A Purged Mouth: The Construction of a *Mirabilia*-Monster

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The Black Death, which took its murderous course in the late fourteenth century, spurred monumental changes in Western civilization. Many historians argue that it led to the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the death of the feudal system, and the Renaissance. With an estimated half of its population decimated during the Black Death, Europe was forced to change and adapt. Undoubtedly, the European people began to see the world differently; the epistemologies of the late Middle Ages began to crack. In the face of a wrathful God whose anger could not be quelled by man or saint, fear wracked the minds of the population and simultaneously made them question what they had long held to be true. It lead people to think that, perhaps, the Church was truly a pit of sin, doctors were not to be trusted, and familial ties could not foster unconditional love.

It is in this context of unknowing that learned men recorded the events of the Black Death. Specifically, I will look at two notable descriptions of plague survivors' children that have yet to be unpacked in Black Death historiography. A French Carmelite friar wrote, “but what is particularly surprising is that when the children born after the plague started cutting their teeth they commonly turned out to have only 20 or 22, instead of the 32 usual before the plague.”¹ A monk in England recorded a similar occurrence: “…everyone born after the pestilence had two fewer teeth than people had had before.”² These excerpts offer the historian a point of entry into medieval culture and psychology. In unpacking the meaning of these excerpts, one is able to witness a teetering, complex mindset. While many great changes occurred at the end of the Black Death, the strength of those changes cannot be fully understood without an examination of first wave survivors; with them one sees the first fissures in the epistemologies of the Middle Ages. These altered, fewer-teethed bodies are constructions made within those fissures. When analyzed against monstrosity, *mirabilia*, and religious discourse on redemption, one is able to explain the birth of the defected mouth. Popular symbols, which stem from hagiography, folklore, Biblical scripture, and architecture, clearly manifested within this constructed body--a body that represented the new image of the world after the decimation of the Black Death.

This image acted as both a reminder of the past and a symbol of hope for the future. Formulating the way in which a culture constructed the purged mouth in response to plague leads us to a better understanding of how the medieval mind functioned. While several historians focus on medieval mentality, I aim to add to the historiography through looking at hitherto ignored primary sources that open up new avenues for understanding the complexity of medieval epistemologies.

In analyzing these sources from a religious and cultural perspective, the discussion expands through works on the social construction of monsters as well as with theories on fragmentation, redemption, and resurrection. Jeremy Cohen's collection of essays, Monster Theory, provides a fundamental base from which to build an understanding of this medieval description of those born after the Black Death. Monster Theory's aim is to utilize the saturation of monsters in text as a means to better comprehend and participate in cultural discourse. In his introduction to the collection of essays, Cohen argues that society is fascinated with the monster, because societies want to name what is unknown and, by so doing, to domesticate and disempower the same threatening subject. 3 "Monster Culture," Cohen's own essay, provides the historian with seven theses: the monster is a purely cultural product, will always shift in time and meaning, is not easily categorized and causes rationality to crumble, is born out of difference, and represents humanity's self-understanding of forbidden desire, and denotes inviolable cultural borders. Each of these theses, when applied to the study of the monstrous, recommends the conclusion that monsters are present in all periods, breaking the barriers of past and present. 4 The primary sources analyzed hereafter are cultural constructions of the monster. Therefore, Cohen's essay is integral to understanding the deeper meaning of the missing teeth.

Other works that offer theoretical guidance to understanding this historical mystery include Caroline Walker Bynum's Fragmentation and Redemption and her essay "Wonders." Fragmentation and Redemption offers discussions on how the physical body and the sensory body link to the study of symbols. The study of medieval symbols and images aids in the understanding of the religious practices of contemporary readers and writers, but even more, such symbols guide the modern historian to a better understanding of how people understood the body in relation to their religious beliefs. Bynum's thesis in her final essay of the book posits that religious debates on resurrection focused on not the body and soul, but bodily continuity and its relation to identity. 5 She goes

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4 Cohen, Monster Theory, x.
on to further argue "this issue of bodily continuity (of how identity lasts through corruption and reassemblage) was manifested as an issue not merely in the bizarre limiting cases considered by theologians, but also in pious practice."\(^6\) In this essay, Bynum shows how ivory tower intellects and the practices of the lay people collided. This work provides a view into the reasons behind the construction of the monster examined here. Bynum's work, "Wonder," on mirabilia and miracula offers further insight into the fewer-toothed construct. The author argues that wonder, for the medieval people, was non-appropriative, cognitive, and perspectival.\(^7\) She posits that medieval theorists believed wonder stemmed from an encounter with something that was different from what was known; "yet wonder will always be in a different context and from a particular point of view."\(^8\) Moreover, she claims that wonder is a social construct meaning that something is wonderful because it is different from the norm, and the way in which it is described and used is reflective of the subject that encounters it. This concept of wonder, coupled with the ontological distinctions between mirabilia and miracula, which will be explained below, lead Bynum to assert that medieval people began seeing extraordinary events explicable by laws of nature. This rationalization of wonders supplements the historian's understanding of how medieval people perceived an event such as the Black Death and viewed missing teeth in relation to it.

