 *Ibid.*, 134.

58 *London Daily Post and General Advertiser*, Tuesday, December 9, 1740; Issue 1912.

59 Blankaart, Steven. *The Physical Dictionary*. 7th ed. (London, 1726), 182.

60 The use of the word "animal" here does not definitionally preclude humans; eighteenth century writers regularly classified humans as animals. The 1736 *Lexicon Technicum* defined "animals" simply as "such Beings, which, besides the Power of growing, increasing, and producing their Like, as Plants and Vegetables have, are endowed also with Sensation and spontaneous Motion." (See Harris, John. *Lexicon Technicum*, 5th ed. [London, 1736]).

61 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, 1-2.

62 2

also expand to contain individuals with secondary sex characteristics associated with the other sex. “Beards like Men and Hair on some of their Breasts” among reputed hermaphrodites do not point to a “Masculine Nature”; after all, Parsons point out, many women without any “Masculine Nature” have beards, while men without beards are “produce as many Signs of Virility, as any others whatsoever.”<sup>63</sup>

The second major effect of Parsons’ narrowed definition is to locate the classification of the hermaphrodite in the generative power of the organs. In order to be fully male and female, the hermaphrodite must be capable of both pregnancy and impregnation. In clarifying these details, Parsons creates a clear distinction between male and female organs that transcends their shape or appearance. The interpretive confusion between penis and clitoris, labia and scrota that pervades early modern accounts of the sexually ambiguous body is resolved.<sup>64</sup> Reproductive capacity, or lack thereof, determines the sex of the organ and thereby the sex of the subject.

Parsons’ redefinition of the “hermaphrodite” allowed him to re-interpret bodies that had historically earned this label, rewriting them as men and, especially, women. Indeed, much of the *Enquiry* is devoted to reassessing old accounts of so-called “hermaphrodites,” such as Thomas Allen’s 1666 account of Ann.<sup>65</sup> Invariably, Parsons concludes that these historical bodies lacked the fully developed double organs that qualify them as “hermaphrodites.” By quietly shifting the criteria for hermaphrodite, Parsons had removed the grounds on which historical accounts of hermaphroditism had stood.

### Monstrosity, Nature and God

Parsons’ rejection of the existence of hermaphrodites extended beyond the lack of empirical evidence. Not only did history fail to provide examples of human hermaphrodites, Parsons argued, but their very existence was impossible on theoretical grounds. His greatest theoretical concerns related to womb as a theater for the works of God and nature. The existence of double-sexed offspring, Parsons argued, could not be reconciled with correct notions of generation (reproduction).

By the mid-eighteenth century, the mechanisms of generation—the processes by which new living organisms were generated—remained controversial among London’s medical community. Medical writers debated the fundamental nature of the female’s egg, the male’s semen, and their respective roles in producing an embryo. Yet participants in this debate tended to assume the predominance of a *pre-*

*formationist* model of reproduction: that is, that the entire organism was pre-formed in the body of one of the parents before the moment of conception. “[Y]et whether the *Animalcule* [the microscopic organism] was lodged in the Seed of the Male, or the Female *Ova*,” explained a medical lexicon in 1743, “is a Matter of Controversy.”<sup>66</sup> Other lexicons, such as the 1736 *Lexicon Technicum*, elide this controversy by treating the latter model (*ovarianism*) as discredited by the former model (*animalculism*).<sup>67</sup>

Despite the ascendancy of these preformationist models, mid-century medical texts continued to recognize the problems posed to these theories by various atypical offspring, such as hybrids and monsters. The most basic preformationist model would predict resemblance between a single parent—either the mother or father—and the offspring. Yet a robust theory of generation must explain offspring that resembled both parents (hybrids, like mules) and neither parent (monsters).