Other helpful works that provide a broader psychoanalytic view of the fourteenth century are John Aberth’s *From the Brink of the Apocalypse* and John Hatcher’s *The Black Death*. Aberth’s work aims to alter the view of the “dark” Middle Ages by positing that this period was essential in laying the footing for the Renaissance. It was not a period that experienced the “waning” of intellect and culture, but rather a time of transition to the modern world.\(^9\) He shows this transition by providing a broad view of the century, covering the Great Famine, the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, and the all-encompassing figure of Death who looms over the life of all in the 14th century. He argues that those who lived through these major crises saw the outcome of their struggles as redemption, and, through coping with what they understood as the Apocalypse,

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\(^8\) Ibid., 3.

they set the foundations for the cultural changes to come. Hatcher’s work buttresses these apocalyptic events with research on apocalyptic thoughts. Hatcher aims to “write history from the inside” by recreating the medieval world through eyewitness tales of the Black Death. He utilizes a vast number of sources to recreate the medieval mindset prior-to, during, and following the detrimental pestilence in this self-proclaimed docudrama. Hatcher’s work offers a deeper psychoanalysis of the medieval people that is necessary to uncover the cultural production of the fewer-toothed body. The children’s mouths with missing teeth were socially constructed by those that survived the disease. Thus, with a psychoanalytic understanding of the people that wrote about these children, we are better able to get at why and how this particular construction came to fruition.

**Monstrum: that which reveals: A Methodology**

These fundamental works on monstrosity, wonder, and the body point to a methodology that examines the religious discourses of resurrection, redemption, and catastrophes, coupled with an analysis of popular symbols and images. In order to comprehend how symbols were utilized for constructing a mirror of the time, one must examine the points in history where such symbols surface. Therefore, this work aims to recreate the mindset of medieval people within the calamitous and apocalyptic context of the fourteenth century, focusing on the Black Death. The medieval chroniclers of such occurrences applied what they knew of the world to catastrophic events and built a body with missing teeth. The first chronicler, Jean de Venette (d. 1369), a Carmelite friar, wrote in France about the aftermath of the Black Death around 1359-60. The other chronicler, John of Reading (d.1368/9), was a monk at Westminster Abbey who wrote between 1346 and 1367. Both ecclesiastical chroniclers’ comments push the discussion towards an analysis of the way in which religious discourse influenced the creation of the defected body. Since the writers were both situated in a religious space, they inevitably viewed and understood the world from a pious standpoint. Therefore, theological and reverent symbols coupled with a popular faith episteme to inform their accounts. This understanding of the authors’ world view will be the entry point to unpacking the meaning of the purged mouth in the context of the chaotic fourteenth century.

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10 Ibid., 4.
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As the pestilence began to recede, there was a space for medieval minds to examine their place in history. Their perception of life had room to shift once the fear of imminent death lifted. Cohen’s *Monster Theory* posits that it is this type of cultural moment that creates the monster. Since the monster is a purely cultural product, it mirrors the event and culture that births it. Since these gaps create the monster, such as the space between onslaughters of plague and between new understandings of how and why the plague functioned, the image of the monster is constantly shifting. Cohen suggests that the shifting monster is born into fragments, or “signifiers that stand in for the monstrous body itself.” The missing teeth were those fragments. The historian must look to the Bible and differing concepts of the Apocalypse and Judgment Day to understand how the survivors portrayed the shifting world. Bynum’s article provides aid in this venue.

Her article “Wonder” reveals how the medieval people understood miracles and wonderful events. Such concepts work toward the understanding of how the defected body was constructed. If historian Christian Rohr is correct, and the medieval mind tends to Scripture for characterizing catastrophes, then it is likely that those same minds would utilize Scripture as well as hagiography and popular symbols to describe the results of such life-altering events. Concepts of *Mirabilia* and *miracula*, offer insight into the cultural body as both wonders and miracles connecting to saints’ lives as well as the medieval means to explain what is not understandable. Bynum describes *mirabilia* as “natural effects we fail to understand” and *miracula* as “unusual and difficult’ events, ‘produced by God’s power alone on things that have a natural tendency to the opposite effect.’” Thus, the case of the missing teeth, a natural event that one cannot understand, is *mirabilia* that takes place after a *miracula*. It is something to wonder at and admire. However, the defected body is also defined as a monster, insofar that it was built as a purely cultural object; it is not a monster in the sense that its aim is to terrify those that witness it. This body invoked wonder—therefore, it is simultaneously *mirabilia*. The defected *mirabilia*-monster also acted as a warning to others, but did not fully function as a portent. It was not a sign that the end of times was neigh, but rather, a sign that God cleansed the

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15 Ibid., 6.
Earth and everyone should follow the example of the *mirabilia*.

The warning against forgetting the past trauma of the pestilence and the perceived acts of cleansing needed because of the Apocalypse offers explanation as to why there are comments on the continuous sin of the people that follow both descriptions of the missing teeth. John of Reading wrote of the year of Jubilee, 1350, on how absolved persons “did not turn away from their despicable crimes. Many sinners absolved in Rome returned to their countries abstaining from none of these things…”\textsuperscript{18} Jean de Venette also wrote, “...the world, alas, has not been made any better by its renewal.”\textsuperscript{19} Many that endured the pestilence, the wars, the famine, and the stalking presence of death, felt that they had sufficiently repented for the sins of the world, and must have been enraged at the actions of the careless. The redeemed man’s products, children and monsters, served as a reminder in the form of *mirabilia*-monsters: evidence of a cleansed world characterized not only through hagiographical images, but Scripture and popular stories as well. A closer look into the context of life before and during the Black Death will provide us with much needed insight into the society that chose such symbols for the purged mouth.

**Famine, War, Plague, and Death: A Background**

Famine spread across Europe, ushering in the crisis of the fourteenth century. The Great Famine of 1315 occurred with the climate changing from the Great Warming Period, lasting from the ninth century to the fourteenth, continuing to the Little Ice Age.\textsuperscript{20} This change entailed endless rain, which hindered farmers’ ability to harvest or grow crops and caused a massive increase in food prices. Rumors of cannibalism surfaced when even the most unsuitable meat was scare and people lay dying in the streets.\textsuperscript{21} The medieval people believed this was a biblical occurrence:

> Considering and understanding these past miseries and those that were still to come, we can see how the prophecy of Jeremiah is fulfilled in the English people: ”If I go forth into the fields, behold those slain with the sword, and if I enter into the city behold them that are consumed with famine” (Jeremiah 14.18). Going ”forth into the fields” when we call to mind the ruin of our people in Scotland and Gascony, Wales and Ireland ... Entering the city we consider ”them that are consumed with famine” when we see the poor and needy, crushed with hunger, lying stiff and

\textsuperscript{18} John of Reading, *Chronica Johannis de Reading*, in Horrox, *Black Death*, 75.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{20} Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, 10.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 29.
dead in the wards and streets.... 22

This chronicler referenced Jeremiah’s prophecy in order to recount what he witnessed in Scotland, Gascony, Wales, and Ireland. The scene of starved bodies plastering the streets could only be understood through a religious epistemology. It is clear that many attributed these tribulations to God’s wrath caused by the sins of man. This ominous feeling gathered strength when war ravaged the lands, which further exacerbated the toils brought by famine.

Adding to the destruction of the famine, the Hundred Years War brought a new form of devastation across urban and rural Europe. Intermittently from 1337 to 1453, England and France fought against one another, and consumed all of Western Europe within the bloody reaches of warfare. Not only was taxation heightened, for the purpose of waging war, in both England and France, but the new forms of war also brought devastation to non-combatants and soldiers alike. 23 The burgeoning English tactic of chevauchées decimated the French countryside, which essentially functioned as a “scorched-earth” stratagem that left French lands barren and unable to produce goods for war. 24 The people of Europe, embroiled in war as soon as they were free of famine, had little chance to recover. The population was left weakened and ripe for Death’s pickings.

In 1348, a terrible pestilence began to race through Europe that conquered the last of the survivors of the famine and war, and acted as a harbinger of the Apocalypse. Following war and famine, Scripture told the tale that plague and death acted as the final signs for the end of times. Given the chronology of the teeth-tales, the Black Death's effect on the medieval perspective is integral for a full analysis of these sources. The learned writers projected the imagery of the Apocalypse onto the Black Death: both events were brought on by the sin of the world, consumed everything in their path, and had fantastical origins.