Some texts circulating at mid-century found these atypical cases sufficient proof against preformationism. In his *Anthropologia Nova* (1707), reprinted in 1717 and 1727, Drake rejected preformationist theories, both animalculist and ovarian, for failing to “[account] fairly and fully for mix’d Generation,” such as the offspring produced by a donkey and a horse. “For if that *Hypothesis* be true,” Drake reasoned, “the *Sperm* of an Ass is full of little Asses, and the being nurs’d by the Mare should never make Mules of them, because the Species is pre-determined, and the creature not only form’d, but living.”<sup>68</sup>

Other writers attempted to reconcile hybrids and monsters to preformationism through additional mechanisms of embryological development, such as the controversial mechanism of maternal imagination. The effect of the mother’s imagination on the embryo in her womb, argued the physician Daniel Turner in 1730, best explained cases such as a human with the head of the horse. For “if the *Animalcule*... was originally perfect and of its own kind,” he reasoned, no amount of “[jumbling]” in the womb could produce “the brutal [head] upon the human.”<sup>69</sup> Yet the mother’s strong impression of a horse, conveyed to the embryo, could change the shape the pre-formed organism.

Likewise, in his *Anatomy of the Human Body*, Cheselden raised “mixed generation” as the “strongest objection” against his own favored theory, animalculism, which seemed to predict offspring “entirely of the same species with the

63 *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, 23–24.

64 These pairs of sex organs were a site of conflation and confusion for observers of Ann and “Elizabeth” (see “Introduction”) and “the famous African.”

65 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, 14.

66 Quincy, John. *Lexicon Physico-Medicum; Or, A New Physical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (London, 1722): 91.

67 Harris, John. *Lexicon Technicum*, 5th ed. (London, 1736). (See the entry on “Animalcula.”)

68 Drake, James. *Anthropologia Nova: Or, A New System of Anatomy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1717): 186.

69 Turner, Daniel. *The Force of the Mother’s Imagination Upon Her Foetus in Utero* (London, 1730), 89.

male animal.”<sup>70</sup> Yet considering the “influence womens fears or longings frequently have upon their children in utero,” he reasoned, it seemed likely that the “mother’s blood...should be thought a sufficient cause of the resemblance between these animals and their mothers.”<sup>71</sup>

A second common metric for evaluating theories of generation involved their conformation to a loosely shared set of principles about the workings of “Nature.” In particular, the assumption of an efficient and un wasteful Nature posed a challenge to animalculism. If the pre-formed organism existed in the male semen, how could one account for the millions of organisms that, failing to find an egg, died uselessly?

Proponents of this theory frequently turned to the analogy between animal and vegetable reproduction to neutralize this objection. “In plants,” points out Drake, “a very few of the whole that reproduced, fall into the earth, and produce plants, and as in plants the greatest part of their seeds are the food of animals, so the greatest part of the animalculae may as well live a time to enjoy their own existence, as any other animal of as low an order.”<sup>72</sup> Drake implies that neither undeveloped plant seeds nor animal embryos are “wasted”; the former become useful as animal food, whereas the latter enjoy a full life as low-order animals.

In other mid-century texts, concerns about Nature took a theological bent or intersected with concerns about God. Two years before the publication of Parsons’ *Enquiry*, monstrosity and theology intersected in an essay published in the *Philosophical Transactions*. In 1739, Royal Society Fellow Philip Henry Zollman published “Some Reflections on Generation, and on Monsters, With a Description of Some Particular Monsters.” The essay was Zollman’s translation of a francophone piece by Daniel De Superville, a French Huguenot theologian exiled to the Dutch Republic. Although Zollman was not the original author of this essay, he nevertheless brought it into the “scientific community” of the Royal Society. In the essay, De Superville draws on his own mechanical explanation of monstrosity in order to build credibility for an animalcular model of generation. By this model, he claims, “one may easily account for those monstrous Births, when two *Foetuses* are joined together, or Children and Animals are double, in the Whole or in Part.”<sup>73</sup> De Superville argues that organisms with double or superfluous features can be explained by the entrance of two animalcules into the same egg: “they touch, they close, they unite, they crowd each other: The Parts of the weakest, being too much crowded, cannot extend or display themselves.”<sup>74</sup> He then provides a diverse catalog of monstrous births that, he be-

lieves, can be explained through this phenomenon: an eight-footed pig, a three-eyed foal, a sheep fetus with no nose and a trunk on its forehead, a human fetus with “no Mark of the Sex” and a piglike tail, and so on.<sup>75</sup>