Many contemporaries hypothesized that the nascent pestilence originated in the east, so several authors characterized the disease as akin to the plagues of Egypt in the Bible: "On the first day it rained frogs, snakes, lizards, scorpions and many other similar poisonous animals. On the second day thunder was heard, and thunderbolts and lightning flashes mixed with hail stones of incredible size fell to earth, killing almost all of the people...On the third day fire...descended from

23 Aberth, From the Brink of the Apocalypse, 75.
24 Aberth, From the Brink of the Apocalypse, 61.
This chronicle of the start of the Black Death reflected Biblical imagery of the Apocalypse—pests, poisonous animals, fire from the sky, and the death of all who were near. Utilizing such symbolism reveals that the religious discourse was a widely used means for understanding the plague. Therefore, it can be said that the use of Judgment Day imagery played into the memory and epistemology of the time.

Rohr points to the fact that the image of Judgment Day was utilized in order to explain a catastrophe rather than function as an eye-witness account. He further asserts that man constructs disasters; nature, itself, has only a small role. This concept is clear in that the Black Death chroniclers used exegetical imagery to depict the pestilence, which ultimately shows that they were in need of a way to understand its causes and functionality when attempting to describe it. Medieval people did this via religion. Biblical explanations were a part of the medieval mindset, and offered a ready means to explain the happenings of the world. These were the beginning steps that led to how they would see the aftermath and how chroniclers would translate the births of children in respect to religious discourse.

When doctors, Church, and personal prayers to the saints failed to explain the cause and cure of the pestilence, bewildered minds assigned blame to worldly sin and God's wrath. Gabriele de' Mussis, an early plague chronicler, explained that the pestilence was brought about "as a perpetual reminder to everyone, now living and yet to be born, how almighty God...looked down from heaven and saw the entire human race wallowing in the mire of manifold wickedness, enmeshed in wrongdoing, pursuing numberless vices, drowning in a sea of depravity." This early chronicler asserted that the sinfulness of the world caused the Black Death. De' Mussis' belief that there was an overflow of sin in the world was not unique. Many noted the way in which mendicants, despite living under a vow of poverty and charity, had immense wealth--tremendously adding to the counts of worldly sin. Moreover, the clergy ran from their duties during the pestilence.

Priests, deemed as "cowardly" due to their neglect of the sick, added to the terror

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26 Rohr, “Writing a Catastrophe,” 100.
27 Ibid., 93 & 99.
29 John of Reading, Chronica Johannis de Reading, in Horrox, Black Death, 75.
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of the climbing death toll.\textsuperscript{30} The medieval population had to look elsewhere for solace and guidance.

Saints were often utilized to aid in understanding the pestilence and its imminent arrival. The images of Madonna della Misericordia represents how people utilized hagiographic and biblical texts.\textsuperscript{31} These depictions portray the Virgin Mary shielding the people from the arrows of Death. She acts as an intermediary between the victims and a vengeful God. Mary is undermining God’s authority here, which makes these images unique to the time.\textsuperscript{32} This use of Mary supports the idea that symbols were re-appropriated to fit the new, altering idea of the world—a population haunted by the harbinger of death who could not be thwarted. As will be seen below, hagiography aided chroniclers in the construction of the mouths with the missing teeth.

Since the plague was an overwhelming unknown entity and many reached to religious explanations, the notion that repentance would thwart the pestilence was relatively common. This concept offers insight into the medieval hopes for the future, free from plague: “[The] only hope is to hurry back to Him alone, whose mercy outweighs justice and who, most generous in forgiving, rejoices heartily in the conversion of sinners; humbly urging him with orisons and prayers that he…should turn away his anger and remove the pestilence.”\textsuperscript{33} In the minds of many, the disease could only reasonably be attributed to God; therefore, the way to quell His anger was with prayer and repentance of sin. Fleeing from the pestilence or living to the utmost despite eventual death were not means of ridding the world of plague. Some took this concept to its ultimate end, and publically self-harmed in the name of penitence. Such flagellant groups gathered people on their march through Europe, the numbers of the dead being replenished by new followers, sung hymns, and finished the procession at the local churches by “beating themselves so hard with knotted whips that drops of blood spattered the roadway.”\textsuperscript{34} Since they believed God sent the plague in punishment for the world’s sins, flagellants thought they could shorten the penalty time by spilling

\textsuperscript{31} Appendix: Fig. 1
their own blood themselves.

In each of these chronicles, there is a sense that a spiritual cleansing would stop the disease. In the years following the pestilence, the cleansed bodies would reemerge as evidence of the victims’ good deeds. It is clear that the plague fostered perplexing feelings of unknowing, and after the pestilence subsided, there was a need to re-characterize the world and to reassert a sense of stability and prescience. It is here that the medieval chroniclers birthed the monstrous.