De Superville’s account of monstrosity answers not only the mechanical challenge of accounting for offspring that do not resemble the parents; it also resolves an urgent theological problem posed by preformationism. If each organism was created by God’s hand, why are some imperfect? “For supposing every *Animalculum* to be an *Embryo* created,” De Superville muses, “I cannot imagine them to be created imperfect.”<sup>76</sup> By placing the origin of monstrosity in the moment of conception, De Superville neutralizes this theological problem; the mechanics of conception, not the hand of God, produces monsters.

Unlike De Superville, Parsons believed the pre-formed embryo to exist in the mother’s ovary. This model, like De Superville’s animalcular model, raised questions about monstrosity. How could God’s own act of creation result in an imperfect organism, such as a child exhibiting both sexes? “[S]ince we know the common Standard of Nature in human bodies,” Parsons reasoned,

is, that there should be but one Sex in one Body, it is impossible that there should be the least Imperfection in the Rudiments of any of the Ova, since they were implanted in Females from the Beginning of Time, by the Almighty *Fiat*, and were under the Restriction of that Law, that every Day’s experience confirms to us is certain.<sup>77</sup>

Parsons’ ovarian model of reproduction, together with his assumption that a double-sexed body was an “imperfect one,” rendered true hermaphroditism unthinkable. Rather, he placed the determination of the organism’s sex in the moment of Creation; only when a given embryo developed after conception was it liable to structural changes that obfuscated its true sex.

Parsons’ observations of a fetus with a large clitoris, with which he closes his book, provide a mechanism for the obfuscation of the female fetus’s true sex. He observes that, at a certain stage in its development, the female fetus has a proportionally larger clitoris than a grown woman. In most cases, the fetus grows and “the neighboring parts of the Pudenda grow more in proportion to than the Clitoris.”<sup>78</sup> But in other cases “the clitoris “continues it’s growth... maintaining it’s first proportional size.”<sup>79</sup> It is such abnormal development, not the coexistence of two sexes in a single body, that creates the appearance of hermaphroditism. Yet each fetus has its true sex, determined by God at the moment of Creation.

Not all monsters were rendered implausible by Parsons’

70 Cheselden, 270.

71 Ibid.

72 Drake, 270-271.

73 De Superville, Daniel and Philip Henry Zollman. “Some Reflections on Generation and On Monsters.” *Philosophical Transactions* 41 (1739): 301.

74 Ibid., 302.

75 Ibid., 303-304.

76 Ibid., 305.

77 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, 6.

78 Ibid., 147.

79 Ibid., 147-148.

understanding of generation and the nature of God. Seven years after the *Enquiry*, he published his “Account of a preternatural Conjunction of Two *Female Children*.” This contribution to the *Philosophical Transactions* explains conjoined bodies and other cases of monstrosity through the joining of two fertilized ova after conception<sup>80</sup>—a theory not unlike De Superville’s. In the essay, Parsons argues that preformationism presents the most just notion of God; only a negligent God would leave the work of generation to such particulars as the amount of semen, as previous theories held. In such a hypothetical world, he writes, “Accidents and Chances against the Welfare of all animal Beings would be so numerous, and the State of Nature so miserable, that the greatest Part of the inhabitants of the Earth and Waters could not avoid being monstrous, and full of Confusion: The Almighty would have produced an Effect contrary to his Divine Goodness, and Care for His Creatures.”<sup>81</sup>

Here, as in De Superville’s essay and Parsons’ *Enquiry*, the monstrous body provides an arena in which to work out the implications of preformationism. Read together, these texts suggest the complex relationship between monstrosity, theology and generation in mid-century medical thought. For De Superville, the ability of his animalcular theory to explain monstrosity *lends* credibility to the theory. For Parsons, the combination of theological concerns and ascription to a preformationist theory *detracts* credibility from the category of hermaphrodites. Other categories of monsters were not, for Parsons, rendered implausible by his ovarian model of generation; rather, cases of monstrosities, such as conjoined children and extra body parts, were *explained* by this theory.