**Redemption Through the Body**

Surviving Judgment Day and seeing the wrath of God pushed chroniclers to be in a position of only being able to describe the events of the world through exegetical images of the plague. This directed some writers to reach for hagiographical and biblical symbols to construct a body that imitated the saints and Scripture. Survivors felt “liberated… from the stifling fear of death, but the harsh experience of a lifetime could not be unlearned in weeks or months.”35 Such an experience translated into the new generation born in the aftermath. When it came to chronicling these newcomers “[s]urvivors, lords as well as peasants, found it difficult to grasp the significance of what had happened and to distinguish reality from illusion…”36 Were the newborns a vision from God? Were they a warning against future plagues? Society constructed them as both, and in that characterization, created a *mirabilia*-monster: a creature of wonder constructed in a fearful moment.

The general bewilderment in the aftermath of the Black Death echoes Cohen’s discussion. This moment is “the gap between the upheaval” and the time that receives the monster. Hatcher also writes about the end point of the gap: “[The ecclesiastic survivors] expressed themselves both amazed and appalled that sinners who had been spared from the lashings of the pestilence had not been humbled by the terrible judgments and lessons from God.”37 Both Venette and John of Reading reflected such emotions in their aforementioned admonitions to the survivors. The people that received the monster had reverted to the old ways; they created the defected body to represent a cleansed humanity, and perhaps, it served as a reminder to those that forgot the power of God’s wrath.

**Symbols from the Church: Hagiography, Architecture, and Holy Writ**

Hagiographic art and stories were an important aspect of popular piety in the Middle Ages. This illiterate learned of God through imagery and oral traditions of saints’ lives. Catholic churches and cathedrals displayed images,

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35 Hatcher, *The Black Death*, 221.
36 Ibid., 221.
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relics, and symbols throughout every space of the building in order to relate stories from the Bible and saints to the illiterate lay people and to those that could not understand the Mass in Latin. Images constantly seen during Mass impressed Catholic iconography into the memories of the onlookers and were tantamount to an exercise in learning. The images eventually developed into useful experience as a means to understand the apocalyptic past, and the saints’ lives offered characters from which to cast judgments and to create mirabilia-monsters.

One saint seen in many cathedrals throughout England and France, from which hailed the chroniclers of the defected mouth, is St. Apollonia (d. 248). She was the patron saint of dentistry and a virgin martyr in Alexandria. Hagiographic stories relate that when the Christians in Alexandria suffered under pagan authorities, the deaconess Apollonia endured great torture for her religion. The pillagers pulled each of her teeth out and then threatened to burn her alive if she did not repeat blasphemous phrases against the Christian faith. Instead of renouncing her faith, Apollonia jumped into the flames and burned alive on her own accord. Given her torture, Apollonia’s hagiographic symbol is that of blacksmith pincers holding a tooth. St. Apollonia’s image, engrained into the minds of churchgoers, rebirthed itself in the construction of the fewer-toothed children in the post-Black Death era. The rood screens, stained glass, capitals, relics, and illuminated images of St. Apollonia are evidence of her prominence within the cathedral walls that affected the minds of those in the Middle Ages. Moreover, her role as the patron saint of dentistry and toothaches undoubtedly made her a popular saint that infiltrated everyday life, as toothaches were ubiquitous in the medieval and early modern world. St. Apollonia acted as an influence in the creation of the embodied mirabilia-monster as she was a part of medieval memory, and as a saint, represented a cleansed body, redeemed in the eyes of God.

Another symbol that likely embedded itself in the medieval mind comes from the grotesques and capitals carved into the exterior walls of the cathedrals.

38 Ibid., 10.
39 For more on this concept see Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). In her research on medieval culture and its connections to memory, she posits that memory was an integral part of learning in the Middle Ages. Memory made knowledge into a useful experience that allowed people to create ideas and make judgments.
41 See Appendix for Fig. 2 & 3.
Toothache-caricatures were common subjects for medieval capitals. The mouth-barring figures are not identified as holding any specific symbolism to the churches they adorn, except in one case at Wells Cathedral where an open-mouthed grotesque is adjacent to Bishop Bytton (d. 1274) who is thought to have performed dental miracles. Given the fact that most grotesques depict scenes of everyday life and intermingle with spiritual images, it can be assumed that the medieval onlooker digested the two images together, equating common images with a higher meaning.

Furthermore, historian G.G. Coulton argues that the symbols portrayed throughout these churches informed the miracles said to have taken place there. Meaning that Bishop Bytton may have not performed any tooth-related miracles, but the architecture of the local church imposed itself on his death. This is likely valid as the capitals at Wells appear to date back before Bytton’s death. Following this argument, the architecture and images did in fact embed within the medieval mind, and then, people applied symbols such as the agape gargoyles to ideas and judgments of the world before and after the Black Death. Since the medieval people appropriated the symbols on the Church for events outside of it, the concept of utilizing the same symbols beyond the walls of the cathedral and in chronicles is believable. As the medieval people walked into a sacred space, where our chroniclers spent a great deal of time, above them lingered grotesques pointing into their stone mouths. Teeth surrounded the space where learning took place, and it is not far-fetched to believe that when chroniclers sought a means to understand the plague, and they thought back to the cathedral where their epistemology laid rest, they thought of those gargoyles and their mouths.