Each of these cases posits a different relationship between theories of generation, monstrosity, and belief in an ordered nature. Taken together, they complicate Da Costa’s suggestion that monsters categorically “defied” an “Enlightenment’ approach to nature based on the search for order and regularity.”<sup>82</sup> Rather, this analysis suggests that the discursive fate of a given “monster” varied considerably depending on its relationship to prevailing theories of the natural world. We cannot attribute Parsons’ attempts to eradicate the “hermaphrodite” merely to the “monstrosity” of that figure, though monstrosity played a role. Rather, Parsons targeted the hermaphrodite for erasure because of its perceived incompatibility with modern theories of generation.

### Ancients and Moderns

Parsons framed his conclusions about hermaphroditism in opposition to a benighted past, characterized by igno-

rance of the human body. The ancients, he recounted in the *Enquiry*, believed that the sex of the child was determined by the “Strength or Quantity” of the mother’s and father’s “semen.”: “if both were equal in Quantity and Quality, a Child of both Sexes was begotten.”<sup>83</sup> And indeed, Parsons acknowledged, this erroneous understanding of generation might seem to render hermaphroditism plausible: “[W]ere we to have regard to this [theory of generation], we might still be liable to be born away by this Hypothesis, as Authors have been hitherto, which would inevitably seduce us to believe that there are Hermaphrodites in human Nature.”<sup>84</sup>

But, Parsons argued, the moderns should be resistant to such seduction, thanks to their superior access to an accumulation of knowledge about the human body. In the first place, awareness of “the Uses of Ovaria... [and] the Fallopian Tubes” undermined the ancient idea that both men and women both contributed semen.<sup>85</sup> Ancient theories pointed to this mixing of male and female semen to explain hermaphrodites; thus, the rejection of those theories demanded a reconsideration of the plausibility of hermaphroditism. Furthermore, Parsons reasoned that modern knowledge of the clitoris should reduce confusion about sexually ambiguous bodies. Before the discovery of this female organ, he speculated, large clitorises were frequently mistaken for penises; this misunderstanding created the appearance of individuals with both a penis and a vulva, giving rise to the idea of hermaphrodites.<sup>86</sup> Armed with awareness of the clitoris, Parsons concluded, modern observers should not confuse women with large clitorises for hermaphrodites. In sum, the *Enquiry* suggests that modern knowledge of female anatomy, both internal and external, ought to undermine belief in hermaphroditism.

Yet belief in hermaphrodites persisted—hence the *Enquiry*. Parsons framed his work as “the Expulsion of superstitious Mysteries and Errors:”<sup>87</sup> an attempt to purge the public of persistent ignorance, rooted in ancient understandings of the world. Though Parsons’ learned peers had thrown away ancient theories of generation, he complained, they continue to believe in the hermaphrodites that only outdated theories could explain. His work suggests a belief that the proliferation of modern theories does not automatically imply awareness or acceptance of all their implications. The *Enquiry* thus represents a call to update the categories that structure the world—male, female, hermaphrodite—in light of new understandings of generation.

### Epilogue: Animal Hermaphroditism

Parsons’ treatment of hermaphrodites received significant

80 Parsons, James. “An Account of A Preternatural Conjunction of Two Female Children.” *Philosophical Transactions* 45 (1748): 536.

81 *Ibid.*, 534.

82 Da Costa, *The Singular and the Making of Knowledge*, 16.

83 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, 8.

84 Parsons, *A Mechanical and Critical Enquiry*, 8.

85 *Ibid.*, 100-101.

86 *Ibid.*, 9.

87 *Ibid.*, iv.

recognition. In the next fifty years, a number of English-language essays and encyclopedias cited Parsons as an authority, perpetuating his relegation of the “hermaphrodite” to the superstitions of the past.<sup>88</sup> The *Enquiry* also enjoyed recognition abroad: Louis de Jaucourt’s 1765 *Encyclopédie* entry “Hermaphrodite” credits Parsons with “demonstrat[ing] skillfully and briefly that the existence of hermaphrodites is solely a popular misconception.”