Stepping away from religious images and artifacts, but still within the confines of the Church building, we look to Holy Writ to understand how the purged mouth was born. After the pestilence began to wane, and many were questioning God’s actions as well as their own sins, there must have been “a new and urgent hunger for moral and spiritual guidance” sought from priests as well as spiritual literature. Hatcher points to the fact that due to the high fatality rate of clergy during the Black Death, a rapid training of new priests to fulfill those empty roles led to a lack of thorough knowledge and education within the Church. With little training, the result was that the pious tended to “take

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42 See Appendix for Fig. 4.
44 Ibid., 281.
teachings out of context or apply them too literally.”46 In such context of seeking solace and knowledge from a confused and unqualified clergy, the cultural construction of a tooth-lacking body is understandable. If one looked into spiritual literature and, then, guided by these newly ordained priests, we can see how a misinterpreted or too literal manifestation of a *mirabilia*-monster occurred.

Out of the coupling of this new, inadequate reading of Scripture and the fear and hope of the world to come, medieval people created the Other, which embodied, quite literally, an opposite of the exegetical characters. Michel Foucault asserts, “The unthought (whatever name we give it) is not lodged in man like a shriveled-up nature or a stratified history; it is, in relation to man, the Other: the Other is not only a brother, but a twin, born not of man, nor in man, but beside him and at the same time, in an identical newness, in an unavoidable duality.”47 The monster reflects its maker. Scripture offered the means to produce this “twin” in that the Bible had many monsters—monsters that embodied the fears and desires of the world post-pestilence through duplication and inversion. The mouth was the “twin” and the missing teeth were the inversion.

In Deuteronomy 32:24, the medieval reader encountered the threat of plague and the promise of death: “They will be wasted by famine, and consumed by plague and bitter destruction; And the teeth of beasts I will send upon them, With the venom of crawling things of the dust.” Here, the cultural product is an inversion of the teeth-barring beasts of the apocalypse: an Other. Perhaps, this monstrous character in the Bible offered imagery that embedded itself in the minds of those that wished to create a being that represented the redemption of the world. Another beast or sinner is cleansed by bodily pain: “Arise, O LORD; save men, O my God! For you have smitten all my enemies on the cheek; You have shattered the teeth of the wicked.”48 Again, in Psalms 58:6 the monster bares its teeth: “O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth; Break out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD.” God’s actions restrained those that sinned by removing their teeth; the *mirabilia*- monster, with fewer teeth, is representative of the beast redeemed by God’s dental work. God is also seen to enact judgment when teeth are involved; he addresses a city of sinners that he hoped to regain under forced penance: “’But I gave you also cleanness of teeth in all your cities

46 Ibid., 264
48 Psalms 3:7
And lack of bread in all your places, Yet you have not returned to Me.’”⁴⁹ Here, the mouth is a place that God again purged in order to remove the stain of sin. The medieval defect is a projection, a “twin,” stemming from such stories.

**Folklore and Popular Literature: Talking with Resurrection**

Away from the walls of the Church, the medieval people came into contact with popular literature and shared stories that recounted subjects of *mirabilia* and resurrection. These stories often reflected the trials and tribulations of the past, but also acted as a beacon of hope for the future. Resurrection tales fit the mold for medieval needs. Coming away from the Apocalypse, people hoped to feel society reborn, in a cleansed body. Thus, came the creation of the *mirabilia*-monster in these tales. This is echoed in Cohen’s assertion that the monster is constantly shifting and binds past and present together: “The monster is that uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness… it interjects the disturbing, repressed, but formative traumas of ‘pre-’ into the sensory moment of ‘post-‘, binding the one irrevocably to the other.”⁵⁰ The fewer-toothed body links the fears and hopes of Judgment Day that occurred pre-Black Death and the mood of the aftermath. In an effort to create a standard for the new population, the *mirabilia*-monster reflected an intermixing of hope and fear as well as religious and popular discourses that mirrored the general epistemology of the medieval mind.