Yet the decline of “hermaphrodite” as a category was not a total or linear process. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the possibility of high-order animal hermaphrodites—perhaps even humans—was reimagined. In 1779, surgeon and animal enthusiast John Hunter read his “Account of A Free Martin” before the Royal Society of London. Hunter pointed to free martins (cattle today understood to be chromosomally atypical) as an example of high-order animal hermaphrodites. He noted that hermaphrodites were common among lower orders of animals, and speculated that “it becomes no great effort or uncommon play in nature to unite the in those animals in which they are commonly separated.”<sup>89</sup> Although Hunter admitted to the rarity of hermaphrodites among dogs and men, he made no theoretical arguments against the possibility.<sup>90</sup> Twenty years later, Everard Home presented the Royal Society with evidence of the former, in his “Account of the Dissection of an Hermaphrodite Dog.”<sup>91</sup>

Other intellectuals recovered the possibility of the human hermaphrodite, as well. In his *Essay on Generation*, published in English translation in 1792, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach raised the possibility. Rejecting preformationist models, Blumenbach argued that “the unorganized matter of generation” developed through an internal drive called the *Bildungstrieb* or “formative nisus.”<sup>92</sup> Blumenbach attributed the existence of hermaphrodites, along with “monstrous” offspring and offspring that resembled a different species, to “deviations of the formative process from its usual course.”<sup>93</sup> Half a century earlier, Parsons had grappled with the problem of whether God could create “imperfect” (hermaphrodite) embryos; Blumenbach’s model neutralized this concern by attributing the creation of the embryo to the “formative nisus,” and not the hand of God.

In addition to providing a theoretical basis for hermaphroditism, Blumenbach pointed to recent empirical evidence in favor of the phenomenon. “In our skeptical days,” he wrote, the possibility of human hermaphrodites, and that of

other warm-blooded animals, has been much doubted. And yet Baron Haller of this university, and Mr. John Hunter of London, have given relations of the most careful dissections of such animals, especially in the cow, and goat tribes, which leave no room for further doubts in this matter.<sup>94</sup>

For Blumenbach, recent empirical examples of warm-blooded hermaphrodites, like those provided by Haller and Hunter, undermined the “skeptical” rejection of hermaphrodites as a category. Yet Blumenbach’s work elided the definition of hermaphroditism on which those earlier arguments were made. For Blumenbach, a hermaphrodite may be constituted by “imperfect marks of organs of the other sex,”<sup>95</sup> whereas Parsons demanded both male and female organs in their fully developed forms.

In the fifty years between Parsons’ *Enquiry* and Blumenbach’s *Essay on Generation*, the hermaphrodite was defined and redefined; the mechanisms of generation were imagined and reimagined; the relationship between hermaphroditism and generation was considered and reconsidered. In this process, the bodies of reputed hermaphrodites—Ann, “Elizabeth,” “the famous African,” and numerous others—were written and rewritten. Their fleshy parts were imbued with one meaning and then another. But those bodies, and those subjectivities, are lost. We are left instead with the “hermaphrodite” of Parsons and Blumenbach: an object of medical discourse, entangled in concerns about theology, monstrosity, reproduction, and even time. At mid-century, Parsons made *belief* in hermaphroditism a relic of the superstitious past. Blumenbach, at the end of the century, made *doubt* about hermaphroditism a relic of a “skeptical” past. The hermaphrodite never constituted a stable category; rather, this chimerical figure stood between superstition and truth, skepticism and empiricism, past and present.

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88 See footnote 12.

89 Hunter, John. “Account of the Free Martin.” *Philosophical Transactions* 69 (1779): 280.

90 *Ibid.*, 281.

91 Homes, Everard. “An Account of the Dissection of an Hermaphrodite Dog.” *Philosophical Transactions* 89 (1799): 157-178.

92 Blumenbach, J.F. *An Essay on Generation* (London, 1792), 20.

93 *Ibid.*, 79.

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94 *Ibid.*, 81.

95 Blumenbach, 81.