Everyday and spiritual combined to inspire the defected body in folklore and concepts of resurrection. Teeth were a center figure in folklore for many centuries, including the Middle Ages, and they often symbolized a person’s character or spoke to rituals focused on the tooth.⁵¹ Some tales warned against toothaches as a form of influence from the devil, and other tales argued that a child born with teeth was either a demon or a future bard.⁵² Rituals concerning teeth were also very popular, and one in particular aids in understanding how the *mirabilia*- monster came about: “It is said here that you will have to find all your teeth at the day of judgment. But if, when you pull a tooth out, you put salt upon it, throw it into the fire and say: ‘Good tooth, bad tooth, Pray God send me a good tooth,’ you will not have to find it at the judgment day.”⁵³ This advice tale shows where the past and present combined in the medieval mind. Since Judgment Day represented a fear gone by, because these survivors made it

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⁴⁹ Amos 4:6
⁵⁰ Cohen, Monster Theory, ix.
⁵² Ibid., 100 & 98.
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through the cleansing, we see how the teeth represented a purged and pure body. If the body falls apart, or in our case if teeth fall out, and the person repents or prays to God, then their time at the terrible Judgment Day will be shortened. Repentance, then, could have led to a shortening of the plague. This tale represents a shared culture reflecting religious discourse through a folktale. They feared the past, but if they kept the lessons of the Apocalypse in mind, there was hope for the future. This lore has long been present in Sheffield, Wakefield, and Derbyshire, which are near the locus of creation of the chronicle that documented the tooth mystery.\(^{54}\) It is likely that this folktale contributed to the chronicler’s social construction of the purged mouth since their communities would have circulated such stories.

As has been seen, the spiritual and lay epistemologies intertwined in the medieval mind; folklore focused on Judgment Day and teeth is further evidence of such an event. Ideas about resurrection were prevalent, particularly in the wake of the supposed Apocalypse. St. Thomas Aquinas’s lasting concept of resurrection as a means of punishing both body and soul links the suspicions of the plague’s causes to the folklore on resurrection. The sinful bodies along with the innocents’ bodies were being punished for the transgression of souls at Judgment Day. Bynum’s essay on resurrection helps further explain how the medieval people, both ecclesiastical and lay, understood Judgment Day and its relation to the body. She notes that from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries, resurrection was depicted and understood as the gathering together of the parts so that the whole would triumph.\(^{55}\) She points to the fact that even during the Renaissance, art\(^{56}\) focused on the collection of bodily pieces as the sound of the trumpet.\(^{57}\) This concept recalls the aforementioned tale that depicts people gathering their teeth before they are released from Judgment. Wandering around looking for missing body pieces would prolong the agony of the Apocalypse. This process was visceral, which made a deep impression upon the memories of the medieval population who learned best through experience.

Aquinas’ notion of judgment as a visible process held true for the survivors of the Black Death.\(^{58}\) This concept of resurrection and judgment as witnessed within the body is applicable to the mystery of the missing teeth—the

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 301.
\(^{55}\) Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 284.
\(^{56}\) See Appendix for Fig. 5
medieval mind, combining the folklore with the spiritual discourse, created a body that acted as evidence of redemption. The new type of body was pure and acted a piece of *mirabilia*-- it was a product of the end of the Apocalypse, washed clean of the world’s sins and born anew in the fires of plague during the end of days. Judgment manifested itself in the bodily defects of the purged mouths.

Another image associated with teeth and the *mirabilia*-monster is found in the popular medieval English allegorical poem *Piers Plowman* written by William Langland in the decades after the Black Death. Langland comments on the past, present, and future, through satire and prose that reflects the themes seen throughout this paper. *Piers Plowman* is a satire on society and a commentary on theology. The narrator, Will, desires to live a true Christian life and through dreams and visions, he encounters three allegorical characters that help in his journey: Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. In Passus XV, Will comes across the character Anima who is toothless and lacks a tongue—although, he can speak. Anima explains that he is Spirit, Sense, Reason, Memory, Soul, and a true creature of God. As a bodily manifestation of such concepts, namely Memory and Reason, Anima acts as a symbol for the past and what should be gleaned from its lessons. Langland’s character, therefore, tells the audience to use their memory of the pestilence as a warning against their evil ways in the past, and then create, through reason, a new way of thinking and acting as to not bring the world back to another Apocalypse.

Mary Carruthers, in *The Search for St. Truth*, discusses the fact that Anima’s epistemology differs from that of Will. Anima believes that knowledge based in science is “against nature,” while an epistemology based in charity and Christ leads to truth. This toothless, heavenly Anima is representative of the shift occurring within society during this time. The purged mouth, just like Anima, reflected the changes taking place. The children’s bodies, born after the plague, were sinless and their mouths with fewer teeth represented that status. They acted as a beacon of hope for a new way of thinking—their constructed bodies told others to reject the sinful life that led to God’s wrath and eventual Judgment.

Langland wrote *Piers Plowman* because he saw a continuation of the sins that led humanity down the wrong path. His character Anima acted in the same way the socially constructed mouth did, and utilized the same type of symbolism obtained from the mixing of the shared and high cultures. Both saw that man’s sin explained the cause of the Black Death, but the ongoing errors threatened to

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undermine those that had redeemed the world. Anima refers to the continuous sin:

As from the temple all good proceeds, / so from the temple all that is evil. / If the priesthood is sound the whole Church will/ flourish, / if it is corrupt the faith of all will rot. / If the priesthood lives in sin/ all the people will be turned to sin. / When you see a faded tree with withered leaves/ you know that it is rotten at the roots, / so when you see an undisciplined and irreligious/ people/ there is no doubt that the priesthood is unsound.61

Here, one can hear Langland’s voice asserting that not all the clergy and the lay people had taken heed to continuously repent after, or before, the devastating pestilence. Anima’s warning states that if the priests are bad and the Church is corrupt, the lay people cannot benefit from it. The health of society rests in the hands of the Church. This type of thinking buttresses the discussion above about the medieval beliefs on the cause of the Black Death. Langland’s Anima helped create an image for the chroniclers through which to describe their fears and translate them to the lay people: in an embodied and human mouth that had been purged of the previous sin. Children with fewer teeth, like Anima, are the reminders of the past and act as a guiding symbol for how to lead a better life through a new understanding of the world based in charity, kindness, and truth. All believed that society needed a new epistemology rooted in charity and Christ not solely in the Church and its wayward priests, and a defected body represented that new episteme.

Conclusion

Popular images of teeth coupled with religious discourse of the lay and the learned strongly suggest that the fewer-toothed body was in fact a mirabilia-monster constructed out of fear and hope. The medieval mindset acted rationally according to dominant epistemologies when it utilized visions of the Apocalypse to make sense of the devastation of the Black Death. The hopes for a better life after Judgment Day were built into the defected body as it represented a cleansed version of humanity. However, the purged body also offered a reminder, a type of post-catastrophe link to the onset of the pestilence where the cleansed body symbolized the concept of the sin of man as the reason for God’s wrath; it was a warning to the past. The mirabilia-monster shatters the constraints of time. “In

61 Langland, Piers Plowman, Passus XV: 115-20.
the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationally crumble.”62 A single category cannot confine the monster, it is both good and evil and it is both fear and hope. Such a realization insists on a new mode of how modern historians should think about the how the medieval mind and culture functioned.

The differing images discussed above each point to possibilities for how the manifestation of the mirabilia-monster formed. Each concept allows for the intermixing of popular and religious discourses as well as the discourses concerning hopes and fears in the pre- and post-Black Death eras. This shows us that religious and secular discourses were more of a visceral experience rather than intellectual understanding, as many modern historians have thus far believed.

St. Apollonia offers an explanation as to how the medieval chroniclers encountered and ingested hagiographic stories, and in her symbolism, they find options for creating a redeemed monster. The toothache-caricatures offer the same insight, but reveal the further prevalence of the imagery. Furthermore, these capitals and their relation to the respective local saints reveal how medieval people appropriated symbols for religious and lay subjects. The concepts of resurrection and its correlation to folklore both aid in understanding the cultural episteme. The two subjects buttressed one another in the medieval culture, despite them both coming from very different classes of discourse. The discussion on Scripture helps to further explain the aftermath of the Black Death and how biblical stories, along with misinformed clergy, inspired the construction of the multi-faceted mirabilia-monster. Images of shattered teeth, beasts, and mouths emptied by God were translated literally into the purged mouth of the new generation post-plague. Lastly, Langland’s confounding poem Piers Plowman provides a character that represents the disillusionment of the medieval people after the Black Death. The character Anima asks that a new epistemology be created that will lead people to act more charitably—after the Black Death, those that were still sinning threatened the now-cleansed world, and Anima as well as the mirabilia-monster functioned to represent the hope, fear, wonder, and warning that emerged in the cultural moments after the Black Death.

Rachel Small will complete her M.A. degree in history at SFSU in May 2016. She has recently been accepted to attend University of Arizona’s History PhD program to pursue her interests in cultural history of early modern Europe, the German Protestant Reformation, and gender identity.

Appendix

Figure 1. Madonna della Misericordia by Lippo Memmi. Chapel of the Corporal, Duomo, Orvieto, Italy. c. 1350.

Figure 2. St. Apollonia rood screen in Exeter Cathedral, Devon, England. 14th Century.

Figure 3. Stained glass image of St. Apollonia in Kingskerswell Church, Devon, England.

Figure 4. Toothache capital over Wells Cathedral, England.
Figure 5. Signorelli, detail: *Resurrection of the Dead* in S. Brizi Chapel, Orvieto, Italy, 149
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